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Arnab Banerji

Loyola Marymount University

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Losing the Politics in Translation: Reading Radical Bengali and Hindi Plays in American Classrooms

Arnab Banerji

English translations of contemporary Indian plays, outside of a very limited canon, are not readily accessible on the Western market.¹ As a specialist on modern Indian theatre, this lacuna is especially disconcerting since I often struggle to find material to teach in my own classes. To circumvent this challenge for my immediate teaching purposes, I decided to don the hat of the translator and translate contemporary Indian plays from their original languages into English. It is important to understand here that the scope of this endeavor is limited from the very outset, since I am fully conversant in only two Indian languages – Bengali and Hindi. My project began with the translation of Bijan Bhattacharya's 1945 classic *Nabānna* (New Harvest). I followed this with the translation of several of Tagore's shorter plays from the comedy and satire sections of his expansive theatrical oeuvre.²

Bijan Bhattacharya (1915 - 1978) and Tagore (1861 - 1941) are undoubtedly political artists. Bhattacharya was responding to the disastrous Bengal famine of 1944-45 with *Nabānna*. The play is a complex tapestry of language, marking a shifting theatrical aesthetic in twentieth century Bengali drama, and the awakening of a middle class from its political nonchalance to active participation in campaigns for political awareness (Ghosh 37-38). Translating this full-length play was a challenge not only because it is so layered, but also because Bhattacharya experimented with the Bengali language to arrive at an idiom that is a freewheeling adaptation of multiple Bengali dialects. Tagore's shorter plays, on the other hand, have been casually dubbed children's plays. The plays, *Ārya-anārya* (Aryan-Non-Aryan), *Ekānnabartī* (The Joint Family), *Khyātira birāmbanā* (The Perils of Fame) (see Tagore *Hāsyakautuk*) are all rife with political undertones that draw critical attention to pressing social and cultural concerns of early twentieth-century Kolkata and Bengali society (Das 23). Both playwrights, however, were writing for an urban audience, which bleeds into the aesthetic choices that they make in these plays (Bhattacharya 1007-1008). Being city bred myself, it was relatively easy for me to retain the aesthetic in my translation in spite of having to weave through a language that is temporally removed from me. Students responded positively to the translations. They understood the urgency in the character of Pradhān in *Nabānna* as he mourned for his sons and pleaded with Kuñja to fight back. They laughed at the hapless lawyer Dukarī Datta and celebrated the wit of Kāṅgālīcarāṇa and the clever pupil Madhusūdāna while reading Tagore.

Their enthusiastic response prompted me to attempt translating more politically charged plays. I was especially drawn to Utpal Dutt (1924 – 1993), the Bengali actor-manager, and Jana Natya Manch (henceforth JANAM), the Delhi based street-theatre company active in the 70s. In this essay, I will present, as case studies, my translations of Dutt's *Kākdvīper Ek Mā* (*A Mother from Kakdwip*) and Jana Natya Manch's (henceforth JANAM) *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhī* (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*) to discuss the challenges of translating politics and the call to urgent political action into a different language and for a different audience.

Rājñīti, translated as “politics” in English, appears as a major roadblock in facilitating the kind of reception that I expected the translations of Utpal Dutt and JANAM would receive from my students. It is therefore imperative that I define and contextualize the term better before the ensuing discussion. *Rājñīti*, as used and invoked in this essay, does not imply only politics, but is also meant to suggest a political consciousness. The plays by Dutt and JANAM which form the core of this essay are products of a political consciousness that prompted young theatre artists to abandon the chase after recognition and wealth and instead create art that was socially grounded and firmly committed to addressing socio-political concerns. Dutt and JANAM were convinced that their art practice had a political purpose, and this is clearly discernible in the works under scrutiny here.

Kākdvīper Ek Mā and *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhī* are both strong political statements fueled by the *rājñīti* that inspired their creators. This is not to say that Western theatre has been bereft of political consciousness. In fact, Brecht, Piscator, and agit-prop were all models and modes of performance that inspired both Dutt and JANAM (Bandyopadhyay; Ghosh *JANAM*). Students, however, and especially my target audience, are not used to thinking about theatre as a political art form. Their understanding of performance is restricted to their experience with the American musical and other commercial performances, which inhabit the spectrum between comedy and tragedy and correspondingly relaxation

and catharsis. The lack of exposure to politics and political thinking inhibits the development of a distinct political consciousness or what I refer to as *rājnīti* in this essay. The absence of *rājnīti* in their everyday milieu blocks a fuller comprehension of these texts, which are deeply rooted and embedded in the very political everyday struggles of the Indian population, as this essay will demonstrate.

The essay is arranged in several sections. In the first section I will briefly discuss Utpal Dutt, JANAM, their work and legacy. In the second section, I will discuss my process of translation and the challenges that I faced along the way. In the final section of the essay I will offer some concluding thoughts on translating political plays from one milieu to another based on my experience of using this material as a teaching tool in my classes.

The Creators

In this section of the essay, I introduce the reader to two of India's foremost voices in political theatre – the playwright actor-manager Utpal Dutt and the group JANAM, arguably India's foremost street theatre company. Dutt and JANAM were and are both unapologetically leftist in their political stance. Both the plays under scrutiny in this essay were written as political calls for action.

Utpal Dutt (1924-1993) is one of the most well-known and revered figures in modern Bengali if not in modern Indian theatre (Banerji 222). In a career that spanned nearly five decades, Dutt wrote, directed, produced, and acted in commercially successful and politically astute plays. During his long career, political challenges and controversies were his constant companions even as he charted new directions in urban Bengali-language theatre. Noted theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay, a living Bengali theatre encyclopedia, observes that 1970 was the end of an era for Utpal Dutt (Bandyopadhyay i). In this year, Dutt quit his long-time association with the North Kolkata-based Minerva Theatre and his theatre group the Little Theatre Group disintegrated, triggered by divisive politics employed by their disruptors who had been planted in the organization by the ruling Congress party.³ Dutt explains the transition, “After the Little Theatre Group broke into a thousand pieces in front of our eyes, after they left Minerva, ... then we took on the name Peoples' Little Theatre. As direct descendants of the Little Theatre Group we claimed that name” (Bandyopadhyay i). *Kākdvīper Ek Mā* is representative of this transition.

The transition is characterized with Utpal Dutt's search for a new form of political theatre driven by his new found “enthusiasm and enchantment” for *yātrā*– the itinerant popular theatre form from Bengal. Fearing the breakdown of the Little Theatre Group, Dutt and his compatriots created the Bibek Yātrā Samāj (which can be translated as Conscious Jatra Society) in 1969-1970. The group realized quickly, however, that they did not have the business acumen to run a *yātrā* operation. Sobha Sen, Dutt's longtime creative partner and wife writes:

We had no idea what the organizers were like. And the organizers were taking undue advantage of our propriety. As a consequence, dissatisfaction was brewing in the group. The organizers would never pay the full performance fee ahead of the performance, and we know that they were unable to pay the full amount. They promise to clear dues once we are at the performance site. And once we are under their supervision their masks fall off and their selfish selves come to the fore (Sen 100).

Dutt and his company decided to not pursue *yātrā* productions after the experience of the first season. *Yātrā*, as a genre, however, continued to influence Dutt's theatre writing and productions.⁴ Dutt explained that the tremendous energy and presence of the large crowds that he witnessed while performing *yātrā* changed him completely. He insisted, however, that the theatre that he crafted under this influence was a completely distinct art form although he tried to infuse the new theatrical language with some of the excitement of a *yātrā* performance (Bandyopadhyay iii).

Dutt eloquently demonstrates the difference between what he calls “pure theatre” and his brand of theatre that is influenced by *yātrā*: “[a pure theatre play] draws its audience into its environment but *yātrā* never attempts to do so” (Bandyopadhyay iii). Dutt continues to explain that a *yātrā* audience is

far more vocal and instantaneous in its appreciation and in its criticism of the *yātrā* even while the performance is underway. Actors, therefore, have to circumvent this challenging and disruptive environment continually over the course of a *yātrā* performance and create small instances of intense emotional scenes. Dutt compares this sectional arrangement of *yātrā* plays to Brechtian epic theatre, but he is quick to point out that unlike Brecht's theatre, which invites the audience to critically reflect on their social circumstances, a *yātrā* performance simply tries to trigger an emotional response in the audience. We see evidence of this style of writing in Dutt's plays from the 1970s onwards, including the one-act *Kākdvīper Ek Mā*.

The 1970s not only transformed Utpal Dutt's performance practice but also mobilized a group of young theatre enthusiasts in New Delhi to create a platform that would allow them to exercise their "dual commitment to both art and politics" (Ghosh *JANAM* 6). The impetus to form a cultural platform came from the urge to support the nascent Student Federation of India's (SFI) attempts to consolidate their position at the University of Delhi. The immediate need was to perform at a peasant's conference in Punjab in 1971. The young students who came together to create the singing troupe did not have any training in music, but they did not lack enthusiasm. In order to regularize the cultural work that the singing troupe was engaged in, the group decided to use the resources of the almost defunct Delhi chapter of the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA). Ideological differences between opposing factions of the Indian left, however, did not allow the association of the young artists with the erstwhile Communist cultural wing to last for long (Ghosh *JANAM* 28-29). Differences of opinion over whether the company should perform in pro-Congress events led to their being thrown out of the IPTA offices and resulted in the eventual birth of JANAM in 1973. JANAM, which literally means "birth" in Hindi, functions as an acronym for Jan Natya Manch (the group's name can be translated as People's Theatre Platform/Stage).

During its early years, JANAM performed proscenium plays that were either written collectively by the members of the group or were translations from other Indian languages. The group travelled to the interiors of the Indian hinterland to reach a larger audience. Arjun Ghosh chronicles the many escapades of the group during these formative years including instances of overwhelming public support and risky life-threatening situations that the members barely escaped. The emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975, after the Allahabad High Court found her guilty of electoral malpractices, put a stop to public political activity including the theatrical work of JANAM. JANAM resumed its work after the emergency was called off in 1977, but even after a year and half the group had not been able to perform as many shows as they did in the pre-emergency period. Ghosh observes that JANAM's hosts, who had to bear the brunt of the repressive Emergency, were in no financial position to make the logistical arrangements for the staging of full-length proscenium plays (Ghosh *JANAM* 34).

Adding to the paucity of resources was the growing dissatisfaction among the actors of the troupe with their creative output and with not being able to reach out to the audience who were "the source of sustenance for their theatre." It was this crisis that inspired the group and one of its founding members Safdar Hashmi to take a momentous decision. Moloyashree Hashmi revisits the moment when JANAM decided to move away from the exclusivity of the proscenium space to a more egalitarian performance space:

We used to rehearse in the JNU City Center at 35, Feroze Shah Road, and we were sitting there on chairs wondering what to do and it was as simple as that – *agar hum bade natak nahin le ja sakte hain janta ke beech mein to hum chhote natak le jayenge* [if we can't take big plays to the people then we must take short plays] – and this is how, you know, the search for short plays began. We weren't quite satisfied with what we found, and so we took a major decision – I think the most important decision JANAM has ever taken – that we would write our own plays (Hashmi 58-59).

The decision resulted in the group's first self-written short street play *Machine* (1978), which propelled the group to recognition amongst its audience. Various trade unions translated, adapted, and performed the play across India in various languages to communicate the message of the systemic exploitation of the working classes by factory owners and corrupt government apparatuses.

Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhli (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*) was conceived and written in 1979 and is a representative example of the way in which the group conceives and creates its plays. In February 1979 the Delhi Transport Corporation (or DTC) raised bus fares, which added to the burden of the common people who were already reeling under the pressure of steep inflation. JANAM's founder Safdar Hashmi was informed by a SFI colleague that the student federation was organizing a protest and enquired if the company could put on a performance during the event. Hashmi gathered his team and in a few short hours had created the play *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhli* (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*) (Ghosh 45-46). The very real portrayal of a bus stop and the many struggles of the daily commuters while navigating the unreliable DTC network resonated with the public who enthusiastically wove a movement around the play. The Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) was forced to reduce and rationalize its fares in response. JANAM revived the play in February 1986 in response to another DTC fare hike. This time, however, the police and the administration were cautious, and they cracked down on the company, arresting senior members during performances to disrupt proceedings. The play, Safdar Hashmi noted, "was the first time that [JANAM] operated like real street theatre should" (Ghosh 47). JANAM continues to function as an active political street theatre group (they have already performed more than 100 shows in 2018) and has inspired a whole generation of street theatre work in various corners of India.

Both Dutt and JANAM represent the political left in Indian theatre. Dutt's style shifted over the years and it was only in the latter half of his career that he turned to an aesthetic that sheds the veneer of style and narrative and directly addresses political questions, as represented in *Kākdvīper Ek Mā* (*A Mother from Kākdvīper*). For JANAM, to take the political message to the streets through short and sharp vignettes was a primary urge. The pace at which *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhli* (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*) was written, readied, and performed represents the style of the group at its very best. It is for these reasons that I decided to shift the focus of my translations from the lyrical, almost poetic politics of Tagore and Bijan Bhattacharya to the shorter works of Dutt and JANAM. I wanted my students to understand the rapidly shifting political situation in India in the 1970s and the ways in which the major artists of the period were responding to it. I found no better representative of the period than these shorter plays. But the task was easier said than done.

Translating *Rājnīti*

Utpal Dutt's *Kākdvīper Ek Mā* (*A Mother from Kākdvīper*) does not offer any build-up: it launches straight into what will eventually be the heart of the play. A neighbor enquires with the mother (of the title) about her son's whereabouts. The neighbor foretells the inevitable death that awaits the young man for his political leanings. The son – we are told halfway through the first page – is an absconding Communist organizer and the cops are looking for him.

JANAM's *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhli* (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*) does not offer much of an introduction either. An actor comes in with a sign that bears the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) logo. The sign symbolizes a bus stop and immediately we are launched into the action of the play featuring hassled and hapless commuters, who are waiting hopelessly for a bus. The immediacy of both these plays captivates the attention of the non-captive audience and allows the performance event to deliver its message. My challenge and goal while attempting to translate these two plays was to replicate the captivating quality that characterizes them.

When seen side by side, both plays appear to have some strong similarities while being very different from each other. The plays are long enough to sensitize the audience to the malpractices of the ruling political party. As a practical consideration, the plays are also easily transportable to their next performance site. They both allow the actors to escape from political watchdogs who would infiltrate the performance sites as disruptors. Both groups wanted to sensitize the common person to the friend that they had in left-wing politics as opposed to the ruling democratic-centrist coalition headed by the Indian National Congress in New Delhi. Both Dutt and JANAM represent the kind of political immediacy to be expected from plays that are meant to be performed in less than twenty minutes, and in locations that lack the basic infrastructure required for even the most basic theatrical events. Short sharp dialogues, gripping action sequences, and the occasional emotional outburst representing the plight of the marginal populations are the driving forces behind these plays.

There are multiple layers of complexity that appear as major roadblocks in my endeavor to not only translate but also to communicate the political urgency which I consider to be the heart of these dramatic texts. My target audience of American undergraduate students is temporally, spatially, and culturally removed from the milieu of these plays. An Indian village, especially the kind that Dutt chooses as the location for a play, is practically impossible for this group to imagine. Equally impossible is for them to imagine the interminable wait for buses at a city bus stop, because public transport is seldom accessed by these students, the majority of whom have had the luxury of either owning a car or having access to some personal mode of transportation. Moreover, these students have also largely grown up in a culture of round-the-clock social-media driven news delivery which aims to outrage rather than inform. One can add to these cultural differences the fact that most of the students have had no first-hand experience of dealing with class and class struggle and therefore cannot comprehend the precarity of the social situation that the characters of JANAM's plays represent. The problem is further compounded by the fact that most of them regard communism as a way of life (not a socio-political philosophy) that is archaic, impractical, and impedes political and personal freedom. The project, therefore, had to begin with sensitizing students to political thought in general and the global role of communism in particular, especially in the Global South. This is followed with introducing students to the temporal, spatial, and cultural complexity of Eastern and Northern Indian urban spaces. And finally, on to the translated plays.

Theatre is a culturally rooted and socially specific phenomenon. This is especially true in the case of political performance which draws on contemporary events from the source cultural milieu and very rarely aim for the universal. For example, JANAM assumes that its audience, when and if they stop for a performance of its plays, will have had some experience navigating DTC networks, or will relate to the plight of workers in mills that have been locked out. Similarly, Dutt assumes that his audience will know about Kakdwip, an island in the Sunderban region of Bengal, and will have seen news reports of young Communist firebrands revolting against the landed gentry in this area of the state. Based on this preliminary knowledge, the writers aim to inform the audience about what is going on behind the scenes or away from the public gaze. The engagement in the case of Dutt's and JANAM's audience, therefore, is political as opposed to aesthetic. The political engagement of the audience infuses the plays with *rājnīti*, and completes the text. Audience reception, therefore, is not simply an aesthetic necessity but a political need. Political artists like Dutt and JANAM and the success of their political art can only be measured by the political fervor they inspire in spectators. The reason that these works can effectively function with their barebone radical aesthetic is the political imagination of their audience, which does not willingly suspend its disbelief, but fills in the works' missing pieces with their own lived experiences and realities.

Students trained to read plays in a Western classroom look for textual markers that make these works a play first, and a political document later. They do not identify with the characters as flesh-and-blood people, but as characters within a dramatic arc. Finally, the plays are thought to be telling a specific story about a specific set of characters rather than representing a social problem and a need to address it through popular mobilization. The Euro-American theatre tradition is not completely bereft of political content, of course. Euro-American political theatre, especially street performances, are however aesthetically very different from their Indian counterparts being discussed in this essay. *The Living Newspaper* or Julian Beck and Judith Malina's *Living Theatre* relied heavily on the use of symbols, metaphors, and double entendre to create a political rhetoric. Dutt and JANAM, on the other hand are interested in addressing the issues that lie at the core of their plays directly and without the veneer of symbols, perhaps because their audience did not believe in such luxurious urban political rhetoric. In other words, teaching theatre and especially plays that are very heavily rooted in their socio-political milieu reminds one of what Peter Hall describes as "looking through frosted glass at the original [...] you can't quite get at the absolute" (Hall and Batty 387). As a translator, I imagined my work as cleaning the glass as much as possible, while trying not to fit into either end of the spectrum of translations imagined by Hall as stretching from the "[a]lmost pedantic accuracy of the Oxford ones to the over-colloquial, [and] sloppy" (Hall and Batty 387).

My translation of Dutt's *Kākdvīper Ek Mā* (*A Mother from Kakdwip*) begins with a preface. The preface locates the play in Kakdwip and explains that this is an island near the mouth of the river Ganges bordering the largest mangrove forest in the world – the Sunderbans. It then goes on to explain that during the 60s and the 70s, this region was rife with political tension between young Communist

guerilla fighters and the forces of the state (Chattopadhyay). The preface enumerates the distance between Kolkata and Kakdwip and explains how that physical distance translates into social, cultural, political, economic distances and therefore substantially increases the philosophical distance between the city and its fringes.

I added a similar introductory section to my translation of *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhli* (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*). The preface explains the urban landscape and sprawl of Delhi, the significance of the bus network for its citizens and especially to those that make the daily commute from the suburbs into the main city for work. It explains the different meaning of the word “suburb” in the Indian and the American contexts, since I found that my students tend to equate suburb with affluence, an equation contradicted by the Indian social and urban landscape. For both plays I have inserted a section in the preface that briefly explains what is meant by Communism in India.

The preface is followed by an elaborate stage direction. I find this particularly useful in the case of Dutt’s *Kākdvip̄er Ek Mā* (*A Mother from Kakdwip*) since the play is set in a domestic space and I want my students to have a fair idea of what that space might look like in an Indian context. In the case of the JANAM street play, the form allows for a certain flexibility and playfulness and my students seem to understand that a man standing with a sign, inviting the audience to temporarily suspend disbelief and play along, is an allowable creative license. The willingness to play allows me, as the translator, to get quickly past the context and head into the play itself.

With the context firmly established and a vivid mental picture conjured for my students, we dive into the theatrical texts themselves. And it is here that we encounter the major roadblock in this process – the untranslatability of certain words and emotions from the source language to the target language. For example, let me reproduce a section from the original text in Bengali followed by my translation in English to highlight the difference in sentiment that the language switch produces:

*Mā: (Hese) ki ye balen āpni? Āmār Mahendra ekṭā māchi mārte giye
pāre nā, ār gharbāri jvālābe ki kare?*

Paṛāśi: Eke’i bale strī buddhi. Lekhāpaṛā jānō?

Mā: Nā to.

Paṛāśi: Khabarer kāgaj paṛo? Ānandabājār patrikā nām śunecha?

Mā: Nā to (Dutt 537).

Mother: (smiles) You have no idea what you are talking about! My Mahendra is incapable of hurting even a fly, and he went about burning people’s houses?

Neighbor: This is what is referred to as feminine intelligence. Are you literate?

Mother: No.

Neighbor: Do you read the newspapers? Have you heard the name of Anandabazar Patrika?

Mother: No. (Dutt and Banerji 1).

To a Bengali speaker the mother would appear demure and deferential in this brief exchange. The mother’s character, as is easily discernable, is acutely self-aware of her position in the society as an illiterate woman. In the translation, however, as my students noted, the character of the mother appears more confident than she originally is. Her disbelief, for example, at the neighbor’s insinuation that Mahendra, her son, has been burning people’s houses in the Bengali original is a quiet rebuttal of the neighbor’s suggestion. When translated to straddle the fine middle ground between soap opera and pedantic accuracy, the mother’s response reads like a confident assertion. The finer nuances of the language increase this challenge further. The Bengali “*Nā tō*” does not have an effective counterpart in English and therefore had to be translated simply as the far more assertive “No.” The strong negative replaces the mother’s bewilderment at being asked the questions regarding literacy and her acquaintance with the largest circulated daily newspaper in Bengal (*Ānandabāzār Patrikā*) which are evident in her defensive response to these questions in the original.

Emotional responses where a character is either pleading or grieving translate slightly better between languages. For example: the mother’s desperate appeal to god to save her child from harm is evident in the lines, “My God! Narayan! Keep a look out for my Mahendra! He is the last hope, my

only comfort, the only comfort of a poor widow, don't let him die my God, don't take him from me" (Dutt and Banerji 3). The reason for grief and loss translating more easily across languages is explained by studies on cross-cultural interpretations of grief which suggest that "grief is both a universal and a personal experience" (Gloviczki 48).

As the play proceeds, Mahendra comes home for a full meal. The mother enquires of him, "What does 'Communist' mean?" Mahendra's response to this question reminded me of the struggle to translate to my students the politics and the far-left propaganda that guides Mahendra's response. It was almost as if the character of Mahendra were channeling my own difficulty in communicating the message to my students. Mahendra says, "You have asked a very difficult question mother. How do I explain?" (Dutt and Banerji 5). Mahendra's response uses rather simple language because Dutt uses the character as a mouthpiece to inform his audience that Communism and its adherents, the Communists, believe that it is possible to create a classless and oppression-free society where the proletariat will be running the government. Since the audience that Dutt wanted to reach was almost uninitiated into the finer nuances of Communism, just as my student group was, the language used is very simple and void of rhetorical excesses. Dutt's audience, however, were living in the political moment of the plays. Contemporary audiences in Bengal revisiting the plays continue to have the advantage of having a reference to reflect back on the milieu for which the play was originally created. My audience lacked the context to reconstruct this. Therefore it becomes important to continue reinforcing the content, by reminding the readers that the play is not to be read as a story of a mother and her son but as a documentation of the political instability in India during the 1970s.

Later in the play the mother acknowledges being illiterate and accepts the fact that she can't follow everything that Mahendra has been telling her about Communism and the people's revolution. The mother's acknowledgment of her naïveté and lack of education to her son carries tremendous emotional weight for the native speaker. The mother acknowledges the son as intellectually superior through this response. But she continues to engage with Mahendra in decrying the violence that the Communists have unleashed on the landed gentry. Dutt uses the character of the mother masterfully to clear common misconceptions and rumors about Communist ideology. In the equation presented to the audience, the mother represents the common person who is outside of the political crossfire but has questions about the politics at play, while Mahendra is the political person who explains the leftist ideology in easily comprehensible terms for the audience to understand and appreciate. The exchange translated well because of the simple rhetoric, but it was read by my students simply as a tender moment between a mother and her son, especially because the mother almost immediately slips into caregiving mode after the political exchange with her son.

Mahendra sits down for a quick meal which is immediately interrupted by the arrival of the *zamindār* (land-owning member of the upper class) and the police. The mother hides Mahendra and refuses to divulge his whereabouts when the police interrogates her. The *zamindār* realizes that the use of soft power instead of force is going to be more effective in this instance, and begins pleading with the mother to tell him about Mahendra's whereabouts, promising that he will ensure that his life is spared. The long pleading scene between the *zamindār* and the mother is a "hot" moment in the play following the "cold" exchange between the mother and Mahendra where the son introduces his mother (and the audience) to the Communist ideology.

The mother pleads with the *zamindār*, initially feigning innocence, and then gradually gives in to his pressure and reveals where Mahendra is hiding. The strength of the mother's plea is intensified by her use of words like "bābu", "hujur", "mālik", "prabhu", "rājā", "mā-bāp", "garibeer mā-bāp". The first four words are various versions of master, sir, and owner. Depending on context, the words denote the extent of the power differential between the speaker and the addressee. The word "rājā" translates as king, whereas "mā-bāp" and "gariber mā-bāp" translate respectively as "mother-father" (i.e. "parents") and "parents to the poor", meaning figuratively a "protector of the poor". Dutt's audience, who know to equate the figure of the *zamindār* with oppression, can immediately see through the irony of this exchange between the *zamindār* and the mother. The sympathy of the audience would lie with the mother who the audience recognize as desperate to save her son while recognizing the futility of her pleas. Communicating the height of the *zamindār*'s socio-cultural pedestal without complicating the reading with a discussion of the *zamindāri* system was a difficult challenge. The *zamindār*'s clever ploy to sympathize with the mother confused my students, who, not unlike the

mother, dropped their guard and pictured the *zamindār* as a benevolent benefactor. The exchange, however, loses the political urgency and emotional intensity of the original:

Mā: Hujur, āpni āmāder mālik, prabhu, rājā. Āmāke bācān hujur. Āmār Mahendrar prāṅ bācān hujur. Āpni chārā āmāder ye keu nei hujur.

Jamidār: Keṃda nā, pā chāro. Āmi ceṣṭā karchi. Mahendra yadi esab khunokhunir madhye jarīye nā parta, tāhale dekhtām ki kare ai pulīser bāccārā āmār grāme dhoke. Ki karba? Barā bekāyādāye paṛe gechi! Mahendra kothāy, bale debe?

Mā: Hujur mā-bāp. Āpnār pāye mahendrake samṛe dicchi. Āpni pāye thāi deben bābu (Dutt 544).

Mother: My lord, you are our lord, our king, our savior. Save me, my lord. Spare my Mahendra's life my lord. Who else do we have but you, my lord?

Zamindar: Stop crying now! Let go off my feet. I am trying my best. If only Mahendra hadn't been involved in all of this murder and looting. I would have also seen how dare these police enter our village. But what do I do now? I am faced with a conundrum. Now, will you please tell me, where is Mahendra?

Mother: My lord, my protector! I will bring Mahendra to you my lord. But please protect him and save him, my lord (Dutt and Banerji 13-14).

Similarly, the appeal with which the play ends rings hollow in translation when in performance it would have evoked a strong emotional response from the audience: “Mother: Listen all of you, Mahi is my son. They took him away from me. I lost Mahi today, but in return I got all of you, you who will finish the work that Mahi started” (Dutt and Banerji 17)\

Without the context and from the relative safety of being situated in a fairly expensive American mid-size school, my students see the ending of *A Mother from Kakdwip* as a tame melodramatic gesture. The grief of the mother at losing her son to an adversarial political situation translates well into English, as previously mentioned. The mother's declamation, “But I got you arrested my boy, I your own mother. I am now responsible for your murder, my boy,” however, does not carry as much of an emotional weight for my students as it would have for the original audience of the play, who are culturally accustomed to imagining a mother as someone who always prioritizes the interests of their children over their own. The culturally specific notion of the mother as an ultimate refuge drives home the emotional intensity of this scene, which is lost for an audience that fails to recognize this cultural signifier. The desperate plea to take up arms and retaliate against the state machinery with which the play ends and Dutt's intended pro-communist and anti-state sentiments to his audience are therefore lost in translation, obscured for my students by the veneer of what appears to be simply an emotional outburst.

JANAM's *Dī. Tī. Sī. kī dhādhī* (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*) is an even shorter play that was created collectively by the group in response to a Delhi Transport Corporation bus fare hike (Ghosh *JANAM* 45). I use the text not only to showcase the work of Jan Natya Manch (or JANAM) but also to demonstrate how artists can and have responded instantaneously to moments of civic and political crisis. I chose this play from amongst JANAM's extensive repertoire of plays because a fare hike – even if in a completely different context – is a phenomenon that my undergraduate student population can relate

to and are often vocally frustrated with. The play's title literally translates as "DTC's Rigging" and is a fairly convenient way to communicate the basic premise of the text. I changed the title to *The Corrupt Trappings of DTC* for my translation to convey the multiple levels of corrupt practices affecting the public utility company with which the play deals. This was part of my strategy outlined above regarding establishing context for my primary readers – American undergraduate students.

Context alone is, however, not enough to communicate the intricacies of the local problem that JANAM addresses through this play. In an initial episode of the play, the hapless passengers see a bus in the distance and they all swing into action to attract the attention of the driver and to get the bus to stop at the bus stop. They, however, soon realize that this is not the ride that they want:

Sab: rok ke, rok ke! nahĩ-nahĩ jāne do, dīlaks haĩ. hā, ye to zarūr rukegĩ. āge badh bhāĩ, yahā kisi ke pās fāltū paise nahĩ haĩ dīlaks mē baiṭhne ke. har dūsarī basko ko to dīlaks banā diyā hai. ye nayā tarīkā nīkalā hai sālō ne kirāe barhāne kā. sām̐ bhī marā, lāṭhī bhī salāmat. are, are, ek aur āĩ. rok ke, rok ke. ye bhī le gayā. mazāk banā rakhā hai sālō ne.

Tīsrā: ye basē kyā sarkē nāpne ke lie calāĩ haĩ. ātī haĩ, jātī haĩ. (nairā lāgātā haĩ.) dī. ṭī. sī. murdābād. bas sārvis im̐prūv karo. dī. ṭī. sī. hāy-hāy (JANAM 41).

All: Stop! Stop! Forget it, let it go. This one is a deluxe. This one will stop here for sure. Move on man, no one here has any extra change lying around to ride in a deluxe bus. Every second bus is a deluxe. This is a new way that these DTC folks have invented to charge us more for the same ride. Two birds with one stone. Hey, hey, there's one more bus. Stop, stop! And of course, this won't stop. What a joke this is.

Third person: Do these buses get out on streets to measure them? They come, and they go. (Starts sloganeering) Down with DTC. Improve the bus service. Down with DTC, DTC down, down! (JANAM and Banerji 2).

While the dominant sentiment of this passage is abundantly clear in translation, students struggle with processing the catalyst behind the scene, because the distinction between the deluxe bus and a regular bus is often difficult to understand outside of an Indian context. The abysmal public transportation infrastructure in Los Angeles helps the students and I to get started on a conversation about the issue that lies at the core of this play. The difference is of course that while for Angelenos the lack of public transport options is a nuisance that we can muse upon, the corrupt practices of the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) affects the real lives of millions of people. And while the play translates relatively well, for the students *The Corrupt Trappings of DTC* is not a political play but a "fun" text based on the daily troubles of everyday people. The misreading stems perhaps from a lack of personal and regular engagement with politics and political art. In the Indian context, and especially in the experience of JANAM, the use of popular culture elements, and peppering a political work with humorous quips and catchy phrases, simply helps drive the message home (Ghosh *JANAM* 155). There are western examples of the same, but over the years the plays of Brecht or the street activism of the Living Theatre have acquired an archival quality which separates the "fun" from the "political." The neo-liberal *rājnīti* at play in excising the political from an erstwhile political text has prevented students from acquiring and appreciating the political not only in foreign texts but in their own milieu as well.

Later in the play, the disgruntled passengers, tired of waiting for buses, decide to march to the offices of the DTC to protest against the dismal service plaguing their lives. The current political climate in the United States and the several marches that have witnessed millions take to the streets since

January 2017 has sensitized an otherwise politically inactive student population to the merits of collective bargaining and a collective show of dissent. Therefore, the suggestion from one of the passengers to demonstrate in front of Scindia House, the DTC headquarters, resonates well with them. What stumps the students immediately, however, is the way that JANAM, borrowing from extant conventions seen across several traditional Indian performance forms, dissipates the building tension and momentum palpable in the passengers' mobilization by introducing the DTC manager with his lyrical musing on the luxury of his coveted position:

Mainejar: phūl hū is muskurāte caman kā, bādsāh hū dhādhaliyō aur gaban kā, mainejar hū dillī parivahan nigam kā. qismat na bhī kyā gaddhī dilvāi hai, ghar baiṭhe bampar lāṭrī khulvāi hai. karorō kā lendēn hai, pūchne vālā koī nahī, ārām hai, tahrīf hai, cain hai, ṭokne vālā koī nahī, har baras saikarō base kharīdavāte hai, ḍipo mē unke iñjan khulvāte hai, karte haī lākhō kī kamāī, ākhīr ham ṭahare prajātantr ke jamāī. phīr prāiveṭ bas vāle hamāre purāne yār haī, āṭh kamāte haī to dete hamē cār haī, ūpar se nīc tak bāṭṭa hai, isīlie dhandhā unse khūb paṭṭā hai. unkī khātīr apnī basō ko kaṇḍam karvāte haī, sāl bhar mē lohe kā bhāv bikvāte haī. hota hai ghaṭā to huā kare, kaun-sā apne bāp kā jātā hai? sarkārī paisā hai, khajāne se at hai, peṭ mē samātā hai (JANAM 42).

Manager: I am a flower of this beautiful valley, emperor of all this confusion and mischief, a manager of the Delhi Transport Corporation. What a seat I hold by sheer luck, a bumper lottery from the comforts of my home. I deal in millions, no one to answer to. Such comfort, such peace, such doubtless bliss, and no one to rein me in. I sanction the purchase of hundreds of buses every year, take their engines apart in the depot, make millions from their sales, after all I am democracy's favorite son-in-law. The private bus operators are old friends of mine, if they make a dime, a nickel is sure to be mine, it gets distributed all the way through the food chain, no wonder then that everyone loves them. For their sake, we condemn our buses and sell them for the price of scrap in a year. The corporation runs on a loss, but why should we bother? It is public money after all, comes from the government coffers to end up in our pockets. (JANAM and Banerji 4).

The rising action followed by the "climactic moment" convention of much of narrative Western theatre seldom allows for such a lyrical intervention at such a critical moment in the play (Cardwell 877-878). The alternating "hot" and "cold" convention is, however, quite common in Indian forms like *yātrā* (Sarkar 93-94). Samik Bandyopadhyay explains this phenomenon while discussing the influence of *yātrā* on the writing of Utpal Dutt: "the attempt to create a highly effective episodic dramatic impact [...] relies on a person succumbing to the tremendous physical and emotional stress surrounding him and yet rising up through it by thwarting the same traumatic episodes through sheer will power" (Bandyopadhyay iii). The manager's lyrical introduction is the "cold" episode that follows the impassioned call from the passengers to initiate a vocal and active agitation against the DTC's malpractices. It also familiarizes the audience to the nature and extent of the DTC's corrupt practices through the person of the manager. The nonchalant way in which the manager celebrates rampant corruption is sure to have provoked strong reactions from the Delhi audience, and that can only be communicated as a complementary piece to the translation along with contemporary references from the student's own milieu – albeit without the same rousing effect.

Bandyopadhyay explains that the conflict which is obvious in these dramatic episodes is between the vested interests of the state power and the individual. The manager, therefore, is not simply a character but a representation of the corrupt state power, whose sole purpose is to trample the

individuals represented by the passengers. While Brechtian epic theatre sought to train the Western reader and audience for his dramas about characters being symbolic, the difference in cultural milieu does not allow that training to inform reader perception in the case of a Hindi play in translation. Students tend to read the manager as a single corrupt character, while the text seems to demand that its audiences/readers interpret him as a metonymy, or as the norm for people holding and wielding similarly powerful positions. The action reaches its highpoint when the manager unleashes police violence on the protesters. The scene freezes, and various characters address the audience, directly telling them why DTC bus fares are on the rise. The actors then break into a song informing the audience that the government is busy colluding with the International Monetary Fund and therefore inflation is on the rise in the country. They also lament the way in which the state mechanism cracks down on protests. The intent is to awaken the audience to political awareness, if not action. The audience is aware that the rising bus fare is but one of the many ways in which the state system is taking advantage of the common masses and therefore it violently quashes any protests.

Even though a learning curve impedes a full comprehension of this play, students seem to understand better the agitation, the protest song, and the call to march that punctuate the play, as opposed to Dutt's more sedentary *A Mother from Kakdwip*. As opposed to Dutt's play, JANAM's work is expressly designed for the streets and for people with short attention spans. The effect of everyday corruption on people's daily lives is, however, lost on the students.

Presenting the two plays *A Mother from Kakdwip* and *The Corrupt Trappings of DTC* together in their translated versions is an attempt to introduce students to post-independence Indian political performance. The plays are from a politically turbulent period in modern Indian history when civil liberty was cut significantly short. The plays celebrate resilience of the common masses in the face of state-sponsored and -administered terrorism; they inform the people about an ally systematically vilified by the state mechanism – leftist politics. And yet, in translation, the plays fail to resonate authentically with an American readership, appearing as static historical artefacts. The lack of historical context and the unfamiliarity of the readers with political art seem to be the main barrier that students face in the attempt to understand the political urgency of the texts, which seems obvious to a native reader. Providing complementary readings and a thorough grounding in the political context that resulted in the creation of the plays partially alleviates the problem. Complementary information, however, is not enough to bypass the problem that certain words and phrases pose, being simply not translatable to English from either Bengali or Hindi. The untranslatability of the words means that the emotion that they represent and the reactions that they engender for a native audience are equally beyond translation, and can only be approximated in the translated text. In spite of these challenges, it is important that more plays are translated from their original languages into English. As Harry Carlson opines, “the drama will always have to lean heavily on translators. [...] Playwrights deserve more translators who can provide these weapons” (Carlson 58). Translation of more Indian plays from their original to English is the only way to facilitate a wider and more complete engagement with contemporary Indian cultural expression in classrooms and in the academy.

Conclusion

Caridad Svich writes, “The art of translation is a delicate one. At its best, you should not notice as an audience member that a play has been translated, but feel as if you are watching and listening to the original” (Svich 377). Even though the purpose of my translation is primarily academic, and my audience is composed of American undergraduate students, I wanted them to experience what Svich hopes the result of most translations, including his own translation of Garcia Lorca's work, would be: a seamless, immediate understanding of a dramatic text, albeit foreign. But as Douglas Langworthy reminds us, the comparison with the original language in a translation is never perfect and “some things just do get lost in translation” (Langworthy 379). Even with Langworthy's assurance, I worried, much like Anushiya Sivanarayanan did while attempting to translate Tamil Dalit poetry, about “making literal translations of poetry that show nothing but a kind of narrow, professional efficiency on the part of the translator” (Sivanarayanan 57). In order to circumvent the risk of falling prey to the “professional

efficiency” or the “pedantic accuracy” of the academic translator, I resorted to prefixing the texts that I was translating with elaborate and lengthy explanations that help transport the audience into the world of the play. Having done this, the translation takes its course, employing what Dirk Delabastita has suggested and Teçza reminds us as being one of the most popular solutions adopted by translators: not translating word for word but reconstructing the ideas of the original by finding similar phenomena in the target language (Teçza 469).

While acknowledging the power translators and translations wield in “constructing representations of foreign countries,” Lawrence Venuti warns translators that translations are often recreated to reflect the current prevalent trends in the target language. This, Venuti says, dehistoricizes “foreign literatures” (Robinson 131). This can represent an undesirable pitfall, no doubt; but in the specific instance of translating political plays from a different milieu and to facilitate understanding, I found it extremely profitable to draw lines that connected the texts to the lived experiences of my audience. In doing so, I echo Langworthy’s celebration of “[g]ood theatrical translations [which] help to eliminate cultural boundaries by making texts accessible that would otherwise have remained undecipherable” (Langworthy 379). For the sake of academic congruity, I attempted to remain as faithful as I could to the “exotic original”, but also to evoke a reaction that could somewhat approximate the intense engagement that *Kākdvīper Ek Mā* and *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhādhī* inspired among its original audience. I had to change the texts ever so little so as to “deliver [them] to [my] audience in as familiar a fashion as possible” (Matthews 38). And for the purposes of communicating *rājnīti*, these texts became, after an “active, imagined conversation” between the creators and myself, the translator, *A Mother from Kakdwip* and *The Corrupt Trappings of D.T.C.* The translations themselves emerge as products of an active political negotiation. Pitted against each other are my own *rājnīti*, which inspires me to teach texts that are not stereotypical representations of exotic India, the *rājnīti* of the original texts which put the stories of the everyday people and their hardships squarely at the center of public scrutiny, and my idea of what constitutes political art informed by my experience of creating, engaging with and performing political theatre in India. The project gets complicated further with a single person simultaneously donning the many hats of being the translator, the educator, and a politically conscious artist. The simultaneity of the multiple roles requires a further negotiation between the expectations of each role. And all this while having to make up for the lack of *rājnīti* in the everyday lives of my audience conditioning their reading and reception of the plays in translation, which in turn effects the way I evaluate the success of my own work and ability to serve as the conduit for the *rājnīti* intended by Dutt and JANAM. The exercise outlined above therefore becomes a very complicated one – but crucial, since it creates a hitherto unavailable platform for performance from the Indian streets.

Notes

¹ Most standard theatre textbooks readily available and used in the Western market include a translation of Tagore. Less readily available is a collection of plays that feature Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad (see Karnad, Sircar and Tendulkar).

² The translations are unpublished. Any references to these works in the rest of the essay are to my own unpublished translations.

³ The Indian National Congress (referred to more commonly simply as the Congress) is the oldest political party in India. It has been at the helm of the Indian Federal Government more times than any other political party in Independent India. Originally founded by A.O. Hume, as a safety valve for the nascent nationalist dissent amongst the nineteenth century Indian middle-class intelligentsia, the party emerged as a strong platform for the M.K. Gandhi-led freedom movement. After independence in 1947 the Congress took over the reins of the federal government under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru's Fabian economic policies laid the foundation for the modern Congress party and its democratic-centrist political stance.

⁴ Jatra or *yātrā* is an itinerant form of Bengali theatre. It is characterized by a loud melodramatic performance style catering to an audience of thousands packed closely next to the performance space. Music borrowed from folk and popular sources is a mainstay of the art form. The Bengali group theatre is a largely urban phenomenon that emerged out of the ashes of the Indian People's Theatre Association in 1948. Educated, urban middle-class young men and women with full-time day jobs got together after work to create socially conscious plays that addressed the pressing political concerns of the day. The groups depended on government grants and public subsidies to continue functioning (for more information see Lal). The form relied more on dialogue and borrowed widely from Western realism, marking a departure from the more flamboyant melodramatic style of indigenous Indian performance forms. Dutt's foray into *yātrā* was signaled by his adopting the more flamboyant style of the itinerant art form while maintaining the political concerns of the urban group theatre.

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Arnab Banerji
Assistant Professor
Loyola Marymount University
USA
arnab.banerji@lmu.edu
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