

Language and Liberation: A Study of Political Theatre in West Bengal

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Thus we must detach the phenomena from the form in which they are immediately given and discover the intervening links which connect them to their core, their essence. In so doing, we shall arrive at an understanding of their apparent form and see it as the form in which the inner core necessarily appears. It is necessary because of the historical character of the facts, because they have grown in the soil of . . . society. This twofold character, the simultaneous recognition and transcendence of immediate appearance is precisely the dialectical nexus.

GEORG LUKACS, *History & Class-consciousness*

IN 1944 A THEATRE MOVEMENT called the Indian People's Theatre Association was born. It was a novel phenomenon because it was organized on a national scale, it was non-commercial and, most importantly, an attempt to use culture for political mobilization and to raise consciousness about politics and society. Culture itself was seen as organizable and a site for class struggle rather than a matter of individual creativity and spontaneity. Created under the auspices of the united Communist Party of India, carried forward by the massive participation of the urban intelligentsia, this movement largely shaped the course of modern Indian theatre. Today's "group theatre movements" or the progressive theatre all acknowledge its legacy. The birth was dramatic; in 1944 in a working class district of Bombay, "the red capital of India," the IPTA held its inaugural conference and announced its motto with a great flourish: "The People's Theatre Stars the People."

With the arrival of this new protagonist, "the people," onto the theatrical stage the IPTA also announced a change in the Indian political scene. This same protagonist "the people" had also become the new revolutionary agent under the name of the proletariat as a combination of the urban working class and the landless and land-poor peasantry. The so-called "natural" leaders of the people — the landlords, the national bourgeoisie, and even the middle-class intelligentsia — had to yield place to this class at the theoretical level. Communist theories learnt from Marx, Lenin, and the Bolsheviks had no provision for any other revolutionary hero.

This new communist politics totally radicalized the theatre scene in undivided Bengal. The focus of theatre shifted from the commercial stage to the amateur political stage and for the first time since the inception of Bengali theatre in the 1860's characters of peasants and workers walked the boards of the stage in non-menial roles, as the organizers of their own struggles. Stages no longer reverberated with the heroic rantings and tragic declamations of the last kings and princes of India. In plays such as Bijan Bhattacharyya's *The New Harvest (Nabanna)* or *The Confession (Jabanbandi)* a definite attempt was made to show the peasant's progress from powerlessness to power. From being portrayed as the victims of the 1943 Bengal famine they were transformed into the members of a peasant collective who promised a fair fight to their oppressors in the next round. This same spirit, sharpened through the struggles of the Telengana and the Bengal share-croppers (*Tebhaga Andolan*), found its expression in songs such as:

Watch out, take care,
Sharpen your scythes,
Brothers, guard your rice and pride,
For
We will never again give up
This rice
That we have sowed with our blood.¹

These were new songs and plays about new times and new politics. And they needed, and were couched in, a new language. The Bengali of the middle class — the gentlemen, the academics,

and the literateurs — no longer sufficed; a different Bengali was resorted to — a Bengali spoken by the millions in the countryside, in the city slums. The middle-class cultural activist in search of a language to expose exploitation and to give a voice to the new hero, “the people,” turned to the “dialects” of different areas and the languages of the streets, the slums and different occupations.

Popular language became a matter of deep concern for the IPTA particularly as its mainstay were members of the urban intelligentsia who engaged in a representational and educative politics. After all “the people’s theatre” which “starred” the people did so with the help of those who were formally educated and westernized, equally removed from the countryside and the city slums. What were presented as people’s stories were in most cases neither created by the people nor narrated in their own voices. It was the middle-class playwrights, with sympathetic observation of the miseries of the people, who wrote the plays, and it was middle-class actors and actresses who put on tattered clothes, carried begging bowls or sticks and spears, and spoke in dialects carefully erasing the traces of the “proper” or “high” Bengali that they had spoken all their lives. And yet given the time and the embryonic state of communist organization, the situation was unavoidable. Consequently the problem of the medium of communication assumed large proportions since the project of this new political theatre was to be easily understood by the people, to represent popular reality both to them and the middle class, and to legitimize popular/folk forms as culture. This project groped for a new aesthetic and voiced a demand for a “realist” theatre; outside and unaware of the European Marxist debate over “realism” the term was used to indicate the creation of an “authentic picture” of popular life and contemporary reality. Language was an indisputable element in this effort at “authenticity.”

In conveying the popular reality this new theatre sought to bridge the gap between the rural and the urban worlds as well as that between the middle and working classes. It sought to convey to the middle class in particular, some knowledge about how the subaltern classes lived and the severity of their day to day exist-

tence. The task of producing a realist art in this context often meant that of a faithful description of the surface of life rather than a dramatization of a social analysis. As such the new theatre dismantled the palatial settings of the old stage and put up tin can huts and torn burlap backdrops, replaced their tin swords with hammers and sickles, and filled the sound-tracks with beggars' cries, the sound of whiplashes and slogans rather than songs of courtesans. The dialogue naturally followed suit and the declamatory, rhetorical prose or blank verse were substituted with rural speech, street or factory talk, or even broken sentences. The result seems to have been particularly convincing to the middle class. The newspaper reviewers of *The New Harvest*, for example, or the established commercial actors, were all equally struck by the novelty and the life-likeness of this new "beggars' opera." It was felt that the use of new types of language was the main graphic tool for bringing the people's reality into the middle-class world. The use of dialect in particular was the hallmark of authenticity of the "real" portrayal of the life of the "real" people of Bengal.

While this equation of realism with a "slice-of-life" approach to reality provided the middle class with a sense of the other kinds of lives lived by the poor, it left unanswered and unposed some major questions regarding analytical and explorative ways of uncovering the social relations that structured those lives. It also took "reality" for granted, blocked questions regarding the methods of this "realism" and equated a "real" portrayal with a naturalistic mode of depiction. It often diverted the cultural activists towards an empiricist rather than an analytical and historical-materialist approach. Preoccupied with an immediate event of an image, the playwrights often left no dramatic provision for the extra-local character of the social forces that informed them. *The New Harvest* (1944), for example, while providing a vivid portrayal of the sufferings of a famine-stricken, once well-to-do peasant household gives us little or no indication of the social forces that structure and surround these lives. Nor is the devastation produced by the famine of 1943 (1.5 to 3 million are estimated to have died in it) made comprehensible by the presence of a few hoarders, black marketeers, and brothel keepers.

This uncontextualized famine assumes the character of natural cataclysm which a careful build-up of dialogue in dialect, capturing moments of suffering, rage, and despair, only enhances rather than historicizes. The concentration of the playwright and the production (with special light effects, a revolving stage, and naturalist make up and acting techniques) is too much on the surface, on the empirical immediate, which, of course, makes the last scene about collectivization and militancy seem empty and rhetorical. It lacks the dynamism of a social process and becomes iconic rather than political since organization cannot happen "in general" but must be context-specific. And yet this play, produced out of a real sympathy for the plight of the people, and also unique in attempting to assign the people an initiator's role, with all its shortcomings was seen by the middle class as the people's own version of the 1943 famine. When we ponder over the reasons for such a belief we can only come to the conclusion that it was due to the creation of a stereotypical environment of poverty and a dialogue in dialect. The attention of the audience was also riveted to the high display of feelings, which could be recognized by the middle-class audience as being noble enough or "pathetic" enough to be worth heightening. The naturalism of language completes the illusion of reality. A life-like copy seemed to be the aim of the producers, and the audience responded to this by finding in the play the "real thing." But because questions regarding the social construction of reality, or the mode called "realism," were yet to be asked it remained unnoticed that often what passed for the peasants' reality was the middle-class version of the rural world. These plays fulfilled certain norms or expectations of the middle-class audience, which is why perhaps the reviewers could talk about the lead actor as being "more of a peasant than a peasant could be." Through the naturalism of acting and language the issue not only shifted from politics to imitation, but often to the imitation of an idealized or stereotypical version of the popular reality.

While such idealization came from the communist movement and its overall social impact, the stereotypes of class, gender, age, good, and evil mostly came from the conventions of the bourgeois/commercial stage and petty-bourgeois or middle-class social

ethos. Large numbers of the audience and most of the cultural producers were brought up within these theatrical conventions and this ethos. The theatrical conventions had naturalized certain stereotypical forms of characterization and emotions. Neither was the influence of the English stage and dramatic tradition negligible in the development of these stage conventions. Overall they encoded the morality and the world-view of a semi-feudal/semi-bourgeois urban population, not that of the working class or the peasantry. This largely unconscious legacy of what was once "the theatre," in conjunction with an imitative realism, generated a form and a content which exposed the new theatre to the danger of subordinating the culture and politics of the very people they wished to help or idealized by offering a decontextualized, embourgeoisified version of their story. Again we may look at Bhatlacharya's *The New Harvest* for an example. Here, in the character of the old peasant "patriarch" Pradhan, Shakespeare's *King Lear* receives his peasant incarnation. Put through the trials of famine, fire, and flood he rises to great sonorous declamations of rage and despair. His pathos and all that he declaims provide the audience more with echoes of Shakespeare than the voice of the Bengali peasantry. That it is in a dialect does not change this, though the dialect lends a touch of the authenticity of peasant life or character. Other examples of conventionalization and non-popular ethics and world-view may be found in the portrayals of women and children: quaint scenes of domesticity and moments of pathos introduced through dying, lisping, or precocious babes and frequent weeping. The repudiation of these conventions does not signify that the peasantry or the slum-dwellers have no personal lives, no hearts and minds; but rather indicates what moments of their lives are selected to be put on view, or what is projected into their lives by the middle class, and to what extent these are in tune with the middle-class's experience and conception of theatre and morality. It would often seem that with other clothes, other settings, and in another language for dialogue, many of these scenes could fit into the genre of drawing-room comedies. It also seems as though the middle-class progressives, in an effort to point out the "humanity" of the poor, measured their "humanity" in terms of their approximation to middle-class morality

and emotional life. The idea seems to have been to point out how much like "us" they were; that they too laughed, cried, loved, and lamented like "us." Without disputing a genuine claim for an emotional life for the subaltern classes one could ask the question — "but do they laugh, cry, sigh, and lament about the same things or love or die in the same way"? And if they did not would they be any less "human"? Must not one avoid the values and practices of the middle class becoming universalized into *the* human practice? Is the creation of the "other" simply a matter of likeness and imitation — sounding something like the other? Dialect, occupational languages, broken sentences, stage props, lighting, and naturalistic acting may all contrive to lull our minds while satisfying our eyes and ears.

The minds of the colonial middle-class audiences can also be lulled, for instance, by the echoes of Shakespeare, by allusions to a knowledge of "tragic" conventions; the echoes may divert the audience from the fact that this is not a mythic, structural use of Shakespeare but a reduction of a dramatic text to a story, a set of typical speeches and fixed theatrical devices. The plays of Aeschylus or Sophocles, or of Shakespeare for that matter, have been often reworked or re-elaborated as myths rather than as stories told through historically specific stage conventions. Sartre in *The Flies*, Brecht in the retelling of *Timon of Athens*, Aimé Césaire in *The Tempest*, Athol Fugard in *The Island*, to name a few playwrights, have reworked certain basic themes to represent Nazism, capitalism, imperialism, and apartheid respectively. But in *The New Harvest* the thematic inner core, the mythic element of *King Lear*, has been bypassed in favour of a ranting, pathetic emotionalism. The aim here seems to be a piece that rouses the audience's emotions, not a comprehensible presentation of the peasant's world.

II

The tradition of IPTA continues in the cities of India. The Group Theatre Movement of Calcutta works within this tradition and abounds with plays about the Bengali peasantry. As before, fewer plays are written or performed about the urban working class, the slum or pavement dwellers than about the peasantry.

And in all this the same kind of problem that faced the IPTA nearly forty years ago continues to haunt the world of theatre. Since the 1940's the urban progressive or left-wing culture milieu is that of middle-class performers/writers trying to enlighten their own class, exposing horror stories from the countryside or the slums. The practice of an imitative realism also continues in all good faith and political intention. Plays abound with attempts to reproduce an immaculate surface of life which comes into direct conflict within the play with a kind of "iconic realism," which presents us with *the* peasant or *the* woman of the people, *the* worker, etc. This characterization is not so much a Lukacsian "type," a representative class character as he actually exists in the present conjuncture of social relations in Bengal, but more a set of fixed, static, idealized images of who they should be, given an abstract formulation of revolutions. As imitative realism suffers from an empiricist approach so this icon building of workers and peasants suffers from an idealism and a political prescriptiveness. In this, revolution is not seen as a developing social process produced by certain historical classes beginning from where they are, but as an event which could be approximated by only the perfect character types. Even though this idealization came about as a result of a change in the political perspective it moved away from the ground of history, took on an ideological character, and complemented the empirical fixity of naturalist description. Since here as well a process-oriented view of society and revolution was lacking, and yet a revolution or resistance was integral to the plot, these iconic representations accomplished this as a part of the idealization itself. They are revolutionary because they are who they are, not because of, and in the way of, who they can become. They "embody" class-consciousness rather than "become" class conscious, much in the manner in which icons embody holiness. Hence they accomplish the task of resistance as indeed they must since in terms of the narrative development the play begins from the last victorious scene.

The use of dialect or appropriate language, however, lends these iconic idealizations the touch of typicality, and often, as, for instance, in Utpal Dutt's play *Titu Mir* serves as a substitute for class analysis. In this play the peasant hero Titu Mir (the

term "peasant" here includes rich farmers such as Titu) stages an idealized uprising against the foreign invaders and dies a martyr's death. The historical Titu Mir as a member of the landed class, the social relations of contemporary Bengal, as well as the colonialist penetration are nowhere to be found, but instead we have a play in universalist terms outside of the frame of "mere" history. Titu Mir and his followers as well as the Foreign Invaders are inflated beyond life-size. One set was born to make heroic sacrifices and the other to dominate; they embody the primal forces of good and evil. As is common with this kind of play, exploitation or domination remains utterly non-specified or undifferentiated, making it impossible to grasp the real political process. There is about as much real political dynamism in this play as quickly shuffling through a pack of heroic pictures! It is basically a series of static images gaining momentum through a successive placement. Here the role of language is not only important in masking an ideological approach to politics, but also in displacing it into patriotism. This play, because it is placed in a distant past, has less of a clash between mimetic and iconic types of realism.

But outside of the naturalistic use of language and the political rhetoric of the prescriptive ideological mode there has also developed a use of language that displays and clarifies the social relations of domination. Instead of a sustained use of a dialect which has a greater chance of presenting a middle-class version of reality than that of the working class or the peasantry the playwrights often combine different types of speech to encode the different class views and relations. This method, instead of drawing the audience into an illusion of reality, distances the viewer and facilitates a clearer observation and a critical perspective. On the one hand, the typicality of the speech with its particular use of idioms, images, and constructions gives a sense of the group in itself, its cohesive community consciousness; on the other hand, the presence of other types of speech makes of language an area of class struggle as well. A good example of this is the use of language in a play by Arun Mukhopadhyay called *The Tale of Marich* (*Marich-samvad*). Here Marx's statement about history as being the history of class struggles is dramatized over a long

span of time. The narrative time ranges from the epic days of *The Ramayana* to the present, moving from the legendary world of the man-god Rama and the demon king Ravana of Srilanka to the streets of contemporary Calcutta. In between Mukhopadhyay provides a detour through the United States of America. At each phase he presents an individual's response to the pressures exerted by the state and the ideological hegemony of the ruling classes, until he reaches the possibility of class-struggle through an individual's growing class-conscious response. In each phase the play emphasizes the particularity of the situation while containing it within an overall framework of domination and response. In this way, each scene which would have been impossible out of its own historical setting, is also dovetailed into the next one. Much of this dialectical complexity is realized through the use of different types of speech.

The play starts in a street of Calcutta where a street entertainer — a juggler/magician/singer/player — is drumming up his audience with a high sales pitch. Like all con-men he promises the impossible. He claims to be able to resurrect the mythic figures of the *Ramayana*, but also, in attempting to please other tastes, he promises scenes that appeal to modern sensibilities. He promises scenes from America as well as from the low life of Bengal. The play moves through a hilarious mixture of these levels creating confusions and mix-ups, but also using these confusions to achieve a clarity and a continuity. The confusion created by the frequent mistakes made by the ruling classes about their different parts (sliding mid-speech from the dialogue of the mythic tyrant Ravana to that of the state department or CIA official) also serves as a basis for political clarity. Similarities and dissimilarities in the historical particularities build towards a resolution where all the subordinated characters get out of the magician-dramatist's directorial control and refuse to die in the service of or at the hands of the ruling classes. The shift in the use of speech indicates alteration without the use of curtains, changes of scenes, or situations. The epic characters (who frequently feature in the popular theatrical form known as *Jatra*) speak in a highly declamatory blank verse with which the audience is familiar from its experience at the *Jatras* and the other Bengali plays. The exhortation

by the demon king Ravana to Marich, the turncoat pacifist demon who is pining away for Rama the man-god, well known to all Bengalis from the *Ramayana*, now takes on the tone of political harangue by the congress (nationalist) leaders as they preach patriotism to the poor. This is further emphasized by the litany of patriotism delivered by a priest figure in mock-Sanskrit (Bengali spoken with Sanskrit endings). The contemporary relevance of this scene is further emphasized as the actor in Ravana's part confuses his cue and immediately descends to dialect. Now transformed in to the landlord's bailiff he brow-beats the ex-retainer of the landlord, a landless peasant called Isvar, to break a few heads during the rent collection. For both Marich and Isvar individual indebtedness, gratefulness to a good patron, patriotism, or the good of the village (identified with the good of the landlord) are used to prod them to identify with their oppressors.

The scope extends even further, laterally to the United States, rather than into the past, where a lackey of the state department harasses a liberal upper middle-class young man to go to Vietnam to fight for his president and his country. As the patriotic injunction of President John F. Kennedy booms through the auditorium — "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country" — the reply comes from the young man Gregory in a monotonous, dead Bengali of the right-wing daily newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. More of the same is continued by the state department official. This is strongly contrasted by the peasant speech of Isvar and the half-gentrified dialect of the bailiff, whose speech betrays class origin and present political affiliations. The audience is further entertained by the lumpenized street Bengali of the magician. The issue of understanding reality is no longer posed in terms of imitation, or life-likeness, but of an over all dynamic version of the social relations that structure domination of different kinds. This particular use of language as integral to the narrative breaks the bourgeois dichotomy between form and context. There is no attempt here to present the poor peasant's world or world-view by trying to step into his shoes through an act of empathy, but instead to display the relations of inequality that entangle the different classes.

There is a clear shift here from aiming at portraying the authentic peasant experience (which the middle class is structurally, existentially barred from doing) to politicizing a problem no matter where it is located.

Other than using language politically in some plays Bengali theatre has a remarkable instance of dramatization of the issue of politics of language. *The Tin Sword (Tiner Talwar)* by Utpal Dutta is a play about the necessity of a new aesthetic. It includes in its purview the problem of language as a medium of representation and communication, not only with middle-class audiences, but with the people themselves. The first scene centres on the encounter between Benimadhab Chatujye (a drunk director of a commercial theatre) and a street-sweeper who is also a latrine cleaner. The drunk Benimadhab is accosted by this character from the lower depths, who sticks out his head from a manhole and throws some dirt at the Brahmin to affront him and attract his attention. Benimadhab, however, takes no offence at this, and instead gets into a conversation with him, trying to convince the sweeper to visit the theatre. At this point the following interchange takes place:

Beni: . . . so you don't go to plays?

Sweeper: Why should I? What's in it for the likes of us any way? The Babus (gentlemen) will live it up at the theatres, screw around with women from the market, and use language that we can't understand. (*Pours out some more dirt.*) Better to watch the dancing girls or *Ramlila* in our own slum. This peacock Mayur play or whatever that you mentioned — what's that about?

Beni: Mayurbahan, you see, is the prince of Kashmir. The story . . .

Sweeper: Damn the prince! Why do you have to do this? Get all dressed up in your red and blue clothes and tinsels, paint your faces and play at kings and princes? After all this education why must you tie a tin sword around your waist and act childish?

Ben: Tin sword? Childish?

Sweeper: Why can't you dress as who you are? Can't you see that there is a lot of dirt on you?

Acknowledging that "there's a lot of dirt" on the middle class as a party to class exploitation, Utpal Dutt attempted to transform this *Tin Sword* of theatre, a plaything of the middle class and the entrepreneur, into a real sword, a revolutionary weapon. The use of language in this play is astounding in grasping the complexity that structures the socio-cultural reality of a colonized middle class. He captures some of the existing contradictions in terms of dialect vs. "high" Bengali, colloquial vs. formal Bengali, occupational language of the street and the stage vs. academic Bengali, and finally in terms of English used by the educated "Young Bengal" confronted by the anti-colonial Bengali of the national liberation movement. The issue of realism has moved very far away from its first groping phase.

In problematizing some of the "givens" of the earlier IPTA organizers the group theatre movement has moved a step ahead. But this has been possible because the IPTA has had a real impact on Indian theatre, and, however unsatisfactorily, has made the demand for a new realist aesthetic. It is not surprising that this most conscious, unique play about language, reality, and politics — *The Tin Sword* — comes from a playwright, actor, and director whose beginnings lie in the IPTA. He and others have often considered it a political problem that the middle class often stood in for the people. Even as long ago as the thirties the Bengali poet Jatindranath Sengupta remarked in a satirical poem on the populism of the middle class:

Remember, brothers,
We are not peasants,
We are the peasants' barristers.

This substitution was and remains as problematic as if Harriet Beecher-Stowe or some other white American writer (no matter how sympathetic) were to write about the "authentic" black experience, or their Uncle Toms or Elizas were to be seen as "types" of the black American, or all black people were to be presented as undifferentiated, stereotypical characters. When the oppressed fight against using the oppressor's language and establish the legitimacy of their own speech the politics this process involves is radically different from the one where members of the

oppressing classes use the oppressed's language to sympathetically mimic them into respectability. At that point even idealization does not compensate for the harm done through the process. Not only are we in danger of an illusion or standing-in effect, but the politics this implies is, at its best, not brought beyond the immediate level of depiction of misery. With a middle-class audience it might have some effect of sensitization to poverty, though mainly of evoking an empty emotionalism; should there actually be a popular audience, it would merely replay for them what they already know. Both the slice-of-life approach and making an icon of a peasant or a working-class hero seem singularly devoid of organizational implications. A great deal more can be done by the progressive/left-wing theatre activists by placing themselves (in class terms) and their language into the plays. This may liberate the political forces of theatre itself and lift it from an empiricism and/or idealism, from liberal guilt or politics of sympathy, into a real politics of class struggle. Then with or without the use of dialect we might still attain a realism.

NOTE

- ¹ All translations are by the author. Telegana was a peasant movement (1948-51) which involved two to three million people and was organized mainly around demands for the redistribution of land.