Theatre in the Dark Times

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There is only one ally against the growth of barbarism: the people on whom it imposes these sufferings. Only the people offer any prospects. Thus it is natural to turn to them, and more necessary than ever to speak their language.

Bertolt Brecht

Let me begin by going back in time, to the beginning of the century. Bombay, July 1908. The tallest nationalist leader of the time, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, was put on trial for having published 'seditious' editorials in his paper *Kesari*. Predictably, Tilak was found guilty, and sentenced to six years' imprisonment. In response, the Bombay working class went on a massive strike for six days, one for each year of the sentence. As many as seventy-six out of eighty-five textile mills struck work for a full week. The police and the army were called out, and indulged in repeated firing. According to official reports, sixteen workers were killed, and nearly fifty wounded.

The Indian working class was coming of age, as Lenin noted with satisfaction. This was perhaps the first mass demonstration of working-class unity for issues that did not, strictly speaking, concern them. Most workers, in the early 1900s, were illiterate. And yet, at least sixteen workers laid down their lives for editorials that thousands of others could not have even read. And now the twist in the tale—Tilak himself was incarcerated for editorials he apparently never wrote! It is said that the pieces were actually penned by Tilak's editorial colleague, Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar. Khadilkar, aficionados of Marathi theatre will recall, was among the leading playwrights of the time—author of big hits like *Manapman* and *Keechakvadh*. We shall have reason to return to him shortly. For the moment, let us note that in those bloody days of July 1908 the hidden hand of a playwright moved many, many actors to acts of courage and sacrifice.

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In this paper, I propose to look at censorship in Indian theatre, which has been mainly of three kinds. The first and the most obvious is censorship by the state. The second is censorship imposed by political groups with or without the connivance of the state. And both these forms of censorship lead to a third and most ignored form of censorship, i.e., self-censorship, or censorship imposed by theatre practitioners upon themselves. This paper is divided into two parts, the first an empirical chronicle of state censorship starting with a brief history of the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, and the second, different in tone and content, is a reflection upon our own dark times.

The beginning of state censorship can be attributed to the growing spirit of nationalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This nationalism was reflected in the plays of the time, and in Bengal in particular a number of '*darpan*' plays were written — plays that held up

a mirror to British rule and Britain's exploitation of India and Indians. In 1875, the Governor-General, Lord Northbrook, apparently read the translation of a Bengali play, *Chakar-darpan* (The Mirror of Tea), dealing with the condition of plantation workers in Assam, and was greatly alarmed by its impact on Indian audiences. He wanted to prevent performance of the play, and asked the Advocate-General if there was any law under which he could do so. None of the existing laws were found quite adequate for the purpose. Thus a separate bill was proposed. *Chakar-darpan* was not the only play to invite colonial wrath. In his minute of 13 June 1876, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal specifically cited the case of four plays — *Neel-darpan* (The Mirror of Indigo), *Chakar-darpan, Gaekwad Natak* (The Trial of Gaekwad), and *Gajanand and the Prince* — while observing that "It is remarkable that in all these instances . . . not only is there libel against individuals or classes, but what is even more important, a design to excite ill-feeling against the British name and nation, against the tendency of British civilization and institutions, and against the result of British rule."

The British state had already moved to strengthen its hands and deal with what it saw as sedition. On 29 February 1876, an ordinance was promulgated which empowered the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal "to prohibit by order dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious, and obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest". The next day, the performance of a play, *Surendra-Binodini Natak*, was banned on grounds of obscenity, and the author and the director were arrested. This was followed by the performance of a farce called *The Police of Pig and Sheep* (caricaturing the Calcutta Police Commissioner, Stuart Hogg, and Lamb, his Superintendent). Finally, the Dramatic Performances Act (19) was passed on 17 December 1876.

Subsequently, the Act was used by the British to try and silence many nationalist playwrights. The most famous of these attempts was the banning in 1910 of the play *Keechakvadh* by Khadilkar, the playwright-journalist who had written the editorials for Tilak's *Kesari*. The Bombay *Times of India* of 10 February the same year described *Keechakvadh* as "a play abounding in every form of incitement to an emotional audience", and as "having exerted a most pernicious influence . . . all over the Deccan, as well as in Bombay city". The paper described, in wonderfully graphic language, the "tense, scowling faces of the men [in the audience] as they watch Kichaka's outrageous acts, the glistening eyes of the Brahmin ladies as they listen to Draupadi's entreaties, their scorn of Yudhishtira's tameness, their admiration of Bhima's passionate protests, and the deep hum of satisfaction which approves his slaughter of the tyrant". The paper saw a connection between the play and acts of violence against British officials: "the teaching of the play is bearing fruit. Within two years of its first appearance [1907] and in the same presidency an attempt is made to assassinate Kichaka's successor, Lord Minto. And it is in a native theatre which has seen 'Kichakavadh' acted that [the Collector] Mr Jackson is murdered". The paper demanded a ban on the play, "arguing that it is more important to protect the lives of the officials than to give unfettered license to Extremist publicists". The government obliged, banning the play under section 3 of the Dramatic Performances Act.

The Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 (hereafter, DPA) was thus a draconian law put in place by the colonial state to deal with any opposition to it. It was to be expected that after independence such a law would be abolished. That, however, did not happen. On the contrary,

soon after independence, the DPA began to be used to silence dissent. On 17 June 1949, for instance, the Secretary to the Government of West Bengal sent a circular to district and police authorities warning that "It is likely that some organizations, such as the All India Peoples Theatre Association and the All India Progressive Writers Association with communist affiliations and leanings may be organizing public dramatic performances, songs, etc ... any attempt ... made by them ... should be stopped by the Dramatic Performances Act 1876 ... No previous reference need be made to the Provincial Government ..." Four years later, in 1953, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was asked to furnish the scripts of fifty-four plays. These included the famous *Neel-darpan*, written all of eighty-nine years ago, and Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna*, first produced by IPTA in 1944 but never banned by the colonial regime. IPTA was warned that "non-submission [of scripts] will result in legal action under Section 176 of the IPC". The same year saw the banning of *You Made Me Communist* by the Travancore-Cochin government. The High Court, however, rescinded the ban.

The Allahabad High Court gave the most important judgment in this context. In June 1953 IPTA staged a play based on Munshi Premchand's story *Idgah*. The City Magistrate, who had earlier given permission for the performance, withdrew it on the day of the performance. This order was served on the organizers after the performance had begun. They refused to stop the performance, and, as a result, four IPTA members, Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Amritlal Nagar, Babulal Verma, and Gokul Chand Rastogi had cases slapped on them. When the cases came up for hearing, the prosecution invoked the DPA. In their judgment, Justices Chaturvedi and Mulla ruled that "Merely because a person preaches or advocates by staging a play, a political ideology different from the ideology of [the] party in power, a prohibitory order under Section 3 is unjustified". Most crucially, however, the judges pointed out that "the Dramatic Performances Act, in the absence of a reasonable procedure to enforce its substantive provisions, is *ultra vires* of the Constitution, since in its operation it places unreasonable restrictions on the rights of a citizen guaranteed under Article 19 of the Constitution".

Around this time most States repealed the central Act but adopted their versions of the DPA, which are really variations of the old Act without any substantive change. For instance, both in Rajasthan and in Madhya Pradesh, there is provision for a hearing before punishment is meted out. On the other hand, what is dangerous in most of these State-level Acts is that the police, rather than the magistrates, have been given executive powers.

The State DPAs have since been used to ban plays in many parts of the country. In Tamil Nadu in the 1950s and '60s, pro-DK or -DMK plays like *Keemanayam*, *Kahita Poo* (Paper Flower), and *Por Val* (Battle Sword) were banned. When the DMK itself came to power, it went ahead and banned anti-DMK plays. In Kerala too, the DPA was used to ban *Nathugaddiga* (Glory of the Country) in 1978, and *The Sixth Sacred Wound of Jesus Christ* in 1987.

Opposition to the DPA has existed as long as the Act itself. In West Bengal, this opposition resulted in the Act being scrapped. Paradoxically, two of the most well-known cases of political censorship in the post-independence era also took place in West Bengal. In 1966, Utpal Dutt's play *Kallol*, on the naval mutiny of 1946, aroused the wrath of the Congress regime. Utpal Dutt was imprisoned for six months. This did not deter Utpal Dutt and his

actors, who faced tremendous odds — including physical threats, boycott by the press, withdrawal of advertisements — and continued performing the play to huge audiences. Eight years later, in 1974, Utpal Dutt was again the target of state wrath, and was this time charged with sedition for his play *Dushwapner Nagari* (Nightmare City). There were huge protests from all quarters even as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) provided physical protection to the play; eventually the government had to withdraw the case.

The DPA is not the only instrument used by the state to curb the freedom of expression of theatre persons. The two other most frequently used instruments are Entertainment Tax and the Police Acts. As mentioned above, in most States, the police have been made guardians of theatre. In some States, theatre persons have to get their scripts cleared by the police before performance, in others a permission is required by the auditorium where the play is to be staged. In the second case, it is the theatre group and not the managers of the auditorium who are expected to arrange for the permission. After much protest, in some States, blanket exemptions from Entertainment Tax have begun to be granted to theatre groups. But in some others, again, no auditorium can be rented by a non-registered group. All these are official attempts to restrict the freedom of expression enshrined in the Constitution.

The overwhelming threat today, however, is not from state censorship. A far more urgent threat comes from the unofficial censorship by fascist organizations, enforced through brute physical force in deep collusion with the state apparatus—a censorship that may occasionally take recourse to official or legal methods, but is by no means limited to or even dependent on such methods.

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Let us not fool ourselves any longer. What we are witnessing today is a fascist takeover of the Indian state, and an attempted fascist transformation of Indian society. This poses very grave dangers for our theatre. Let me give one recent example. Last year, the well-known theatre group from Karnataka, Samudaya, was attacked by fascist goons belonging to front organizations of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) — thrice in the space of a fortnight. Samudaya was then engaged in a State-wide *jatha* to celebrate the bicentenary of Tipu Sultan's heroic fight against British colonialists. There were many activities that marked the jatha, among which were street plays performed by various Samudaya troupes all over the State. The three attacks took place at three different places, and the most vicious one took place on 1 May 1999 in the town of Anekal, barely thirty kilometres from Bangalore. A senior Samudaya member, Gundanna, who is also a member of the Karnataka Natya Akademi, was chased through the streets of Anekal by goons wielding knives and other weapons designed to kill. A badly injured Gundanna was able to save his life only when he ran into a local hospital. At least four aspects of this attack are worth noting.

One, this was not an isolated attack; it was one of a series of three attacks, taking place more or less simultaneously in different parts of the State. Clearly, the intention was to unleash a deadly terror that would paralyze not only Samudaya, but also other theatre groups in the State. And this wasn't the first attack of this kind on Samudaya. Some time ago, Samudaya's production of Shiva Prakash's play *Mahachaitra* faced similar attacks.

Two, the attack was led by the local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) councillor, and therefore

the police refused to take action against the attackers. The collusion of the state apparatus and fascist goons was there for all to see — and that too in a State not ruled by the BJP!

Three, the attack was as much on Samudaya as on Tipu and all that he represents. The Hindutva forces had argued last year that we ought not to be celebrating Tipu, the Tiger of Mysore, the only one among all the eighteenth-century Indian rulers who gave his life on the battlefield fighting the British. What is under attack, then, in this as well as in the attack on *Mahachaitra*, is what constitutes our history.

Four, the Anekal attack was carried out on 1 May, the international labour day. That morning, the local workers had hoisted the red flag, as they always do on the day. Samudaya was a part of the May Day celebrations in Anekal, and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) had hosted their performance. Therefore the attack was not only on the freedom of expression of artists but equally on larger democratic rights enshrined in the Constitution of India.

I am sure we can all come up with lists of similar, more or less vicious, attacks on theatre persons, cultural workers and artists. I will not take up space chronicling these. The point I want to make is: what we are witnessing today is a qualitatively new conjuncture, an unprecedented state of affairs. It will of course be nobody's case that artists have not been subject to official and/or unofficial harassment and attacks over the years. They have been, not only in our country but all over the world, and unfortunately we somehow tend to assume that some amount of such harassment is part of the landscape, the inevitable wages of living in the modern world. But what we are witnessing in our country today is qualitatively of a different kind. This is the onset of fascism. This is more than a state of Internal Emergency, where the democratic rights of the people are curtailed, sometimes quite severely, by the state. What we have today is a state of inverted insurgency, where a fascist party, the RSS, with its multiplicity of front organizations, is waging a long, unceasing, continuous, sometimes overt, sometimes covert war on the people. To be sure, control over the organs of the state is an important condition for the success of this insurgency, and the organs of the state—the police, the judiciary and the executive—are used as and when required to aid the fascist party and its front organizations, but this insurgency is carried out most typically by terror squads in the streets.

Look at what happened recently in Varanasi, regarding the shooting of the film *Water*. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry cleared the script, not once but twice; the Kashi Vidwat Parishad — a body comprising persons ideologically not far removed from the RSS — cleared the script; there was no official ban on shooting; but none of this mattered. Using sheer strong-arm tactics, and with more than ample collusion with the organs of the state, the terror squads of RSS were able to create a 'law and order' problem, and the obliging Uttar Pradesh government declared that the film could not be shot in the State. After it appeared in newspaper reports that the film may be shot elsewhere, the leaders of these terror squads began saying that they would not let the film be exhibited, even if it was shot. And after what we saw at the time of the film *Fire*, we don't need to be told how this would be accomplished.

In such a case, then, an official ban is not even required. A few windowpanes will be smashed, a couple of hoardings will be set afire, and a 'law and order' problem will be created. The cinema owners will withdraw the film, the police will move in to make sure that further

damage is not done to property, and the district administration will do nothing to bring the rioters to book. The terror squads will have succeeded, and there will be a real, if unofficial, ban on the film.

This is how things are likely to shape up for some time to come. Terror squads, more than official orders, are going to act as censors of artistic and cultural expression. Now don't get me wrong on this. I do not mean that more and more draconian laws are not in the offing. They very probably are. But for a wide variety of reasons—the compulsions of coalition politics, the resistance mounted by democratic opinion, the unpleasant memories of the Emergency that the Indian people have, the need to survive and grow electorally, the compulsion to operate within a democratic constitutional structure—for all these reasons, the fascist party of the Hindu right, the RSS, and its parliamentary front, the BJP, will find it more and more convenient, at least in the short run, to invoke the 'law and order' problem rather than official censorship.

The other thing that has not yet happened, but may well happen in the short to medium run, is the introduction of draconian laws at the State level. So the Gujarat government may decide tomorrow that its version of the DPA prescribes far too mild punishment to offenders, the U.P. government could decide to introduce a patently communal clause in a bill, and so on. If such things have not happened so far, it is probably only because the fascists are far too uncultured to be looking closely at theatre.

But how long can the barbarism of the uncultured shield us? In the long run, there is little doubt that their basic objective remains the total subversion of the present Constitution, and the ushering in of a full-fledged fascist constitution. This is unlikely to happen at one go, all of a sudden, overnight. It will take time, and be accomplished bit by bit. And make no mistake about it, one of those bits is going to be theatre.

In the meanwhile, the fascists are using the time at their disposal for the most dangerous enterprise of all—creating conditions for the acceptance of their world-view as the popularly accepted common sense of our times.

Examples of this are most obviously seen in mainstream, popular cinema. Think, for instance, of the films that have appeared in the last decade or so. One of the things you will be struck by—and I am talking about the Hindi cinema coming from Mumbai—is the increasing displacement of the Muslim character from being the hero's best friend to being the villain. (I do not say that you do not see the friendly Muslim character at all these days. You do. But earlier, in the 1940s and '50s, one rarely found the villain a Muslim; today it is possible to rattle off a whole list of such films.) Villainization of the Muslim is relatively new in Hindi cinema, and I think it can be dated quite precisely to the rise of the temple movement in the late 1980s.

Fortunately, Indian theatre has been by and large free of communalization. This is no mean achievement, and all of us in the theatre should not only be proud of this but also safeguard our secular and syncretic art from uncultured fascist barbarians. Let us, however, not imagine that we are going to remain immune forever, or that the attempt to push the fascist agenda in the field of theatre is going to take the same shape and form as it has done in popular cinema. A battle for the minds of the people is on. In this battle, the fascists will use intellectual argument to persuade those who are willing to be persuaded. But that is not

the only method they will use.

Terror, too, is one of the ways to capture the minds of the people. When terror is used against a particular artistic work or personality or group, the effects are far more widespread. Terror tactics work precisely because the attack comes out of the blue, its target is caught unawares, and it is impossible to predict the next target. In other words, what the terrorist tells the bystander is that *the next target could be you*. When terror squads begin attacking works of art with regularity and success, they create the atmosphere for self-censorship. The artist himself or herself begins to reformulate his or her creative expression for fear of offending someone or the other. Most of the reformulations the artist begins to accept in his or her work do not appear to him or her as very big compromises, and there is always some factor that justifies the compromise, but the overall atmosphere that is created is one of fear. In this sort of situation, it is very difficult to even see censorship at work, let alone resist it. But no matter how invisible, no matter how intangible, no matter how difficult to establish, self-censorship is a form of censorship. And it is the deadliest, most effective, censorship of all.

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In conclusion, let me say only this. The Indian people have seen, and defeated, the Emergency in the 1970s. That victory is our best resource in our fight against the state of insurgency that the Hindu right has unleashed. Yet, paradoxically, that very victory has made our task a little more difficult. Let me explain what I mean.

The forces of the Hindu right were also at the time opposed to the Emergency. They have seen those days, and have drawn the appropriate lessons from that experience. They have understood how very difficult it is to keep in place a deeply authoritarian and unpopular state. They have realized, in short, that the fascist transformation of the state structure itself is not an easy task: it is going to be contested at many different levels by many different people. This does not prevent them from attempting that transformation, of course. But the task is difficult, they realize that, and is likely to take some time.

What they are doing meanwhile is unleashing the state of insurgency on the streets. It is relatively simpler to fight the censorship of an authoritarian state apparatus; we have done it in the past, and our political practice has evolved ways of dealing with it. But how do you fight the censorship imposed by the artist on his or her own work, the censorship that is born of deep fear, the fear that the next knock could be on your door?

I do not have the answer to this question. One thing, however, is clear. The artist is not alone in this. The question of freedom of expression encompasses all of society, the toiling people in particular, for whom it translates into the right to protest against oppression. And this is the first right to be curtailed in any authoritarian set-up. The toilers understand this. Sixteen workers gave their lives in that distant July for Tilak's right to publish editorials. In my own experience, I have seen how thousands upon thousands of workers and others raised their voices in protest and anger at the brutal murder of Safdar Hashmi in 1989. It can be argued that without that protest, the protest of the artists and intellectuals may not have amounted to anything beyond a few photographs in some newspapers. Or think of May Day last year in Anekal, where, again, workers came to the defence of artists. We are not alone in this. Whatever strategy we evolve to defeat this state of insurgency, that strategy will have

to revolve around the larger unity of artists with working people. Let us join hands with other comrades engaged in other fights in other places. Our art must address them, must speak their language. This is of course not easy. But it can be learnt. It is a question of survival. *Our* survival.

In the meanwhile, let us keep our ears and eyes open. And let us be prepared. The flying sparks, the grinding noise we hear could be the fascists sharpening their knives.

Note: Much of the research regarding the history of the Dramatic Performances Act in the first part of this paper is by Rati Bartholomew. See her article 'On the Dramatic Performances Act: Censorship on Theatre' published in the brochure released for the all-India street theatre festival, Chauraha, in 1989 in New Delhi.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the seminar which ran parallel to the festival Nataka Bharathi. I thank all the participants at the seminar who offered comments on the paper. Thanks are also due to Vijay Prashad for his comments. As always, Mala Hashmi has done more than simply read and comment on the paper. And, as always, it is impossible to thank her. — S.D.