THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THEATRE IN INDIA

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The role that theatre ought to play in contemporary society has been debated among artists the world over, no less in India where changing social and political conditions since the late 19th century have resulted in diverse attempts to exploit theatre as a means of reaching vast audiences for purposes of education, publicity, and propaganda. But the groundwork for the relatively recent attempts may be seen in past precedents and need not be attributed solely to the inventiveness of the modern age or to the progressive thinking of youth. In Chapter I of the *Natyasastra*, India's earliest and most significant surviving manual of dramaturgy, Bharata attributes to Brahma the creation of an educational purpose for theatre:

> This *(natya)* teaches duty to those who go against duty, love to those who are eager for its fulfilment, and chastises those who are ill-bred or unruly, promotes self-restraint in those who are disciplined, gives courage to cowards, energy to heroic persons, enlightens men of poor intellect and gives wisdom to the learned.
>
> It will (also) give relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief or (over) work, and will be conducive to observance of duty as well as to fame, long life, intellect and general good and will educate people.
>
> There is no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft no device, no action that is not found in the drama.[1]

Whether or not producers achieved Brahma's ambitious objectives may never be known for there is little evidence to suggest that spectators in ancient times changed their behavior or opinions as a result of witnessing plays.

But much later in history the actions of at least one powerful king were reportedly influenced by the contents of a drama which

he had seen. In 1504 Veera Narasimhadeva Raya, a powerful ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire, put to death a petty prince after observing Kuchipudi players impersonate the hideous tortures employed by the tyrant to extract taxes from the peasants.[2] Between the 15th and the 18th centuries theatre was widely used to great advantage by poet-saints to spread and sustain the *bhakti* movement of Hinduism among the common people throughout the length and breadth of India. Perhaps one of the most spectacular surviving examples is the *Ramlila* which still attracts hundreds of thousands of faithful pilgrims annually to sacred shrines and holy places in North India.

The more recent and perhaps the more interesting place in which theatre has served as an instrument of social change began in the late 19th century when dedicated patriots were committed to exposing social evils, many of which had resulted from British rule and many of which had plagued Hindu society for centuries. This first period, marked by an unrestrained desire among Indian writers and producers to propagate independence, is also characterized by suppressive restrictions imposed by the colonial government on the publication and performance of plays.

A second period began in the early 1940's when independence was virtually assured but the direction that the new nation would take was still debatable. This period is characterized by an eagerness among left-wing political parties to exploit theatre as a vehicle of propaganda, and although the ideas initiated then are now over thirty years old, they show no signs of losing their original appeal or flavor, for political parties and politicians still clamour for ways to gather votes and sympathy for their own ideologies.

The most recent phase dates from the early 1950's when the central government employed theatre as a means of serving democratic socialism. Since that time the central government has joined hands with some state governments and a few private institutions seeking to publicize various social reforms, primarily among the villagers. Barely out of its infancy, this utilitarian approach to theatre may not mature for many years to come.

Theatre of Nationalism and Social Protest

The first significant drama of social protest in India was *Nildarpana* (The Mirror of Indigo Planters) by Dinabandhu Mitra, published in 1860. The play dramatizes incidents drawn from the revolution of 1885 in which Bengali indigo cultivators were mercilessly persecuted by their English overlords for refusing to sow their crops. The incident is usually cited as the first attempt of the Bengalis to harass the British rulers. Inspite of its timely subject matter, Das Gupta in *The Indian Stage* claims that Dinabandhu has no political motives behind the work and intended

it only to expose the cruel and heartless treatment of the labourers at the hands of English planters.[3] Whatever Dinabandhu's real intentions, the play aroused considerable public sentiment in Bengal against British tyranny and paved the way for a host of patriotic works written along similar lines elsewhere in the country.

Nildarpana was first staged in Dacca in 1861 where it met with unqualified success among the Indian spectators and apparently aroused no adverse reaction from the English community. In the same year as the first public performance, a sanction was granted to the Reverend James Long for an English translation on the grounds that the play faithfully depicted rural life in Bengal. Approximately five hundred copies were printed and sent to the Bengal Office for approval. But only fourteen were permitted to circulate freely in India and the remaining copies were either sent to England under official seal or withheld by the Bengal Office. The good Reverend was paid for his trouble by being sentenced to one month in prison on a charge of libel and ordered to pay a fine of Rs. 1,000. The fate of Reverend Long and the English translation suggests that British policy at this time favored the immediate suppression of any material that smacked of sedition. And through its actions the government admitted that English, the very language nurtured among a segment of the Indian population as a means of sustaining indirect rule, could be effectively used to promote nationalistic sentiments among Indians throughout the country. That the Bengali version of the play was not suppressed was probably because the government rightly assumed that it would not be read outside the Bengali-speaking regions of the country.

Eleven years passed before *Nildarpana* attracted public notice again, this time in 1872 when it was chosen as the first professional offering of the newly formed National Theatre of Calcutta. Undoubtedly, the production was designed as a commercial venture to launch the National as the first professional theatre company in India, but the choice of *Nildarpana* as the vehicle suggests a more significant underlying motive; the play was meant to symbolize Indian nationalism. And apparently it struck a sympathetic chord in at least one spectator who furiously hurled a shoe at the hated English overseer, acted by the distinguished actor-playwright, Girish Chandra Ghosh.[4]

Even though the Government of Bengal took no formal steps against the production in Calcutta, an enraged band of Europeans stormed the stage during the Lucknow production of 1875 when the Indian hero of the piece tried to rescue a helpless Indian girl from the clutches of Mr. Rogue, the villainous English planter. The outburst became so heated that the District Magistrate had to be called out of bed to quell the disturbance.

Encouraged by the impact of *Nildarpana* in 1875, three more works were produced by the Great National Theatre, a splinter

organization of the National. All of them were allegories propagating patriotic sentiments. The extent to which the Bengalis dared to go in expressing their demand for freedom from foreign rule is illustrated in a song from one of the works—Jyotirindra Nath Tagore's *Puru-Vikram*. Midway through the play, King Porus challenges his soldiers to fight the Greek invaders:

> Awake. Arise! Look, the cruel Yavanas trespass into your home; Be of one mind, liberate the Motherland. Delay is intolerable. Advance with the banner of victory in your hand. What is life without freedom? Fie on him who wants to live being robbed of his liberty. It is better to die, but let liberty and honour live in the land. Come and swear. Either you must win or die. Either you must kill the Yavanas or follow death yourselves.[5]

King Porus undoubtedly personified the spirit of Indian patriotism and the Yavanas unmistakably represented the colonial rulers.

The popularity of *Nildarpana* and subsequent works of its kind raised serious questions for the colonial government. Should any play, regardless of its content, be permitted public performance? And should the press be allowed to publish a play whatever sentiments it espoused? In 1876 Lord Northbrooke, then the Viceroy of India, issued an ordinance as an emergency measure under the Government of India Act giving the Government of Bengal full power to control dramatic performances until a new law could be enacted. The Government moved swiftly to cancel three productions which it labelled "libelous and obscene."[6] Subsequently, the proprietor of a theatre and actors of the play *Surendravinodini* were taken into custody on a charge that an obscene act was discussed on the stage: a European (perhaps meant to represent the District Magistrate himself) spoke of deflowering an Indian woman and carried a bloody *sari* to prove it. Two of the accused were sentenced to a month in prison, although the judge dismissed the charge of obscenity lodged against the play for lack of convincing evidence. Shortly after, the presiding judge was sent home to England, presumably because he failed to rule in the Government's favour.

Finally, on March 14, 1879, the Dramatic Performances Act No. XIX was submitted to the Supreme Legislative Council, and Mr. Hobbhouse, who introduced the bill, concluded the arguments in support of his case by paraphrasing Plato's reasoning from the *Republic*. Hobbhouse said. "Now it has been found in all times and in all countries that no greater stimulous could be supplied to excite the passions of mankind than that supplied by means of the drama."[7] The Act was swiftly passed into law and gave liberal censorship powers to local authorities throughout India.

In essence, the Dramatic Performances Act is modelled on similar contemporary laws in England and is designed:

> to empower the Government to prohibit public dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious or obscene.

Furthermore,

> for the purpose of ascertaining the character of any intended public dramatic performance, the Local Government may apply to the author, proprietor or printer of the drama about to be performed, or to the owner or occupier of the place in which it is intended to be performed for such information as the Local Government thinks necessary.
>
> Every person so applied to shall be bound to furnish to the same to the best of his ability, and whoever contravenes this section shall be deemed to have committed an offence under Section 176 of the Indian Penal Code. If any Magistrate has reason to believe that any house, room or place is used, or is about to be used for any performance prohibited under this Act, he may, by his warrant, authorize any officer of police to enter with such assistance as may be required by night or by day, and by force, if necessary, any such house, room or place and to take into custody all persons who he finds therein, and to seize all scenery, dresses and other articles found therein and reasonably suspected to have been used, or to be intended to be used, for the purpose of such performance.[8]

Hardly three months passed before the Vernacular Press Act also became law, thus throttling free expression of the press as well as the stage.

Both Acts were frequently used by the Government throughout the decades which followed to suppress dramatic performances and plays considered seditious. However, the urge for Indian independence had been unleashed and the instruments of government could only hope to slow down the process.

Frustrated by censorship, many theatre organizations in the late 19th century turned their efforts to exposing glaring social evils in Indian society, such as alcoholism, child marriage, enforced conversion by Christian missionaries, women's education, the *purdah* system and widow remarriage.

With the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, however, many playwrights resorted to veiled allegories propagating nationalism and spreading disaffection among sympathetic spectators. They often did so with great imagination by imbuing Hindu mythologies with allegorical significance. One of the best known examples is Probhakar Khandilkar's 1906 Marathi play *Keechakavadha,* based on incidents from the *Mahabharata.*[9] The well-known story pictures Keechaka, the crude brother-in-law of King Virata, falling hopelessly in love with Draupadi, the wife

of the five Pandavas who live in disguise in Virata's court. Pursuing his lecherous designs, Keechaka steals into Draupadi's room in the dead of night only to find Bhima, the most powerful and jealous of the Pandavas, who unhesitatingly pulverizes Keechaka with his mace, thus avenging Draupadi's honour. Marathi readers easily recognized in Bhima the great Marathi patriot Lokmanya Tilak. And Keechaka obviously represented Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India. Like so many other Marathi plays of its day, *Keechakavadha* was banned from the stage.[10]

Numerous other mythological incidents provided ample scope for symbolizing the struggle for freedom from foreign oppression. The battles between Rama and Ravana in *Ramayana,* as well as those between Krishna and Kamsa in the *Puranas,* provided Indian patriots with considerable latitude for creating dramatic allegories.

Historical events glorifying India's past also captured the public imagination and helped to reinforce the idea that independence was to be sought at any cost. After the partition of Bengal in 1905, Girish Chandra Ghosh turned to writing historical allegories and produced three powerful dramas—*Sirajuddulla, Mir Kasim,* and *Chhatrapati Shivaji*—all of which were banned by the British Government under the Dramatic Performances Act.[11]

Elsewhere in India, other playwrights glorified their own local patriots: In Assam, the struggle of the Ahom Kings with the Burmese invaders was dramatized. In Maharashtra, Shivaji's exploits came to symbolize Tilak's political struggles. In Mysore, Ecchama Nayaka, Tipu Sultan, Nargund Baba Sahib and Kittur Chennamma provided the subject for many nationalistic dramas. Every region found legendary heroes to glorify to the chagrin of the British.

Theatre as a Tool of Political Ideology

Themes of nationalistic and patriotic fervor continued to dominate the stage until independence was finally won in 1947, but diverse political philosophies decidedly sympathetic to Socialism and Communism began to be detected by the early 1940's in many plays and among various theatre organizations. The developments in this period arose logically out of past successes; the argument followed that if theatre could be used as a tool for inciting public opinion against the colonialists, it could also be used effectively to mould public sympathy for specific political ideologies. Undoubtedly, the triumph of Socialist Realism in Russian art and literature during the previous decade stimulated sympathetic Indian playwrights and producers with creative ideas. But besides the exemplary work of the Moscow Art Theatre, the Group Theatre of New York, and especially the works of its prize-winning playwright Clifford Odets, must have appealed to Indian theatre artists who were very much aware of recent trends in theatrical activities in all the major western countries.

Thus, in the twilight of World War II, one of the most significant organizations of its type came into being—the Indian People's Theatre Association. According to Som Benegal in *A Panorama of Theatre in India,*

> It is not clear and probably never will be whether the I.P.T.A., as it was called, was born of a positive directive of the Communist Party of India, or whether it came about through the anti-fascism of the war years with some remote identity with the international artistic movement of progressive forces. . .[12]

Whatever the original political intent of the I.P.T.A., it clearly directed its messages to the masses rather than to the bourgeoisie and it "took up issues of social abuse, religious bigotry, political oppression and economic exploitation."[13]

The central character of Syed Sajjad Zaheer's one-act Hindustani play, *Bimar,* written in the early 1930's and published in 1941 in an English translation entitled "The Living and the Dead," articulates the axis of the peasant-laborer versus the middle-class which was to recur often in the works of the I.P.T.A. playwrights. On the verge of death, Bashir says:

> The law as it now stands says that he who labours shall not get the fruits of his labour; the custom is that those who do nothing become lords and masters of those who toil. The workers might die of hunger while the leisured spend their time in comfort and luxury. Convention demands that if those who labour ask for the fruits of their labour, then they should be called seditionists and rebels, and serve as targets for bullets. . . .wealth, which ought to be the fruit of labour, is in the hands of useless, inept, stupid, half-witted and short-sighted fools. And he who has wealth has power; and he who has power lays down the law and makes principles. For me obedience to such principles is a crime against humanity.[14]

The I.P.T.A. started as a low-key affiliate of the left-wing Anti-fascist Writers and Artists Association of Calcutta in 1942. Bands of artists, singers and dancers toured the country performing to aid victims of the disastrous Bengal famine of 1943, which is said to have taken the lives of more than two million people. Capitalizing on the corruption resulting from the famine, Bijan Bhattacharya wrote *Nabahna* (Bountiful Harvest) in 1944, which is regarded as the first major offering of the I.P.T.A.

> It showed a group of peasants who leave their famine-striken village and make the long journey to the city only to find themselves beggars, facing the indifference of the metropolis. Their stay in the city politicizes them and they decide to return to the village with their new awareness.[15]

Nabanna became a popular success perhaps due in part to the brilliant direction of Sombhu Mitra, who is still regarded as one

of India's leading directors. Thousands of people gathered to see the play in public theatres and open-air arenas.

Soon after *Nabanna's* triumph, new branches of the I.P.T.A. sprang up throughout Bengal to deal with other social issues—the hard life of laborers and farmers, the responsibility of the middle-class to the workers and the advantage of mass action.[16]

Apparently, the I.P.T.A.'s mission at this stage in its development was not to propagate the Communist Party line but simply to expose social injustices, for Bhattacharay is quoted as saying, "Our job was to prepare the soil. It was the job of the political people to sow the seeds."[17]

The enthusiasm and the desire of the membership to create an association of first-rate artists prompted the I.P.T.A. to organize nationally, with branches throughout India. It was then that some of the most talented young artists were drawn into the fold—men like Ravi Shankar, Mulk Raj Anand, Ramesh Thapar, Shanti Bardhan, and Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, to name only a few. Talented playwrights also contributed substantively to the I.P.T.A.'s work.

In Orissa, Kalicharan Pattanayak wrote *Bhata* (Rice) which deals with the problems of untouchability and hunger among Oriyan peasants. The story concerns a cruel landlord whose only son turns against him and joins the rebellious peasants. In an ensuing conflict, the son is fatally shot. Rather unconvincingly, the penitent father reverses his philosophical stand and vows to become a servant of the people. A few yars later, Pattnayak wrote *Raktamati* (Red Earth) in which a poet selects a mate from among the untouchable class; together they vow to effect more revolutionary changes in the society.[18]

In Kerala, the struggle for freedom raised a fundamental question—who should wield economic power? The themes of landlord versus tenant were also exploited here in order to spread communist ideology. *Pattabakki* (The Landlord's Dues; or, Balance of Rent) written by K. Damodaran is the first major work in Kerala to raise this question. The plot involves a heroic laborer who is driven off his land by a heartless landlord. Forced to steal for a living the tenant is eventually caught and jailed. Taking advantage of this unfortunate situation, the landlord harasses the tenant's sister who finally yelds to his lecherous desires until he grows tired and throws her out on the street where she is forced to take up a life of prostitution. When the brother is released from prison and happily united with his sister, they launch a life-long campaign against the injustices brought about by the corrupt society in which they find themselves. Obviously, the playwright meant to imply that poverty and dependence of the poor on the upper classes breeds immorality, that only in an equalitarian society may evil be eradicated and that revolution is the only sure means of achieving social change.[19]

One of the I.P.T.A.'s most effective means for making political propaganda palatable to the common people was to garb it in the familiar forms of traditional theatre of a region. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, enthusiastic workers exploited *Burrakatha*, one of the state's most popular forms of storytelling. Typically, in Burrakatha, a narrator who strums the *burra* (a small tanpura) and who is accompanied by two drummers, sings and dances short historical tales *(kathas)* celebrating regional patriots. At times, one of the drummers assumes the role of a clown, freely criticizing contemporary social practices to the delight of the spectators. Periodically, the second drummer impersonates a politician and makes incisive jabs at the corruption of the governmental bureaucracy. The narrator cleverly weaves their criticism into relevant historical tales and manages to accent pathos and heroism in the process. The Andhra Pradesh branch of the I.P.T.A. also made use of other traditional forms of theatre and storytelling, such as the *Veethi Natakam, Harikatha* and *Yakshagana.*

In Maharashtra, *Tamasha,* or *Lok Natya* (people's drama) as it is commonly known, was successfully used during and after the 1940's to spread the doctrine of Communism among the villagers. *Tamasha* is a bawdy form of popular theatre distinguished by its use of female artists who dance and sing. Typically, *Tamasha* begins with prayers to Ganapati, the Hindu God of Good Fortune. Then, Lord Krishna enters and teases the milkmaids who are on their way to Mathura to sell milk. After a lively exchange of suggestive dialogue, Krishna departs and the *wag* (dramatic portion) of the *Tamasha* begins. A classic example of a Communist *wag* is *Aklechi Goshte* (A Tale of Wisdom) composed by Shahir Annabhav Sathe in 1944.

The story shows how a poor farmer, after gaining knowledge from a local cooperative union, puts an end to the malpractices of a moneylender and corrupt milkman. Janba, the hero of the piece, confronts the money-lender and the milkman on a village road. Assuming that Janba, like all farmers, is a fool, the corrupt businessmen challenge him to a contest of wits. Each of them agrees to tell a story with the stipulation that if anyone accuses another of his story being a false one, the accuser must forfeit his land and estate. Conveniently, five judges happen along and agree to preside over the contest.

Both the moneylender and the milkman tell outlandish tales believing that even a simpleton would consider them false. But Janba listens patiently and vows that every word they have said must be true. When his turn comes, Janba relates a tale of how two people from his village have cheated the farmers by lending them money at unfair interest rates and by selling them watered-down milk. Supposing that the story is a personal attack on them, the moneylender and the milkman foolishly declare that Janba's story is false, whereupon the judges promptly award Janba their

lands and estates. A chorus of jubilant farmers concludes the *wag* with a song of celebration:

We're the lucky children of the earth,
The children of the earth.

Let's go hand-in-hand on the farms
Singing like birds in the forest.

We'll work the fields the whole year round
And watch fruit ripening everywhere.

The grain will look like shining pearls
And we'll eat *Bhakri* from these jewels.

We'll destroy the rule of moneylenders and black-marketeers
And we'll see the judgement come true.

We'll have equality among all
With no masters and no servants.

We're the lucky children of the earth,
The children of the earth.

Sathe's *wag* is a pointed attack on the middle-class and an obvious attempt to romanticize the peasants who are imputed to be naturally intelligent once they have been politicized and made aware of the corruption which surrounds them. The farmer's local cooperative union referred to in the earlier portion of the script is glorified as the instrument of social change. Through it, Janba gains wisdom and uses it against those who would take unfair advantage of him. The song at the end of the *wag* suggests that the meek shall inherit the earth. Sathe, who wrote many popular *wags* around the same basic theme, built a considerable reputation for Communist *Tamasha* in Maharashtra. He was aided in his efforts by Shahir Amar Shaikh, one of *Tamasha's* greatest singers who also contributed his talents to the Communist Party about this time and is said to have thrilled hundreds of thousands of people with his folk rhythms, charged with radical content.[21]

Despite its ingenious experimentations and national character, the I.P.T.A. suffered a major setback when ideologies were polarized within the group after Independence in 1947. Many disenchanted artists left the organization in protest because they declared that their work was being misused by the Communist Party. Today, the I.P.T.A. is little more than a "paper" organization struggling to survive in several large urban areas.[22]

Convinced that the ideas for which the I.P.T.A. stood were viable in modern India, the C.P.I. (Communist Party of India) continued to exploit the potentials of theatre as a vehicle of propaganda in various regional strongholds. In 1952, the Kerala People's Art Club of Trivandrum staged *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me A Communist) which was performed more

than six hundred times and is thought to have helped put the Party into office in 1957. The story deals with an old man who abandons his orthodox views of life and embraces Communism when he finally recognizes the evils of capitalism and the plight of the working class under it. Some observers believe that the songs, of which more than one hundred thousand booklets containing the lyrics have been sold in Kerala to date,[23] were more appealing than the play's political ideology and contributed to its popularity. Whatever the reason for the play's success, the Kerala Congress Party soon retaliated with Kesava Dev's *Jnanippo Communistavum* (I Will Not Become a Communist Now), designed to retrieve voters lost in the election. The play tells of a faithful housemaid who threatens to become a communist depending on the outcome of the elections in which her boss has registered as an independent candidate. It criticizes the corruption of the political system in which all parties try to buy the support of the independent candidates. *Manthriyakkolle* (Don't Make Me a Minister), *Bhagwan Macaroni* (Lord Macaroni), and *Kootu Krishi* (Collective Farming) were also written during this period to support various political ideologies.[24]

Perhaps the most vocal spokesman for the use of radical content in theatre today is Utpal Dutt, a former member of the I.P.T.A. and founder of the People's Little Theatre Group of Calcutta which has produced plays since 1947. In the early fifties, Dutt adapted *Pathanatika*, a form of streetcorner play which is improvisional in form and contemporary in subject matter, as inspiration for one of his own works entitled *Charge Sheet*, used by the Communist Party to urge viewers to seek the release of political prisoners and to support the C.P.I. in the 1952 elections in Bengal. He claims that the play and others like it won many voters for the party.[25]

Dutt's most important early drama was *Angar* (Spark) produced in 1960. The play exposes the irresponsibility of managers whose unsafe mines bring death to countless laborers. The final scene continues to intrigue spectators even today with its clever lighting techniques which suggest the slowly rising water level in a shaft where the miners are trapped.

In a recent interview, Dutt characterizes his early work as expository, in line with the general trend of the ideological propaganda then current with the pro-Soviet element of the C.P.I. It was the habit of the leadership, according to Dutt, to regard their speeches as more important than political drama, although they began to realize in 1972 that people came to see plays and not to hear speeches.

Along with other disenchanted artists in the late sixties, Dutt shifted his allegiance to the C.P.I. (M) (Communist Party of India—Marxist), the pro-Chinese element of the Party. In line

with the radical dogma of the C.P.I. (M.), Dutt has recently proposed that, "revolutionary theatre must *preach* revolution; it must not only expose the system (as his earlier plays had done), but also call for the violent smashing of the state machine."[26]

In 1967 his play *Teer* (Arrow) and Anal Gupta's *Rakter Rang* (The Color of Blood) romanticized the peasant-guerrillas who were said to be brutalized by soldiers and policemen in Naxalbari, a wilderness area of eastern India which has served as a refuge for radicals. Dutt's *Din Badaler Pala* (Tale of the Changing Time), a courtroom drama written during this period, professes to expose Establishment hypocrisy, prove that West Bengal is being colonized by the Central Government in New Delhi, and show how the Centre is acting as an agent of foreign powers, namely the U.S.A., the Soviet Union, and Great Britain.[27] Aware of the potentials of utilizing traditional forms of theatre which appeal to mass audiences, Dutt recently adapted *Jatra,* a popular form of Bengali traditional theatre, to suit his strong Marxist viewpoint. The subjects of his most recent *Jatra*-style works include *Lenin, the Fall of Berlin, Vietnam,* the *Indigo Revolution.*[28] *Mao Tse-Tung,* the *Indian Guerrillas of 1944,* the *Punjab revolt of 1919.*

Perhaps inspired by Dutt's examples and perhaps by their own disenchantment with all political and social institutons, a group of Miranda House College students in New Delhi produced a bitter atack on Indian society in 1970, entitled "India '69." The aim of the students as boldly announced in the programme was "not merely to understand the world, but to change it;" sentiments articulated by Marx and paraphrased by Dutt sometime earlier. The students made stabbing attacks at almost every political institution in India, from the Prime Minister to the two Communist parties. Their approach was organized as a revue, with short dramatic and narrative segments punctuated by song . In one of the segments the Jana Sangh election symbol, under which were written the words *Mein Kampf,* was projected on a giant screen while a mellow voice announced over the P.A. system:

> Hitler wanted to make bombs. For bombs he needed phosphorus. For phosphorus he needed human bones. For bones he needed Jews. So he phosphorized the Jew . The Jana Sangh wants to Indianize the Muslims.[29]

In another segment, the players dramatized Mrs. Gandhi's Bank Nationlaization Scheme. The Prime Minister began by referring to her father and ended up by babbling couplets from "Mary had a little Lamb." Presiding over the occasion were Nixon and Kosygin, who handed prepared speeches to members of different political partie in India sympathetic to their own political ideology. In a review of the production, a Delhi critic observed that the audience was comprised of the upper class strata of Delhi society to whom the criticism seemed nothing more than an evening of humorous entertainment.

The Communist Party of India was not the only political organization in the 1940's to capitalize on the propaganda value of theatre, however. In Madras, the Tamil politician C. N. Annadurai, who had recognized the potential of swaying spectator's opinions through his first drama, *Chandrodayam* (The Rise of the Moon)[30] written in 1943, persuaded the leadership of the D. K. (Dravida Kazagham) to elevate drama to the status of an official party activity. In this he was joined by T. V. Narayanaswami, a leading member of the T.K.S. Brothers Company (one of the largest professional theatre troupes of the period) and other prominent individuals who were active in producing plays at the time, M. Karunanidhi, now the Chief Minister of Madras; E. Nedunchazian, currently the Minister of Education; and K. A. Mathialokan, until recently the Minister of Finance.

Through the production of plays, Annadurai and his colleagues sought support for the basic party platform of the D.K. which included sovereign independence for the four linguistic divisions of South India, a casteless society in which the Brahmanic traditions of Hinduism were eliminated from among the masses, support for widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage, and independence of India from Great Britain.[31] But in 1949, Annadurai and many other members became disenchanted with the leadership and broke away from the party and formed a more powerful political organization, the D.M.K. (Dravida Munnetra Kazagham), which continued to support the basic objectives launched by the D.K. but which sought to democratize the leadership and enlist mass membership to consolidate its power base.

The very foundations of the Brahmanic tradition of Tamilnadu (the Tamil-speaking region of South India) were shaken when the D.M.K. officially asserted that *Ramayana* was not in reality the story of a god incarnate but a traditional piece of North Indian propaganda, designed to gloss over the cultural conquest of Tamilnadu by an unscrupulous adventurer, Rama.[32] Annadurai's play *Neethi Thevan Mayakkam* (The Seduction of the Just King) reverses the traditional interpretation of Ravana as a villain and solicits audience sympathy for his plight.

By the late 50's theatre was one of the major propagandistic activities of the D.M.K. According to a recent article in *The Drama Review*,

> Almost all the plays were written by dramatists who were also leaders of the party. Very often the major roles were taken by the leaders themselves. Thus, the D.M.K. had evolved a unique arrangement: The D.M.K. politicians could address the public in person, in plays they had written themselves.[33]

With the advent of the "talkies," the D.M.K. swiftly moved to capitalize on cinema as a means of conveying political ideology.

Some of the success of the Party in 1967 elections may be attributed to the effective use of both theatre and cinema for propaganda and publicity. These forms of traditional and modern media, respectively, also helped to return the party to power in the 1971 elections. And undoubtedly the close ties between the leadership of the party and the methods used to promote it have contributed to the success of the approach.

Compared to the Communist Party of India and the D.M.K., the Congress Party has been rather slow to use theatre as a vehicle of political propaganda. Perhaps its extraordinary size and power lessened its need to do so until recently. But the Ruling Congress Party lately saw the need to use theatre as a disseminator of knowledge, particularly in the 1971 election campaign in Maharashtra where it reportedly employed half of the two hundred *kalapathkas* (art squads) used by all political parties in the election. According to an unpublished article by Tevia Abrams,

> A majority were hired by the candidates themselves. Six were signed on in mid-January to work directly for the Bombay Central Office, and each was presented with a tour schedule covering 200 performances before the start of polling in March. Together, these six troupes accounted for 1200 performances in a six-week period.[34]

To develop the appropriate political message, the Ruling Congress Party commissioned various writers to compose stories in *Tamasha,* the traditional forms of theatre ferequently employed by the Communist Party for its own propaganda campaigns in Maharashtra. One of the stories developed for the Ruling Congress was *We Must Win This Time* by Jagdish Khebudkar of Kolhapur. The play follows all the traditional formulae of a typical *Tamasha,* beginning with a song in praise of Lord Ganapati and ending with a dramatic story. After the invocational ritual, Krishna and his partner Pendya meet three beautiful *gaulans* (milkmaids) on the road to Mathura. In the ensuing encounter, Pendya proposes that Krishna hold an election to determine the most beautiful among them. Each of the *gaulans* is given a chance to mouth her own political philosophy without actually naming the particular party that she represents. But the spectators easily recognize the Communist Party of India, the Jana Sangh, and the Old Congress, by the girls' remarks. The following bit of dialogue illustrates Khebudkar's humorous method of criticizing the Communist Party of India:

Pendya :	What's your name?
2nd Gaulan :	My name is Red.
Pendya :	Red?
2nd Gaulan :	Yes, because everybody likes this colour at home.
Pendya :	How many people live at your home?

2nd Gaulan : Five. They're all called comrades. There are more, but they're abroad right now.

Pendya : Where?

2nd Gaulan : In Russia. They're earning money.

Pendya : What will you do if Krishna elects you?

2nd Gaulan : I'll nationalize all the cows. And I'll put them all in government barns. And all the milkmen and milkmaids will work for the government.

They'll work and earn on a fair basis. Those who don't agree will go without.

Pendya : And what about the milk?

2nd Gaulan : It will be stored in the government dairy. Those who need it can come to get their quarter litre per day.

Pendya: And what will you do with Krishna?

2nd Gaulan : His rights as a god will be taken away, because I don't believe in gods, his kingdom will be confiscated, and he'll be obliged to seek work in the government dairy.

Krishna : Pendya, throw her out of India![35]

Eventually, all the girls are discarded except Radha, who is elected the most beautiful *gaulan* because she symbolizes the good qualities that Krishna (the Indian public) desires, those of the Ruling Congress Party.

Besides initiating and sustaining public support for the independence movement and proving a useful tool of various political parties, the drama and theatre of India have recently publicized a broad range of social welfare, primarily through the auspices of the Government of India. Publicity programmes supporting various scheme, such as family planning, the five-year plans, modern methods of agriculture, national integration, unity and defence policies have been carried out by the Song and Drama Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.[36]

The Division was formed in 1954. The original intention had been to weave material aimed at mass audiences into traditional forms of entertainment, much as the C.P.I. and the D.M.K. had been doing. But it was soon discovered that the actors engaged to undertake this work could neither read or write, so plays had to be created by script writers and repeated word for word over and again until the artists could memorize them by rote. Finally, it became apparent that puppets and marionettes could best achieve the initial aims of the Ministry. So the Division developed troupes

of puppeteers to travel around the country publicizing various themes approved by the government. The success of these early experiments led to a considerable expansion of the operations and to the addition of actors, dancers, and singers.

The Division now has four permanent drama troupes which regularly tour North India, one of which is exclusively devoted to promoting family planning themes.[37] In addition to the four Divisional troupes, the Deputy Directors of various regional offices of the Song and Drama Division help to sponsor local dramatic, musical, and puppet parties which agree to introduce approved themes, especially those of family planning, into their performances. In 1969, six centres—at Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Bhopal Calcutta, Chandigarh and Lucknow—were opened to intensify the Division's programmes in the area of family planning.

Besides these schemes, the Song and Drama Division annually sends twentyfive troupes of players to propagate themes of national integration, unity, defence and patriotism among the villagers along all the international borders of the country. The parties are required to perform in local dialects and prepare items of their programmes in the form of dance and theatre peculiar to each region.

The organization also employs nine troupes to entertain the Jawans (soldiers) in remote areas of the country where theatrical entertainment is rare. The Song and Drama Division is also responsible for organizing and executing a National Drama Festival held every year in New Delhi. Troupes from all over India are sent to the capital to compete for prizes. At the request of the Chief of Protocol and various governmental departments, the Divisional troupes perform for visiting dignitaries a range of plays, songs and dances stressing India's cultural heritage and the recent successes of the five-year plans.

The most ambitious projects of the Song and Drama Division in recent years have been two sound and light programmes, one to celebrate Guru Nanak's 500th birthday anniversary in Amritsar during May of 1970 and the other entitled *Asee Aasi, Asee Aasau* (We Are, We Shall Be), produced in Srinagar during November of 1970, which stressed the unity of Kashmir. The first show attracted 10,000 patrons for each free performance. An estimated total of 1,500,000 people are said to have attended the show. And the Kashmir performance was done on such a grand scale that it required the use of an entire mountain to illustrate the history of Kashmir. Thousands of people acted in the production and literally tons of scenery and lighting equipment were used to achieve spectacular effects.[38] Undoubtedly, the Song and Drama Division has developed an extremely important channel of communication for disseminating relevant information to the masses.

State governments and private institutions have also used theatre to support social change. In Rajasthan, D. L. Samar of

the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal, an institution dedicated to sponsoring performances of plays and engaging in research, was granted government funds to mobilize troupes of puppeteers and strolling players of *Khyal* and *Pad,* traditional forms of entertainment. Samar seems to have gone about his work systematically for he required the artists to present their traditional material before a team of workers who then analyzed the forms and selected ways of inserting propaganda into the programmes with an aim to preserving their artistic integrity. His most successful experiment seems to have been an adaptation of the *Ramayana* based on a popular puppet play and *Amar Singh Rathore,* which emphasized the social and moral aspects of the story rather than its religious subject matter.[39]

Recent attempts have been made in Gujarat and Mysore to integrated themes of family planning into traditional performances of *Bhavai* and *Yakshagana,* the respective forms of village theatre in these states. The Literacy House of Lucknow[40] and the Darpana Academy of Ahmedabad have both used puppet plays to conveey social messages, particularly those devoted to family planning.[41] For years, the Fertilizer and Chemical Companies of Travancore have exploited fairs and festivals *(melas)* to publicize the work of their respective organizations. A market survey made by Hindustan-Levers in the late 60's is reported to show that nearly four hundred *melas* are seen annually in the Coorg district along.[42]

The concern of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication with the effectiveness of the traditional media as a means of communicating modern ideas, resulted in a seminar on August 20 and 21, 1968, in which the following recommendations were among those made:

> 1. The seminar affirms that traditional forms of entertainment have vast potentials for conveying new ideas and recommends that efforts should be made to utilize them as media of mass communication for bringing about social and economic change;
>
> 2. That the Indian Institute of Mass Communication should organize regional conferences at centres where traditional forms are being intensively used for promoting exchange of information.
>
> 3. And that the Institute should undertake research projects to find out the relative effectiveness of traditional forms and other media of communication.

Little research has been done in any language on the role that theatre has played and ought to play in modern Indian society. Most of the data in English is buried in superficial historical surveys of drama and theatre of various linguistic regions. And the playscripts that ought to be analyzed are either out of print or

rotting on the shelves of libraries and private collections, often inaccessible to a would-be researcher.[43] Considering the recent interest shown by the government and political parties in using drama and theatre for their own ends, immediate steps should be taken to form research teams of Indian scholars to preserve and analyze the pre- and post-independence data before it is lost through carelessness.

The effect of drama as a means of moulding public opinion ought to be systematically studied by competent teams of communication research. Up to now, comment has been the perogative of literary critics, newspaper, and periodical reviewers,[44] whose judgment is often colored by an obvious bias against such attempts. Studies to determine whether or not people change their behaviour or opinions as a result of exposure to theatre would prove invaluable to writers and producers. It seems strangely inconsistent that the C.P.I. and D.M.K. should have overlooked this important aspect of communication research. It is to their credit, however, and later to that of the Central Government, that they recognized the potential of reaching millions of people in the rural areas through traditional forms of theatre. Perhaps the successful use of theatre as a vehicle of social change in the People's Republic of China encouraged the Indians to expore its potentials.[45]

Whatever the outcome of research and systematic evaluation, it is apparent from the acceleration of efforts in recent years that theatre will continue to be used by the state and national governments, political parties and private organizations for spreading the ideas of social change.[46] But perhaps theatre may be put to more positive social uses if the process of traditional communication is scientifically scrutinized.

Finally, a new standard of literary criticism may have to be evolved to deal with the growing corpus of plays produced by and for social and political institutions, since it seems somewhat inconsistent to criticize writers in this field for abandoning the established principles of artistic creation when their aim and purpose is not to produce a literary masterpiece but to bring about social change.

FOOT NOTES

1. Manomohan Ghosh (tr.) *The Natyasastra Ascribed to Bharata-Muni.* 2 Vols. (Vol. I, 2nd revised edition, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1967), pp. 14—15.
2. Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao, "The Kuchipudi Dance Drama," *Marg*, XIX, 2 (March 1966), p. 33 and reiterated in his unpublished paper entitled "Folk Forms of Art as Media for Mass Communications," prepared for a Seminar of Traditional Media of Communication sponsored by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi, August 20-21, 1968.

3. Most of the details in the following discussion regarding the content and production of *Nildarpana* are drawn from Das Gupta's account published in 4 vols. (Vol. II, Calcutta: Metropolitan Printing and Publishing House, Ltd., 1938), pp. 91—111, 172—178, and 243—245.
4. Balwant Gargi, *Theatre in India.* (N.Y.: Theatre Arts Books, 1962) p. 109.
5. Quoted in Das Gupa, II, p. 251. The original is in verse.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 261—62.
7. *The Englishman*, 15th March, 1876; *Ibid.*, p. 255.
8. India, Government Legislative Department, *The Unrepealed General Acts of the Governor General in Council.* 2 vols. (Vol. II, 5th ed., Calcutta: Government of India, 1928), pp. 74—75.
9. Shantaram, "Marathi Drama," *Indian Literature*, I, 2 (April-September, 1958), p. 112.
10. For details concerning this and other dramas banned between 1898 and 1910 see: India, Government of Bombay, *Source Material for a History of the Freedom Movement in India.* 2 vols. (Vol. II, Bombay: Government Printing, Publishing and Stationery, 1958), pp. 674—681.
11. Asutosh Bhattacharyya, "Bengali Drama," *Indian Literature*, I, 2 (April-September, 1958), p. 80.
12. (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1967), p. 10).
13. Som Benegal, "Theatre's Commitment," *Enact*, 39 (March, 1970), p. 39.
14. *Indian Writing*, I, 4 (August, 1941), pp. 201—202.
15. Samik Bandyopadhyay, "After Professionalism," *The Drama Review*, 15, 3 (Spring, 1970), p. 239.
16. Utpal K. Banerjee, "Walk Ahead of Me," *Enact* (August, 1967).
17. *Ibid.*, Bandyopadhyay, p. 239.
18. Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, "Historical Growth of Oriya Drama and Theatre," unpublished paper, Drama Seminar of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1958, p. 221.
19. P. K. Parameswaran Nair, *History of Malayalam Literature.* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1967), p. 158.
20. Translated and adapted by Nilima Vaidya and Tevia Abrams.
21. Tevia Abrams, "A Dash of Art with Your Politics," An unpublished article, March 7, 1971.
22. Sachin Sen Gupta, "People's Theatre in India," *Unity*, 2, 5 (December, 1952 — January 1953), pp. 8—17.
23. K. M. George, "Malayalam Drama," *Indian Literature*, I, 2 (April-September, 1958), p. 110.
24. Personal interview with N. N. Pillai, Indian Institute of Mass Communication, January, 1970.
25. A. J. Gunawardana, "Theatre as a Weapon: An Interview with Utpal Dutt," *The Drama Review*, 15, 3 (Spring, 1970), p. 232.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
27. Avik Ghosh, "Last Month in Delhi," *Enact* (April, 1971), n. pag.
28. This is the famous incident on which *Nildarpana* was also based.
29. Sumanta Banerjee, "Review of 'India '69'," *Enact* 40 (April, 1970).
30. The following material was derived primarily from an article by Karthigesu Sivathamby, "Politicians as Players," *The Drama Review*, 15 (Spring, 1970), pp. 212—220.
31. R. S. Perinbanayagam, "Caste, Politics and Art," *The Drama Review*, 15, 3 (Spring, 1971), p. 209.
32. In "The Great Tradition in a Metropolitan Center: Madras," Milton Singer notes that the parody produced riots which led to strong legislation in 1954-55 to regulate dramatic perormance. In *Traditional India: Structure and Change.* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1959), pp. 154—55.
33. Sivathamby, p. 217.
34. Abrams, n. pag.

35. Unpublished script has been translated and adapted by Nilima Vaidya and Tevia Abrams.

36. Much of the following discussion is based on a personal interview with Colonel Hemchandra Gupte, Director of the Song and Drama Division, October, 1969, and an official Background Note obtained from the Division outlining its objectives and achievements.

37. Unfortunately scripts prepared by the staff writers of the Song and Drama Division were not made available to the author during several visits to the Central Office in New Delhi between 1969 and 1970. And the only performance seen was *Jagran* (Awakening)), a dance extravaganza which pictured the virtues of developing water wells with electrical pumps and using modern agricultural machinery.

38. For details see the reviews by Rajinder Paul in *Enact*, 41 (May, 1970) and 47 (November, 1970).

39. Information derived from an unpublished paper by D. L. Samar entitled "The Use of Traditional Media for Communication," prepared for the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, August 20-21, 1968.

40. In an Annual Report submitted to USAID, Washington, D.C., in 1969, Literacy House listed nine courses in puppetry, 117 puppeteers trained, and 458 puppet shows produced before an estimated total audience of 250,000 villagers during the period from July 1, 1964, to December 31, 1968. By 1970 eighteen puppet plays of various lengths dealing with family planning, agricultural reforms and life insurance were in the permanent repertory of the regularly employed puppeteers. The financial support for this interesting organization comes from three main sources: 1. USAID and private contributions in the U.S.A. made to World Education, INC. of New York City; 2. World Literacy of Canada; and 3. The Government of India, private contributions from Indian citizens and the sale of publications and other materials.

    In recent years the Life Insurance Corporation of India has commissioned Literacy House puppeteers to produce plays supporting the need for life insurance among villagers and according to representatives of World Education, interviewed in New York in March, 1972, the productions have been so successful that the Life Insurance Corporation continues to fund this activity generously.

41. Meher R. Contractor, "The Role of Puppetry in Contemporary Education," *Journal of the Sangeet Natak Akademi*, 15 (January-March, 1970), pp. 31—40.

42. Pillai interview.

43. Perhaps the largest single collection of published and unpublished manuscripts in Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi and English is housed in the Censorship Office of Bombay, where one copy or scenario of every play presented in the city since the early 50's has been faithfully preserved. Undoubtedly, other large urgan arbas of the country have similar collections. One wonders if a national research library ought to be established to house, catalogue and maintain these valuable documents.

44. An exception is reported by G. C. Tiwari in "Puppets Propagate Ideas," *Yojana*, XIII, 9 (May 18, 1969), p. 15. Tiwari briefly documents the "business value" of a puppet play promoting the benefits of buying life insurance which was played 440 times for an estimated combined audience of 250,000 people in villages of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The success of the production was determined by "counting the increased number of enquiries at the local L.I.C. (Life Insurance Corporation of India) units over and above their normal frequency in the weeks that followed the performances and by interviewing the L.I.C. field staff on the impact that they felt on their business. It was found that in nearly all branches the enquiries significantly exceeded their normal number."

    Although the research methods described may not warrant the conclusion that "puppetry hits bull's eye in traditional societies which have to be persuaded into accepting new ways of life," at least some quantitatve research was attempted before evaluating the effectiveness of the play among the spectators.

45. N. N. Pillai, "Traditional Theatre in Modern Communication" an unpublished paper prepared for a Seminar on Traditional Media and Communication sponsord by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi, August 20-21, 1968.

46. Benegal, "Theatre's Commitment," concludes that "there is enough of encouragement in the atmosphere" to sustain a campaign in this direction.

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