

**A NEW THEATRE MOVEMENT IN WEST BENGAL
(1954-1983): AN ANALYSIS OF ARTIST'S SUBJECTIVITY,
NOVELTY AND POLITICAL COMMUNITY**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
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INDIA
2012**

Dedicated to my Loving Parents

*For having always performed,
the most difficult task of negotiating with all my whims and fancies.*

Acknowledgement

It is difficult to think in my situation - where to begin and where to end; or whether to begin at all or whether to make an end. I am indeed indebted to so many people, in so many different ways that it is impossible to even try to thank them all or even show the audacity to do so. If it would be blasphemy to try to thank my parents or my grand-parents who have been with me through everything; it would not be any less blasphemy to thank my guide Prof. Bishnupriya Dutt, without whose affectionate supportive and often, even pampering presence- which has been with me since my initial days at School of Arts & Aesthetics; nothing would have been possible. While her thoughtful inputs and subtle criticisms have always been beneficial in academic matters; she has been there to help me out in all my difficulties in research or otherwise, in whatever ways she could.

Prof. Samik Bandopadhyay's crucial inputs in the initial stages of my research have proved to be immensely helpful in the course of my research. In many ways, he provided it the direction it urgently needed in the initial stage. The courses under Dr. Urmimala Sircar have been helpful in developing the methodological apparatus in my research. She has also been a caring presence at SAA. I am especially thankful to her for letting me stay at her apartment in Kolkata during my field trips. It has been an association invigorating, rich with exploration of ideas and thoughts with Prof. H.S. Shivaparakash which has in many ways knowingly or unknowingly been crucial to my development as a researcher.

Back at Santiniketan, my teachers of graduation days at DEOMEL, Prof. Abhijit Sen, Dr. Amrit Sen, Dr. Sourav Dasthakar have always been source of inspiration and often of more tangible help. I cherish the warmth and affection with which they have always responded to my calls for help. Prof. Abhijit Sen especially has put me in his debt, by sharing his views on various aspects of my research in our discussions regarding it, for which he had to share with me his precious time.

Dr. Soumyabrata Choudhury has been since the days I met him as a faculty in my post graduation days, less a teacher and a more a friendly philosopher. His lectures or the long friendly discussions in Delhi or later in Shimla on almost any matter at hand; the experience of working with him in a production have left their effect on me in more ways than I could myself would ever be able to comprehend.

I am indebted to theatre personalities- Bibhash Chakraborty, Soumitro Bosu, Asit Bose, Mala Hashmi and Rudraprasad Sengupta, extremely busy people as they are, for sharing with me their invaluable time. The discussions with them have aided me in understanding the period I was working on, better in various ways. I am indebted to Samir Chakraborty of Bohurupee group for helping me out with important documents.

Actor, director and academician, Ashok Mukherjee has been a generous source of help. Without his help my chapter on Ajitesh would have remained in the domain of intentionality. He not only shared his personal experiences with me on Ajitesh; but made sure I had access to whatever literature existed on Ajitesh's work.

The chapter on Ajitesh can never be thought of leaving aside Sandhya Dey who has almost single handedly taken the responsibility to publish all of Ajitesh's works and is moving towards her objective with great gusto. I was hugely benefitted from the long discussion with her where she

revealed her personal experiences on working with Ajitesh as well as helped by providing access to invaluable documents regarding Ajitesh.

My sense of gratitude would be at a loss of words for Shobha Sen, who kindly let me stay at her place and also use the library, during my field work at Kolkata and though herself ill, made sure my stay was comfortable in every possible way.

I am indebted to the official staff at the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Kolkata and Natya Akademi, Kolkata; Rabindra Bhavan Archive, Santiniketan for letting me access their archives. I am equally indebted to the library staff at my SAA library for their kind cooperation.

I have been fortunate enough to enjoy the company of some dear friends during my stay at JNU who have always made my stay enjoyable. Anirban and Parijat have been consistent comrades of all seasons and partners in crime. Even at this time, Anirban is helping me in formatting my dissertation, as I write. Without Rojio, Ankush, Meghna and Rashika the M.Phil would never have been the fun it has been. Soumikda, Sharmisthadi, Pujya, Vibhuti, Rishi, Anubhuti, Anirban Kapil Baishya, Raja, Pratyush, have all made my life at JNU seem colorful. My friends in my hostel, Arijit Das, Saikatda, Gokulda, Pintu, Joydeep have made my stay at Jhelum memorable. My friends back at Santiniketan have been equally dear ones. Sovan has now been a friend for more than twenty years and has been beside since I can remember. My school friends Sidhartha, Abhisek and Deepayan have never for once let me feel friendless at Santiniketan.

My uncles, aunts and cousins have always shared their love and affection.

I have the cherished the loving presence of Bihan, Nirmal kaku and kakima during my most testing times, while writing my dissertation and I hope to do so more in times to come. Without the gastronomical pleasures that both kaku and kakima have indulged me in, life would have seemed less bearable in these days.

To Shromona- each of my words here is above all guided by your love for me. May we both create together like this, always.

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Introduction

Prelude:

“That which is an affair of the people is also a kind of “people””.

–Soumyabrata Choudhury

(Why the People to Come Will Not, and Must Not, Be Sovereign: Notes on a Political and Mathematical Puzzle)

Distinguished Performance studies theorist, Janelle Reinelt begins her essay *Performing Justice For the Future of Our Time* by foreseeing “theatre’ s role in imagining a just future in a time of great confusion, change, and undecidability, arguing that performance offers a subjunctive epistemology for the social imagination”¹. I too, definitely feel the institution of theatre should be an integral constituent of any desirable social structure of equality, that today we may conceive of and I also believe it is singularly theatre which among all arts can put is privileged to put forth a claim in this matter. However, what I also firmly believe is that, it will be only be a theatre where its political potential is realized to the fullest that will be helpful to such a cause. Theatre, I believe, is inherently political and its true political nature has been in the recent years put through a steady corrosion facilitated by both institutional and ethical forces. Under the present circumstances, it could be befitting to search in the history of theatre, for those instances where the institution of theatre the political potential of theatre was realized to various degrees. Thus, as it must already be evident by

¹ Janelle Reinelt, ‘Performing JUSTICE FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR TIME’, *EUROPEAN STUDIES* 17, (2001), 37-51.

now, my research would entail looking at the relation between categories of theatre and politics through a case study.

My research interests, thus to be plainer, lie in the investigation of those periods in history of theatre practice where theatre has been able to reflect the state of socio-political affairs in its contemporary times. What the much renowned and controversial political philosopher Carl Schmitt would name as “The Rupture of time into Play”² in the title to his famous treatise on Hamlet. Thus I am interested in theatre which reflects on “today” as “difference in history and a motive for a particular philosophical task”³, an attitude towards its own time that Michel Foucault would trace back to Kant’s text on “What is Enlightenment?” However this would exactly where I would also like to make an intervention. My question would concern the nature of the relationship between theatre and politics and their consequences. This would at the very outset, warrant a redefining the categories of both theatre and politics and a chartering of what is desired from both theatre and politics at our contingent historical moment. On the basis of that, thereafter, I would look to reflect on the negotiations between these two categories in the history of New Theatre Movement in West Bengal, since independence (1947) till the sudden death of Ajitesh Bandopadhyay in (1983). Finally through this study, I would like arrive at a certain philosophical and also implementable conception of the way forward in the relation between theatre and politics.

My choice of post independent Bengali urban theatre as my case study is not only an ontological choice (as I myself belong to that region) but; it also justifies the requirement of the nature of my study. The knot between theatre and politics was tied in the Bengali urban, modern theatre in at its

² Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Eruption of Time into Play* (Washington Press: Plutarch Press, 1956).

³ Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment? (‘Qu'est-ce que les Lumières ?’) Rabinow (P.), (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50

very inception. Urban Bengali theatre, traces its origins from the IPTA movement⁴ in Bengal in the 1940's which was born under, and as a coming together against tumultuous political conditions of the global fascist politics of the early 20th century, British colonialism in India and Bengal Famine in West Bengal. Thus political contingency was inherent to the aesthetic event of IPTA. Thus modern theatre in Bengal since then had always thought for itself an urgent political responsibility. This however is not a singular disjunctive form, unique to Bengal. The pace at which history of twentieth century has provided such overwhelming political events of wide variety for analysis of the political theorists is unmatched in the history of civilization. Artistic productivity in general draws its materials from the world and is created at the hands of artists who constitute this world as human beings; thus it is but natural that every art would bear impressions of these political events. But theatre more than any art thrives on its momentariness: on its success as a chance at the time of its performance and as is 'inherently political'. Thus theatre bore a different degree of political responsibility towards these political events. This consequently resulted in different degrees of engagement with politics and different constellations and conditions of such engagements. These symptoms have been quite apparent in modern Bengali theatre because of its close proximity with politics since its initiation.

In terms of the time period, for me 1954, the year the amateur theatre group of Bohurupee produced one of the most significant productions in the history of post independence modern Bengali theatre, *Raktakarabi*. Though, Bohurupee had been established in 1948 and LTG in 1952, I feel it is this production by which the amateur theatre groups, for these amateur theatre groups would be my case study, who were trying to find a new language of theatre breaking away from IPTA found their first major success. Moreover, the years 1948-52, when the communist party was banned, constituted extremely interesting underground theatre activity under the IPTA which needs separate attention for

⁴ IPTA, Indian Peoples Theatre Association.

research. 1983, on the other hand, I feel marks the end of a period in the history of modern Bengali theatre prematurely with the premature death of Ajitesh. Thereafter Bengali theatre has not been able to maintain for itself the same zeal and depth which was promised to it. Ajitesh's early death I feel is a much more significant event in the history of modern Bengali theatre and the degree of its consequences are yet to be realized completely.

Considering as a period, the most striking feature of commonality in the theatre practice which was taking place in this period in Bengal and identifying themselves, within the bigger umbrella of the New Theatre Movement were the amateur theatre groups. These amateur theatre groups formed the basic units of theatre activity in Bengal (even in other parts of India) in the period. The three major such amateur theatre groups which would constitute my present case study were, Little Theatre Group and later on People's Little Theatre under Utpal Dutt, Bohurupee under Sombhu Mitra and Nandikar and later on Nandimukh under Ajitesh Bandopadhyay. It has generally been a tendency in any historical analysis of the period to take the presence of these groups for granted. However in my research I would consider these groups as constellations (more in their philosophical and aesthetic considerations and less in their anthropological existence) which would be essential to analyze, for a proper understanding of the prevalent modes of relations between theatre and politics. The history of such kind of an artistic constellation or coming-together as the amateur theatre groups signify can be traced back to the first artist communities or collectives formed in Bengal like the Anti-fascist Writers' and Artists' Association (estb:1937 with Rabindranath Tagore, Indian Progressive Writers' Association(estb:1936), League against Fascism and War(estb:1937, also with Tagore as the chairperson) in protest against fascist politics throughout the world; followed by the formation of IPTA and its hay days in the late 1940's.

Where I would like to draw the line between the amateur theatre groups and the earlier such collectives as the IPTA is the declared refusal of submission directly to any political party. This criterion as I would like to argue, not only signify an attempt of a coming together of theatre and politics of a novel kind. This is because, though they were in themselves not the cultural front of a political party; but they could never forsake a sense of political responsibility tried to sustain a theatre which was responsible to the people.

The history of New Theatre Movement is however as much a history of amateur theatre groups as that of a few individuals who found them. A fact which should be asserted at the very outset and which would have very apparent consequences on my work is that all of these amateur groups were essentially founded by individuals who were passionate towards theatre, respectively as Utpal Dutt in case of LTG, Sombhu Mitra in case of Bohurupee and Ajitesh Bandopadhyay in case of Nandikar and Nandimukh, so on and so forth. Though there was space for dialogue, it was these individuals, whose thoughts and conceptions became the guiding force in the functioning of these groups. Thus, my study in its praxis would begin from the study of three such premiere individuals of the time: Utpal Dutt, Sombhu Mitra and Ajitesh in their thoughts about theatre and politics, theatre and life. While it might be another interesting perspective to study the history of these groups by chartering out the various discourses that emerged within the groups in opposition to perceptions of these individuals, it is definitely not my principal intention to do so. While such instances would keep intruding my research, my principal intention would be to trace relations between theatre and politics that was developing in the conceptions of these leading figures. I feel, only when we are armed with such analysis first; that we can hope to begin marking out the non-conformist discourses within the group. While such a decision of counting the leading figures of the groups as the groups would create obvious silences in my reading; but it would also help to bring forth certain interesting areas of analysis, as to the role played by these individuals as coordinators and teachers within the group.

Such questions would directly relate to our analysis of the idea of politics. Coordination and pedagogy have been two crucial questions in the history of political thought since Plato. Moreover, this will facilitate a study between in the inters-space of the individual and the community and the incessant negotiations in-between.

Hypotheses:

If the first half of the twentieth century was politically tumultuous, 1950's, 60's and 70's too, saw politically turbulent times throughout the world, in India and in particularly Bengal; without a brief chartering of which it would not wise for us to begin. Europe was still struggling to deal with the huge ethical vacuum left over by the devastating World Wars and the world had just witnessed Hiroshima-Nagasaki. While colossal destructions of life and property in the wars made way for a time where violent political encounters were avoided it was a time for institutional politics: politics of power consisting of cold war, political propaganda, espionage, and enforcing influences and counting sides. The fall of the British Empire and the consequent tussle for the "super-power" status continued, with Russia and America emerging as the dominant influences. Consequently, there was emergence of new forms of economic and cultural hegemony. Countering these new forms of hegemony was emerging, new nationalist and regionalist movements in the countries of the third world. Debates regarding the new trends of multiculturalism gathered steam. India of course being a newly independent nation found itself at the very heart of such political propaganda. The Congress government at the centre opened the doors of foreign investments in the industrial field. It tried to take a diplomatic stance in respect to the politics of cold war. However more often than not it encouraged the proto-capitalist ventures of America and Russia. Theatre activity in Bengal with its communist history remained strongly critical of the foreign policies of the government at the centre.

A very important event in context of Bengal was the collapse of the vision of the communist utopia in the aftermath of Stalinist regime in Russia, and The Cultural Revolution in China in the 50's and early 60's. A growing rift was revealing itself among the major communist forces of the world China and Russia. Similar rifts were emerging the Communist Party of India in the early 1960's⁵ and there were growing debates in the Communist circles regarding matters of violence, fascism, regimentation of the arts and ideological propaganda.

More than anything else, around the world, the 60's and 70's were the time for the people to assert their rights, to demand for their rights more ardently than ever. The student's and worker's movements around the world in the late 60's and the early 70's, the Civil Rights movement demanding the rights of the Blacks, the Vietnam War paved the way for the birth of the new individual who is no longer ready to be intimidated by institutional forces; but taking the new found technologies of mass media to his advantage, by creating an increasing public awareness of the injustice perpetrated on him by the forces in power; is ready to fight for his rights. In India too, 60's and 70's was a time when the initial euphoria and enthusiasm of the independence had started to subside and the problems that were assumed by the left movement (CPIM) in India to be dead with the gaining of independence; resurfaced in the post-colonial contexts. It was the time when it was becoming clear as Ranajit Guha would go on to say later-“As the Indian experience shows, the formal termination of colonial rule, taken by itself, does little to end the government of colonialist knowledge.”⁶ The rulers had changed from the British colonizers to the Congress bourgeoisie but the political choice of have and have-nots have not changed. It was by this time that the first three five year plans have been implemented, Nehru has voiced his controversial foreign policy and it had

⁵ In 1964 a group of members broke away from Communist Party of India (CPI) to form Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPIM) with complaints of revisionism against CPI.

⁶ Ranajit Guha, *A rule of property for Bengal; an essay on the idea of permanent settlement* (Paris: Mouton, 1963).

becoming that political subjects of his sovereign were certainly the elites. The questions of the poor, the ethnic, the religious minority, the woman, the unemployed were not being given enough importance. Thus a political crisis was at hand where the marginalized were ready to fight for their rights. What made the time very special, is the way the petit bourgeois middle class intellectuals joined the revolution with a an unprecedented zeal, and took the responsibility of leading the movement. The climaxes of these developments were in the country wide students and workers movements in late 60's and early 70's (the Naxalbari Movement) and the consequent declaration of the nationwide State of Emergency in (1975).

The countries throughout the world that had to deal with their new found independence in Africa, Australia or the subcontinent the political problems and conflicts were arising out of their very being in the state of post-coloniality. While on one hand there was a sudden exposure to and arrival of modernity from the west and it was normal to influenced, people were still not over the hegemonic exploitation by their colonizers. Thus, what ensued and is in no way a problem of the past, is the problem of the new subject of the independent state faced with the dichotomy of modernity and national identity. Would he look towards the past for lost roots or embrace the present which is easily available in front of them? In India too, these questions were crucial at the very outset of its independence. On one hand when Nehruvian nationalism looked towards a historical reconstruction of the Hindu past there ensued protests and struggles from different quarters against such a hegemonic reconstruction.

In the Indian context, late 1950's, 1960's and early 1970's in India would certainly come across as the era of the most intense political negotiations that independent Indian state has encountered. In the national context, firstly to begin with there was the Sino-Indian war in 1962.

The Sino-Indian war and the harassment in the hands of China put a deep dent in the confidence of Indian subject on the government at the centre. The chaos and corruption in the defense department became apparent. Thus a time was coming, when the initial euphoria and enthusiasm of the independence had started to subside and the problems that were assumed to have solved with the gaining of independence; will resurface in the post-colonial contexts. By 1964 the failure of the Nehruvian, Hindu Nationalistic project was evident. The questions of the poor, the ethnic, the marginalized, the woman, the worker, the peasants, the unemployed were not being given enough importance. The undivided CPI took upon itself to lead these struggles against the government. However, the conflicts within the left in the greater global context were definitely affecting the political situation in Indian left parties too. In 1964 seven members of the Communist Party of India broke away from the party to form CPIM (Communist Party of India Marxist). In 1969 another split saw the formation of CPIML (Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist). Thereafter were more divisions. All of this culminated in the Indian wide workers and students Movement in the late 60's and early 70's and the Emergency declared thereafter. It was the late sixties that the Women's movement organization in India which earlier used to work under the bigger umbrella of the Communist Party of India decided to break away and establish an independent identity of its own. It is perhaps revealed that independence from a colonial rule itself does not put an end to the patriarchal nature of the society which is manifested even in the workings of the left political parties. Thus 1960's in India, was the time when it had become a matter of asking "how things in society are counted or go uncounted"⁷ under the domain of the independent Indian democracy.

Coming to the context of West Bengal exclusively, these incidents mentioned above had their consequences in the state as well as there were developments which were exclusive to the state too. After independence the Communist party was banned in India till 1952. Since the ban was lifted

⁷ Interview titled 'Politics and Philosophy' of Alain Badiou by Peter Hallward, 116

Bengal was one of the states where CPI was successful in gaining mass popularity. By the 1960's they gained considerable popularity in Bengal. The decade however proved to be far from smooth in terms of the progress of the Communist Party Bengal. The first jolt was provided by the 1962 the Sino-Indian war and the Left party which was emerging as a major political force in Bengal stood divided in their stand. Thus, when Indo-China war broke out, many party leaders and members were arrested. In 1964, the communist Party of India split into two under allegations of revisionism. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) was formed. The political situation gradually became worst and the Congress Government tried to dominate the popularity of Communism among the people by tormenting Communists, adopting many illegal ways. In spite of these attempts by the Congress however, a non-Congress Joint Front Government was elected in Bengal first time in 1966 and second time in 1969, both times failing to sustain itself. In 1967 there was the Naxal Uprising led by workers and youths which also created a rift in the communist front. The Naxalites took recourse to immediate, violent means. Later on, there were splits within the Naxalite group too. Mid 1960's in between had encountered "Khadyo Andolan". What followed was the notoriously unfair election of 1972 and emergency declared in 1975. Thus we see Bengal in this period was going through a lot of political turmoil.

The above political issues were being fervently debated in the public sphere, which grew keeping theatre activity at its centre in contemporary west Bengal. The amateur theatre groups which consisted of mostly people from the middle-class became the space for sharing and voicing opinions on these matters of political concerns. Not only the plays and their performances but; what also became a very interesting space for debate, were the magazines which were published by each of the theatre groups. These magazines often provided the space for charged debates among contemporary practitioners and critics. Theatre became the medium of expression for people's expectations from and dissent against the institutions of power and governance.

Apart from the political debates the tradition of theatre activity in Bengal in this period found itself entangled in aesthetic debates too, most of which were reflected in the contemporary debates around the world regarding aesthetics. The theatre practitioners and critics were aware of the developments taking place around the world, in the field of aesthetics and referred to them in their debates. There were debates regarding the nature of relation between theatre and politics: whether theatre should subject itself to ideological regimentation, what should be relation between the form and content, the much debated question of representation: realism and expressionism. There were debates regarding the importance and necessities of translation and adaptation of foreign plays. There were debates regarding the philosophical and technical implications of the work of various European and American playwrights and practitioners like Brecht, Pinter, Pirandello, Beckett, Stanislavsky, Artaud, Grotowsky, Shechner, Beck and Melina.

Now coming to the context of the New Theatre Movement, the conditions for the beginning of this New Theatre Movement was however not the same as it was in the case of the People's Theatre Movement. If the "People's Theatre Movement" as already discussed in brief, was an accidental development, an emerging out of circumstances an, unconditioned coming together, The New Theatre Movement was a much more planned affair. If the former emerged from a void of what we may call real circumstances, the later was made to emerge to fill the void that the former event had created. What was, it seems the objective of the New Theatre Movement was to reformulate systematically, structurally a theatre which could be situated in the void that was left by the immature end of the People's Theatre Movement. This new theatre had an extremely ambivalent relationship with the People's Theatre Movement. On one hand, it wanted to replicate the earlier theatre in its character and its success, on the other it was anxious not to replicate its untimely demise. Thus the new in the New Theatre Movement, which was interestingly a self professed new, signal an

ambidextrous relationship with the old. On one hand it acknowledges the old as the one whose legacy it is maintaining; on the other it distinguishes itself from the old as the new who exercises a corrective measure in order not to commit the same mistakes as the old.

A fundamental characteristic the New Theatre Movement attempts to inherit from the older one is of course a conception of a theatre that has its fidelity to the public, a people's theatre, and a politically critical relationship to its own time. Utpal Dutt, Sambu Mitra or Ajitesh Bandopadhyay and correspondingly the theatre activity of the groups they headed, cannot be categorized under one type by any means. All three of them had their individual traits in terms of aesthetic conceptions, relation to the public and reading of the society, but nonetheless what has repeatedly reverberated in their writings about theatre and their theatrical endeavors is the desire for a theatre of the people and for the people; and not people as a subtraction but people as a generic category. The plays which each of them wrote, adopted and produced were all responding to their times ethically and critically or at least such was their claim.

Here, we should discuss a little about the very nomenclature 'New Theatre Movement'. First of all "New Theatre Movement" was an umbrella term to signify all the theatre that was going on in that period and does not signify the fidelity to any particular manifesto or philosophical ideal. A fact which also deserves mention is that certain sections of the theatre fraternity expressed reservations regarding the nomenclature of "New Theatre Movement". A very interesting instance would be an article published in the journal named "Bohurupee" under the name Suranjan Chattopadhyay which is now revealed to be written by Sombhu Mitra under the pseudonym, titled "There should be an end to the name: Naba Natya Andolan"⁸. It is argued in the article though not going into historical instances

⁸ Shombhu Mitra, 'Naba Natya Andolan-e Namer Shesh Hok', *Sombhu Mitra: Dhyane O Antar Dhanye* Shaoli Mitra (ed.) (Kolkata: Nandanik, 2011).

that Nabya Natya Andolan has lost its character post the production *Rakta-Karobi* by Bohurupee. Interestingly, it was Sombhu Mitra who had first used the nomenclature in his writings. Utpal Dutt had a reservation to the nomenclature from the beginning, which we will discuss in detail in later on. However, in spite of these, the nomenclature was used more often than not and is still used to mark the period of theatre activity.

The point however, where The New Theatre Movement distinguishes it most from its older counterpart and which also brings to its second nomenclature, “Group Theatre Movement”, is in the nature of constellation of the groups that were doing theatre. First of all, a fundamental fact is that People’s Theatre Movement was happening under one group, IPTA where the group member’s loyalty was first to the political party of CPI. However in the case of New Theatre Movement, contrary to this, first of all there were not one; but a number of separate groups that were working and secondly as an obvious consequence of the failure of IPTA, none of these groups wanted themselves bound by loyalty to any political party. Thus Bohurupee, Little Theatre Group or Nandikar and all the others were groups which were constellations of people whose point of coming together was only theatre itself. It is important to note that commercially too these groups were initially, mostly self-supported. Later on in the late 60’s government and private funding too made their entry. However, there were two principal problems which presented themselves. First, how to organize these separate groups, which had their own, aesthetic and social conceptions into a Theatre Movement and how to maintain such a group which does theatre as its own end in and not as a part of a political or a commercial set up and yet maintains its responsibility to the people. It was particularly the answer to this question which resulted in various negotiatory constellations between theatre and politics. An idea of the intense discourse that was taking place and which focused on the two problems mentioned above could be formed if one takes a look at the number of journals that were being brought by the various theatre groups and at times independently. Journals like

“Bahurupee”, “Epic Theatre”, “Gandharba”, “Abhinay Darpan” and others had become the site for lively debates between the theatre practitioners themselves and critics.

In an overview it appears to me however that theatre in Bengal in this period I am looking at, at least in the initial stages, was able to retain the political nature of the theatre that I have elaborated before. Irrespective of the nature of it there was still space for political thought. The amateur theatre groups were a novel constellation of people yet to be assimilated within Government or corporate interests and thus could afford to respond to immediate political situations. It could thus furnish prescriptions against the state and government. Thus theatre in this period I believe though not made to serve the cause of any one political party was able to maintain its political nature, which has indeed increasingly subsided since then. Moreover in absence of an imposed nationalist aesthetic agenda which, since the 1970’s working through the Government funding institutions like Sangeet Natak Akademy or academic institutions like National School of Drama has rendered theatre in India politically impotent, the regional amateur theatre groups could actually react to politics at its own locale of origin.

The New Theatre movement too could not sustain its force beyond a decade. By the early 1980’s it had almost become a spent force. The evils were two fold. First, the limitations formed by the internal conflicts in the amateur theatre groups themselves and the other an external one in form of state ideology and the resulting financial benefit. Since the 1970’s an agenda of, constructed nationalism was put into motion by institutions like Sangeet Natak Akademy and National School of Drama. Such mandates as making performance traditions to follow Natyashastra to avail government support or otherwise asking urban based directors to work with traditional forms for the same cannot be seen in any other light than exploitation of theatre and rendering them into tools of governance. One however suspects such an idea of fabricated nationalism was also initiated in some way to

counter the numerous urban regional theatres that did exist throughout the country in the 1950's, 60's and early 70's and I also suspect this because of the very nature of the uncomfortable political questions that these theatres were posing to the government. It definitely seemed safe for the government to push theatre down into a historico-aesthetic black-box.

This was the biggest evil that almost single handedly became responsible for the regional Indian theatres to be rendered impotent had become apparent by then, the import of a wholesale nationalistic aesthetic construct to which all cultures of theatre were made to confirm. This was aided by institutionalization of theatre in Government sponsored drama schools (National School of Drama, New Delhi) or institutions funded by corporate (Ford Foundation). Theatre practitioners were lured into these institutions by promises of economic stability. However it came for a heavy price of making theatre yet another tool in the mechanism of governance or a marketable commodity.

What has often accompanied this financial control is also control exercised more directly by banning plays like Utpal Dutt's *Kallol* or Satyadeb Dubey's production of Mohit Chattopadhyay's *Rajrokt*. The emergency of the 1975 was the revelation of an otherwise carefully hidden truth that the parliamentary democracy is ultimately, only symbolic in nature. Recent acts of censorship under the new government in West Bengal which brought with itself hysteria of hope shows that; political party in power might change but unless the change is in the way politics is conceived- the people, their art and their theatre will continue to suffer.

Research Methodology:

“So, I'm not proposing a new political content within the old frame but trying to re-define, or to think differently, what is involved in the political as such, and for the very same

reason I don't propose a political theory because what I'm saying, specifically on friendship and hospitality, on what friendship is and what hospitality is, exceeds, precisely, knowledge. In its extreme and more essential form it has to do with something which cannot become a theoreme, it is something which simply has to be known, there is some type of experience, of political experience in friendship and hospitality which cannot be simply the object of a theory. Which is not an anti-theoretical move; I think political theory is necessary, but I try to articulate this necessity of a political theory with something in politics or in friendship, in hospitality, which cannot, for structural reasons, become the object of knowledge, of a theory, of a theoreme.”⁹

-Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida in his study on politics titled *Politics of friendship (1994)* does the groundbreaking act of bringing the two categories of Politics and Friendship together. Though formally groundbreaking because of the previous disinterest shown by political theorists towards the term friendship to the extent that they thought it to be antithetical to the idea of politics such a shift of paradigm could be anticipated in the context of the political developments in the 20th century. Political theory since its very beginning had never before friendship as a criterion for discussion under its domain; friendship was generally discussed under the domain of ethics and morality. The term ‘politics’ shares its roots with the Greek term *Politikos* meaning of, for or relating to the citizens. In the first book on Politics, Aristotle discusses the city (*polis*) or “political community” (*koinonia politike*) as opposed to other types of communities and partnerships such as the household and village. He asserts that the highest form of community is the polis (originally meaning city but meaning state in its more modern connotation). In his third book on politics Aristotle reflects on the category of ‘citizens’ who

⁹Jacques Derrida, ‘Politics and Friendship’, Centre for Modern French Thought, (University of Sussex, 1 December 1997), <<http://www.livingphilosophy.org/Derrida-politics-friendship.htm>>, accessed on 15 March, 2012.

are the subjects of politics. Aristotle asserts that a citizen is anyone who can take part in the governmental process and that he who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state. The Platonist view in this regard was however far more restrictive. Thus we find, both the space of discussing politics and its subject are defined in relation to the institution of the state or polity. Thereafter the history of political thought has almost always conceived politics in terms the institutions of governance, state, religion, empire and others. In the nineteenth century such convictions were at their zenith.

The twentieth century however arrived with a major setback for the institutions of political power. After a colossal loss of life and property the faith that was invested by individuals on the institutions of political power lay broken into smithereens. The twentieth century saw the brutal annihilation of men in the name of religion, cast, country, gender, color and other political difference. Thus the antagonism which was earlier thought essential to politics revealed itself as fatal. Questions of ethics thus could no longer be considered independent of politics or vice versa. The individual found himself, alone at the mercy of fascist forces. The most ironical of all facts has been the revelation of the fact that democracy championed as the system of political equality has also failed. As one finds the premiere political thinkers of our times assert in the crucial study *Democracy but in What State*, democracy to have become emblematic. The 'count for one' constitutional democracy was considered to be the precondition of equality. But the 20th century has shown us time and again, the misgivings of such an assumption. Giorgio Agamben's brilliant study "The State of Exception" reveals how interestingly the idea of "exception" or "emergency" has been used a tool for governance in the 20th century. The situation of "emergency" has become the alibi for doing away with the same system of legality that it had begun as a protective measure against. Thus we see politics, as Foucault would say it, "has yet not been able to cut off the king's head". Politics which by the meaning of itself should concern matters of the state have been mostly concerned which institutions which have posed as state, not with the people in general who constitute the state. Politics

in its pure eventuality and locality of action has become impossible to attain in a parliamentary system of governance. As Badiou would say-

“...The parliamentary form of politics, that commodity without concept, by virtue of the thickness of the consensus it organizes renders almost invisible and untenable all genuine politics capable at thinking at the locale where it takes place...”¹⁰

Thus a parliamentary form of politics has become what Jean Baudrillard would call a “simulacra” where everything that is of value is a “symbolic value”. It becomes impossible for such a politics to respond to the real political situation which is contingent and momentary.

Thus the realization has dawned that one would have to think politics anew, not in the institutions but elsewhere. Equality would have to be thought of, at the threshold of the ethics of the individual and the community. Equality has thus been one of the principal motives in the work of the premiere thinkers of our time, Ranciere and Badiou. So has been the nature of the singularity of the community which would house equality and the beings who would constitute such a community. Thus the premiere political question of our times has become: how to be equals? In other words, how to be friends?

Now, theatre among the forms of art has been by far the most consistent presence in the debates concerning the relation between art and politics. Sovereign states have always been afraid and concerned of the institution of theatre and thus have always tried to monitor and censure theatre activities (a very interesting case in the 20th century has been that of the left political parties who have found theatre, beneficial to their interest while struggling for power; but theatre has become an anathema, as soon as they have come to power). It must be for the same reasons that theatre has always been the favorite tool of any anti-state movement. Thus theatre has almost always been an

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, ‘Rhapsody for Theatre-A Short Philosophical Treatise’, *Theatre Survey* 49:2 (November, 2008), 187-238.

area of concern for any institution of governance. Such an observation of course must be analyzed for two immediate inferences. Firstly, theatre among all art forms, has a relation with public which is unique in its potential; secondly theatre has a capacity to disturb, challenge, and critique any system of governance by making appear a new which is always an inconsistent new.

It is only theatre among the arts, which works through and with a community in it's very tangible. Firstly a theatre group in its very constellation presents the world in a microcosm. Thus the very process of doing a theatre is similar to that of being in a community. The individual has to negotiate his subjectivity within the singularity of his being an artist and collectivity of the group as the creator of the theatre.

Secondly, what is more significant is the unique relationship that theatre has with its audience.

Contemporary thinker, Alain Badiou has dealt on this aspect of theatre in considerable detail, in his short treatise on theatre "Rhapsody for Theatre". I feel it will be adequate for our present purpose to paraphrase what he says there about the unique relationship between theatre and the people who see it. Badiou in the article makes a comparative analysis and differentiates between the viewing of cinema and theatre. He says that cinema is a capitalist and private enterprise and being a private enterprise, it is also a private spectacle. Nobody is responsible for cinema, other than a producer and his employees. Thus cinema has only a viewer, while theatre has a spectator. Cinema is always already a past while theatre is a perpetual present; it is a happening which is unique in its every moment which cannot be re-visited. The principal aspect of all theatre is contingent and indiscernible. Thus it demands from its spectator an intent engagement, for its spectators are not just a by-product; but an essential part of the theatre-event as its only witnesses and also the subject of transformation of that event. A theatre is always a chance, even if a well reasoned chance, and the public forms an essential part of that chance-

“Who can ignore the fact that, depending on which public one is playing to, the theatrical act does or does not deliver the theatre-idea, does or does not complement it? But if the public is part of the chance that is at work in the theatre, it must itself be as prey to chance as possible. We must protest against any conception of the public that would depict it as a community, a substance, or a consistent set. The public represents humanity in its very inconsistency, in its infinite variety... Only a generic public, a chance public, is worth anything at all.”¹¹

Now coming to the question of theatre’s being an anathema to any system of power. Any honest art practice for that instant is potentially disruptive due its situation in the threshold of appearing and disappearance. Art above all, has the capacity the new which cannot be assimilated by the existing systems of visibility or intelligibility. By its very performative process of creation, art always nurtures the promise of breaking boundaries of thought and senses. Therefore, the practice of art always challenges the very process of prescriptive governance by creating a fissure in its system of knowledge and sensibilities. In other forms of art however such inconsistencies can often be remain undiscovered but in theatre however due to its proximity to the world, life, community and politics such disruptions are always played out. In simpler terms, theatre has always shown its power to exert influence on people, as mimetic medium, which emulates life itself and performs life itself on stage, a life which then can be emulated by the spectator in its praxis. Thus, Theatre has the capacity to put into presence a life in its ethical practice for emulation of its spectator. It has the power to question and critique any system of governance by proposing an ethics which can escape the prescription of the state prescribed ethics of conduct. It is for this reason, theatre as an art form has been looked upon with suspicion by the political sovereigns since in Plato’s Republic to Christian Liturgies to even modern democracies because it has the capacity to challenge this domain of “ethical conduct”

¹¹ Alain Badiou, ‘Theses on Theatre’, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 74.

through which they govern. Theatre under the guise of a falsity has the power to produce ruptures in the very political intention of a sovereign state. It is thus sovereign powers have always tried to monitor and censure theatre activities. Therefore, theatre as a form of art and as an institution is inherently political. Theatre always presents an analysis of the state of state in its life forms.

In the 20th century however more than ever there has been a steady corrosion of theatre's political potential and what is even more ironical is that it has happened in the name of rendering it more political. A term which has very often been associated with art practice in the 20th century is 'movement'. Theatre too had its share of movements. But; what is indeed meant by the term 'aesthetic movement' or a 'theatre movement' as such? Why did this term as a concept gain such importance in the period? What are the conditions or circumstances under which such a usage was gaining popularity? Here we find two apparent contradictions being played out. On one hand is there is the trajectory of the discourse around the concept of the Cultural Revolution taking from the Althusserian argument around ideology following its implementation in China and Russia and on the other hand, there are avant-garde artist movements in Europe and America. When Althusser stressed upon the fact the socialist revolution was not self sufficient and one needs to sustain it by following it with Cultural Revolution which works to create and develop the communist ideology in the society and thus prevent a regression, post socialist evolution back to the capitalist societal structure¹². In opposition to this however, could be traced tendencies later expressed on the urge to do theatre not to propagate a political ideology as such but for its very aesthetic ends, as the radical protest of the individual against conformity. When both would seem to exist in oppose polarities both trends were similar in their final objectives: to put theatre to other ends than theatre. Our contemporary philosopher Jacques Ranciere in his seminal theoretical treatise on art: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The*

¹²[Attributed to Louis Althusser] Jason E. Smith (Trans.) *Décalages* Vol. 1,1 Article 9, <http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/9>, accessed on 10 February, 2012.

Distribution of the Sensible would argue that both these tendencies apparently seeming different are the manifestations of the same phenomenon, what he calls as the “aesthetic regime of art”.

“The entire question of the ‘politics of aesthetics’—in other words, of the aesthetic regime of art—turns on this short conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that and. It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of ‘changing life’. Matters would be easy if we could merely say naïvely that the beauties of art must be subtracted from any politicization, or knowingly that the alleged autonomy of art disguises its dependence upon domination.”¹³

Ranciere argues that even where an apparent autonomy for art is claimed by avant-gardes as such, it is actually a domination in disguise as even there to art or rather aesthetic experience is valued as much it is non-art, that something else than art in most cases “life”. In most such cases he claims a threefold logic is drawn, either it is of art as life, or life as art or the scenario where the two are in a dynamic exchange process. A close look at the logic which in most cases the practitioners of the New Theatre Movement presented in support of a theatre movement as such would reveal that it were these conceptions which were being practiced.

So how should be a theatre of our times? Ranciere says it would be a theatre of appearance: a theatre which would appear by breaking through the regime of visibilities and intelligibilities. But then how would it define itself with respect the artist’s subjectivity and the world. Alain Badiou says it would

¹³ Jacques Ranciere, ‘THE AESTHETIC REVOLUTION AND ITS OUTCOMES’ in *New Left Review*, Issue 14 (Mar-April, 2002), 134

be “immanent” and “multiple”¹⁴ at the same time. It would be a singular existence subtracted from and at the threshold of the two multiplicities, the artist and the world. It would exist at the liminality of ethics and politics. It would be directed towards the generic public and not a counted and definable one. Finally it would be analytical, as it would reveal the state of state. It is such a theatre which can become the ‘thought’¹⁵ of the state in a Foucauldian manner.

Chapter Design and corresponding Research Questions:

In the light of the brief picture that I have already provided of theatre in Bengal from 1960-1975, I would like to enquire into and deal with through three chapters in my research the thoughts regarding the relations between theatre and politics in the work of three premiere figures of New Theatre Movement respectively, Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay and Sombhu Mitra. The research questions that I would like to investigate in each of these chapters are broadly as follows-

- I. In my first chapter titled *Utpal Dutt: in the Regime of Ideology* I would like to make an analysis of Dutt’s conceptions regarding the relations between politics and theatre through his writings on theatre and art in general. Dutt a lifelong believer in the Communist Ideology in spite breaking away from IPTA, the cultural front of Communist Party of India only after an association of eight months. It would be my intention in this chapter to firstly argue through the case of Dutt how any form of Political ideology does not make theatre political but intact puts its political nature through a steady corrosion. I would also like to point out the very

¹⁴Alain Badiou, ‘Art and Philosophy’, in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9.

¹⁵Foucault defines thought as – “Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meanings, its conditions and its goals.” See, Pg, xxxv, Introduction by Paul Rabinow in *Ethics: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*.

impossibility of the implementability of Communist ideology as a program of cultural action, for its inherent contradictions. I would like to point out the limitations that Dutt was putting himself under by trying to pursue the ideological agenda in spite of the apparent problem he encountered as a theatre artist. Finally, my argument would be to say that political ideology is inherently hegemonic in any form and any art and especially theatre must not subject itself to its representative regime.

II. In my second chapter titled *Sombhu Mitra: in the Regime of an Ethical Individualism* I would like to investigate the ideas of Sombhu Mitra regarding the relations between theatre and politics or theatre and the world. Though Sombhu Mitra too like Dutt got his first break with IPTA and left it later on to form his own group unlike Dutt he intended to distantiate himself from institutional politics. Mitra's was a search an individual ethics through his theatre. He looked to attain it through forming certain proximity between life and art. I would like to critique however that such an aestheticisation of life appertains to giving birth to a new regime of individual ethics and morality. It too works through a mimetic logic of pedagogy and thus is essentially hegemonic in its application. Such ethical individualism does not take into count the ontological differences of beings in a community and thus is reductionist too. I would like to analyze the limitations of such a view point through a study of Sombhu Mitra's thoughts as revealed in its writings about theatre.

III. In my third chapter titled *Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: in the Neighbourhood of Liminality* I would like to investigate the shift of paradigms that Ajiesh Bandopadhyay was bringing with himself in the relationship between theatre and politics and to speak more broadly between theatre and life. I would like investigate and evaluate his thought gestures appertaining to the field of theatre as well as life and find out whether and how he was trying to form a threshold

space in both of them: a threshold where politics and ethics, community and the individual, global and local, action and reflection can exist together as equals not imparting the hegemony of one on the other. How was Ajitesh conceiving such a theatre where it puts forth itself as an analytical presence of life and society unmediated by an ideological or ethical regime. Finally I would like to argue that it is in such a liminal presence in life and theatre that I feel the key to our future community of equality lies and Ajitesh showed the promise to create and perhaps but for his untimely death Bengali theatre might have found for itself the kind of political theatre that is truly necessary for our times.

Conclusion:

Thus, through my research I would like to investigate the complex relationships that grow between theatre and politics, theatre and life and theatre and the world. While such relationships and negotiations have always existed they have taken new dimensions under the unprecedented political developments in the 20th century. Today, when in India and around the world institutions of power have become more powerful through more advanced mechanisms of control than ever and every moment they intend to prescribe us our life and our art. Democracy today has only symbolic today and equality a facade. It is our thought which is the only tool of protest in our hands against the steadily increasing processes of control. We would have to think and device ways of keeping our arts free from those means of control. Where our differences are being exploited to political ends we would have to learn to be friends in our life. Theatre would definitely be one art which can come to our aid in this struggle; but not just any theatre, a theatre which would be daring enough to be the critical thought of its times and a theatre which is sensitive enough to analyze the problems of people

irrespective of their ontological differences. It is only such a theatre that could contribute towards our coming community of equality.

Chapter I

On Utpal Dutt: In the Regime of Ideology

Prelude:

“For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.”¹⁶

Let us, following the Socratic form of dialogue¹⁷, begin with a question. ‘What would be an apt political response to a political situation which puts forth the claim for a wager?’ A politically contingent moment demands on the concerned subject of politics to take a decision, to make a choice. Every such contingent moment by its uniqueness demands a decisions that is unique too and also momentary. It demands a decision which is axiomatic. But how would it be possible to take an axiomatic decision and under what conditions can such a decision be taken. A premiere philosopher of our times Alain Badiou has to say in this matter- “Love what you will never believe twice”¹⁸. Thus one would have to take risk. One would have to make a leap of faith with his belief in the new. Badiou has however asserted that it is impossible for institutional politics and especially

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Conversations with Brecht’, in Adorno eta al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1970), 82.

¹⁷ “The only thing I say I know,” Socrates tells us in the *Symposium*, “is the art of love (*ta erôtika*) (177d8–9). Taken literally, it is an incredible claim. Are we really to believe that the man who affirms when on trial for his life that he knows himself to be wise “in neither a great nor a small way” (*Apology* 21b4–5) knows the art of love? In fact, the claim is a nontrivial play on words facilitated by the fact that the noun *erôs* (“love”) and the verb *erôtan* (“to ask questions”) sound as if they are etymologically connected—a connection explicitly exploited in the *Cratylus* (398c5–e5). Socrates knows about the art of love in that—but just insofar as—he knows how to ask questions, how to converse elenctically.” C. D. C. Reeve, ‘Plato on Friendship and Eros’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/plato-friendship/>, accessed on 21 February, 2012.

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso Books, 2001), 52.

parliamentary democracy to respond in such a manner. Badiou also stresses that the impossibility is because of the nature of the 'consensus' also the nature of 'antagonism' that any institutional politics attempts to form through the practice of ideology. What inhabits such politics, is an established hierarchy of knowledge and an exercise in the mimetic pedagogy. Badiou in one his interviews¹⁹ with Peter Hallward distinguishes ideology from a contingent political decision by its condition of relevance. An ideology according to him is, what was thought too, when it took birth at a specificity of time and space and also could have worked under the dimensions of the same; but has been rendered dysfunctional by its act of deferring. A new contingent political situation calls for a new thought and ideological trappings can only hinder the inception of it.

Among the number rather ill formed and badly nuanced allegations that Marxist Indian historian Sumit Sarkar presented against the Subaltern group of historians of which he was an essential member during its formation in his charter of criticism titled *The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies* he however also made a significant point of criticism against the practice of subaltern studies in its later part. He allegation was in plainer words was that subaltern studies had become too ideological. As another critique Vinay Lal in his has paraphrased Sarkar's views-

“It is only the slightest exaggeration to suggest that for Sarkar, the trajectory of historical reasoning once took us from Ranke to Marx, it has now moved to Said, though this marks a regression rather than progression, especially since Said's mantras are said to have been uncritically adopted by his followers (37). A newer

¹⁹ Alain Badiou and Peter Hallward, 'Politics and philosophy an interview with Alain Badiou', *Angelaki* 3:3, (1998),132.

positivism has replaced the older dogmas: where for Ranke the “fact” was everything, Sarkar suggests that for the post modernists ideology alone is of consequence...²⁰

Sarkar elaborated by sheer statistics that from a beginning rich in sociological study facilitating the promise of giving voice to the subaltern; Subaltern Studies has gradually reduced its paradigm to superficial ideological debates and explanations under cultural studies. However Sarkar also alleges that Subaltern Studies began with a fundamentally Marxist critical perspective but post Foucault and Derrida has wrongly turned to a Eurocentric postmodernism. While Sarkar is right to point out that the ideological apparatus as the key miscreant in subaltern studies, he is definitely not right to detect it as later rot. Subaltern studies since its very beginning relied on an ideological apparatus and attempted to find an applicatory relation between ideology and reality. The recent postmodernist turn and the transposition of ideology to the domain of a search for a more inclusive idea of a community utopia does not as Sarkar alleged signify a flight in ideological utopia; but rather post an ideological bankruptcy after the failure of the movements in 60's; a more imperative gesture following the European post-modernists to think of politics beyond representation and antagonism. It is however, yet another matter that both Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy have managed to bring back this discourse once again back to representative categories, by trying to find actual examples in Indian communities of past. It is however the believers in the classical Marxism of class conflicts like Sarkar, who could not make the leap and got trapped in an ideological discourse of Marxism which took them further from contingent politics.

The first protests which collected around the world, against the tyranny of the fascist forces at the beginning of the twentieth century did so mostly under the political ideology of class conflict of

²⁰ Vinay Lal, 'Subaltern Studies and Its Critics: Debates over Indian History', *History & Theory* Vol.40 No.1 (Wesleyan University, February 2001), 5.

Marxism. A vast majority of these forces were constituted by artists and intellectuals. Thus art and especially theatre consequently had become one of the principal fields where communism ideology had found a voice. In India, there was no exception. Communism seemed the only political solution to a political problem. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917) and the Chinese Revolution (1949) were thought to steps towards that solution. But the 50's and 60's had more despondency in store. The chances of success for the only political solution of Communism, was looking bleak, post the Stalinist regime in Russia and the Cultural Revolution in China. Communism too has led people to the same ends struggling against which it had begun its journey. The revelation was perhaps the harshest for the artists and intellectuals. The Communist movements which had been benefitted so much by the field of art once in power began censoring and straight jacketing of art in the name of ideology. Art works were arbitrarily censored; artists were tortured and killed under the allegations of defying communist principles. What was attempted in the name of ideology was to create a political regime for aesthetics. Under such circumstances, French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser proposed a new structure for Communist Revolution. In his response to Cultural Revolution in China titled *On the Cultural Revolution*²¹ published unsigned in the November-December 1966 issue of the *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*; Althusser proposed a revisionist theory of Communist Revolution. He wishes to distinguish between a political revolution which does away with the economic class structures and an ideological cultural revolution which educates the masses and prepares the ground for a societal structure of equality. Althusser detects an economic and political "overdetermination"²² over the ideological revolution and thus calls for certain autonomy for the ideological revolution. He

²¹ [Attributed to Louis Althusser] Jason E. Smith (Trans.) *Décalages* Vol. 1,1 Article 9, <http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/9>, accessed on 10 February, 2012.

²²The [Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser](#) imported the concept into [Marxist politics](#) in an influential essay, "Contradiction and Overdetermination". Brewster, in Althusser et al.'s [Reading Capital](#) defines overdetermination as such: "the representation of dream thoughts in images privileged by their condensation of a number of thoughts in a single image (condensation), or by the transference of psychic energy from a particularly potent thought to apparently trivial things ... [For Althusser] overdetermination of a contradiction is the reflection in it of its conditions of existence within the complex whole."

asserts that every post political revolution society would encounter a process of “regression” until the political revolution is supplemented by a parallel and autonomous cultural revolution. He rejects the traditional Marxist model of base and superstructure for a complete autonomy in favor of ideology. The problem however was not what Althusser determined: the overdetermination of ideology by economy. Rather the problem was an ideological bankruptcy in Marxism. The ideology of class conflict was no longer sufficient to address the politics of the times. While the ideology of class-conflict as Alain Badiou says had given whatever it had to give but the political tasks at hand were far more complex and variedly organized.

Renowned Bengali playwright, director and actor Utpal Dutt too began by asserting his faith in Marxist ideology of class-struggle. In the beginning of sixties as the Nehruvian project of developments were revealing their obvious beneficiaries, the Indian state was waking up to a harsh truth. It realized that the coming independence has done little to do away with feudal structures of the colonial times. At that time Dutt in his plays *Angar* and *Kallol* was able to respond to the political contingency of his times. The Naxalbari movement of the late 1960's brought another politically contingent moment in front of Dutt and he took a leap of faith. He wrote and produced *Teer*, which too responded to the politics of its times. But ultimately the Naxalbari movement became a failure because of obvious political deficiencies and Dutt received a huge blow. The following years perhaps marked the most successful for him aesthetically and politically. He produced his much successful and politically contingent plays, *Tiner Tolwar*, *Dushpner Nogori*, *Barricade* and others. His was one of the sharpest voices of critique against Congress despondency under Indira Gandhi till the emergency. Consequently however CPI(M) came to power in Bengal. This was a crucial phase in Dutt's career where he had to take a decision and he took a decision in the Althusserian terms. He too made a similar political diagnosis as Althusser which consequently decided his faith. He refused to see through bankruptcy of Marxist political ideology of class-conflict and ultimately took himself

farther away from the contingent politics of the time. The historical analysis by which Dutt had once produced such brilliant critiques to the Hegemonic constructions of Nehruvian project of Hindu Nationalism now became his safe abode. Thereafter the ideological discourse took him far from the actual regional sociological perspectives to lands further remote, away from immediate political situations.

Snehasish Bahattachaya in one of his articles²³ on Dutt detects the presence of fundamental contradictions in Dutt's critical writings; but chooses not to delve deep enough to find the causal source of them. A close reading would show that these contradictions arise from different layers of negotiation that Dutt was always engaged in between his art and his politics. The first set of such contradictions can be traced to an aporia inherent to the very Marxist conceptions of cultural ideology in form of a conception of 'people's art'. The second set of contradictions arise due to his being an artist and a theatre artist and thus bound to respond to certain demands of his time in certain ways which were in conflict with the Marxist idea of aesthetics. The third set of contradictions would arise when his writings before and after Naxalbari are compared due to an obvious shift in his stance regarding association of theatre and politics as already discussed above. In this chapter I would like to trace these points of contradiction in Dutt's conceptions and therefore finally show how he himself had negotiated with the self-imposed ideological regime in his writings. I would also like to discuss the obvious limitations in judgment about his contemporary theatre that were being revealed in his writings due to being trapped in the ideological regime. Thus ultimately it would be my intention to argue firstly that the Marxist cultural ideology too often mentioned in Dutt's writings as the only alternative, was a problematic construct and finally that art and theatre among arts especially must

²³ Snehasish Bhattacharya, 'Ek Abismoroniyo Japendar Anonyo Anusandhan-Utpal Dutt Bisesh Sankha', *Shobdo Shahitya Patrika* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2010), 177.

not orient itself in reference to any political ideology but should always let itself open to new and contingent forms of political thoughts.

Marxist Ideology & Art, Inherent Aporias

Utpal Dutt's conceptions regarding art and the association of arts and politics was hugely influenced by his study of Marx, Engels and Mao on one hand and Marxist theatre practitioner Brecht on the other. What however, is a fact that there were contradictions inherent in the Marxist thought regarding aesthetics, which were revealed more clearly in their application in Russia and in China.

Marxist politics and the practice of arts have always maintained close proximity right from the emergence of Marxism in the writings of Marx and Engels. The collected papers in the work; *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*²⁴ bears a testimony to not only the fact that Marx and Engels often looked towards analyzing the artistic productions of an age for a historic-materialist evaluation of it; but also the importance function that Marx comprehended of art in the development of human society and the crucial role that it would have to play in the becoming of any new social order. Marx and Engels proposed a new discourse of aesthetics breaking away from fundamentally Aristotelian viewing and evaluation of art under a self-referential aesthetic paradigm which they termed "idealist". Any discourse worth making on art they proposed should be founded upon the principles of "dialectical materialism".

²⁴ Marx & Engels, *Marx and Engels on Art and Literature* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/art/preface.htm>>, accessed on 12 March, 2012.

“Idealist aesthetics considered art as a reproduction of the ideal, standing over and above actual reality. The origin of any art form, its development, flowering, and decay, all remained incomprehensible to the art theoreticians and historians of the pre-Marxian period, inasmuch as they studied these in isolation from man’s social existence. Marx and Engels considered it absolutely impossible to understand art and literature proceeding only from their internal laws of development. In their opinion, the essence, origin, development, and social role of art could only be understood through analysis of the social system as a whole, within which the economic factor — the development, of productive forces in complex interaction with production relations — plays the decisive role. Thus art, as defined by Marx and Engels, is one of the forms of social consciousness and it therefore follows that the reasons for its changes should be sought in the social existence of men.”²⁵

Thus the development of art in the history of human civilization according to Marx has not been strictly according to rules of art as ‘classicists’ would like to believe but always reflexive to the socio-economic transitions that societies have gone through. However Marx did not believe that such an influence of the society on art is one-sided- “For Marx and Engels, any social formation constituted a complex and dynamic system of interacting elements, each influencing the other – a system in which the economic factor is the determining one only in the final analysis”²⁶. However, they were in no way inclined to qualify art as a passive product of the economic system, but in the final analysis secondary to the economic system. The founders of Marxism emphasized that arts would have to be the vehicle of class truth and an important weapon in the ideological struggle

²⁵ Marx & Engels, *Marx and Engels on Art and Literature* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/art/preface.htm>>, accessed on 12 March, 2012

²⁶ Marx & Engels, *Marx and Engels on Art and Literature* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/art/preface.htm>>, accessed on 12 March, 2012

between classes. Marx and Engels therefore called for a clear distinction to be made between progressive and reactionary phenomena in feudal and bourgeois culture and put forward the principle of the Party approach to art that it be evaluated from the position of the revolutionary class.

Writings of Marx and Engels however reveal that they were also aware of art's relative independence as it develops. The fact that works of art are connected historically with particular social structures did not mean for them that they lose their significance when these social structures disappear. Marx, for instance, cites the art and epic poetry of the ancient Greeks which "still give us aesthetic pleasure and are in certain respects regarded as a standard and unattainable ideal"²⁷ Thus the very first aporia within the Marxist theory of art was this co-existence of one hand a theory that art is always socially and economically contingent and on the other the existence of a category of "classics" which can transcend their socio-economic point of origin and can become eternal marks of cultural elegance.

The second element of contradiction that we encounter in Marx and Engels is regarding their conception of the formal aspect of art. The dominant formal characteristic of the arts that Marx and Engels stressed in their writings as the supreme necessity for any art which would look to participate successfully in the class struggle from the side of the proletariat was "realism". Marx and Engels considered realism, as a trend in literature and a method of artistic creation, to be the supreme achievement of world art. Engels formulated what is generally recognised as the classical definition of realism. "Realism, to my mind," he wrote, "implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances"²⁸. This is what, they valued in the work of the great realist writers such as Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Balzac, Pushkin and others.

²⁷ Marx & Engels, *Marx and Engels on Art and Literature* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/art/preface.htm>>, accessed on 12 March, 2012

²⁸ Marx & Engels, *Marx and Engels on Art and Literature* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/art/preface.htm>>, accessed on 12 March, 2012

Such an ambiguous conception of “realism” would reveal itself to be hugely problematic in the Russian context when used as means for control.

It was Marx’s preference for realism as form which gave birth to the cultural ideology of Socialist Realism in Russia post October Revolution. At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, held in Moscow in August 1934, Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s Culture Minister, proclaimed the doctrine of Socialist Realism as the only acceptable form of writing for genuine Socialists. Soviet-supporting critics like Georg Lukács and Alfred Kurella tried to develop Zhdanov’s generalizations into a workable theory. They put the emphasis on content, and scorned especially the Modernist obsession with form (‘Formalism’) which, they said, either offered ‘old’ content in continually changing, ‘new’ forms, or else simply ‘form’ without content. For Lukács, since the subject matter of art, specifically literature was new; the actions of individual characters in a work of fiction or drama were newly significant, because their motivation revealed the submerged causes.

The regime of realism required psychological and illusionist dimensions, because those were what enabled the reader or spectator to empathize with the character, accept his motives and thereby ‘go along with’ his actions, and thus result in effecting enlightenment in the spectator. Thus the central function underlying the project of socialist realism was the creation of an art which is pedagogical in nature: an art, which ultimately would become the vehicle for Marxist knowledge or in more technical terms, its “ideology”. Thus what perhaps Marx conceived had conceived as form which would be able to analyze socio-economic phenomena better was used as a tool to suppress all formal experimentation in art and thus put the artistic field into the representative regime.

However the debate of realism in Russia got complex entangled with another dichotomy which was apparent in Marx's own propositions: on one hand, the responsibility to critique the present for the existent class inequality and on the other, to exceed it, to represent a future beyond inequalities. The artists in Russia argued that they had to experiment in order to find the form of art in synchrony with the class less nature of future society. However bureaucrats were no ready to take that risk. They wanted everything under count and were no prepared to risk for something uncounted for. This was perhaps one of the fundamental problem that communist regimes found with the field of arts as is revealed in a few lines that Bertolt Brecht told Walter Benjamin in one of their private discussions on the subject of "Russian literary policy, especially the figure of Lukacs,

"They are to put it bluntly, enemies of Production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is the unforeseeable. You never know what's going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the *apparatchik* and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat"²⁹.

What strikes as the concern of the communist regimes like in the case of Russia here; is the very innate unpredictability and uncontrollability of the artistic phenomenon. Arts or any creation by its very nature always exceeds its authorial intentions. Now, it is a fact that "Novelty is untimely, inasmuch as it irrupts into already established habits of thought, deranging or diverting customary modes of attention and expression, their rhythm and composition"³⁰. Thus, artistic creativity by its nature is antithetical to ideological regimes which for the basics of any materialist politics. Thus,

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht', in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1970), 97.

³⁰ Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron and Alex Murray (ed.), *The Work of Giorgio Agamben Law, Literature, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1.

there indeed was a disjunction which was very apparent whenever art was asked to follow or represent politics. What resulted was a frequent chastisement of the arts.

If the Marxist aesthetic conception of realism proved to be controversial in Russia the Yen-an lectures of Mao Tse Tung in China revealed another major aporia not only in Marxist conceptions of art in the very conception of a populist politics like Marxism. Mao, in his lectures, stressed upon the Marxist idea of a People's art and asked his comrades to try to form one in its very numerical sense. One finds the Mao imparting repeated importance on the sheer mathematical count of the audience for an art to fulfill is objective of becoming the "the people's art"-

“Take the cadres alone. Do not think they are few; they far outnumber the readers of any book published in the Kuomintang areas. There, an edition usually runs to only 2,000 copies, and even three editions add up to only 6,000; but as for the cadres in the base areas, in Yen-an alone there are more than 10,000 who read books...Our literary and art workers must do a good job in this respect.”³¹

Mao asserts that the primary requisite for the artist of a people's art is to be able speak in the tongue of the mass-

“What does lacking in knowledge mean? Not knowing people well. The writers and artists do not have a good knowledge either of those whom they describe or of their audience; indeed they may hardly know them at all. They do not know the workers or peasants or soldiers well, and do not know the cadres well either. What does lacking in understanding mean? Not understanding the language, that is, not being familiar with the rich, lively language of the masses. Since many writers and artists stand

³¹ Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Vol. III* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 72.

aloof from the masses and lead empty lives, naturally they are unfamiliar with the language of the people.”³²

On Final evaluation thus the guiding principles of a people’s art according Mao should always be decided not by principles of aesthetics but the comprehensibility of the masses-

“In discussing a problem, we should start from reality and not from definitions. We would be following a wrong method if we first looked up definitions of literature and art in textbooks and then used them to determine the guiding principles for the present-day literary and artistic movement and to judge the different opinions and controversies that arise today.”³³

Therefore we are lead to one of the major issues of contestation for Marxism, a populist³⁴ politics by its very nature, was ‘what was meant by the phrase “People’s art”’. Should it signify an art which is otherwise shallow yet popular to the masses, or an art which has survived the test of time and thus has proved itself of worth to the people; an art which entertains the people or educates them. Who could be the possible author of the people’s art? Can a bourgeoisie artist steeped in a bourgeoisie system of production produce something which would claim to be a people’s art or whether a “people’s art” should be ‘ontologically always poor’? Should the conception of “people” in art be searched for in the intentionality of the art work or in the reception of it? What should be an ideal economic setup for the production of a “people’s art”? What should be an ideal setup for its distribution? What would be the inherent aesthetic qualities of a “people’s art”? How would it represent “people”, always in its collectivity or individuality? What form would the Marxist realism

³² Ibid, 73

³³ Ibid,75

³⁴ By the term “Populist” I am referring to the conception of “People” as the collective of the poor and marginalized, not a derivative of “Populism” as used by Ernesto Laclau tracing back from the work of Hegel.

take in its particular singularity of application? What role exactly would the communist political party look to play in the relation between the “people” and the arts?

Therefore, we see there were contradictions which were inherent in the very nature of Marxist thought regarding art and when in Russia or China, a program of cultural ideology was attempted to be forged out of these conceptions they were bound to be controversial. Thus ultimately the ideological program in its inception became representational and coercive. It became impossible for the artists consequently finally to follow such a program. Dutt, while aware of the presence of these aporias in conceptions of Marxist cultural ideology; tried to negotiate them being within the ideological apparatus and therefore, as we shall see, often had to contradict himself.

Which People & Which Art?

Utpal Dutt always remained apprehensive of the terms like “Naba-natya” and “Sat-natya” which were doing the round in the intellectual circles post the IPTA split in the 1950’s and 60’s. For him it always remained a “People’s Theatre”, as he reiterates in several of his writings. He always maintained that, as and in terms of politics and theatre his fidelity in only to the ‘people’. This conception formed the central criterion of almost all his critical writings. I have already reflected in the introductory chapter on the emergence of the phrase ‘people’s theatre’ in the context of West Bengal from the IPTA movement. As it is very evident, the notion was an extension of the populist logic inherent in Communist ideology itself. Though Utpal Dutt’s association with IPTA remained

for a very brief period of eight months³⁵ and which he maintains like a lot of other members of IPTA, he was forced to sever due to conflict with some high-handed bureaucrats of the Communist party like Sudhi Pradhan³⁶; unlike Sombhu Mitra and Ajitesh Bandopadhyay he always maintained a very close relation with the CPI and later CPIM party³⁷ and maintained an explicit fidelity to the concept of people's art or correspondingly people's theatre, central to the Communist cultural ideology. Thus, it is possible to trace the very conception of the category of 'people' in Dutt's writings for knowledge of how he conceived of the category in its abstractness of the idea and also its material implementations and of course how he was looking negotiate the aporias apparent in such a concept.

Now, as we intend to search for a *dispositif*³⁸ in the Foucauldian sense of the term, an interesting instance to begin with, seems to me the critical essay on Romain Rolland's book "The People's theatre" which was published in Kolkata with a preface by one of the major bureaucratic figures of IPTA, Sudhi Pradhan. Sudhi Pradhan, in his preface praised the book in eloquent words and prescribed it as a text of seminal importance for any person willing to participate in the People's Theatre Movement. Dutt on his part declares any intention of taking Rolland's book as seriously as a guiding stone for the young members of theatre movement as dangerous to the extent of being suicidal. The primary allegation that Dutt puts against Rolland is the very irony of the title of Rolland's book, which is revealed once set against otherwise several instances of great aversion to the category of common people that escaped Rolland's lips. Dutt points out the instance where in a socialist congress in the year 1900 viewing a get together of millions of workers Rolland had written-

³⁵ "My association with IPTA, the party's official organization, was extremely brief-about eight months in 1950-51." Utpal Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Publishing, 2009), 38.

³⁶ Ibid,

³⁷ Ibid,

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, 'What is a Dispositif?' <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/what-is-a-dispositif/part-1/>>, accessed on 9 December, 2011

“The eternal crowd as described by Shakespeare, busy in fighting, thoughtless with no coherence in their ideas”³⁹

Even in the People’s Theatre book itself one is faced with the snobbish attitude of Rolland towards public when he says-

“The public is like a lady: they are not guided only by rational and logical powers of judgment; rather more by their instinct and passion. Thus these should be nurtured and directed.”⁴⁰

The above statement, Dutt points out not only displays a shocking disrespect towards the public in general; but also more importantly women. Rolland goes on to declare that “it’s a pity that such a great writer like Shakespeare would have to be brought to the level of the masses”⁴¹. Thus we find Dutt in this critical piece vehemently critiquing Rolland for a dismissive attitude towards the common mass. The common mass or the multitude, who according to Dutt; have the capability to understand classic work of art and from which they have been so long deprived by the bourgeoisie exploiters. A similar strain can be heard in many Utpal Dutt’s other writings too, most importantly “The Statue of Rabindranath” where he reveals the fallacy of such a declaration of Tagore as a bourgeoisie figure. He categorically mentions that it is indeed some of Tagore’s self-employed care-takers who have created a God out of Tagore, a God who is accessible only through them and declaring Tagore a bourgeoisie is for the revolutionary falling into the very trap of the discourse of esoteric elitism constructed by those ill-intentioned care-takers⁴². Thus, for Dutt any art can be called ‘people’s art’ only when it is shared by the populace. The mass has the capability to comprehend the

³⁹ “L’eternal people de Shakespeare, braillard, irreflechi, sans aucune suite dans les idees.” Jean Perus cited in Utpal Dutt, *Romain Rolland er Gono Natya* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 543.

⁴⁰ Romain Rolland, *People’s Theatre* (H. Holt and Company, 1918), 10.

⁴¹ Ibid, 29

⁴² Utpal Dutt, ‘Rabindranther Murti’, *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 153.

so called classical art and it is only because they have been barred from doing so that such classifications as classical and popular exist. Thus a popular art need not necessarily be an art of a low taste. When Dutt, on one hand claims such a distinction as that of popular and classical art made from a perspective of its reception, as null and void he however goes on to make distinction between folk art or people's art and mass art in one of his essays titled "Ghure-Fhire" (repeatedly)⁴³. The folk or the people's art is of the people's own construct while mass art is something the people have been forced to forge for the entertainment of feudal rulers. Thus Dutt locates the origin of mass art or popular art in the intention of the feudal elite and thus also claims them to be its audience. Thus it would require us a simple syllogism to conclude from this inferences that the category of people's art for Dutt is not ontological but rather constructed by its reception. Thus what is enjoyed by the multitude can only be called the people's art and also the only art worthy of its creation.

But can audience reception be the only criterion of classification for determining a people's art? Is every work of art that becomes popular worthy of being called people's art can a people's art signify only a popular art. The artist in Dutt could never agree. In one of his essays titled "Cabaret Theatre" he says-

"...People might want different things. But nobody comes to the world of art, signing a bond to provide just whatever is wanted...It is a pimp's logic to say that an artist would have to provide whatever people want...The artist bears a responsibility towards the society, towards its mental health. One who does refuse such a responsibility should be like a smuggler or a pimp, taken to jail..."⁴⁴

⁴³ Utpal Dutt, 'Ghure Fire' *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 392.

⁴⁴ Utpal Dutt, 'Cabaret Natya', *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 222.

Thus one can arrive at the first element of contradiction inherent in Dutt's conceptions of the nature of people's art. On one hand, when we hear such a declaration that, to give the people whatever they want, must never be the only objective that any art should have and on the other the only criterion that Dutt sets for any art to qualify for being called people's art and also the only proof of doing so: to be received, understood and accepted by the public. Thus, any artist is at the same time responsible to the public of the present in its counted magnitude and on the other to the welfare of the society- the society to come, the people to come, yet to be realized, yet to be counted. This however was, as already mentioned earlier not a novel debate but; one inherent in the very fundamental nature of Communism being a populist politics and thus manifested in its cultural ideology too. It would be, I assume of interest here, to see here what Brecht, another Major Marxist playwright of the century and one who perhaps was the biggest influence on Dutt, has to tell about a people's art in his essay titled, "Popularity and Realism". Brecht says, asserting what is meant by the term to him -

"Popular means: intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression/ assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it/ representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well..."⁴⁵

It would be quite evident that at one end of Brecht's definition is the criterion of communicability and comprehensibility of the broad masses and on the other, one of representation the thoughts of the progressive section.

Such a contradiction can also be traced through another major issue of debate in modernism and also in Marxist idea of aesthetics as I have already hinted, around the concepts regarding form of art, that of "realism and expressionism". In Dutt's writings too, we find the debate addressed to. Firstly, in his

⁴⁵ Bertolt Brecht, 'Popularity and Realism', in Adorno et al. (eds.) *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1970), 82.

essays like “Adhkhana Manush” (Half a Man) and “Natya Adoloner Bishoybostu” Dutt stresses on the importance of theatre to transcend what is merely he observed reality in front of the eyes. In “Adhkhana Manush” Dutt brings up the issue of realism wonderfully through a debate regarding the fact whether art for the sake of mirroring reality should represent people as a collective only instead of individuals. In his perspective to this argument he makes a strong case for art to transcend only what is immediately perceptible. He says-

“Theatre is not only to reflect the struggles taking place in reality. Theatre is much more than the reality. Lenin addressed Pisarov with the words: revolutionaries learn to dream. Without a concoction of dream and reality it does not become theatre, it merely becomes a pamphlet...Whatever happens in reality is not the only element of theatre, what would happen or should happen are also subjects of theatre.”⁴⁶

In the second essay he seems to come to a similar conclusion addressing the bad influence of photography on theatre almost in a similar way as Walter Benjamin did in his cult essay. First he alleges most of the contemporary plays of mimicking life in the name of reflecting it. As its remedy he prescribes-

“We are never saying that great plays cannot origin from the very mundane conversations of everyday life. We are saying- Not all this. This is not the only or even the best way to represent life. We are saying- if one has to mimic life then he has to keep writing dialogues analogous to that in life. In that case the huge world of

⁴⁶ Utpal Dutt, ‘Adhkhana Manush’ in *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 165.

imagination that human beings cherish remains unaddressed. The truth of what is said becomes perceptible but the truth of the unsaid remains in the dark.”⁴⁷

The instance which Dutt repeatedly mentions, citing his own oeuvre while addressing the realism debate, is that of his plays *Angar* and *Kallol*. In *Angar* (1960) a group of workers at the coal mines die under the cruel exploitation of mine owners. The play ended with the death of the workers. In *Kallol* (1965) a play on the Indian naval mutiny (1946) Utpal Dutt chose to show the mutineers fighting to death while though in reality they had surrendered. Dutt defends his decision to change the historical fact in favor of the ideological class truth -

“To us, the end of the RIN Mutiny is the beginning of a revolutionary process...larger than the fact of surrender is, is the truth of revolutionary transition, and that in the theatrical language is symbolized in Khyber’s refusal to surrender. Khyber refuses to surrender for precisely the same reason that Eisenstien’s *Potempkin* does, though in factual history it did...Thus we say truth is revolutionary. The bourgeoisie wishes to reduce truth to an abstraction, to a philosophical concept, independent of time and change. Truth to them is ‘faithful reportage’, ‘neutral presentation’, ‘impartial observation’ and many other fancy terms...”⁴⁸

In another essay written exclusively to address the debate around the issue of realism in art and thus titled “Real and Extra-Real” we encounter a similar polemic against the declared realists -

⁴⁷ Utpal Dutt, ‘Natya-andoloner bishoy boshtu’ in *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 380.

⁴⁸ Utpal Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Publishing, 2009), 64.

“The realists are actually non-realists. They are actually repeating the Greek aesthetic theory of the harmony...The desire to see everything as complete, perfect and beautiful...”⁴⁹

However contrasting to these vehement supports for breaking the regime of realism, we find in Dutt a more contingent defense of realism on stage. In one of his essays in the collection “Chayer Dhnoa” on stage lighting named “Alo” (light) we encounter words-

“Of course not! In a true theatre, there is no place for realism. But, in the present Bengali stage it is that which is urgently required. Hitherto the Bengali stage has been in a state of complete chaos. If one desires to bring it up to condition where it would thrive on non-realist aesthetics, it will have to be nurtured for a while with simple realism.”⁵⁰

This is where I think we can afford a digression on an interesting phenomenon which we encounter often in Dutt’s writings. It signifies deference to a practically effective now truth ahead of the abstract and ideological truth. A suspension of what is to be done for what is necessary, between what is ultimately desired and what is desired now. Thus we encounter a split between people counted in two ways, people of now and people to come. This however is a consequence of his being a theatre director and playwright. It is a fact that the success of theatre is lies in its very present and Dutt new it better than anyone being the most popular director in Bengal of his times if not ever. It is therefore we find such a contradiction manifest in his writings. Such contradictions however perhaps receive its most blatant manifestation in Dutt’s views on how should religion be represented in the

⁴⁹ Utpal Dutt, ‘Bastob o Basobottor’, *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 108.

⁵⁰ Utpal Dutt, ‘Alo’, *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 84.

people's theatre or more generally people's art. On one hand when we find him criticizing the bourgeois religious propaganda in these words-

“Political theatre must ceaselessly assail the thinking habits of the players, the grooves and patterns in which they find themselves. We must especially concentrate fire on the vestiges of religious belief which every petty bourgeoisie carries within him, irrespective of how much he has read. Only by attacking his belief in God can one really shake him out of his faith in the ruling class. The two go together.”⁵¹

On the other, we find him defend the religious faith of the public-

“This of course does not at all mean that a revolutionary theatre must directly attack the audience's religious beliefs. That would be wasteful because the object of the theatre is to rouse class hatred, to make people angry, to make them want to fight, and religion is by no means a hindrance to this struggle. Deeply religious men can be at the vanguard of struggle.”⁵²

And finally asserts the importance of counting on religion in any revolutionary struggle of the people-

“The people, therefore, have no obligation to renounce religion before they begin to fight. But such freedom cannot be allowed to the worker of the revolutionary theatre.

⁵¹ Utpal Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Publishing, 2009), 35.

⁵² Utpal Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Publishing, 2009), 36.

Because he believes neither in God nor in religious muck, he can understand the dark power of religion over the daily religion of our masses.”⁵³

However the relative ambiguity around the issue of religion is by no means a novel occurrence in the history of Marxist thought; but existed in its very conception. A quick recollection of Marx’s own words in the role of religion in the revolutionary struggle would vindicate such a proposition. Marx’s most famous statement about religion comes from a critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law*-

“*Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.”⁵⁴

Thus we see religion is at the same time the “heart of a heartless world” and at the same time also the “opium of the people”. There at the same time it is unwanted and important.

However coming back to the discussion about form, the discussion above would also bring to us a more general discussion on the function or place of form in any art practice and Dutt’s views on this matter. For Dutt, as he reiterates in several of his writings form is never an end in itself or cannot be the final objective of any art practice. We comprehend that form to Dutt is always something subservient to the content of art. It is the content which according to Dutt should dictate the form in the people’s art. He stresses on this point in his essay on Brecht, “Brecht o Marxbad” (Brecht and Marxism). Brecht’s conception of *Verfrumdung*⁵⁵ as a form, he says is contingent to his time and

⁵³ Ibid, 36

⁵⁴ K. Marx, ‘Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critique_of_Hegels_Philosophy_of_Right.pdf>, accessed on 17 March, 2012

⁵⁵ *Verfrumdung* or what has been often translated into alienation is one the key theoretical terms in Brecht’s writings.

people. Firstly, Dutt maintains it was conceived to counter the mass hysteria generated by Hitler's Speeches. Brecht was a witness to the huge public empathy which was at the root of such hysteria and thus thought of a form which would be able break through such an effect of affect by forcing them to think critically. Secondly Dutt feels *Verfrumdung* as suitable for the German audiences, who are in many ways scarcer and more culturally aware than audiences in India. Thus he diagnosed a sheer act of stupidity in trying to adapt or regenerate Brecht's technique in Bengal stage. Thus according to him, a single form can never be prescribed for people's art as kosher for the very reason that the category of people does not bear the same character everywhere.

We find Dutt speak in a similar vein on the "back to the roots" movement in Indian theatre which was gaining wind in the late 60's. In the essay "Ghure Phire" Dutt criticizes the trend of the late 60's and early 70's to search for the re-discovering traditional Indian forms like Nautanki or Khyamta and others which were vanishing rapidly unable to resist the post-independence burst of modernism, in their pure form and giving them a new lease of life by doing performances in these forms.⁵⁶ This indeed was the premiere agenda of the Sangeet Natak Akademi at that time. Dutt is strictly against such a reconstruction and promotion of almost extinct forms for their under the now considered controversial agenda of searching for an "Indian tradition of performance". For Dutt such attempts are futile as no form can survive or made to survive for its own sake. Thus, those traditional forms which have been able to adapt themselves to the new times and new people have survived and the rest have not and neither would there be any purpose to force them to do so. Moreover he maintains many of the forms which are now being promoted as traditional were in reality forms of entertainment which the people were forced to device for their exploiters. Finally he says- "Form is a device. A weapon. Important is the subject. Whatever is required to express it I will take recourse

⁵⁶ Utpal Dutt, 'Ghure-Fire', *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 393.

to...”⁵⁷ It is the same allegation he has against forging out only a form out of the Tagorian tradition of performance. Such acts according to Dutt would make push art down to an aesthetic black-hole where it would be apolitical: irrelevant to its time and people.

Thus we find the issue of realism too set in a fine balance of contradiction. On one hand, is the claim to represent the present with its class inequalities, oppressions, exploitations and alienated individuals, on the other is the claim to represent the utopia of the future for which there are no real signifiers. Yet on another, is the need to represent past but not merely as a fact, as a neutral document or as a form; but as a history of the revolutionary movement. As Brecht says-

“Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society/ unmasking the prevailing view of those who are in power/ writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up/ emphasizing the element of development...”⁵⁸

Thus we find there was a contradiction inherent in Marxist conceptions of cultural ideology which became more apparent in the process of their implementation. The fundamental aporea was the very intention to put an ideological control over art practice which by its natural tendencies evades controls. Dutt was aware of these contradictions but his intention was to find reconciliation, a way out of his dichotomy. It is perhaps because of this reason that when he saw a possibility in form of the Naxalbari Movement to find reconciliation between ideology and action he took a leap.

Dutt was even not unaware of the hegemony inherent in the very idea of ideology, but chose to ignore it. In one his articles titled *Theatre and Ideology* he while analyzing the ideological propaganda of the Congress government since independence says-

⁵⁷ Utpal Dutt, 'Ghure-Fire', *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 399.

⁵⁸ Bertolt Brecht, 'Popularity and Realism', in Adorno et al. (eds.) *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1970), 82.

“The ideological superstructure is thus confusing and reflective of various trends and subtrends”⁵⁹

However Dutt chose to see such a critique of ideology in the context of ruling party in India and does not go on to consider it as generally symptomatic of all ideologies as our contemporary philosopher Ranciere would maintain ideologies are regimes, tools of control, they can be as easily be used to unite as to exclude. Even Brecht in his discussions with Walter Benjamin, while referring to the propaganda of realism by Lukacs, quipped-

“There can’t be any doubt about it any longer: the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology.”⁶⁰

However Dutt repeatedly tries to find a solution to the problem of the unstable ideology to amalgamating it with the practical necessities of the working class-

“To fight the ideology of the ruling classes, the world’s theatre and literature must steep itself in the knowledge of exactly what makes the working man the willing tool of his exploiters”⁶¹

However in spite of being aware of the perils of an ideological overhauling of the arts time and again we hear from him, declarations of blind faith of him on the ideological guidance of the Communist party. He refuses to identify the traps inherent in the form of ideology and always points out at individual despotism as the principal culprit in this regard. Dutt says in his book *Towards Revolutionary Theatre*-

⁵⁹ Utpal Dutt, ‘Theatre and Ideology’, *On Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Publishing, 2009), 46.

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Conversations with Brecht’, in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1970), 97.

⁶¹ Utpal Dutt, ‘Theatre and Ideology’, *On Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Publishing, 2009), 52.

“I am not one of those frustrated intellectuals of the West, nor their empty-headed Indian imitators who equate party-guidance with regimentation, Zhdanovism and what have you. My relations with the Party in my country have been intimate and long... I have heard from others of a bullying tendency adopted by the Party in 1948-49 and the consequent disaster that overtook the cultural front at the time. But that was part of general leftwing deviation which was denounced later by the Party itself.”⁶²

“It can be historically proved that the Party’s guidance assumes the form of arbitrary interference and suppression only in periods of leftwing deviation, which is a petty-bourgeois deviation... The excesses of Proletkult and the Imagists in the USSR was the work of a petty bourgeois clique, who openly declared they would uproot Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky from Russian soil. Recently in China, the havoc wrought by the Gang of Four was especially fearful in the field of theatre, opera and cinema...”⁶³

“In India too we saw the leftwing deviation in the Party in 1948-49 coincide with virulent and totally incomprehensible attacks on Tagore, Bankimchandra Chatterjee and every other classics writer. The entire pattern was repeated by the Naxalites.”⁶⁴

Thus it should be quite evident from the above discussion that the conception of the idea of “people’s art” was for Utpal Dutt never a singular coherent idea simply because the idea of the “people”

⁶² Utpal Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Publishing, 2009), 37.

⁶³ Ibid, 37

⁶⁴ Ibid, 37

oscillated between three alternatives: first, the now people in their counted presence and their now demands; secondly, the people to come and their abstract demands and thirdly the demands of the collective under the party. It was however not an indecision particular to Dutt's own conceptions but inherent in the very nature of Communism an institutional yet populist politics. Dutt however was an artist and above that a theatre artist. Therefore it was impossible for him to follow the dictates of ideology of the Communist ideology to its perfect execution. It is thus he often had to negotiate and forge contradictory alibis for himself as an artist.

Limitations of the Ideological Regime:

“Ideology is a system of representations controlling, in all societies, the relation of individuals to the task fixed by the structure of the social whole. This system of representation is thus not a system of knowledge. On the contrary, it is a system of illusions necessary to the historical subjects.”⁶⁵

An ideology is thus finally a system of representation to create an illusion of knowledge. Therefore in Foucauldian sense a power-knowledge concept inhabits in the very nature of ideology. It works by a mimetic pedagogical form which ensures an unidirectional flow of knowledge. Ideology denies agency to its subject and thus hegemonic in any form elitist or communist, anywhere, in a class or class-less society. Thus the cry of giving voice to the subaltern others too is in the end a Hippocratic claim. For that voice of the theoretician or the artist can never be of the subaltern. It becomes equally

⁶⁵ Jacques Ranciere, 'On the Theory of Ideology', < <http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/on-the-theory-of-ideology>>, accessed on 17 April, 2012

repressive as the hegemony of exploiters. Ideology by its very representational and illusory character takes an artist or intellectual further from the contingent real and once subjected to its bindings his judgments become pre-conditioned, a-priori. The implicit hierarchy in the ideological discourse also brings with it the evils of dogmatism. Analysis become reductionist and judgments prejudiced. These symptoms are quite apparent in Dutt's writings.

A fact which is quite apparent in his writings about theater is his skepticism and apprehension for the emerging 'new' theatres around the world and particularly in Bengal. Utpal Dutt, ignorantly was always critical of the term "New Theatre Movement". Theatre movement was always he maintained a people's theatre movement and not a new theatre movement. The word 'new' as we often find in his writings signified for him something negative in the sense, something totally severed from the past. The discussion on the necessity of learning from the past cultural heritage appears repeatedly in his writings. Dutt wrote an essay titled "Rabindranth Tagore's Statue" addressing the issue of the breaking of the statues of Rammohan, Bidyasagar and Rabindranath by the Naxalbari supporters. In this essay we find him polemical towards any attempt to bring the new order through a destruction of everything that belongs to the old order and rather asking the revolutionaries to look for support in the art of the old order. The following excerpt from the essay which is written mostly in form of a dialogue between Japenda, the dogmatic intellectual of the "japenda series of essays" and two Naxal sympathizers would be able to vindicate point-

"Rajen(a young naxal supporter) said, still even this is an accepted fact in Marxism that Literary-philosophy, Law, religion and various other intellectual traditions develop solely under particular kinds of production-relations. Thus if the base is changed the intellectual tradition is bound to change. In the new social order the old values and principles are done away with...Japenda burst out in anger...where in

Marxism did you find this strange formula...Language is one of the pillars of any intellectual tradition. Do you think language changes after the revolution...Stalin has said the noble acts of man which reflect their own age are ageless, they transcend the production relations...Whatever was beautiful were for the enjoyment of the exploiters in the old times...Those who speak of doing away with the all beautiful creations of the old for the sake of doing away with the exploiters are either petty-bourgeois pessimists or Trotskyite Middle classes.⁶⁶

While effects a revolution would have on the field art and culture can definitely be a point of keen contestation and the gesture of breaking of the statues can be argued in a completely different way; however one cannot but notice the dogmatic tone and arbitrariness of the syllogisms applied.

In another of his essay “Graveyard”, Dutt vents out his anger against the modernist theatre movement in America. Dutt’s critique of the new physical theatre that was emerging in America in the hands of people like Melina, Bech and Schechner, who pledged to follow in the footsteps of European masters of theatre Artaud, Grotowski, Barba has seemed completely baseless to some critiques⁶⁷. Dutt lists the reasons of his utter disliking to the above performance traditions, reasons which are hardly aesthetic. He singles out Shechner’s production “Dionysus in 69” for critique. The very first allegations that he has against them are moral allegations, against the boundless sexual activity in their performances drawing a parallel with the excessive consuming of drugs and the fake spirituality which was brought more into fashion through the 70’s by the Hippies. He says-

⁶⁶ Utpal Dutt, ‘Rabindranath Thakurer Murti’, *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 149-150.

⁶⁷ Snehasish Bhattacharya, ‘Ek Abismoroniyo Japendar Anonyo Anusandhan-Utpal Dutt Bisesh Sankha’, *Shobdo Shahitya Patrika* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2010).

“The great American revolutionaries are all birds of the same feather. They all often discover great truths of Hindu religion, consume hashish to always be in an inebriated state, commit sexual intercourse with whoever they manage to find. They call such a lifestyle a revolution against the establishment...They have adopted the name new left...There cannot be a more disastrous distortion of the name ‘left’.”⁶⁸

While such a critique based on morals can be refuted with easy arguments, the straight jacketing of those performing groups within the category of hippies defy rational logic. The next point that he has against them could be defended as easily too. Dutt time and again mentions in his writings on theatre that the most important aspect of any theatre is language. Utpal Dutt’s second point of critique of the new American theatre arises from this very view of things. He is disapproving of the diss-association of the body and the language in the new American theatre-

“Ianesco had said a play would be without meaning, Bech would say a play would be without language”⁶⁹

A simple counter argument could be that the one which the avant-gardes often took recourse to: the very process of beginning thinking about the performance from a written text results in a pre-regimentation to the body in form of language. To break this hegemony of the written text which is always some preconceived and pre-planned network imposed one would to begin with the unregimented body. It would be in such situation only that the coming together of mind and body is possible. More over the conceptions of meaning-less-ness or language-less-ness are historical

⁶⁸ Utpal Dutt, “Graveyard”, *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 196.

⁶⁹ Utpal Dutt, “Graveyard”, *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2011), 200.

contingent conceptions which cannot be counted as mere whims of individual artists and even these conception are not without their own long traditions in western thought.

The third reason that Dutt lists and which he often accuses the theatre directors in Bengal with is the very distortion of the principles of a genius like Grotowski at the hands of the American theatre practitioners-

“You are trying to put all the blame upon the Americans! Does the Polish Grotowski Has no role to play in this disaster? (a guy called Madhu asks).

‘Grotowski!’ burst out Japenda. Did you try to bring down Jerzy Grotowski into this murky land of sexual diseases. You fool; you think that because these American sex-maniacs pronounce the name of Grotowski so often, he is in the same league with them?”⁷⁰

It is however a fact which can never be denied that any consideration of the history of modern theatre in America could not hope to discount the major influences (sometimes direct as in case of Barba) of European tradition of theatre practitioners: Artaud, Grotowsky, Barba and others on it.

Last but not least, he charges the tradition of absurd theatre writing in Europe of Ianesco, Beckett, Pinter often with the charge of being essentially banal and thus apolitical. Regarding the proponents of absurd drama his comments were-

“Western New theatre Movement is full with stinking filth...they are successors of Ianesco, Beckett and Pinter. The purpose of Ianesco and others were to hinder the

⁷⁰ Ibid, 196

progress of a potent theatre movement in socialist country, so that Brecht's influence does not affect theatre in the countries of Western Europe. Disguised with various names they wanted to say theatre should have neither meaning nor purpose.⁷¹

Beckett, Ionesco or Pinter, much like Kafka has already been considered by their own right not only as great artists but who more than anyone else have been able to give expression to the agony, loneliness and helplessness of the individual in the modern world of the 20th century. In the context of the post-world war and cold war of 50's, 60's and 70's there were potent political expressions too. Dutt, is critical of the theatre practice in Bengal which was being majorly influenced by the absurd playwrights, like Mohit Chattopadhyay or Badal Sircar -

“The Bengali Playwrights too have been infected by similar maladies. Plays have become small, tiring and life-less...Plays have been infected by middle-class sensibilities. Plays have become trapped within the skirmish of quarrelsome fathers, unmarried daughters, silly wives, Jobless-youths.”⁷²

The valuable contributions of the above mentioned playwrights to the development of modern Bengali theatre are now an accepted fact of history.

Thus, one realizes that the critique that Dutt provides of his contemporaries, are shallow and dogmatic. His deductions are based more on intuitions than on a systematic critical study of their work. Thus the fact which clearly comes through in these polemics is that his apprehension or dismissal of these new forms of theatre emerges not in a sphere of experience of them; but rather in a

⁷¹ Ibid, 195

⁷² Utpal Dutt, 'Natya Andoloner Bishoy Baostu', *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 380.

sphere of his own consciousness and intentionality. While it is a fact that none responded more intensely to the political reality of his times and times that were difficult, it is a fact too that most of Dutt's criticism of his contemporaries, be it of the American avant-gardes, European absurdists or Bengali directors arise from a deep skepticism of the "new", a new which always puts the ideology in risk.

Utpal Dutt is critical of most of the productions of adapted or translated plays as well as techniques or forms hired out of context from western theatre practices in Bengali theatre though he himself produced Shakespeare, Brecht or Gorky with much success and was influenced by his encounter with various foreign traditions of theatre in his number of visits abroad. Dutt was extremely critical of Ajiesh Bandopadhyay, be it when he produced *Six Characters in Search of an Author* for doing a play by Pirandello who allegedly was a supporter of Mussolini or when he produced *Teen Poysar Pala*, an adaptation of Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera* for allegedly distorting Brechtian form of the play. Perhaps one of the most famous of such criticisms is the critical review of Sombhu Mitra's production of Sophocles' Oedipus written under the title "Oedipus Wrecked" and pseudonym of Iago where Dutt categorically mentions-

"We put this proposition squarely to Bohurupee: if you want a 'stylized' production which will avoid the problems of our time, create your own plays. But for Heaven's sake, if you try Sophocles, be honest to him."⁷³

While such allegations against Sombhu Mitra were nothing new and neither totally uncalled for; but for Dutt, one must understand the criticism had its origin not merely in the production itself, but also in a more general form of dismissal he was indulging himself with.

⁷³ Utpal Dutt, 'Oedipus Wrecked', *Epic Theatre* (March 1998), 19.

However, it must be mentioned here that Dutt was not being an exception to believe in Communist ideology and be apprehensive of the emerging new. Very interesting here, would be to refer to two similar instances of reservations from two premiere Marxist figures, one a critic and second a writer and theatre director. Theodore Adorno, one of the most celebrated critics of modernism and certainly one the chief promoters of traditional aesthetic forms as essentially better than the emerging avant-garde, was brusque in his dismissal of one of the major artistic geniuses of modernist era, Charlie Chaplin⁷⁴. Brecht's dismissal of another modernist genius Kafka has remained documented in his discussions with Benjamin who incidentally had written an essay on Kafka before the conversation took place. Brecht evaluation of Kafka had been-

“The images are good, of course. But the rest is pure mystification. It's nonsense.

You have to ignore it.”⁷⁵

Conclusion:

Political ideology and even that of the Communist party is not without its inherent hierarchies, as ideology is a system of representation of knowledge and not knowledge itself. It is a way of organization of knowledge and in its implementation always reductionist. For any art and more than any art theatre the subjection to ideological consciousness takes away from it what essentially makes it an object of art. Any object of art worthy of its name is a new constellation of the sensible, a new

⁷⁴ Frederic Jameson, 'Presentation Three', *Aesthetics and Politics* by Adorno et al., (London: Verso, 1970), 107.

⁷⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht', *Aesthetics and Politics* by Adorno et al., (London: Verso, 1970), 90.

organization of the sensible or at least an attempt of that. The ideological regime however reduces it to form the nobility of art to the banality of mimicry.

Novelty in art is untimely, inasmuch as it irrupts into already established habits of thought, deranging or diverting customary modes of attention and expression, their rhythm and composition. Novelty is delocalizing, insofar as it disrupts the standardized places of thought and re-sculpts their topologies. Taking such novelty seriously is tantamount to being stupefied or deranged: one cannot simply know how to respond, precisely because such a response would, by definition, fail to be up to the challenges of the novelty itself. Thus any ideological discourse, as the Marxist discourse, which wants to charter itself in terms of a-priori regime, wants to subject its emergence to the intentions of politics, as its ultimate end can only look towards a fascist regulation of it. Utpal Dutt was aware of this aporea inherent in the intention of creating an art or a theatre with a declared political agenda but tried to look for a futile reconciliation of it in institutions “ideology”. It is this willful suspension of his realization which revealed themselves conflicting elements that one often encounters in his critical writings and it is definitely his mastery over the art of acting and rhetoric, and intelligence as an artist; that in spite of being handicapped by the regime of ideology has managed to leave Bengali stage and literature richer in ways that hardly anybody else has been able to match.

Chapter II

Sombhu Mitra: In the Regime of an Ethical Individualism

Prelude:

“What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, not our life?”⁷⁶

— Michel Foucault

When French philosopher Albert Camus titled his unfinished autobiography, *Le Premier Homme* (The First Man) or when he wrote one of the greatest of modern philosophical treatises, championing man's noble struggle on earth, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and when another French philosopher Michel Foucault reflected on the need for a “Care of the Self” or when yet another poet and philosopher way far in India, Rabindranath Tagore conceived of the “universal aesthetic being”- those were by no means disjunctive incidents in the face of our earth. The 20th century, which has perhaps seen the liturgical systems of power as that of the state, religion or science yield more control over the life of people than ever, has consequently also revealed their own fallibility in the process. If the 19th century was of belief in institutional order; the violence and hate perpetrated by these institutions had left people's belief on them shattered by the end of the first half of the 20th century with the two

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault. 'On the genealogy of ethics: An overview work in progress'. *The Foucault Reader* (Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1991), 350.

consecutive world wars. The result of this was that- the modern man finding himself alone, unable to put his faith, his spirituality in a system felt the world as absurd and alien where he does even know or have control over his own self. Neither politics, nor religion bore for him any meaning or sense of purpose. Thus a search began: a search within for an ethics, an identity and a meaning. A process of learning the self or governing the self thus began fascinating the intellectual and artist alienated from the world.

What however was not given enough importance initially in this quest of the self was also a very important question: how to associate with others? It was not realized that the crisis not only lies in individuals but also how they associate with other individuals to form a collective or community. Apart from philosopher Emanuel Levinas who was the first perhaps among modern thinkers to attempt thinking “an ethics of the other” in the 1950’s; there was still not much thinking about the question of community and association. So the discourses promoting the idea of ‘caring for the self’ were even thinking in terms of antagonism between the individual and the society. It was perhaps this weakness which became so apparent in the world wide student’s and worker’s protests or movements in the 60’s and 70’s or the feminist and black civil rights movement around the same time. These movements which had begun as a struggle against hegemonic structures were themselves emerging as equally hegemonic practices. This was precisely because, a key problem was yet to be identified and that lied with the way of association among individuals, in the way politics was conceived. The mimetic representational character of the association, the pedagogical nature of politics still existed. Thus evidently the politics of resistance too could not break free from the practice of hierarchy.

Sombhu Mitra (22 August 1915 – 19 May 1997), theatre director and the founder of the first of amateur theatre groups named Bohurupee in Bengal too grew up amidst the horrors of the second

World War which left a deep impression on him. Later on when he formed a group and started producing plays, he found his philosophical groundings in the Tagorian conception of the aesthetic individual. However, as I described above, he fell into similar shortcomings which was inherent to such a program. So dangerous were those shortcomings that beginning his group by declaring sheer apathy to any form of political ideology he ended by becoming a tool of governance at the hands of the state power. He became assimilated in the ideological discourse of a Hindu nationalism which was being forged out by the Congress government at the centre, post independence. In this chapter firstly, I will analyze the ethical individualism as a presence in Mitra's writings and work and then I will go on to elaborate on the precise nature of limitations that such a project was revealing.

Against the Regimentation of Institutional Politics:

Sombhu Mitra began his career, training as an actor in the Bengali commercial theatre that existed in Bengal, before the IPTA movement ushered in a new dawn in the field of modern theatre practice. As he himself often said, it was IPTA, where he could truly find for himself a space for doing the kind of theatre he actually wanted to do. However, in the years following the historical success of *Nabanna* which Mitra co-directed along with Bijan Bhattacharya and more so after independence, a rift was rapidly growing between the bureaucratic sections of IPTA and the artists. Sombhu Mitra being a key member of the squad, in his case the rift went on to become a more openly played out conflict than in the case of many others. There were two major incidents which made Mitra's split with IPTA final. The first arose concerning the organization of a cultural event on the occasion of Rabindranath Tagore's birthday in the May month of 1946. Sombhu Mitra as one of the key members of drama club had put forth a few objections on his behalf regarding the preparations to the festival. Firstly, he had problems with lack of discipline displayed on behalf of the participants in the drama club. He had said according to the IPTA report later prepared by Charu Prakash Ghosh-

“...He (Sombhu Mitra) also criticized the members of the drama squad in general for their characteristic unpunctuality and irregularity in attending rehearsals which, he asserted, justified his apprehensions to great extent...as far as he (Sombhu Mitra) was concerned he would accept the decision to show *Navanna* provided each and every member of the Drama Squad solemnly promised to attend rehearsals every day from 6 to 10pm without fail.”...⁷⁷

While IPTA officials found this only an excuse, there was a second objection too that Mitra had put down in this context. It was against inviting a few popular artists (namingly, Kanan Bala Devi) to perform at the cultural event organized by IPTA, by saying that their personal way of living did not correspond to IPTA’s aims and objectives. As Charu Prakash Ghosh’s report says-

“As to taking popular artistes, his approval or disapproval would depend on what he thought of the particular artistes and their art vis-a-vis the aims and objects of IPTA.”⁷⁸

Consequently, Sombhu Mitra was criticized inside IPTA as being an egoistic individual. This incident however, gave birth to a rift which intensified when in the same year at the invitation of P.C. Joshi he went to Bombay to take part in the making of *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946). The IPTA brigade slammed Mitra for deserting IPTA, lured by more profitable money making ventures in Bombay. It

⁷⁷ Report by Charu Prokash Ghosh ‘Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents’, (ed.) Sudhi pradhan(1st part) cited in Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 43.

⁷⁸ Report by Charu Prokash Ghosh ‘Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents’, (ed.) Sudhi pradhan(1st part) cited in Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 47.

however, has been mentioned by other members of IPTA too that there indeed were poor economic conditions at that time and many other artists too were forced search for other options to support themselves or their family economically. Moreover, Dharti Ke Lal was a carefully executed and much appreciated artistic venture which included stalwarts like Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Bijan Bhattacharya, Balraj Sahni and others. What this incident exhibits clearly is the highhandedness and bureaucratic ego problems that had infected IPTA at that time; which many other artists too who left IPTA then or a little afterwards have recollected later in their life. However, in spite of the arrogance of IPTA bureaucrats what comes across in the first instance are two important markers for us: two tendencies which we will find to be repeated in Sombhu Mitra's thoughts and actions. First, is a stress to the aspect for personal discipline and secondly in believing that a good artist should be as in his life as in his art, thus rendering life and art as inseparable from each other.

Sombhu Mitra left IPTA in 1946. However, the negligible relation he had with the Communist party was broken when almost a decade later in 1962 one of the veteran comrades and writer Gopal Haldar criticized Sombhu Mitra in the journal *Parichay* of which Haldar was the joint editor at that time. Sombhu Mitra had allegedly shared the stage with Bengal Congress candidate Humayun Kabir and recited a few poems before the state assembly election held in that year. Gopal Haldar wrote a piece titled *Casualty*⁷⁹ where he interestingly enough claimed Sombhu Mitra to be capable of doing nothing but politics and criticized him for unashamedly supporting a political party just to attain favors when that party comes to power. Sombhu Mitra on his reply in a letter to Haldar said that neither did he have any political intention (he went to attend only a cultural event), nor it would be wrong if he actually had one, for democracy is that which marks the free space for voicing opinions. Sombhu Mitra categorically mentions that-

⁷⁹ Haldar, Gopal, 'Casualty', *Parichay Patrika* 1962 cited in Sombhu Mitra, 'Parichay Sampadak Samipeshu', *Sombhu Mitra: Dhyane O Antar-Dhyane* (Kolkata: Nandanik, 2011), 141.

“It is extremely unnatural for anybody who is aware of my history for the last twenty years to believe this (that what he does is only politics). From my very childhood I have loved theatre and whatever I have done is only for theatre.”⁸⁰

It was not only that Sombhu Mitra did not participate actively in institutional politics but he was mostly vehemently critical of institutional politics and did not believe in following any political ideology in his work, in theatre. Not only politics but he had an intense apathy with anything concerned with the mass. For instance, in one of his essays titled *Popularity* which is extremely significant to our purpose he says-

“The political leaders say people are the heaven, people are the religion, and people are the absolute. The ultimate achievement lies in being popular. It is votes which determine the election. Don’t you see the Jinna Sahib who is purely European in his mannerisms and behavior who is the father of the Muslim *Kaum* and Nehruji went to water the Kumbh. It seems particularly surprising when a Marxist leader speaks like this. Because, as much as we know Marx himself could never become popular among the proletariats in his life time.”⁸¹

Thus we can make sense here of what exactly Mitra was apprehensive about in the system of institutional politics or in parliamentary system of politics. He was against the nature of populism, the politics of count and consent that is inherent to any institutional mode of politics and more so in a

⁸⁰ Sombhu Mitra, ‘Parichay Sampadak Samipeshu’, *Sombhu Mitra: Dhyane O Antar-Dhyane* (Kolkata: Nandanik, 2011), 25.

⁸¹ Sombhu, Mitra, ‘Popularity’, *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 56.

parliamentary democracy. Parliamentary democracy signifies for him a politics of vote, of appeasing the people, which to Mitra seems never, can be the true objective of any politics. It is indeed interesting that many of our contemporary thinkers have raised a similar criticism against democracy in a much celebrated collection of essays *Democracy: In What State?*⁸² Alain Badiou for instance chooses to call the politics of democracy as emblematic in nature thus antithetical to the notion of all true politics. In another of his treatise he speaks more plainly-

“The parliamentary form of politics, that commodity without concept, by virtue of the thickness of the consensus it organizes renders almost invisible and untenable all genuine politics capable at thinking at the locale where it takes place...”⁸³

It would be interesting to mention here that it was in 1952 that the first general election of India was held. And it is at that year Sombhu Mitra chose to produce a play which spoke against the majority: *Dasha Chakra* (1952 adaptation of Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*) performed by Bohurupee.⁸⁴ Mitra was consequently alleged for a lack of belief in democracy. However, not only parliamentary democracy but; Mitra was equally apprehensive of Leftist socialist revolutions as the one that happened in Russia and also its effects on art. In one of his essays while speaking of the state of politics in the time of German playwright Bertolt Brecht he says-

“Then, there were one or two attempts for a socialist revolution. But they were unsuccessful. Since then all countries have become like the tower of Babel. Strange theories, stranger techniques came to be known as modern in the field of art. Humanitarian qualities, ethical qualities became the butt of jokes. Unhealthy

⁸² Alain Badiou et al., *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁸³ Alain Badiou, ‘Rhapsody for Theatre-A Short Philosophical Treatise’, *Theatre Survey* 49:2 (November, 2008), 198

⁸⁴ Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 142.

imagination became a matter of pride. It was those which were claimed as left ideas and progressive modernity.”⁸⁵(On the time of Brecht)

He was also concerned of an ideological brainwashing of the common mass by the petite bourgeoisie left intellectuals in the name of political ideology. He was especially pained by the way certain political leaders took advantage of innocent students and simple minded farmers during the Naxalbari Movement-

“In the name of politics a farmer is instigated to kill one of his farmer brothers, where workers and students are taught to brutally annihilate their own colleagues or class mates.”⁸⁶

Thus Mitra is skeptical of any interference of institutional politics in the field of art. He is critical of political manifestos regarding art and culture for he believes political regimentation of arts to be detrimental to its development. He more than once in his writings lashes out against the political prescriptions forged by political parties to practice control over the field of art. He has to say about the propaganda of “socialist realism”-

“I have heard that at that time under Stalin there emerged a thing called socialist realism. Russia had to pay for it. But still in the meanwhile, numerous times the political manifesto was modified according to their own needs.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid, 134

⁸⁶ Ibid, 267

⁸⁷ Ibid, 150

Sombhu Mitra believed that a populist politics can only promote an art which is essentially popular and he never believed that the judgment of the mass can become the sole criterion for deciding the worth of a work of art-

“Now throughout the world, a new eulogy for the people is being sung. It is the judgment of the people which is decisive. All this is asserted by the leftists. Thus every true artist is also eager to become popular with haste. Yet on one hand, we will follow the footsteps of the great artists of the past on the other hand we will become popular: this castle of dreams is not being built in actuality. Again we do not have the courage to claim fearlessly that we do not believe in people’s judgment. As then we would be declared outcasts.”⁸⁸

He did never consider numbers as important. In one of his longest interviews with Bengali poet and critic Sakha Ghosh he brings forth this point. He had just returned from a trip around the world and while speaking about the various responses that he got from people in Europe on narrating the situation of theatre activity in Bengal he said-

“Some count and say, so many thousands of groups. We are astonished and overwhelmed at hearing that. What is a better solvent today than numbers, when numbers have become the principal weapon. Do you know I get this fat a sum as my salary? Oh very Fine indeed! Do you know I can fetch so many people a one call and beat you up? Oh very fine indeed! So we are overwhelmed by this simple fact that we are so many in numbers. But does qualitative brilliance move in the same tempo

⁸⁸ Sombhu, Mitra, ‘Popularity’, *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 53.

with the mathematics of numbers? - There is no future for our country or our theatre without being of quality. Neither for human beings.”⁸⁹

In his essay *Popularity* he says-

“I would not become honest by putting in some effort, yet the society would become honest? It is people like us who constitute the society. If I signify a zero, then may whatever number it is multiplied by; the result will always be zero...”⁹⁰

Thus it would be evident that Sombhu Mitra was always skeptical of institutional politics or politics of the party. For him consensus was never the essentially the good or the right. The notion of mass as a collective entity always appeared in his thoughts as essentially mediocre and ordinary-

“The more is the crowd the lesser becomes the intellectual-quotient”⁹¹

Thus he could never accept the appeasing of the mass as the only or the ultimate objective of any art practice. It is perhaps this belief that often prompted people to allege him as apolitical, elitist and bourgeoisie.

⁸⁹ Interview of Sombhu Mitra by Sankha Ghosh, 'Ek Baktar Baithak', (Kolkata: Talpata, 2012), cited in Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997 Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 265.

⁹⁰ Sombhu, Mitra, 'Popularity', *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), cited in Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997 Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 266.

⁹¹ Sombhu Mitra, 'Promiti Prosokto', *Sombhu Mitra: Dhyane O Antar-Dhyane* (Kolkata: Nandanik, 2011), 5.

Ethics of Aesthetics:

So if Sombhu Mitra did not have faith in popular judgment then the obvious questions would arise: what were the criteria that he thought essential for any art to become worth of its existence? What he thought of as the objective of art and how he perceived the work of the artist? In one of his early essays *Promiti Prosokto*, published in the Bohurupee magazine in his pseudo name Suronjon Chattopadhyay we find him searching for answers-

“What signifies the good? What are the criteria based on which a theatre (in the stage or in writing) could be claimed to be good?

- a. That which the crowd says is good?
- b. That which the crowd is indifferent to?
- c. That which is praised in dailies or monthly journals?
- d. That which receives a national award?

Everybody would equivocally accept that it is none of these. So, then?

If I am an artist (may God have pity on me!), for whom would I do a play? If art signifies an association, a coming together; then it is a fact to be known that, with whom, is that association to be made. Materialistic lust can be advertised by hitting out in the dark but art; it seems to me holds something more...⁹²

Thus we find Mitra here reflecting on what does art signify and why does an artist practice art? He concludes that it is not the public, neither the government that is the institutions of power whose judgment should be taken as clinching in the field of arts. The answer that finally seems acceptable to him is-

⁹² Ibid, 4

“If one has to say anything profound in a serious way then only he is an artist. If he continuously attempts to become the apple of the public eyes, if he concentrates on appeasing the public mind, then he is just a clown.”⁹³

Thus the primary condition of being an artist is having something profound to say. But what does Mitra mean by ‘anything profound and to whom would the artist communicate that to? He explains elsewhere-

“Not the life of a particular party or class, but that of the whole race, of all classes: their continuous life processes along with their hopes and happiness, which is scripting daily, the backdrop for the future of our country would have to be represented on the stage”⁹⁴

Two facts here deserve to be noted. The first, fact that should be noticed here is the way Mitra relates life with art and theatre in particular. More important is the term ‘life-process’ taken together which would signify the life lived in its daily praxis. Thus for Mitra, it is the life process of every day which should be the subject of theatre or art. Secondly, his assertion implies that a good theatre cannot be made with any particular intended audience in mind. It would indeed be interesting to recollect here what our contemporary thinker Alain Badiou has to say about theatre. According to Badiou, theatre is a chance and the public is a party to that chance. He calls such a public by the name “generic public”. Mitra’s statements however reveal his apathy towards any particular public but the very category

⁹³ Sombhu, Mitra, ‘Popularity’, *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 57.

⁹⁴ Sombhu Mitra, ‘Judhottor Juge Bangla Manche Sonkot’, *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 27.

of the public as such. For Mitra form of art like theatre is a struggle. A good theatre he believes can only happen at the cost a sacrifice; the sacrifice of the desire of the artist or the group to gain popularity or make profit.

“What I want to say is, the blatant shrill of news papers, the cunning fox-like smile of politicians, the hippopotamus-like slothful dissatisfaction of bureaucrats and the middle class banality – I have seen them all with deep sadness. Rebellng against all these, the few people who toil and try humbly to live a life of peaceful objectives, to help them forward, in their fate and all the while struggling with my own fate, I would like to grow my life like a life-artist, and this is the only wish.”⁹⁵

Therefore we find for Mitra, artistic activity and especially theatre is an ethical action itself, of a willful sacrifice of monetary and other immediate gains for something more valuable. At the same time, theatre for him is the space for representing the everyday struggles of human life. Thus life and theatre for him are not separate but are always in a continuous dialogue with each other. Thus art or more specifically theatre for him is always a struggle to create something worthwhile in spite of the worthlessness all around. It is the struggle of the artist individual against the rigid common place institutions and also against the mediocre public taste. For an artist, he thinks, life should be as much an art as art is life.

⁹⁵ Sombhu Mitra, 'Promiti Prosokto', *Sombhu Mitra: Dhyane O Antar-Dhyane* (Kolkata: Nandanik, 2011), 4.

Ethical Individualism:

Now as we have diagnosed the existence of a concept of ‘ethical individualism’ in Sombhu Mitra’s thought-gestures it would be important also to realize that such a conception was also not independent of context. Rather Mitra too was being influenced by a tradition of thought and existence of certain real circumstances. Thus to understand the nature of Mitra’s ethical individualism and trace its emergence we would have to revisit the historical contexts.

It might not after all seem rather pretentious to the extent of even being labeled absurd to begin by raising a point on the nature and character of the society in the 19th century while trying to write about one of the finest Bengali actors of the 20th century, Sombhu Mitra. I feel our present enquiry cannot be continued in a proper manner without doing so. Let me elaborate on what I have already hinted at in the prelude. The Victorian age has very often been described as the period of optimism in the west. It was an age where people had faith in the institutions: religion, state, science, medicine and others. Such an ambience of welfare and a corresponding discourse of progress and development however received a sharp jolt at the beginning of the new century in form of the two consecutive World Wars. Intellectuals, artists were beleaguered to come to terms with the fact that the under the utopia of development and well being the institutions of power were breeding conflicts: violent conflicts of power which left Europe devastated. Thus the honeymoon with the political institutions of power was over. The people were revealed to their tyrannical and hegemonic nature. Under such circumstances, took birth in the western intelligentsia, a new form of individualism, an ethics of individualism, a conception of the individual as the point of opposition to the institutions of power,

as the declaration of a *point converse* with the attempts on behalf of all institutional powers to bring them into a *liturgical* order. Even before the beginning of the 20th century, a tradition of thought had already taken birth in the west, holding the hands of a German philosopher who announced the significance of the human will and the requirement of a new ethics, an individual ethics. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (15 October 1844 – 25 August, 1900) was much ahead of his times when he presented a scathing critique of religion and institutional politics in his writings. Though his treatise *der Wille zur Macht* (The Will to Power) has been diagnosed with seeds of racism where he detects dominance as an inherent characteristic of man and makes it the supreme distinction between the superior and inferior people, a perception which allegedly revealed itself in the brutal fascism of Hitler's Third Reich; his treatise was at the same time an assertion of the power of man and a discourse on his self-mastery and self-overcoming. His was also the eulogy to the individual who has a will to follow and a choice to make-

“I have found strength where one does not look for it: in simple, mild, and pleasant people, without the least desire to rule—and, conversely, the desire to rule has often appeared to me a sign of inward weakness: they fear their own slave soul and shroud it in a royal cloak (in the end, they still become the slaves of their followers, their fame, etc.) The powerful natures dominate, it is a necessity, they need not lift one finger. Even if, during their lifetime, they bury themselves in a garden house!⁹⁶”

The twentieth century intellectual who took it upon himself to dissect the institutions of power and their mechanisms with unparalleled rigor was Michel Foucault. In his early work on institutions (*Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punishment*) Foucault lays bare the means of control that various institutions powers exercise on their subjects.

⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass* (Fall 1880), 206

“The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.”⁹⁷

In his work on ethics and governmentality Foucault analyses that any political power, works upon its subjects by a creation of ethics. A Foucauldian conception of ethics draws its lineage from the Greek philosopher Aristotle’s conception on ethics, contrary to a Kantian idea of ethics⁹⁸, in that it considers ethics as not an idea, or a set of regulatory norms, but a set of practical activities that are germane to a certain way of life. Foucault explains that the subject of institutional politics has to by the performance of certain operations, a process he analyses under the label “techniques of the self” in order to become the ethical subject of the political sovereign. This transformation into the ethical subject happens under the strict monitoring and vigilance of what he calls “a mode of subjection” a “liturgical body” –for instance a divine law, a rational rule or a cosmological order. Thus any political sovereign works through a prescription of conduct, which applies, to the very physical being of the ethical subject. Foucault asserts, that to escape such an ethical regime an individual has to always work on himself, has to exercise his will to the right of thought. For, Foucault thought is a reflective action on life-

“Thought is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot

⁹⁷ Noam Chomsky & Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky - Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: New Press, 2006).

⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment? (‘Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ?’) Rabinow (P.), (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50.

help but liberate or enslave. Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must be done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm, thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action-a perilous act.”⁹⁹

It is only through the reflexive action of thought that Foucault believed the individual subject can look to build a resistance against the ethical regimes of institutions.

The ethical vacuum that had emerged in the western world had not left the intelligentsia in India wholly unaffected. Artists and intellectuals were concerned with the political developments in the west and which can be sensed by the very formation of artist’s collectives like the Anti-fascist Writers and Artists Association (estb:1937 with Rabindranath Tagore as the president), Indian Progressive Writers Association(estb:1936), League against Fascism and War(estb:1937, also with Tagore as the chairperson). Rabindranath Tagore had been by far one of the most outspoken critics of the politics of nationalism and violence¹⁰⁰ in the West. In his much celebrated essay Nationalism, he detected an ethical anomaly in western political thought which according to him has conceived the idea of development through the contestation with the external other. As opposed to this he conceived the idea development through self development, through challenging the self continuously. It is often the case that in the context of IPTA or the other artist communities formed before that one is reminded of a collective political intention. It is however a fact that IPTA was not only a collective effort; but its root was also steeped in a more individualistic sense of ethics, especially in case of the artists.

⁹⁹ Michel Foucault & Paul Rabinow, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ Rabindranath, Tagore. *Nationalism* (India: Penguin Books, 2009)

Sombhu Mitra too was in his youthful days during the Second World War and the atmosphere of violence had left a deep and dark impression in his mind. As he later recollected those days in one of his writings-

“It was the year 1941. It was the time of the Second World War. One day, while going to sleep in the night, a few Japanese bombing planes were passing by the dark Kolkata sky dropping bombs...I can still remember, how helpless I felt...at that time, I had left Shyambazar theatre and was yet to know about the Antifascist Writers and Artists Association. But I had sensed pain at realizing our vulnerability as a common citizen at the time of the Second World War...The shadow of those feelings had darkened the background when I wrote this play (*Uluhagra*).”¹⁰¹

On one hand, when he was horrified by the atrocities and the constant fear of violence and death that accompanied war he also realized that all of this was because people had tried finding the solution to their problems by the wrong way, through the path of violence and conflict-

“Binod: It is by only this sullied ways that the people of this world have tried find their solutions, and that is why perhaps, the sky of this earth today has been blackened by nightmares.”¹⁰²(*Uluhagra*)

On the other, he was overwhelmed and bewildered to find human civilization to have reached the brink of destruction despite institutions of progress-

¹⁰¹ Sombhu, Mitra, 'Introduction', *Abhinay Natak Mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 19-22.

¹⁰² Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 25.

“Binod: It is the ghosts (past) which are now our future. Mine and Yours. The present is only an illusion. As false as progress.”¹⁰³(*Ulukhagra*)

He was pained to see the individuals being turned into thoughtless selfish monsters on one hand and expendable tiny non-entities on the other. Thus occurred to him the need for a new ethics, an ethics which was not forged by institutions of governance like religion or politics but an ethics of the individual, a faith to teach him, to give him emancipation from the institutions and strengthen him to fight sand up against the reign of terror. He saw the ancient institutions failing and thus felt the need for developing a new ethical imperative-

“Even after appreciating the profound wisdom of the eternal truths uttered by the rishis of past, one cannot hope to escape the fact that, for the uncounted ones who attained their youth in the seventh decade of the 20th century; the criterions for distinguishing and indicating good and bad, virtue and sin have been taken hostage.”¹⁰⁴

These thoughts stayed with him and kept coming back to him at different points of his life, in various contexts. He expressed them either in his writings or mostly through his plays. It is perhaps the reason why he decided to perform *Raja Oedipus*, and adaptation of *Oedipus* by Sophocles and *Dashachakra*, and adaptation of *An Enemy of the People* by Henric Ibsen in the Bahurupee theatre festival held in 1964 and called them two plays on darkness. It seemed a dark time to him in many ways. The communist party was split in 1962; the Sino-Indian war began in the same year. Nehru

¹⁰³ Ibid, 25

¹⁰⁴ Sombhu Mitra, 'Promiti Prosokto', *Sombhu Mitra: Dhyane O Antar-Dhyane* (Kolkata: Nandanik, 2011), 3.

died in the May of 64 and at the same time the country was waking up to the failure of the first three five year plans. Once again, Mitra found the individual man being reduced to play thing at the hands of institutional powers and thus decided to organize two plays which champion the struggle of the individual against the society and against his own fate. He wanted show that individual will is not a valueless entity. It is due this very reason Mitra explains later in his interview with Sankha Ghosh that he chose not to retain the original ending of Oedipus. He explained-

“The talk that I had with father Antoine- that people are extremely happy in our country to see fate being found guilty for anything...Thus in this context if I would have retained the concluding statements of the chorus, that nobody can say for sure if a person is happy until he dies- then people would think that is the moral. That, this is what Sophocles has meant in the play (Oedipus).”¹⁰⁵

When Bohurupee later decided to associate with playwright and director Badal Sircar for producing his own plays *Evam Indrajit* and *Baki Itihas*, we understand that the link is maintained. However coming back to the time of Mitra’s association with the Antifascist Writers and Artists Association; it was around this time that Mitra began thinking of a new theatre in the context of Bengal. A theatre which would unlike the commercial stage, try to address the ethical concerns of people of that time, a theatre which could become their voice. He recounts later-

“It is my conception that since the last world war there has emerged a new movement in arts which has attempted to find new ways to achieve new goals...The beginning

¹⁰⁵ Interview of Sombhu Mitra by Sankha Ghosh, ‘Ek Baktar Baithak’, (Kolkata: Talpata, 2012), cited in Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997 Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 170.

of the New Theatre Movement is from there...Even then maybe there were many a glitches in our acting and productions; but still people liked them.”¹⁰⁶

It was from that time that Shaoli Mitra asserts that Sombhu Mitra’s thoughts on Tagore’s plays had begun-

“...Sombhu Mitra’s thoughts regarding Tagore’s plays had begun at that time (at the time of his involvement with Anti-fascist writers’ and artists’ association)...”¹⁰⁷

These thoughts were later going to develop into the production of *Roktokorobi* another play on the horrors of institutional tyranny and the individual’s struggle against it.

While one of the roots of the notion of ethical individualism in Mitra laid in the socio-political historical contexts another was hidden in his personal-historical context. I have already mentioned earlier that before joining Antifascist Writers and Artists association or IPTA, Sombhu Mitra was working in the commercial theatre of Kolkata. A quick look back at the commercial, professional theatre of the time would reveal that till mid 40’s, theatre in Kolkata, comprised of a decaying, professional, proscenium theatre tradition which was a mimicry of the British stage of 19th century formed to appease the British rulers. By then, what had remained of an actor dominated theatre tradition which could once boast of towering figures like Girish Chandra Ghosh and Sisir Kumar Bhaduri was reeling under the weight of reckless actors, unimaginative drop scenes and obscene

¹⁰⁶ Sombhu Mitra, ‘Introduction’, *Abhinay Natak Mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 20.

¹⁰⁷ Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 27.

plays. One of the major reasons of the failure of this tradition was its undisciplined actors including the great Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. We often find references to this fact in Mitra's writings-

“But this did not happen in a day. The rot had through time spread deep and has now began stinking unbearably...A broken feudal ambience has engulfed our stage with its webs.”(On commercial theatre before IPTA)¹⁰⁸

As Shaoli Mitra recollects-

“He did have a lot a criticism to offer on numerous aspects of Sisir Kumar's conduct.”¹⁰⁹

In one of his essays while writing on Sisir Kumar he says-

“Thus was the actor. He was there with unmatched talent. But he perished. May be he destroyed himself because he was unmatched.”(On Sisir Kumar Bahduri)¹¹⁰

Thus we find in Mitra along with the sense of ethical individualism a sense of personal discipline which he considered to be basic necessity of an actor, any theatre practitioner, any artist and finally any human being. However we must also realize that underlying this is a deep skepticism towards his fellow beings, a deep lack of trust in them, whom he often addresses by the name public and whom he considers unworthy of associating with.

¹⁰⁸ Sombhu Mitra, 'Judhottor Juge Bangla Manche Sonkot', *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 25.

¹⁰⁹ Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 105.

¹¹⁰ Sombhu Mitra, 'Judhottor Juge Bangla Manche Sonkot', *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 25.

Limitations of the Regime of Ethical Individualism:

Thus we find how an ethical individualism was spreading its roots in Sombhu Mitra's thoughts since his youth and which was getting expressed in his writings and his productions. While the ethical individualism as we have already seen had its roots in particular historic-politically contingent circumstances and it had its own necessity, it indeed had its limitations. Ethical individualism emerged as a voice of freedom against coercion and hegemony of institutional ethics but as it was realized in time, ethical individualism itself was not without its own hegemonic tendencies. These tendencies started becoming apparent in Sombhu Mitra's thoughts and actions too and its symptoms received its manifestation in two-fold forms in his life and in his theatre. It is but a fact of irony that the ethics through which he desired reconciliation between art and life through the figure of the artist would reveal its deficiencies in both in different forms.

Sombhu Mitra's thoughts regarding the association of life and art in his theatre and finding an ethicality encompassing both had a very singular effect on his work. It made him concentrate more on the form of his theatre often than its subject to the extent that in its culmination he began thinking about a form of theatre whose form itself is its subject. The subject was the life of the people of India in the microcosm, in their daily individual struggles. Thus a seed of the idea of a form of national theatre of an Indian theatre began taking shape in his mind. His writings often began bearing thoughts like-

“We desire to find a form of theatre which is completely Bengali by its nature. No one should be able to allege after seeing our theatre that it is a fourth grade version of

foreign theatre. May our Bengali images, Bengali songs and Bengali dances give life to that theatre...”¹¹¹

“A nation is known by its theatre”¹¹²

“Have you ever listened to the farmer’s songs sitting with them in the night? Have this never happened, that the particular line of your song which leaves you overwhelmed, has left the rustic folk brimming with emotions too? If that has happened, what is its explanation?”¹¹³

He organized his thoughts regarding this matter in of his essays which was to be published in the TDR, and American journal of repute. There he started elaborating on the conception of a distinctly Indian/National theatre that he had in his mind. He explained-

“Indian theatre...It has its expanse at various levels: from mundane daily speech to deep philosophical reflections. Everything is a ‘leela’. All these people running around, committing mistakes, again at times becoming peaceful, realizing the nature of deeper truths; all of this is like a show, as if there is a dance going on all over this earth, this is what we call ‘leela’ ... “like the Vaishnav poem or the Avadhi dohar, a free flowing incessantness is the mark of our most coveted treasures in theatre. An openness. Where not only toil, not readying one’s quills like a porcupine on

¹¹¹ Sombhu Mitra, ‘Bangla Theatre’, *Abhinay Natak Mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 36.

¹¹² Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 212.

¹¹³ Sombhu Mitra, ‘Judhottor Juge Bangla Manche Sonkot’, *Abhinay Natak mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 28.

encountering someone...that theatre then take the form of a 'leela' . Easy and simple; but intense like an intoxicant..."¹¹⁴

These semi-rational and semi-mystical explanations were interspersed with sporadic emotional claims-

"We must not forget the Indian characteristics. Our theatre is a theatre which is to our liking. There is nothing to be concerned about if the foreigners do not understand."¹¹⁵

So where would Sombhu Mitra think the roots of such an Indian tradition of theatre can be found; or is there actually any real manifestation of its roots? To answer such a question Mitra took recourse to the example Rabindranath Tagore's form of theatre as the principal guide and marker. According to Mitra, Tagore's plays and their performative forms have connections with the "golden age in India's cultural history" and this holds the "deeper beauty of our culture".¹¹⁶

After he has expressed the idea of national theatre in its spirit he went into a more troubled chartering of a genealogy for its form-

"I am thinking of a making a different form of theatre. That will have only one central character and he will discover the world through conflicts with everything around him. In the theatre of action and conflicts we are strangers who notice others

¹¹⁴ From, the unpublished article by Sombhu Mitra written for publishing in American theatre journal TDR. Source – Samik Bandopadhyay.

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Sombhu Mitra, *Prasnga Natya* (Kolkata: Ananda), 98.

from behind an imaginary wall. In the more Indian and emotion/thought based theatre that I am talking about we can be at closer proximity of the character; we enter his imaginary world of thoughts.”¹¹⁷

Now as it would be quite self-revealing by now, a few very disturbing questions can be aroused on Sombhu Mitra’s conception of a National Theatre. These questions can be asked at various levels of his thoughts regarding an India/National theatre. First, let us begin with a terminological question. What is meant by the term Indian or National theatre? Sombhu Mitra mostly wrote in Bengali and the term which he used in this context is more ambidextrous than the terms national or Indian. He used the term “Jatiyo Natyarup”. The word “Jat” as used in Bengali can mean quite number things from nation to race to religion, caste and so on. Thus a very obvious question that would arise is what exactly he meant by this term: ‘Indian’ or ‘Bengali’. It obviously was quite bizarre for a thoughtful person like Sombhu Mitra that he chose to overlook the very basic blunder in such categorizations. He could not have, not known that Indian or Bengali are not monolithic historic-cultural constructs. India indeed is home to numerous cultural traditions which are as distinct from each other as chalk and cheese. Even in Bengal alone one can afford to find various conflicting cultures and traditions living besides each other. The examples that Mitra provides of national theatres are also dubious. Kabuki from Japan, Beijing Opera of China, Moscow theatre from Russia, so on and so forth. But he could not have been unaware that there are many other forms of theatre too which survive and thrive in these countries, which have equally rich heritage and past. Thus, under such circumstances the creation of a distinctly Indian or National theatre is a not even a utopia but a dystopia of acute hegemonic structure, if realized.

¹¹⁷ Sombhu Mitra’s unpublished article written to be published in American journal TDR. Source – Samik Bandopadhyay.

A more ridiculous categorization would be the bracketing of all of western theatre tradition under the conflict and action dominated theatre. While there is a very old and rich tradition of action and conflict centered form of theatre existing in Europe from long back; there are also since long existing in Europe one or even more than one parallel and conflicting streams of theatre of whose instance we find in Strindberg, Chekov and many other impressionist and expressionist plays. More recent examples are absurd plays of Beckett or Ionesco. It indeed would seem to us a mystery as to why Mitra took the care to put all of European theatre under such an arbitrary common bracket. Who else in India, could have known better than himself about the existence of these alternative traditions of theatre?

The more Mitra began delving deep into his coveted conception of a national theatre he began expressing hostility to any influence on any Indian theatre from theatre traditions abroad. We hear from him-

“Many of the youngsters in the aspirations of becoming modern are attempting to find and mimic each and every new trend that is emerging in the western hemisphere. As a result they are becoming more and more confused, losing their roots- quite similar in nature to what had happened to their grand fathers in the colonial regime. Wishful translations of plays by Brecht, Ionesco, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee

and others are being put on stage. In most cases, these adaptations are so independent that they can easily be termed thievery”¹¹⁸

So the question would arise, would the National theatre conceived by Mitra close all its doors to external influences. Would this national theatre conceived by Mitra not take into account influences from theatre traditions abroad? Or would it create a black box around itself by closing his doors to everything foreign and just try to develop a form out of its own ingredients. But such a proposal would be in complete disjunction with Sombhu Mitra’s own such long engagement with theatre. Who can deny the fact that perhaps one of the richest traditions of theatre in India which has grown up in Kolkata since the days of IPTA have developed maintaining close proximity to its foreign counterparts and Sombhu Mitra himself is no exception to this? Thus today, a decision of closing all doors to the world in a quest for self-development would be an act of gross incomprehension.

Moreover, under the present socio-economic and political condition it would be a significant question, whether as proposed by Mitra, the conflict within the individual should be the only predominant subject of theatre, because numerous collective concerns or crisis of the people of India or the world are yet to find representation in a thoughtful manner in Indian theatre. Thus can a national theatre develop without addressing these mass political concerns and conflicts?

Now, if we place Mitra’s demand for a national theatre under the context of what was happening at the behest of the Congress Government at the Centre, it would be easier to sense a murky area of politics and ideological governance. It would not indeed be very difficult for anybody interested, to notice that the International Theatre Institute and its Indian members and some people fed at the behest of Central Government have for the past years made devious attempts to alienate Indian

¹¹⁸ Shaoli Mitra, *Sombhu Mitra: 1915-1997—Bichitra Jibon-Parikrama* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 267.

theatre from political thinking. In the international seminar held at Bombay in 1956 the topic stressed upon was Folk theatre. In 1966 a similar seminar was held whose topic was total theatre. To these intellectual rackets formed at the behest of the Central Government, the importance of Natyashastra, Nautanki or Ramleela often over rode the real concerns and crisis of people in India. It is also not a fact to be overlooked that it is after his association with the Sangeet Natak Akademi that Mitra's theses of national theatre began taking shape in his writings. Thus Mitra too was trapped in his own thoughts and the aesthetics of ethics which began as an emancipatory gesture in its final destination became a tool of governance in the hand of the institutional power, the state; the very power to defy which was its initial intention.

While on one hand, such an aesthetic regime which was making its presence feel more strongly in Mitra's thoughts which even made him write the play *Chand Baniker Pala* an equally hegemonic regime was being created in his personal associations and conduct. We have already discussed why discipline formed an important part of Mitra's being as an artist a theatre worker. There was indeed an attempt to create reconciliation between the theatre and life. However, as he began being enclosed in his aesthetic conceptions, his personal convictions to got blurred. He became more and more unpredictable, polemical, unmerciful and authoritative. Shaoli Mitra remembers from this period that-

“Among the stories that I remember one is getting scolded by him without reason...Almost every day he would have made the ambience tense by scolding somebody or the other...”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 159

In one of his essays *Andoloner Proyojon* where he speaks about the various problems encountered by amateur theatre groups and the necessary precautionary measures against such problems he says-

“But as it is important to decide on the rules of the group sitting together it is equally important to give certain responsibilities to individuals and to be in consent with them. This is once again a problematic area. Now a day, we all know the term democracy and use it to different ends. As if, we are actually all equals. Therefore if a veteran comes, there is no need felt by younger members to stand up or for that matter even offer one’s seats to women. Here are such numerous uncivilized ways of practicing democratic rights. Another one is no to consider any one as superior in any matter. It is common to become annoyed if anyone orders anything and always nurturing the thought that the leaders of the troop are taking the cream while exploiting us.”¹²⁰

“Thus it would in the best interests, if love affairs or what is called flirting does not happen within the group.”¹²¹

Thus we find an individual conception of ethics and discipline asserting itself as regime of ethicality. We encounter a form of fascism which is less apparent, but which also disguises itself like all fascism under the innocent motif of pedagogy and taking care, which also works by tools of governmentality as identified by Foucault and which is by no means less violent. Once again like any ethical regime we find an inherent mimetic logic: logic of conduct.

¹²⁰ Sombhu Mitra, ‘Bangla Theatre’, *Abhinay Natak Mancha* (Kolkata: Saptarshi, 2010), 83.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 91

Conclusion:

The second half of the 20th century had begun with hope in form of protests against the tyranny of a politics of antagonism and violence. The 60's and the 70's saw the marginalized individuals come together in protest against the oppression of hegemonic political systems on them. Voices against discretion on the basis of religion, cast, colour, country, gender, money and others were being heard louder than ever in the history of civilization. But what began with such promise, ended in an Eliotian "whimper". By the end of the 70's these counter discourse had themselves indulged in hegemonic practices. They had managed to alienate many of their supporters through hierarchical practices. They had become equally coercive as the power they wanted to struggle against. This is because they could not realize the importance of means in any struggle. They could not comprehend the roots of all political problems lay in not with any particular group but among themselves too, that is among human beings, in the nature of their association. Unless and until that problem is addressed all politics may how much noble the intention will ultimately forge out hegemonic structures. If the mimetic pedagogical regime is not broken, one cannot hope to escape the antagonisms inherent in that.

Thus, we find, what began as an attempt to break free from the ethical governmentality of institutions only forged for itself a more individual form of fascism and thus also constructed for itself a regime. It is indeed the nature of pedagogical structure to create hierarchies and hegemonies. This is because; a pedagogical structure of ethics always works through a mimetic logic of representation. As we know in the Platonic mimetic logic there is always an original and representations and thus the flow of power and knowledge are always unidirectional. There have been repeated attempts, right from the time of Plato to subjugate art into a mimetic logic of pedagogy and thus imagine an ethical function for it. But; such subjugation will always be in the ultimate end limiting and detrimental to the

development of art. The ethics of individualism which we find to be a predominant presence in Sombhu Mitra's thoughts and works attempts at building a life like art and an art like life. As Jacques Ranciere often argues in his work on aesthetics how both of these propositions attempt to create a pattern, a system out of life which is ultimately antithetical to life's nature. Perhaps this is the reason Frederich Nietzsche could be called by Natzis to their support for the dormant associations were not yet dead. Art was not yet important for being art but for being something else. But it is perhaps because Mitra was a thoughtful person and a thoughtful artist that he had realized this and perhaps this is why chose to stay away from theatre in his later days.

Chapter III

Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: In the Neighbourhood of Liminality

Prelude:

“Nothing is more instructive ... than the way Spinoza conceives of the common. All bodies, he says, have it in common to express the divine attributes of extension ... And yet what is common cannot in any case constitute the essence of the single case. Decisive here is the idea of an *inessential* commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence. *Taking-place, the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension, does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence.*”¹²²

—Giorgio Agamben.

The degree of tyranny and oppression that the beginning of the 20th century witnessed in the name of religion, caste, country, gender and color was perhaps unmatched in the history of this world. The World wars, Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki left people of this planet dumbfounded. As a sense of doom grasped the whole world intellectuals and artists encountered realized the tragedy of the individual at the mercy of violent political forces. The sense of an ethical vacuum began becoming apparent in their work. They sang the glory of the individual in protest as French philosopher Albert Camus wrote “The Rebel”. The 1960’s and 70’s saw the marginalized of the world in protest. The students’ and workers’ movements around the world, the Civil Rights Movement, Feminist Movement championed the cause of the underprivileged of this world. There was new hope. But by the end 70’s these protests had failed to maintain the promise they had made. They themselves have

¹²² Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* Michael Hardt (Trans.), (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 18-19.

become hegemonic and hierarchical. The identity politics of the 60's and 70's did no longer seem to hold the future. Under such circumstances, a question, the seeds of which had already been sown, came with renewed importance to the intellectuals and artists. The question was of how to think of a community without antagonisms. How to think about a community where people could be able to associate, be equals, with their differences? How would be such a community and how would be the being which would constitute it?

A study that almost single handedly ushered in a new era in the domain of 20th century scholarship was Benedict Anderson's "The Imagined Communities". While, if Anderson's work did not present one with an answer to the community question it certainly was an articulation of the problem inherent hitherto conceptions of community. The notion of community finds presence as a collectivity that is unified, continuous and enclosed. As Anderson says clearly, the community that he imagines, within the auspices of the idea of nation-

"...regardless of the actual inequalities and exploitation that may prevail ... is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship"¹²³

In other words, the idea of community that is manifested in Anderson's work not only enacts a closure of potential and possible forms of collectivization, but more crucially proposes that such an idea of community breaks down the complex relations and networks of power that constitute the notion of community. Anderson's attempt at a proposing community as being which can be represented in its subtraction was bound to have its exclusions. Anderson's idea was critiqued by numerous intellectuals; two of the best articulated critiques were presented in Jean Luc Nancy's work

¹²³ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983), 16.

The Inoperative Community and Giorgio Agamben's study *The Coming Community*. In all these critical studies including Nancy and Agamben's the objective was to form a conception of the idea of community beyond representation, a community which has an innate capacity to reincorporate differences at every moment: a community whose subject would exist at the liminality of a singular existence in his own ontological being and the being within the differences in the society. Therefore a necessity was felt on behalf of thinkers to re-conceive human association at such a threshold existence, an existence beyond the hegemony of a singular representative one. It was perhaps Jacques Derrida who gave voice to such an intention most strongly in his work *Politics of Friendship* where he put forth a claim for a shift in the objectives of political theory. He stressed that political theory to be able to conceive of equality would have to break through the thresholds of a conception of politics in terms of antagonism.

Now, while we shift our focus towards the Bengali theatre scene as all of these had been happening; I have already discussed in the previous chapters, how in case of both Utpal Dutt and Sombhu Mitra, theatre itself finally became subjected to regime of institutional politics and ethical individualism respectively; it was perhaps Ajitesh Bandopadhyay in which Bengali theatre could have finally found freedom from this regimentation. It was not as if Ajitesh was not interested in politics or in ethics of the individual life forms. Rather, he was interested in both; but what he was most interested in, was theatre. It was this immense passion for theatre and the indomitable will to follow that passion with gusto that prevented Ajitesh to subjugate theatre to the regimentation of neither politics, nor ethics nor philosophy though they were present in his theatre. It was thus, that beginning as a politically motivated theatre worker in IPTA he did not hesitate to produce *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as a formal experiment. While extremely aware of the importance of the regional cultural influences in theatre, he was never afraid of producing adaptations and translations of Brecht, Pirandello, Chekov or Wesker: adaptations which were as good as original plays and plays which if

not politically decisive were politically analytical. Always being aware of the need for professionalism in theatre he did never compromise on the quality of his productions. While always being a good actor himself never taught anyone to imitate him. Many other contrasting tendencies had found their manifestation in Ajitesh. Thus Ajitesh signified more than anything perhaps liminality: an existence in the threshold. His fidelity and his faith lay in theatre only, the kernel of his being. Yet, he is also remembered as an exceptional person in his personal dealings. Ajitesh was able to create a harmony between theatre and life, in his life, while maintaining the clash of the two or the subjugation of one by another. It is this, which I feel was the secret to his being, trying to form an existence which can hold within itself contradictions without conflicts. In short, in life and theatre, his was the quest for an existence of being friends, neither to control, nor to be controlled. In both life and theatre he was an ephemeral presence. Thus, in more ways than other, Ajitesh presented the third alternative in modern Bengali theatre, as well as a modern Bengali and Indian subjectivity, what our contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben would call a “whatever subjectivity”¹²⁴, whatever in the sense of someone who has no interest in anything; but as someone who has interest in everything. It would be my intention in this chapter to investigate how in his work and life, Ajitesh signified such whatever-singularity, a potentiality perhaps where the future to our theatre and our life lies.

Politics, Ethics and Art:

Ajitesh Bandopadhyay began his theatre career as a member IPTA at Kolkata. Thus his association with theatre began in the mid fifties under a left political background. He made a name for himself inside the IPTA quite early owing to his fine theatrical and coordination skills. In the year 1958, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay was elected the secretary of the Dumdum branch of IPTA. In the second state

¹²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* Michael Hardt (Trans.), (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

meet of IPTA, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay was elected the joint-secretary of the state committee. Associated with the local committee of the Dumdum branch of Indian Communist Party, Ajitesh was intensely involved in workers', refugee, cultural and teacher's movements¹²⁵. However Ajitesh's tryst with IPTA, like in case of so many other artists had to end abruptly in 1964 because of conflicts arising out of apparently trifling matters.

As Ranjan Gangopadhyay¹²⁶ reveals in his book from the recollection of Nirmal Ghosh, the rift between Ajitesh and IPTA grew keeping at the centre two principal incidents. Both of them bear a testimony to the high handed nature of IPTA bureaucracy of the period. The first one of the two was regarding a statement or opinion that Ajitesh expressed in one of the meetings at the Dumdum Patipukur regional branch. He had said that, the progress of any theatre movement is never marked only by mere forming of casual theatre groups and doing careless productions. There he had also announced- "I think of Bohurupee as the only serious centre for thinking about theatre nowadays." As Gangopadhyay explains, the IPTA leadership present that day, began being offensive towards Ajitesh without trying to comprehend the true meaning of his words. Even a person of the stature and nature of Digindra Bandopadhyay began attacking Ajitesh with harsh words. They even alleged that Ajitesh was actually acting as an agent of Congress in a roundabout way. But there was not fault with what Ajitesh said and there neither was any lack of fidelity towards the IPTA exhibited by his statements. Still, due to this single statement, Ajitesh was labeled as an agent by some IPTA workers. Such sudden unprovoked allegations against any artist as being an agent of Congress can only be read as a marker of immaturity on behalf of those workers. One senses that the gesture of naming Bohurupee in this context must have invited the wrath of IPTA workers whose old differences with Sombhu Mitra had found new impetus in the early 60's.

¹²⁵ Bimolendu Dutt, 'Saontal Bidroho, Gana Natya Sangha o Ajitbabu', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre proscaenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 89.

¹²⁶ Ranjan Gangopadhyay, 'Ajitesh Bandopadhyay ebong Gana Natya Sangha', *Natyanashi* II year. Volume, 12-13.

The second event which deepened the growing rift and finalized Ajitesh's split from IPTA was when in 1961 Ajitesh did a production of Italian playwright Gian Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* under the banner of IPTA. There were immediate allegations from IPTA authorities regarding the ethicality of doing a play by Pirandello because of Pirandello's association with fascist dictator Mussolini. Not only IPTA authorities; but such questions were being asked by other renowned left minded critics and theatre practitioners. As Radharaman Tapadar who was in Nandikar then and remained a colleague and friend till the end recalls- "Utpal Dutt had said that we should not have performed a play by Pirandello"¹²⁷. It is fact beyond doubt that there emerges a place for debate when a play by such an author is produced under IPTA but Ajitesh's intention was never to defy principles of IPTA. His, was only a search for variations in form. Later on Ranjan Gangopadhyay commenting on this event has said-

"It is still a question whether IPTA actually cared to sit with Ajitesh in serious discussion regarding his mater... But it would only have proved to be beneficial to IPTA if it could have hold onto such a talented coordinator, director and actor."¹²⁸

Ajitesh, however, in the later years had become doubtful regarding the workings of IPTA or for that matter regarding any theatre done under direct political or ideological patronage, even if a left Marxist one. It occurred to him that a left political institutional patronage does not essentially guarantee the existence of a sincere and serious theatre practice, that it can also be equally exploitative in nature. One of the memorable production of his IPTA days is *Saontal Bidroho* which was also the first play authored by him.

¹²⁷ Radharaman Tapadar, 'Amar Ajitda', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 65.

¹²⁸ Ranjan Gangopadhyay, 'Ajitesh Bandopadhyay ebong Gana Natya Sangha', *Natyanashi* II year. Volume, cited in Prodipto Mukhopadhyay, 'Rupantorer Rupokar', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 194.

While, it is true that the first phase of his career was spent in drawing forth all his energies in enriching an outright political theatre practice, it is also a fact that Ajitesh's first association with theatre in his childhood was not in form of political engagement; but as he recounts to fill up a void created by the horrors of the war in the 40's that haunted him as a child. Ruminating on those days he later wrote-

“I felt very helpless. War- Why a war, a war with whom? I did not know when, at what time in a war with whom we would all perished by the strike of a single bomb. The year passed by amongst these horrific thoughts...To fill up this void appeared three claimants- Foot ball, politics and theatre. Among these, I left Football; Politics left me and thus I am only left with theatre now.”¹²⁹

Thus, it is a fact that almost similar to Mitra, in case of Ajitesh too there was an extremely personal sense of ethics from which Ajitesh's interest in institutional politics developed. In many ways it was a personal gesture. However, he gradually found it difficult to maintain such an ethical position while remaining within the party especially with regard to his theatre practice. He realized the limitations that any institutional politics by its very nature presents to any art practice. We find him voicing these realizations in a number of his writings at that time or which he wrote later. In one of his essays titled *Atyalpa Abhijog* (A Few Complaints) he writes-

“The commercial theatre by their numerous tactics and promotional practices announces a Jihad against classical plays. They try to explain that, “Avigyanam Sakuntalam” might be an excellent play but; does it contain any reflections of the political problems of our contemporary society...Our audience then do not remind them that the theatre does not begin and end with only a theatre of political problems.

¹²⁹ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Abhnetar Diary theke', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 13.

Psychoanalytical plays, plays about conflicts within the individual, plays analyzing the ethical ends of science and religion in their social contexts have formed the subject of theatre since ages and many of them have also found recognition with posterity. If in the next one or two decades, there forms a tradition of writing only political problem plays in Bengal literature then what would be the scene of Bengali theatre after that... Actually our audience, do not realize that the commitment of these people lie not with theatre; but with the theatre business. Not in politics; but in exploiting politics to commercial ends.”¹³⁰

Thus, here we find Ajitesh trying to make two significant points regarding the practice of conventional political theatre. First of all, he stresses on the fact that there can be problems in society which might not necessarily be political problems; but rather personal ones too, which also form the subject of theatre, and theatre does not begin and end with only a singular category of ‘political theatre’. Therefore, it would be wrong to begin with such a precondition for any theatre tradition that to be relevant it has to only be able to represent institutional politics. Secondly, the very significant point that he makes is that, such politics like every other phenomenon of our times can be used to fulfill commercial ends. People can be fooled and exploited in the name of a political ideology. Politics too can take advantage of their weakness. He presents a keen analysis of the technicalities of such exploitation in case of theatre in another of his essays, *Baiplabik Theatre Ebong Amader Ajker Sangram*(Revolutionary Theatre and our present struggle) . He says-

“Thus, we try to assert our importance by abusing each other. The noble expression of anger which imparts importance on the creation, has its own risks, therefore our outbursts of anger excites the audience only for a while. Our anger against the

¹³⁰ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, ‘Theatrer Darshak: atyalpa Abhijog’, in ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 11.

political system or social system never reaches the revolutionary climax. We are careful about being angry too. A pattern of our anger too has been created. Thus, all our angry plays have patterns too. Actually the origin of this anger does not lie in our own sensibilities. Their birth is from the stereotypical form of a theatre of anger, thus they do not have any identity of their own. Because they do not have an identity of their own; they provide emancipation for neither the creation nor the creator. Yet this emancipation is the primary condition of a revolutionary theatre.”¹³¹

Thus, we find Ajitesh here making a crucial point. He voices the concern that, more often than not revolutionary theatre has fallen into a trap of a representative pattern. A revolutionary theatre can begin re-performing itself again and again if it is not careful enough and in such a situation the said revolutionary theatre confines itself within a discursive paradigm and fails to address the real politics and the real concerns of the people. It becomes trapped in formal and structural regime which renders it into an empty signifier. Such a theatre according to Ajitesh and as is evident could never contain true emancipation for its audience.

While Ajitesh parted from IPTA and thereafter was strongly against doing theatre under the patronage of either government or any political party, his theatre did not forsake altogether, political thought. Though vehemently criticized by the critics during their productions as being apolitical, *Sher Afgan*, *Manjari Amer Manjari*, *Teen Poysar Pala*, *Paap Punya* and many of his other plays today at hindsight seemed to open a very interesting space for analysis of socio-economic structures in the society without being starkly political in the institutional sense. Ajitesh did believe that doing theatre without any politico-philosophical thought behind it, is futile. He says in one of his essays-

¹³¹ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Baipalabik Theatre Ebong Amader Ajker Sangram', *Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 22.

“I can accept this fact without reservations, that an art should always be influenced by a political philosophy or it will lose its essence in amidst the cultural activities, at least that is my experience. Why I am doing a theatre? Which play would I like to do? How would I do it? If an artist is not politically clear about these things, I feel it is impossible for him to reach a certain degree of completeness.”¹³²

But he was aware of the dangers that institutional politics in a country like ours posed by the very nature of the consensus it generates among people the way it forms that consensus. We find him saying-

“But politics in our country is confined within such few people, the crisis of food, clothing, education, health are so acute that, in spite of a deep will and attachment with culture it has not been possible for any political party to provide any sort of decided guide line. Thus, we have done whatever we could. There was no doubt regarding who were our enemies, but there were no end also to conflicts, wrong conceptions and anger amongst friends.”¹³³

Thus he always consciously intended to keep his practice of theatre free from subjugation to any form of institutional politics, or any political ideology.

Veteran theatre critic Samik Bandopadhyay in his lucid and enlightening article *Ajitesh: Theatre-Rajni* provides us an extremely well thought analysis of Ajitesh’s views regarding the relation between politics, ethics and theatre. He says-

“In later years, Ajitesh did not directly participate in what today can be called a political theatre. Rather Nandikar moved away in certain ways from directly political

¹³² Ajitesh Gangopadhyay, ‘Amar Chetanar Rang’, in *Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 19.

¹³³ Ibid, 19

thinking. There is no reason not to accept that. There was a certain thinking of Ajitesh behind that. He has voice that thought to us a number of times. That notion was the understanding that it is not only by directly representing the reality on stage or bringing forth a political decision at the moment that he political responsibility would be fulfilled. Because, if one has to do a political theatre, if theatre has to play a political role then, that could never end with mere providing facilitation to a few people with similar opinions or belonging to the same the same party.”¹³⁴

Theatre has greater objectives to fulfill. Being political in theatre means to Ajitesh as he himself would say according to Bandopadhyay-

“I feel if we have to do political theatre, then we would have to realize firstly what form of politics is going around the world and contextualize it. Secondly, we have to criticize it without fear, without thinking of receiving any aids or benefits whatsoever. Thirdly one would have to show the historico-philosophical way forward and for that one will have to read books of various theoreticians.”¹³⁵

Thus, we find a completely different definition of politics in Ajitesh’s thoughts. Politics to him lie, not in supporting or abusing a particular group. Politics, means to him to be concerned about, to think and analyze in depth in a historical context problems that concern people as a collective-

“The responsibility of a political theatre is a bit more... That can never be reached by providing certain stereotypical political decisions. There, one has to judge critically-

¹³⁴ Samik Bandopadhyay, ‘Ajitesh: Theatre-Politics’, ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 127.

¹³⁵ Dilip Dutt, ‘Ajitesh Bandopadhyayer Shakhatkar: Prosongo Theatre’, in ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 148.

one has to distantiate himself. A little bit of the past-the continuity-one has to place the moment among these. The moment is never a distinct and independent one.”¹³⁶

Politics for Ajitesh, has ethics too and politics to him does not mean an ethical control by a specific party or group. Politics happens in a continuous dialogue between the self and the community not the exclusion or subjugation of any of these; but by finding ways of coexistence Thus politics for him always lie at the liminality of an individual ethics and a collective responsibility without compromising on any of them. Theatre as an art form however, again for him exists at a liminality of its being an art form and also an expression of ethico-political concern. Form and its content are always should always be in dialogue with themselves.

Negotiating Globalism & Nationalism:

It is now indeed for some time that in India, and almost all the countries with their new found independence from colonial regimes we have been witness to two contrasting tendencies in the field of arts and perhaps more so in the field of theatre than any other forms of art. The 20th Century has more than anything been the age of communication- transcending geographical borders of regions, states, nations and continents and communitarian borders of class, cast, religion and gender. A process which began in the colonial invasions of the 18th and 19th centuries has received fervent impetus due to technological inventions in the field of communication. This has caused radical shift of paradigms in sharing between people. The field of culture has been rendered open. There have

¹³⁶ Samik Bandopadhyay, 'Ajitesh: Theatre-Politics', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 127.

been increasingly apparent political¹³⁷ implications of such an act of unfettering. On one hand has emerged a discourse of globalism and multiculturalism, a cultural enrichment through unrestricted sharing of aesthetic signifiers and real political concerns. On the other such conceptions of a blissful co-existence has been jeopardized by new hegemonic structures identifiable within the discourse of globalism. There has been a gradual erasure of languages in their traditional purity. Thus, new forms of language have emerged, compulsively hybrid in their origin, what Marxist critique of postmodernism has termed “pastiche”¹³⁸. Theatre by its very nature being political¹³⁹ as an art form, has been, especially in the countries struggling through the after effects of a long regime of colonial exploitation and a new found modernity, in the very midst of this cultural phenomenon. Responding to such a situation of course, two mutually conflicting set of political discourse has emerged in these countries relating to the field of culture generally and theatre in particular. A certain half of the theatre practice has responded to the globalization process by openly accepting thematic and stylistic effects of foreign theatrical and cultural traditions¹⁴⁰. While the second half has found its objective in searching and preserving traditional forms in their purity, making them their cultural bastion of identity and resistance¹⁴¹. In the Indian context however contrastingly, the discourse of cultural identity has been used as a tool of governance to enforce the field of arts into a secluded, formalistic, aesthetic cocoon and thus render it politically impotent. It is rather the urban cosmopolitan globalised theatre which has emerged in India as the politically sentient voice.

¹³⁷ ‘Political’, not in the sense of institutional politics.

¹³⁸ Frederic Jameson introduces the concept of Pastiche in his work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (p-16): “The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche.”

¹³⁹ Theatre is inherently political as the audience of theatre is always people united in an arbitrary collective.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Brook celebrated what he called ‘multiculturalism’ in his production “Mahabharata”.

¹⁴¹ Most of the African intelligentsia.

As it has been already discussed in the second chapter, one of the questions which was often being asked or rather a demand often being made in cultural field in the post-independent Indian context was for an Indian or national theatre. Sometimes as an aesthetic searching of roots, as in case of Habib Tanvir, Sombhu Mitra and at others as propaganda by the Central Government; any hint of foreign influence on Indian theatre was being criticized. Indigenous and traditional forms existing at the very verge of extinction were being proposed as alternatives. In the context of West Bengal, it was Ajitesh Bandopadhyay who more often than not was the bane for most of these attacks. We have already discussed the vehement criticism that he faced for producing Pirandello. He was equally or even more criticized for his adaptation of Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*, *Teen Poysar Pala*. Utpal Dutt was severely critical of the production claiming, Ajitesh to have done injustice to Brecht by rejecting the Marxist context and reducing him to a mere formal exercise¹⁴². Samik Bandopadhyay, presented a vehement criticism of the production in an interview *Problems and Directions: Calcutta's New Theatre*. He said-

“The popularity of Tin Paisar Pala makes us somewhat apprehensive, for it corrupts and destroys the basis of the experimental theatre on the one hand and that of the strongly committed political theatre on the other”.¹⁴³

Ajitesh however continued to produce translations and adaptations of Brecht, Chekov, Pirandello, Wesker and others throughout his career.

It is indeed an irony of sorts that it was Ajitesh who was alleged of being partial to Western cultural influences. Ajitesh unlike Utpal Dutt, Sombhu Mitra and many other urban born and brought up theatre practitioners spent his childhood away from Kolkata in a small town. He came to Kolkata

¹⁴² Utpal Dutt, 'Epic-er Sarkatha', *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 280.

¹⁴³ 'Problems and Directions: Calcutta's New Theatre: A Conversation with Two Critics Dharani Ghosh and Samik Bandyopadhyay', *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 15, No. 2, *Theatre in Asia* (Spring, 1971), 241-245 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144645>>, accessed on 22 October, 2011.

only during his college days and it was while studying English honors at the Manindra Chandra College that he came in contact with various foreign playwrights. However it would be simply nurturing a wrong conception if it is thought that Ajitesh's theatre activity was alien to Bengali cultural contexts. We often hear statements from him like-

“When I have been to the villages to do jatra I have seen thousands of people standing outside the pandal, not able to enter for their incapacity to pay for the ticket; and the sound of Kirtan, Katakatha, Panchali, Alkap used to come blowing with the wind. Our urban middleclass would never be able to touch the minds of those artists or audience. Our hearts are not that sensitive; our bodies are airy as compared to them.”¹⁴⁴

In one of his essays written during the IPTA days we hear about his desire to reach a wider public than urban intellectuals or even urban mass. He was not interested in doing fringe, parallel theatre-

“It was not about performing easier plays for common mass or performing difficult plays in an easy and careless manner; it was our objective that the commitment with which we have presented any play for the urban intellectuals, we will reach out to the audience at Asansole or Durgapur with the same commitment...”¹⁴⁵

However there are a number of questions which would be claiming to be answered and which were often asked to Ajitesh in regard to his production of translated and adapted plays. Ajitesh in one of his essays titled *Anudito Natok* (translated plays) articulates his defense in this matter. First of all he answers he answers the question: why translated or adapted plays?

¹⁴⁴ Ajitesh Gangopadhyay, 'Utser Dike Phera', *Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 11.

¹⁴⁵ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Anubad Natak o Moulik Natok', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 8.

Ajitesh begins by mentioning the importance of translation in sharing of knowledge. According to him, the-

“...distinct nature of any distinct philosophy or art could only be established through translation”¹⁴⁶.

He draws evidence from the history of theatre to show that how much poorer the tradition of world theatre would have been without translations. He points out that productions of Shakespeare’s plays or the most modern English plays would never have happened in Russia if there was no translation. Moreover, Stanislavski could not have produced *An Enemy of the People* if he did not have access to a translation of the play by Norwegian playwright Henric Ibsen. Bertolt Brecht could not have produced Greek plays if they were not translated to German; and in very recent times, Italian Pirandello could not have been produced in England. Neither French, Ionesco could have been produced in the absence of a translator. He reminds that the hundred and seventy year old Bengali theatre that was founded by Gersim Lebdef began with translated plays only. He lists three distinct ways in which any theatre tradition can benefit from translated plays-

- a) “New spirit, forms, structure, characters, events, rhythm and emotions are brought into literature. The production of the translated plays similarly brings to the stage spirit, forms, structure, characters, events, rhythm and emotions.
- b) The translated plays bring the realization of the fact that people of the world all belong to the same family, and their life too flows by the same variant and blissful stream.
- c) Facilitates weak, underdeveloped understanding of theatre to move towards gaining maturity. Translated plays work as its friend, philosopher and guide.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, ‘Anudito Natok’, *Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 25.

The next criticism that Ajitesh responds to is a voice of dissent heard quite often from both critiques and directors of the period: is not translation and production of translated plays a hindrance to the writing of original plays? In reply to this, Ajitesh says that such allegations to producers would be unjust in the very beginning as- if they are able to produce plays by Sophocles, Checkov or Arthur Miller successfully then there should be simply no reason whatsoever, why they would not be able to produce original plays with the same efficiency. Thus, he concludes, the problem lies elsewhere; that is in the absence of good plays being written and he says unless and until good plays are being written, producers would have to produce translations and adaptations of foreign plays. However, he continues to say that it is the very translations and adaptations from which the future authors of plays should take lessons. Such learning does not seem to him to be something shameful; but quite natural for a theatre tradition which is only hundred and seventy year old. It can only develop by looking to learn from richer and older traditions of the world. Ajitesh also refuses to accept the argument that foreign plays must be translated as literary works while it is original plays which must be produced as for him theatre is fundamentally an applied art and unless and until something is tried out on the stage, in practice, theatre he feels could never look to benefit from it directly.¹⁴⁸

Thus, as his final explanation, he says that if he supports doing translations and adaptations of foreign plays, he feels it is this practice which will finally lead to writing of original plays. He quotes famous English critique Kenneth Tynan to the support of his statement, who while evaluating the consecutive productions of Sophocles, Sartre, Ionesco and Pirandello in England, had written-

“Even if it seems absurd to hear now, I can foresee that within one or two years we would start finding good plays in England. Realizing this belief of Tynan the next

¹⁴⁷ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Anudito Natok', *Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 26.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 27

year only was produced “look Back in Anger” and there ushered in a new age of theatre in England.”¹⁴⁹

It is indeed a fact that tilting the land of theatre with translations and adaptations of foreign plays did yield rich dividends in case of Bengali theatre. In form of crop, not only we have got excellent plays by Dutt, one after another; who, one should remember began his career by doing Shakespeare first at the Saint Xaviers college group and then with the group of famous English director Jeffrey Kendhal, Shakespiriana; but in the 60’s and 70’s we got brilliant plays by Badal Sircar like *Ebong Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas* and others and also by Mohit chattopadhyay like *Mrityu Sanbad*, *Rajrokto*, *Konthonalite Surjo*, *Captain Hurrah*, *Mahakalir Baccha* and others. These plays have been of immense value to the development of Bengali theatre and it is a fact every theatre enthusiast would know that the inspiration behind writing of these plays were reading of foreign plays and also watching them being produced by the contemporary amateur theatre groups.

However, Ajitesh in spite of being a supporter of translations and adaptations from foreign plays, was, as have been often been alleged, not indifferent to the question of Indian regional forms of theatre. In this essay, he devotes a few lines too on the ongoing debate on the issue of a national theatre and asserts that we would have to draw as much material possible from the available history of our Sanskrit tradition of theatre and he stresses on the fact that, that too can happen only through translation of Sanskrit texts. He says-

“We can discuss in this context how in recent times our intellectuals have begun discussing about an ‘Indian theatre’. We cannot; but feel interested in this issue. At least, from the curiosity of knowing history we would have to think- how much can we look to get from the practice of theatre which has become extinct in our country?”

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 28

When the history of Sanskrit theatre is discussed in the countries abroad... our neglect towards the roots of our own theatre is truly painful... Today, without Bengali translations of our Sanskrit plays and a few successful productions of them, we cannot hope to realize our dreams of developing an 'Indian Theatre'.”¹⁵⁰

Not only from ancient Sanskrit theatre; but we have to have translations of plays written in various regional language in our times, he stresses-

“We at times through the newspapers get a feeling of where thoughts regarding theatre exist in various other Indian states. When we hear about famous director Ebrahim Alkazi we naturally fill interested to know about his productions. Regarding this matter however the work of translation is still much neglected.”¹⁵¹

Thus, it would indeed be a fictitious allegation against Ajitesh, to say that he was apathetic too all aspects of Bengali, regional or national culture and was just a smuggler of cultural products from the West. Ajitesh never undermined the huge resources that lay in his own country.

Now, if we come to an analysis of Ajitesh's work on how much he was actually doing what he was preaching, we find that even his productions of translated or adapted plays are replete with influences from regional culture. His adapted plays like, *Manjari Amer Manjari*(adapted from Chekov's *Cherry Orchard*), *Sher Afghan*(adapted from Pirandello's *Henry IV*), *Teen Poysar Pala*(adapted from Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera*) or *Pap Punya*(adapted from Leo Tolstoy's *Power of Darkness*) become independent plays by their sheer rootedness in Bengali culture and traditions. Each of these plays provide keen study of socio-economic conditions in, marginal spaces of and individual psyches of people, in Bengal. Ajitesh's brilliant study of human nature, their physical and linguistic habits were infused into the characters to the extent that losing their foreign garb they became of regional.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 27

¹⁵¹ Ibid

Apart from certain intellectuals and intellectual minded critics nobody of the huge audience ever put forth the question that whether the plays were Indian or foreign? Ajitesh's adapted plays provide a very interesting overlapping space between Indian and foreign cultural traditions. While, Ajitesh did adaptations of foreign plays he also did not reject ancient Sanskrit or regional plays. Thus we found him producing *Mudra-rakshasa* or *Andhay Yug*.”

There is a notion about Ajitesh, which is often voiced by people: that he was passionate and thus produced or did whatever he felt passionately about. But that is only a partial truth. While it is indeed true that Ajitesh would have never produced a play just because it was famous one, he also had a well planned strategy to construct his theatre career in a particular manner and was working towards it. Ajitesh had a particular agenda in theatre. Theatre is according to him was a European medium and thus Ajitesh wanted to understand it through practice. He had a thought that through these exercises he would be able to give shape to an Indian form of theatre. One has to realize, that when he began with adaptations or translations of foreign plays, he was not interested in their philosophy but their form. Ajitesh himself clarifies-

“When Nandikar performed foreign plays it was this exercise with form which the principal objective. It was same reason to do Pirandello. We were not much concerned about the philosophical nitty-gritties of Pirandello rather we were enticed by the form of Pirandello's plays...is is much needed in Bengal (an exercise in form)”¹⁵²

Later on, when he produced *Mudra Rakshas*, he had a similar objective. But he knew that these forms in themselves were not an end and certainly not without a content which was relevant to our country, our state, our times. He has always expressed such a notion-

¹⁵² See page 8,

“For the content as I will look towards the whole world I will also look towards villages.”¹⁵³

He knew in the end he had to reach through this arduous journey through which he could conceive of a harmony between the form and content and figure out a new and unique language of theatre. When he wrote his second independent play in 1976 it was perhaps the first step towards realizing this objective. However, we could not become the spectators to the culmination of his career as it was put to a sudden halt by his sudden demise at the age of only fifty in 1983.

Thus, here too we find Ajitesh drawing from both western and Indian paradigms and formulate a third and new language out of it. While there have often been demands for going back to roots; and while there indeed might be important resources to be utilized in Sanskrit theatre tradition or indigenous traditional forms but under changing socio-economic structures in the last hundred years and especially so after our independence a complete transposition of our theatre to the form of a Sanskrit theatre or indigenous one is a thought of gross stupidity. I have already discussed at length about the folly of such attempts in the previous chapter; but I would like to add that we would have to open our senses to the world and draw resources from wherever we can to enrich our theatre and there should not be any prejudice working in his matter. We would have to look to create a state of negotiation between tradition and modernity and can never hope to exclude any of the two altogether. Thus as Ajitesh would say-

“Of course we live in Bengal and India and are the part of Bengali theatre tradition. Therefore, the problems of Bengali theatre concerns us and thus we are driven by thought whether Bengali theatre would be able to achieve a form of its own. But the matter at hand is not so simple. Numerous complicacies of tradition and modernity

¹⁵³ Dilip Dutt, ‘Ajitesh Bandopadhyayer Shakhatkar: Prosongo Theatre’, in ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 148.

entwine that. We have the tradition of Indian Sanskrit drama or Bengal's very own rural traditions. But theatre is ultimately an urban phenomenon and how much Jatra (an indigenous form of performance in Bengal) would be able to facilitate its growth is a question yet to be answered...But it is true Indian theatre has a characteristics of its own...But how put that in to use in our contemporary western influenced society and find an Indian form?.. It is because of the need for this knowledge about forms the translations and adaptations of foreign plays need to be performed. At the same time we should also perform Sanskrit classical play.¹⁵⁴

Being Equals with Friends:

“One must therefore also "con-sent" that his friend exists, and this happens by living together [syzen] and by sharing acts and thoughts in common [koinonein]. In this sense, we say that humans live together unlike cattle that share the pasture together.”

Aristotle,

Nichomachean Ethics.

Bibhash Chakraborty, a renowned director and founder member of the amateur theatre group Theatre Workshop in one of his essays on Ajitesh Bandopadhyay titled *Ajitesh: Bhitore Agun Baire Proshanti*(Fire within, calm without) says-

¹⁵⁴ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Anubad Natak o Moulik Natok', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 9.

“When the third Pandav of Bengali theatre made his first appearance in the Bengali theatre scene, Utpal Dutt at the Minerva theatre and Sombhu Mitra at the New Empire had already established themselves. People like us, who had little more self respect than others found it difficult to go near those two castles. They were great figures and our respect for them was sky high; but whatever little we could see from afar it seemed they were surrounded by a high wall, crossing which neither they would be able to reach out to us, nor we will be able to reach out to them. How could we have discovered, if we would not been able to come at the proximity of each other? And how could we develop if the sudden instincts would have been left undiscovered by the teacher or vice versa; if those two are watertight containers of safe drinking water. Ajitesh was a flowing river breaking banks and dams- one who wants to move along taking everybody in his path by making everything fertile in his path. No body is a pawn of chess in his hands; all are his companions and comrades in arms. If you are an established artist you have enclose yourself in a shell- or you have to create a cocoon around your presence- he never believed in such a theory.”¹⁵⁵

One of the principal political questions of our times has been how to be friends with the other. In earlier times ‘friendship’ was generally not considered as a concern of political theory but that of the domain of ethics or morals. Antagonism was thought natural to politics, to the extent that Aristotle advised political allies to choose friendship of virtue over their alliance. But the twentieth century has been witness to such horrific violence being perpetuated in the name of politics, no longer is it being able for thinkers to separate the issue of friendship from politics. The question of the other- the colonial other, the racial other, the religious other, the national other has become crucial to philosophers as it is an unbelievable amount of violence have been perpetuated in these grounds.

¹⁵⁵ Bibhash Chakraborty, ‘Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, baire proshanti’, ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 82.

Thus politics today and our politics of future can no longer ignore the issue of friendship. So long, we have only had political regimes, and regimes by definition are constituted by unequals: those who govern and those who are governed. But the future society, the community to come has to think beyond this dichotomy: for the sake of brevity, have to learn how to become a friend.

It is in theatre, more than any individual art perhaps that friendship is important and especially so in an amateur theatre groups as economic prospective is sacrificed at the outset. In such circumstances it is only friends, who can be together and such difficult circumstances make easier to distinguish the friend from the selfish. Ajitesh's comrades in theatre or even those who were much younger to him and have worked with him have always identified Ajitesh with the term friend. Bibhas Chakraborty says-

“Thus even friend of the same age would often become his disciples. An intensely overpowering friendship. Nobody would be spared. In our times a rare personality who could make everybody his own and instill faith in them.”¹⁵⁶

Ajitesh, like every human being, wanting to create in a group and every founder of theatre group of the time we are dealing with found people betray him, leave him. When fourteen members of Nandikar chose to leave the group in 1964, many traced the reason to a fascist regime of Ajitesh at nandikar-

“There are two forms of chemistry which are at work behind the splits in group theatre: individual and political. Protesting against politics in theatre and an unannounced Fascism, Theatre Workshop was formed under Bibhash Chakraborty

¹⁵⁶ Bibhash Chakraborty, 'Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, baire proshanti', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 58.

who left Nandikar. Maya Ray, Ashok Mukhopadhyay, Chinmoy Ray, Ajoy Ganguli, all together fourteen members left Nandikar”¹⁵⁷

However, when one finds Bibhash Chakraborty hail Ajitesh as a friend, the fictitious character of such claims becomes apparent. The next devastating split that Ajitesh had to deal with was when in 1974 Ajitesh had to leave Nandikar the amateur theatre group that he himself founded. Rudraprasad Sengupta, Ajitesh’s friend and comrade in Nandikar from the time of its inception and the leader of the Nandikar group since the split has in a recent article on Ajitesh said that Ajitesh left Nandikar by his own choice, though he does not care to point out the reason. However, Radharaman Tapadar speaks more clearly on the issue-

“7th September, 1977, Ajitda left Nandikar. Ajitda was against taking Governmental subsidies. That was the principal reason. He did not agree to the plan of receiving money from the government at the same time also criticizing it.”¹⁵⁸

Thus, it would be clear that Ajitesh was forced to leave Nandikar because he refused to compromise on his ethical beliefs and thus he did not desert Nandikar because of mere ego conflict as often a case been made for. However, even after leaving Nandikar, Ajitesh is never found to criticize Nandikar in any of his writings. He never uttered a single word of complaint. Nandikar though, was not so generous. The publication which was brought out at the 20 years celebration of Nandikar the name of Ajitesh was omitted. Ajitesh however was not bothered-

“In the family of theatre, we all belong together. But; even in a family might split; similarly the founder of the Nandikar group had to leave it. Even the publication marking 25 years of Nandikar group saw no mention of Ajitesh’s name in it. Is this

¹⁵⁷ Panchu Ray, ‘Group theatre-e Bhangoner Khoti Ki?’, *Bihan 40 years Special Edition* (2009), 250-268.

¹⁵⁸ Radharaman Tapadar, ‘Amar Ajitda’, in ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 65.

only a mistake? But such a deliberate criminal act can never be excused in the name of a mistake. Though Ajitda after hearing all this had only said- ‘Nandikar has done what they have thought the right thing to do, why are you people concerned with it? Neither do I think, nor will I ever...’¹⁵⁹

If this was not enough, he was even denied the right to his own work by Nandikar; but sill Ajitesh refused to make it an issue-

“When in front of his eyes carbon copies of his productions *Mudrarakshas* or *Jakhan Eka* appeared in the market in the name of another director and with that was associated the name of the best man of Bengali theatre Sombhu Mitra or potentially brilliant actress Usha Ganguli; Ajitesh went forward brushing aside these frauds.”¹⁶⁰

Perhaps, Ajitesh understood that there would ultimately be no productive outcome of a quarrel. Perhaps, he wanted and knew to dissociate himself from such malice. Perhaps, he wanted only to do theatre with friends and no meaningless petty politics. However, when he knew how to dissociate himself from the undesirable; he also knew to be passionately truthful with his friends-

“He had immense belief in friendship. Once because I spelt an English term wrongly and later once because I mis-named an author he scolded me in public. ‘it is unthinkable to me that somebody among my friends could do such a mistake...Again if anybody used to praise with any of my written pieces he would to say-‘oh quite

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 64

¹⁶⁰ Bibhash Chakraborty, ‘Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, baire proshanti’, ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 84.

natural, he is my friend, do you know we used to study together, I had English honors and he had Bengali...”¹⁶¹

Ajitesh though coming from a middle class family did never have middle class Bengali insecurities. He was always brave enough to take any risk for the sake of his passion, theatre. For almost two decades, he managed to run amateur theatre groups, first Nadikar, and then Nandimukh without having to ask for grants to either Government or commercial funding agencies. He had immense self-belief and achieved everything he could, because of it. It was definitely not easy for him to come from a small town and struggle his way to become one of the finest directors in the history of Bengal. We find some the instances of his self belief and courage in the recollections of his colleagues. Debasish Dasgupta remembers-

“I said if you could run the show for at least once a week it would be good. At that time it would have been quite a risk for Nandikar to decide on doing one show per week... But Nandikar began doing shows at the Muktangan and they never had to look back thereafter. Once again it was risk to take a commercial theatre like Rangana but here too making the leap and coming out a success”¹⁶²

Ajitesh feared of nothing and nothing could convince him of doing things against his belief, though he was always open to suggestions from everyone. As Bibhash Chakraborty recounts-

“Only he who has deep self belief can do such thing and it is his self belief that gave Ajitesh immense courage. Regarding art he had no fear and neither any compromising mentality. Many a questions have arose on the context of foreign plays: Why so many foreign plays brother? Aha this is not Brecht! You did Pirandello! He is a reactionary!

¹⁶¹ Bibhash Chakraborty, ‘Ajitesh- Bijeta o Bijito’, ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 60.

¹⁶² Ibid, 59

Again Pinter! He is absurd! None of the stupid criticism that he faced could shake him up. No political party or any person could instill fear in him. He used to listen to everybody with the same attention. But whenever he realized unwarranted criticism or advice is being made he could very easily become indifferent to it.”¹⁶³

Ajitesh not only had self belief; but could instill belief in others and perhaps this formed the key to his being an unmatched coordinator. As a coordinator, Ajitesh’s tremendous courage and uncompromising mentality has now become proverbial. The way, he had to begin, again and again from the scratch with all the humility. He had struggled himself to a position of importance within IPTA, but had to leave it. He then constructed Nandikar almost from a scratch, brick by brick with inhuman labor and love. Nandikar did never receive in the time of Ajitesh any financial aid from any institution or political party. However, Nandikar did performances continuously not only in Kolkata; but also in towns and villages. The second blow came in form of fourteen members leaving Nandikar in 1966. Ajitesh in response produced “Sher Afghan” in the rehearsal only twelve days. Nandikar regained strength. Again in 1977 he left Nandikar with not a single penny in his pocket and through unmatched rigor formed Nandimukh and produced Paap-Punya”.¹⁶⁴

However, in spite of the being an extraordinary person, he never had airs of one. Humility was inherent in Ajitesh’s character. Perhaps because of this he had to work more than others but he tried to never disappoint anyone. As Bibhash Chakraborty reflects-

“This simplicity in the extraordinary had made him a true people’s artist. Whenever he received a call for a show from anywhere in Bengal he never failed to do a show there. Never did the difficulty of the journey, meagerness of the allowance become a

¹⁶³ Bibhash Chakraborty, ‘Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, Baire Proshanti’, ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 83.

¹⁶⁴ Ashok Mukhopadhyay, ‘Hey Shomoy uttal shomoy: ajitesh badopadhayer natyo protibha’, *Prosongo Abhinay* (Kolkata: Kalabhrit, 2007), 118.

hindrance in his way. He used to say- how much you can, wherever you can, act; go to the people. In this manner he has taken Chekov and Brecht to even to the most remote parts of Bengal. He has made his group Nandikar the busiest of all Indian groups, we must remember without governmental subsidies or support from the embassy or patronage of a particular political group.”¹⁶⁵

Now let us come to one of the most important facets of his personality- Ajitesh as a teacher. Ashok Mukherjee had told this author, that even as a teacher, Ajitesh was a more a friend. His method of teaching acting to the young members of his group was also not hegemonic. In one his articles on Ajitesh he voices his views on this issue more clearly-

“I have seen many individuals, who were never destined to do theatre have sacrificed their life at its alter falling in love with Ajitesh. But the most important of all his virtues was that he never put himself before his art, overshadowing it. Like many a great yet proud theatre experts he never had the audacity to say that “my dear I am greater than theatre itself”. The true humility learnt at the very outset of his life from the poor people has always saved him from such follies. Thus, he never imposed himself on his students. The only hard oath he had made his students take is: may their emergence be from inside, may they discover themselves by themselves.”¹⁶⁶

Thus, we see Ajitesh never believed in any of his disciples mimicking him, neither did he believe in directing them in their every other action on stage. He always allowed them with space to develop in their own ways. Sandhya Dey, one of his disciples describes Ajitesh’s method of teaching in her recollections, which presents us with a very similar picture-

¹⁶⁵ Bibhash Chakraborty, ‘Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, Baire Proshanti’, ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 82.

¹⁶⁶ Ashok Mukhopadhyay, ‘Hey Shomoy uttal shomoy: ajitesh badopadhayer natyo protibha’, *Prosongo Abhinay* (Kolkata: Kalabhrit, 2007), 119.

“I could understand Ajitesh Bandopadhyay as a director to some extent in the production of *Pappunya* at Nandimukh. He never used to create any sort of pressure on anybody. He always gave any actor or actress a certain amount of independence. His technique was to bring out of me the way I could play the character. He imposed nothing. Thus, one would realize that among those who have acted with or under Ajitesh there is none who imitate him. At many places, one can witness theatre or acting imitating Utpal Dutt or Sombhu Mitra but imitation of Ajitesh? It is not there in any of his plays, never-this is my realization. Say, Rudrada, Asitda, Chinmoy Ray, Radhuda and Bibhashda all of them have acted with Ajitda; but none of them express any imitation. This is because, his technique of teaching was- ‘I am saying it as I would; you have to express it as you would’. I think in such a process actors and actresses develop more completely. Thus, many actors and actresses of Nandikar are of high stature: all of them are skilled and well equipped. He has prepared numerous great actors like Rudrdada, Bibhashda, ashokda, Maya Ghosh, Bina Mukherjee, Monju Bhaacharya, latika basu, ajoy Ganguly, keya Chakraborty, Deepali Chakraborti, Shelly Pal but none of them are mere imitators...”¹⁶⁷

We hear from Radharaman Tapadar that Ajitesh not only taught the junior members of his group to act; but gave them responsibilities which would help them develop completely, adept at every aspect of theatre-

¹⁶⁷ Sandhya Dey, ‘Nandikar Theke Nandimukh’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 74.

“At Nandikar Ajiteshda wanted to make everybody technically sound in every aspect of theatre. When Rudraprasad got the responsibility of directing *Antigone*, I was given the chance to direct *Saudagarer Nouka*.”¹⁶⁸

Theatre is not only a reflection of life on stage but a microcosm of life in its institutional frame work too. Within that people are not only evaluated for their aesthetics imagination and artistic skills; but on also their role on being the part of a collective a community. Within the community of theatre too, as a teacher, as a coordinator we find him practicing the same ethical imperatives that he practiced in his theatre practice. Here too, he wanted to break free from the mimetic frame work of pedagogy and appear as a presence at a threshold. He rejected the hierarchies that are inherent to them. His was a struggle against middle-class mediocrity that plagued the majority of the theatre workers. He intended to know what seemed ethically right to him and follow it with all his ability and capacities. Compromise was not his forte, neither ethical, nor economical, nor political. His allegiance was only to theatre and the theatre of the people; not people of any group, party, community, class or religion but a category of generic people.

¹⁶⁸ Radharaman Tapadar, ‘Amar Ajitda’, in ‘Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’, *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 65.

Conclusion:

The nineteen sixties before Ajitesh appeared on the Bengali theatre scene, it was the tale of exploits and limitations of two exceptional figures of theatre. While they gave theatre practice in Bengal a new dimension and a new pace, their limitations had begun revealing themselves in the early and middle parts of the decade. On one hand the regimentation of the party on the other, the self, on one hand ideology and on the other ethics began clenching like shackles on the spirit of the New Theatre Movement. There were debates regarding petty issues. Theatre which should have been the primary objective found itself in the backseat. New institutions of power had emerged Bohurupee and LTG and once again a hegemonic structure was being put into motion. Thus, a philosophical void was being created and craving for a new intervention was growing within: an intervention which would find a way beyond the interested ideology and aesthetics of indifference. What aggravated the crisis was a sheer dearth of good plays on one hand and on the other hand propaganda for the promotion of traditional and indigenous forms from the Central Government and finally the economical crisis and consequent risk of falling into the financial scaffolds of the Government or other financial institutions. Thus Bengali theatre was in the need of someone who would succumb to neither institutional pressure nor be lured by financial benefit and who can also find his way through the aesthetic problems of modernity evident in the post-colonial state. It was Ajitesh who appeared in the Bengali theatre scene with seemingly the promise to fill this vacuum. With only and only theatre in his mind and the humility of a genius he negotiated with all these obstacles to guide theatre through these times of crisis. Passionate towards theatre and courageously indifferent to whatever looked to make a dint in that passion. Along with passion was a very well thought out structure through which he wanted to receive and learn from both western and regional forms and ultimately form a language of theatre unique in its own sense. Thus Ajitesh was presence; a presence which perhaps cannot be

summed up in a single theoretical formulation for every theoretical formulation is representative and thus exclusionary by birth. But; the only ethics and ideal that Ajitesh sacrificed his life to, was that of being a friend, an equal which perhaps is the most politically difficult task of our times yet a task which is ultimately beyond the capacity of all political theory: of a being a presence at the liminality, at the threshold of an appearance and a disappearance. But Ajitesh lost to life before he could fulfill his promise to the Bengali theatre; but today if there is any way forward for Bengali theatre it would have to take into count the ways chartered by Ajitesh.

Conclusion

“Friendship is, in fact a community; and as we are with respect to ourselves, so we are as well, with respect to our friends. And as the sensation of existing (aisthisis hoti estin) is desirable for us, so would it also be for our friends.”

-Aristotle, *Nicomachean*

Ethics.

As I had been sitting and writing this work in my home at the town of Santiniketan, in West Bengal I was also being witness to an unfurling of political banalities. The hysteria of the winds of political change after 34 years of CPIM rule was yet to die down; but the harsh reality underneath was already staring people of West Bengal in to their eyes. The same group of intellectuals and artists, quite a few amongst whom were theatre personas, who bore the flags of change in their shoulders few days ago, seemed apprehensive. Once again, the parliamentary democracy have shown its true colours, a democracy where equality and freedom are symbolic are so are its changes. The politics of antagonism has again revealed its hegemonic self and spread its claws of control. Once again, it has been revealed that the problem lies not with any particular political group; but in the nature of our politics, in the nature of our associations. Parliamentary democracy; due its representative nature is bound to have its exclusions and thus would evidently be hegemonic. At present in our democracy, there is no other democracy except as equality among everyone - an equality which can be calculated, countable: you count the number of units, of voters, of voices, of citizens. But such a ‘counting of consent’ or ‘consent of count’ would not be enough- as we would have to reconcile this demand for equality with the demand for singularity, with respect for the other as singular. Thus we would have to find the answer to the question- how can we, at the same time, take into account the equality of everyone, justice and equity, and nevertheless take into account and respect the

heterogeneous singularity of everyone? It is therefore, is not only a matter of conjuncture, that any art practice in our present scenario can never hope to find emancipation by subjecting itself to political ends of institutional politics or just finding for itself an enclosure of individual ethical and psychological or merely aesthetic investigation. Thus, the ideas of politics and community would have to be re-thought and re-practiced and so should be rethought the relation between art and politics. So how should be our coming community of future, how should be its subjects and what role can art look to play in taking us towards that community? These are questions, one must ask today to our past and our present, for our future.

Both Jean Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben try to give us an answer on similar terms. What Nancy and Agamben offer in *The Inoperative Community* (1991) and *The Coming Community* (1993) respectively is a conception of 'community' that is marked by a shift in thinking of the idea of community as a concept that we always already occupy, of being in (hence one is red, French or Muslim, or an activist) and as could be found in Benedict Anderson's conceptions of it, to one that sees it as a concept that does not have a guarantee of meaning, identity, belonging; a concept that does not have an essence - that of a unified collectivity. This is Nancy's idea of "community without community". Agamben shares a similar critical trajectory in his designation of the coming community - a community

"...without destiny and without essence, the community that returns is never present in the first place".¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* Michael Hardt (Trans),(Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 157.

What Nancy does here, is shift the question of, or on, community away from one invested in the notion of identity and belonging (being-in) to an idea of the community that ceaselessly works to produce more democratic, open and fluid relationships with others to foster a sense of “being with”¹⁷⁰. Like Nancy, Agamben also proposes the idea of community that is based on the notion of belonging without identity. This is a community of singularities, fragments: it is

“of a being whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging ... nor by the simple absence of conditions ... but by belonging itself”¹⁷¹.

Therefore, in such a community the co-existence of its subjects does not appertain to their sharing of or participation in a common substance; but rather by a sharing that is purely existential so to speak.

So then, how exactly would in such a community, its subjects would associate with each other? Democracy we must remember means minimally, equality - and here we see why friendship is an important key. Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida both take recourse to the concept of friendship. As Agamben, would say in his work, *What is an Apparatus-*

“Friends do not share something (birth. law. place.taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship. Friendship is the con-division that precedes every division, since what has to be shared is the very fact of existence, life itself. And it is this sharing without an object, this original con-senting that constitutes the political”¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Jean-luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* Peter Connor, et al., (Trans). (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).33

¹⁷¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* Michael Hardt (Trans),(Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 85.

¹⁷² Giorgio Agamben. ‘The Friend’, *What is an apparatus?: and other essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Derrida in his study *Politics of Friendship* speaks quite in the similar vein. Democracy according to him-

“...means, minimally, equality - and here you see why friendship is an important key, because in friendship, even in classical friendship, what is involved is reciprocity, equality, symmetry, and so on and so forth.”¹⁷³

Thus the quest for any politics which still could claim to have a stake in our future would have to think in terms of an equality that is possible only among friends which is a category yet not being categorical. It would only such a politics that can take politics out of its representative regime into a domain more contingent and inclusive. It can only bring forth the realization that we can live only being friends, with friends and for friends. Therefore politics must find for a luminal existence, an existence at the threshold of the self and its other, the self and the world.

But how, would be an art which could facilitate us towards such an existence. What would be its relation to politics at this point of time or how would it position itself with respect to politics. Jacques Ranciere points out in his studies *The Future of an Image* and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* that art under modernity has been cleansed out of its political potentials by its regimentation both by proponents of cultural ideology and Avant-garde movements. Art, Ranciere asserts need not subject itself to the regime of representative politics to become political-

“Art is not political owing to the messages and feelings that it conveys on the state of social and political issues. Nor is it political owing to the way it represents social structures, conflicts

¹⁷³ Jacques Derrida, 'Politics and Friendship', Centre for Modern French Thought, (University of Sussex, 1 December 1997), <<http://www.livingphilosophy.org/Derrida-politics-friendship.htm>>, accessed on 15 March, 2012.

of identities. It is political by virtue of the very distance that it takes with respect to those functions. It is political insofar as it frames not only works or monuments, but also a specific space-time sensorium, as this sensorium defines ways of being together or being apart, of being inside or outside, in front of or in the middle of, etc. It is political as its own practices shape forms of visibility that reframe the way in which practices, manners of being and modes of feeling and saying are interwoven in a commonsense, which means a "sense of the common" embodied in a common sensorium.”¹⁷⁴

Art has been for the most part of the last century, he exclaims has been judge for its orientation to mostly what is non art, politics, philosophy, ethics, so on and so forth. While it is not that there will not be any ethical, philosophical or artistic presence in art; but its existence would not be as a guiding or ordering principle, it would be there for the simple reason that art is created in this world and with his world. Thus, there would only be presences and unregimented presences of this world. Alain Badiou on his part in his work *Handbook of Inaesthetics* sees in 20th century a century which was at the same time, ‘conservative’ and ‘eclectic’¹⁷⁵. He therefore declares, art is an autonomous truth procedure and truths of art are unique to itself and do not or should no subject themselves to any form of philosophical regimentation-

“We will therefore affirm this simultaneity. In other words: Art itself, is a truth procedure. Or again: The philosophical identification of art falls under the category of truth. Art is a thought in which artworks are the Real (and not the effect). And this thought, or rather the truths

¹⁷⁴ Jacques Rancière ‘Rene-Ranciere-the politics of aesthetics’ *16 Beaver >Articles* (May5, 2006) <<http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001877print.html>>, Accessed on 12th February 2012.

¹⁷⁵ Alain Badiou. ‘Art and Philosophy’ *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press,2005), 5.

that it activates, are irreducible to other truths-be they scientific, political, or amorous.

This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought, is irreducible to philosophy.”¹⁷⁶

Both, Ranciere and Badiou however detect an important role for theatre as an art form in the process of bringing forth a community of equality. Both Badiou and Ranciere feel theatre as an art for unique in its capacity to present life in its contingent realities. Badiou says-

“...the aim of theatre is to clarify our situation, to orientate us in history and life....theatre has to render the in-extricable life legible.”¹⁷⁷

Thus Badiou feels theatre is the only art which can create a visibility of life in its process for the analysis of people. Therefore theatre to him is an essential critical mechanism any community of equality. Theatre is space for presentation of ideas, ideas of life and the world. Theatre is the only art Badiou believes which can look to represent this ideas in their contingent form due to its ephemeral quality and of course due to its unique relationship with its spectator. Ranciere too says in similar vein-

“...theatre remains the name for an idea of the community as a living body. It conveys an idea of the community as self-presence opposed to the distance of the representation.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 9

¹⁷⁷ 72. Alain Badiou, 'Theses on Theatre', *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press), 76.

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Ranciere, 'The Emancipated Spectator', Gregory Elliot (Trans.), (London: Verso, 2009), 136.

But is it any theatre which would be helpful to our task of conceiving a community of equality? Both Badiou and Ranciere answers in similar terms here too. Both of them claim that it is only a theatre which will be able to gain emancipation from representative regimes would be worth a bet. Badiou warns-

“In every epoch, the general difficulty that besets the theatre is its relation to the state. The theatre has always relied on the state. What is the modern form of this dependence? This is a matter that requires a delicate estimation. We must subtract ourselves from a polemical vision that would turn the theatre into a salaried profession like all others, a grumbling sector of public opinion, a cultural civil service. But we must also subtract ourselves from a concern with the simple fact of the prince, who installs lobbies of courtesans”¹⁷⁹

Thus Badiou believes that as spectator is an integral part of theatre, a part of the chance that is theatre; the intended spectator of theatre cannot be representative by nature; it can only be a generic public-

We must protest against any conception of the public that would depict it as a community, a substance, or a consistent set. The public represents humanity in its very inconsistency, in its infinite variety. The more it is unified (socially, nationally, civically...), the less useful it is for the complementation of the idea, the less it supports, in time, the eternity and universality of the idea. Only a generic public, a chance public, is worth anything at all.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Alain Badiou. 'Theses on Theatre', *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press), 76.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 74

It is therefore, a theatre which can imagine a spectator beyond representative categories can only be helpful to our cause. It would then only be able to form a community without community within the theatrical event. Ranciere too, believes that theatre should be able to bring itself out of pedagogical intentions to meet the spectator at a plane of equality-

“Theatre should question its privileging of living presence and bring the stage back to a level of equality with the telling of a story or the writing and reading of a book. I should call for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.”¹⁸¹

Therefore theatre is an art which could actually become the space for experiment or inception of the community of equality which is the quest of politics of our time. But it is only a theatre which can realize itself outside regimes of visibility and representation can hope to become so.

Till the 1980's in India, the urban theatre that existed in various cities, among which perhaps the most rich and prominent one was one which was situated in Kolkata; one could find the potentiality of a theatre for our future times. Foundations had been laid for a theatre which could become a critical thought of the state. Indian and Bengali theatre since the 1980's however, has seen a fast and steady downfall. The program of nationalism promoted by Governmental organizations like Sangeet Natak Akademi and IGNCA as well as the lure of private funding by Ford Foundation and other corporate investors both have come at the heavy price of rendering theatre politically impotent and aesthetically regressive. The new trend in the cities has been the theatre festivals, a vehicle for both

¹⁸¹ Jacques Ranciere. 'The Emancipated Spectator', Gregory Elliot (Trans.), (London: Verso, 2009), 138.

the above forces. The urban theatre of post independent era rich in its artistic and political thoughts now seem a dream from a distant past. Under such conditions, even the diehard optimist cannot hope to predict a bright future for theatre. Especially in Bengal, not only theatre but the whole field of culture is reeling under a wholesale mediocrity. Under such conditions, such kind a study as I have attempted to pursue here, I feel is urgent. However it is also a risk; and a risk that I have taken keeping in mind the facts and figures, for I believe it is urgent to take risk in our days to think in ways that are not encouraged. It is important to comprehend the working of the systems of knowledge and power which have stifled our theatre and our art and without trying to understand the complex ways in which they have done so it would be impossible to form a resistance. My research, in its final objective, is only an attempt at such an understanding.

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