

Genesis of Street Theatre: Understanding through People's Theatre in India

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Abstract

Street theatre has a long history in India. In ancient times, the theatre has a specific place in the life and culture of Indian people. Theatre has key ingredients to integrate the people's life for social and cultural expression in an artistic manner. This is evident from the long, varied and multi-layered theatre tradition in this country. The street theatre is born out through single distinction and honour through Bharta Muni's Natyashastra, the ancient encyclopaedic work on the dramatic art written or compiled about two thousand years ago. Before setting the historical background as a context for studying the significance of India's contemporary street theatre, it is necessary to bring forth the prevalent debates regarding the popular culture and locate popular theatre as an important space for political resistance, development, and social change. This is an attempt to explore and trace the genesis and evolution of street theatre in India.

Keywords:

Street Theatre, People's Theatre, Street Theatre in India, Popular Cultural Movement.

With the introduction of western cultural forms and their superiority, the resistance against the colonial power and the subversion of the notion of superior culture emerged in colonial India. The resistance started taking place firstly at local levels in the form of popular culture by the marginal communities. This hegemonic condition constrained the middle class and led them to develop their own discourse and forms of resistance.

According to Deshpande, the bourgeois forms of representations during the colonial period were accompanied by the strong new national identity which moved the middle class to produce theatre in its own language and forms (Deshpande 2007: xi-xii).

The study of popular forms of theatre and its historical-critical analysis is significant because of the material conditions of literacy and working class

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culture. Thus the importance of street theatre can be understood with reference to the emergence of modernity in India. Hence the following sections will trace the emergence and development of street theatre as a form of resistance in colonial India.

1. People's Theatre in Colonial Period

In the mid-19th century, along with the regional theatre forms, the proscenium/stage plays by different theatre groups started taking shape. Among them, Parsi, Gujarati, Marathi and Bengali theatre groups were prominent. The underpinning of modern theatre in India started with the foundation of two theatres: 'The Playhouse' in Calcutta, 1753 (Lal 2011: 32) and 'Bombay Theatre', Bombay, 1776 (*Ibid.*) recognized by the British colonizers for themselves. However, the 'Bengali Theatre' (1795) was established by Russian bandleader, Herasim Lebedeff who practiced and performed Bengali plays based on the mythologies.

Meanwhile the British took modern contemporary ideas to India. They appropriated the first modern Indian play scripted in English by Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjee in 1831": "*The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindu Society in Calcutta*". It was neither performed, nor did it instigate any successors (Lal 2011: 32-33).

In the mid-nineteenth century, a wide range of reformists and socialist plays like *Ramnarayan Tarkratna's* (1833), *Kulin Kulasar basva*(1857) and Gunabhiram Baruo's *Ram Navami*(1857) in Bengal led to the establishment of the 'National Theatre' in Calcutta, in 1872 (Dalmia 2009: 31; Mukhopadhyay 1999: 09). The trajectory of theatre in Bombay was somewhat different; there were Parsi theatre groups performing their plays on different social issues. The commercialization of Marathi theatre began with the first show of Vishnudas Bhave's play *Raja Gopichand* at the Grant Road Theatre in 1853(Lal 2011: 33). Parsi theatre companies commercially performed plays in Bombay and toured all over the regions and sub-continent with their troops. By the end of 1860s, Parsi businessmen started investing in the theatre and established several theatre companies like Victorian Theatre Company (1868). They entered into the capitalist professionalization with this (Hansen 2005: 163-178). Simultaneously, with this capitalist move, the theatre in eastern and western regions of India marked a more conscious development in terms of the presentation of realistic plot and contemporary social and political themes from 1860s onwards. Very soon, theatre became the space for voicing critical and protesting themes.

This led British rulers to pass registration and censorship acts for exercising better control over publishing and performance of theatre. The *Dramatic Performance Act* (1876) was designed to exert direct control over the

theatrical performances. The immediate cause for passing laws was Dinbandhu Mitra's play *Nildarpan* (1860). This play dramatizes the revolution of the peasants in 1855 in which Bengali indigo cultivators were persecuted cruelly by the British officials by refusing to sow their crops. The play incited public sentiments in Bengal against British tyranny and paved the way for other plays displaying protest and patriotism (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 40).

Some other plays like Upendranath Das's *Sarat Sarojini* (1874) and *Surendra Binodini* (1875) had a tremendous impact on the public during the same period and aroused public sentiments because of which the British government had to propagate the 'Dramatic Performance Act' in 1876, the roots of which can be seen as early as 1837 in the report on native drama published in the *Asiatic journal* (Dalmia 2009: 06). This impact can be understood in the statement by one of the British officials, Hobhouse: "Now it has been found at all times and in all countries that no greater stimulus could be supplied to excite the passions of mankind than that supplied by means of the drama" (quoted in Dalmia 2009: 10).

Notwithstanding the stringent censorship, many theatre groups started performing and producing plays for social upliftment in late 19th century. They started working on themes like child marriage, alcoholism, women's, education, caste system, widow-remarriage, and purdah system (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 10). In the western region of India, anti-caste radicals like Jotiba Phule started exploring theatre the organization *Satyashodhak Samaj* wherein they rewrote the indigenous forms like 'tamasha' and communicated the problems of Shudras, ati-shudra and marginalized community and radically questioned the brahminical hegemony over lower caste people (Rao 2010: 12-3).

Censorship of drama also led to the translations of the English plays into the regional languages and the development of the major dramatic modes such as allegory, satire, and irony in theatre. The colonial power struggle and censorship initiated the perspective of looking at theatre as a political weapon against power through the use of satire and rewriting of the mythology and history. This triggered the question of nationalism which led to the socialist as well as fundamentalist movements in India (Dalmia 2009: 09).

The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was a significant turn through which the playwrights started spreading nationalism through allegories. One of its notable examples is Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar's Marathi play, *Kichakvadha* which was based on a well-known story of Kichaka, a brother to King Virata in *Mahabharata* and performed in 1906. Kichaka gets attracted towards Draupadi who lives in disguise in Virata's court and he steals himself in the room of Draupadi in a night to seduce her. He finds Bhima, the most powerful of Pandavas who defeats Kichaka and saves Draupadi. The play symbolizes Bhima as the Marathi patriot Lokmanya Tilak

and Kichaka as Lord Curson, the Viceroy of India. Like many other Marathi and Bengali plays, *Kichakavadhawas* banned from stage (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 10).

The mythological allegorical plays based on India's glorious past helped reinforced the idea of independence. In a similar vein, plays like *Sirajuddulla* (1905), *Mir Kasim* (1906), and *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1907) portrayed protest against oppression and celebrated political independence and they too were subsequently banned. All over India historical figures were portrayed as regional heroes. For example, in Assam, the struggle of Ahom King (the local patriot of Assam) with the Burmese invaders was dramatized. In Maharashtra, Shivajisymbolized Tilak's political struggle. In Mysore, *Ecehama Nayaka*, *Tipu Sultan*, *Nargund Baba Sahib* and *Kittur Channanawere* famous allegories practiced by the playwrights in the first two decades of the 20th century (*Ibid.*, 11).

With the foundation of the Indian National Congress, there came a shift in leadership, political ideas and theatre in early 20th century. Until 1920, theatre mainly portrayed nationalist ideas popularized by leaders like Tilak, Lajpat Rai and others (*Ibid.*, 05-10). The period between 1915 and 1920 marked a shift with the introduction of Gandhian and socialist ideas which influenced theatre and adapted the new idea of political theatre which was basically the outcome of socialism (*Ibid.*, 05-10).

From the 1920s onwards, diverse political philosophies influenced by Socialism and Communism started claiming the attention of people. This development in the political scene of India was the result of past successes and the influence of Marxist and Leninist thoughts. The communist ideology was spread across the country with the formation of Communist Party of India by M. N. Roy in 1921. Indian National Congress tried to integrate with the Marxist-left forces in India and so, to bring about unity among them, the Congress Socialist Party came into existence during the period of 1936-39 (Sarkar 1990: 109-118).

This period is basically known for the different political theatrical practices undertaken by various leaders and patriots which will bediscussed in the next paragraphs.From 1932–1940 the *Satyashodhak Samaj*, which had been operative in the mid to late nineteenth century, revived its tradition and produced some new plays in the form of "jalsa". *Shethkaryanchi Vyatha* (the sufferings of the peasantry) was part of the peasants' movement in India during the colonial period (Rege 2006: 33). The two major cultural groups which came into existence in the 1940s and practiced theatre for freedom struggle were *Congress SahityaSangha* and *KrantiShilpiSangha* (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 41).

According to *Unity* (December, 1953), a journal of left-wing politics, some university students planned to organize a group through which they could reach common people through the medium of theatre in 1940 (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 46). They wrote and produced plays like, *Politicians Take to Rowing* and *The Boy Grows Up*. Some important members of youth cultural movement were Jyoti Basu, Nikhil Chakraborty, Renu Roy, ChinmohanSehanobis, Joly Mohan Kaul, Ram Krishna Mukherjee, Debbrata Bose and Mohit Banerjee and most of them actively participated in politics.

At the same time, more specifically in 1941, *Indian People's Theatre Association* (IPTA) was established in support of the Communist Party of India. It was first formed in Bangalore in 1941 under the secretary-ship of Anil D'silva, a Cylonese lady. She helped to form the IPTA in Bombay in 1942 and then in 1943, the IPTA became an all India organization (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 47). The first performance of the IPTA was *Nabanna* (Bountiful Harvest) in 1944. The play was written and produced by Bijon Bhattacharya. It is with this performance that the IPTA started drawing the attention of people to the political message in its plays. The enthusiasm of playwrights helped the IPTA to establish nationally with its regional branches. Some of the most talented young artists like, Ravi Shankar, Mulk Raj Anand, Ramesh Thapar, Shanti Bardhan, Utpal Dutt and Khwaja Ahmed Abbas joined the IPTA and made significant contributions (*Ibid.*, 11).

The IPTA's efforts were aimed at not only to make the arts more relevant to common people, but also to involve the people in the anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggle, attempted to go back to these popular mainsprings, at least in music and dances and contributed greatly towards their revival and recognition of their beauty and power (Jain 2003: 183). The IPTA continued to use the western dramatic modes, though it brought a new realism, authenticity and social purpose to its dramatic presentations. Play based on the life of the common people-peasants, workers and struggling middle classes rather than the god, kings or heroes- were written and staged with an unprecedented sincerity, directness and simplicity (*Ibid.*, 183-184).

There are several significant and successful plays produced by the IPTA which drew the attention of people to their political fervour. In Orissa, KalicharanPattanayak wrote *Bhata*[Rice] and *Raktamati*[Red Earth] highlighting social and political problems. In Kerala, K. Damodaran wrote *Pattabakki*[The landlord's dues] which dealt with the social problems (Mukhopadhyay, 1999: 11-12). In Andhra Pradesh, the IPTA used indigenous forms like, 'Burrakatha', 'VeethiNatakam', 'HariKatha' and 'Yakshagana' for spreading the socio-political messages. In Maharashtra, ShahirAnnabhauSathe used traditional folk form 'tamasha' and produced, *AklechiGosht*[A Tale of Wisdom] in 1944 which disseminated the idea of communism. Shahir Ahmed (Amar) Saikh, tamasha's well-known singer, also joined the IPTA and

contributed significantly to the Communist Party (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 13). The IPTA worked quite significantly after the independence. It has produced very important plays like *Chargesheet* which was the first street performance by the IPTA and produced in 1949. The IPTA movement was at its peak in the 1950s and 60s and performed the street plays with its explicit aim of political awareness in India (*Ibid.*, 12-14). The IPTA's plays agitated against national evils like black marketing, casteism, and exploitation of the weaker sections of society.

2. Post-Independence Street Theatre in India

Several political organizations which came into existence in India in 1940s utilized theater as a medium for their political propaganda. Tamil politician C.N. Annadurai who led the *Dravidian Kazhagam* used theatre as an official party activity. He joined some leading professional theatre troupes and individuals like T.V. Narayanaswami, M. Karunanidhi, E. Nedunchazian and K.A. Mathialokan. Annadurai receive support from the basic party platform of *Dravidian Kazhagam*. His *Neethe Tnanon Mayakkam* [The Seduction of the Just Kind] had tremendous impact over the audience (*Ibid.*, 12).

This was the period when political aspiration of several organizations with different ideological perspectives began to thrive to mark their meaningful presence in the transition phase. After independence, the CPI continued utilizing the potentials of theatre as a vehicle to spread its political messages. In 1952, Kerala People's Club of Trivandrum produced *Nilgalenne Communistakki* [You Made Me a Communist] which was performed more than 600 times all over India in regional languages which helped the C.P.I. to grab political power in 1957 (*Ibid.*, 12).

The Congress Party also started using theatre. Some of its significant performances are Kesava Dev's *Jnanippo Communist a Vum* [I will not become a Communist Now], *Manthriakkolle* [Don't Make me a Minister], Bhagwan Macaroni [Lord Macaroni] and *Kootu Krishi* [Collective Farming] were written and produced to support different political ideologies and were written immediately after independence (*Ibid.* 12).

After 1960s, the IPTA disintegrated due to the conflicts within the Communist Party. However, many theatre groups across the country, inspired by the IPTA were established during the 1960s and 70s. Some of them are the Indian National Theatre (INT), The Little Theatre Group (TLTG), Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC), the *Janam* and several other state units of the IPTA (*Ibid.*, 55).

The more powerful political organization, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power in 1967 and 1971 for which theatre attributed an

effective role (*Ibid.*, 12). The 1970s marked an important phase in the development of street theatre in India. The political atmosphere was charged with the imposition of the Emergency by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This drove the revolutionary theatre practitioners and artists to resist against the undemocratic situation of the nation. During the 1980s and 1990s, street performance reached its highest peak due to heightened political upheavals like the global economic crisis, the Babri Masjid controversy, communal violence, etc. In this particular moment, street theatre is also used by the government and NGOs for promoting social awareness and emancipation as well as community development in India.

Street Theatre in India today has become a medium of communication, especially for its political interventions. It has become a bridge between the political parties/resisting communities and the people. Street theatre has been used not only by the working class political parties or the resisting communities but also by parties across the political spectrum: from the communist left to the Hindu Right (Ghosh, 2010: 88). However, the form of street theatre varies according to the politics it attempts to disseminate. Before looking at the forms and politics of these theatres the following section undertakes an overview of the development of Street Theatre in India from 1988s onwards.

3. Modern Street Theatre in India

The origin and development of Street theatre is a debatable question. The introductory paragraphs of this unit will throw light on how street theatre is practiced and developed as a medium for protest in India as well as in the West. The roots of the modern street theatre are in the West. The earlier form of modern street theatre was developed by the factory workers as a medium for communicating their resistance against the industrialization in late 19th century in Europe and Russia. Street theatre as a revolutionary form of theatre was used during the Russian revolution which influenced the whole world.

There were more than 3000 theatre groups in Russia during the period of 'War Communism' (1917-1922). Meyerhold and Eisenstein were the two prominent playwrights during Russian revolution who adapted, rewrote and experimented with the 19th century theatre forms and made them agitprop and street performances. Street theatre was at its highest peak during the time of First World War; it was used as a tool for the antiwar movement. Groups like, 'Road gang', 'Red ladder', 'Broadside', 'Counteract', 'Live theatre', 'Half-moon', 'Combination' etc. are some of the groups committed to revolutionary change through street theatre during the period of 1930s to 1950s (Mukhopadhyay 1999: 17-19).

During the 1930-1950s, the most important contribution was from Germany by Bertolt Brecht. Piscator and Brecht propagated the ideas of class

struggle and workers' theatre to serve the needs of the proletarian revolution. Similarly, in France, workers' Theatre groups started taking shape in the early 1930s and in 1932, the national theatre organization, *Federation Des Theatre Ouvriers de France* was formed which practiced agitprop theatre in streets, factories or in working men's halls (*Ibid.*, 18).

In fact, the very idea of Indian street theatre comes from IPTA. There is no evidence of the practice of street theatre by IPTA in 1940s immediately after its foundation. The very first street performance by IPTA was *Chargesheet* (1949) as mentioned earlier. Street theatre was practiced by the IPTA members in 1950s rigorously. As Utpal Dutt says in one of the interviews published in the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* in 1984, "In the IPTA, we introduced the street corner play during the 1952 elections. And before that in 1951, during the bandimukti andolan, (movement for the release of political prisoners) we organized street corner plays – that was the first time" (Van Erven 1992: 25-42).

According to Rustom Bharucha, the street performances by Utpal Dutt and other IPTA members are of different lengths. Some of them are very short plays whereas some are three hours performances. He discusses the performances of the plays in detail, such as, *'Din Badler Pala'*, it is not really very clear how they were different from open air proscenium productions. Bharucha tells us that they were street corner plays and there was no other account of the description of those performances (quoted in Deshpande 1997: 07). But, as Sudhanva Deshpande notes in his article that street theatre existed even in those days...more informal accounts of people who saw some of these plays suggests that there wasn't much difference in terms of form, apart from a lack of stage effects: a wall or cloth served as backdrop, the audience was placed primarily on one side of the stage (which may or may not be elevated), the actors entered and exited as if from wings (*Ibid.*, 07).

Between the 1950s to the mid-70s, there is some evidence of street theatre being practiced by people like Utpal Dutt. However, these seem to be occasional occurrences. It is only in late 1970s, or to be more precise, in 1978, that modern Indian street theatre came into existence. There are some reasons for this gap in the history of the development of street theatre in India (*Ibid.*, 7). Bharucha calls this gap as irony whereas according to Deshpande, this gap is very logical as he says: ".....to me it seems perfectly logical that radical, oppositional theatre flourishes precisely during, or in response to, repression: this is the reason for the sporadic, broken history of street theatre" (*Ibid.*, 7)

The political climate in India is also very significant in the development of street theatre. The modern street theatre reaches at its highest peak with the emergency of 1975-77. The street theatre is the result of this shocking attack on

the belief of democratic India. The pioneers of the modern street theatre are *Jana Natya Manch* in North India and *Samudaya* in South India (*Ibid.*, 06).

As for the street theatre after the 1980s, it can be considered as belonging to two separate streams of street theatre in India. (1) Street theatre for advertisement and awareness (mainly practiced by NGOs and other organizations; and (2) Political and agitprop street theatre. The first kind, street theatre is practiced on a commercial basis as well, by the government and other commissions such as, the Doordarshan and the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC). These agencies provide grants for proposals and quotations for theatre groups, for using street theatre as a medium for the purpose of creating social awareness (*Ibid.*, 04). There are several groups which use street theatre for election campaigning on commercial bases. Similarly, NGOs also use the medium of street theatre extensively. Another similar and significant move in the development of street theatre in India was when it was used in the literacy movement in the 1990s. According to the records from National Literacy Mission, street theatre is used extensively for creating awareness about literacy all over India (*Ibid.*, 04). Deshpande calls these forms “awareness campaigns” rather than ‘theatre’ as they provide information to the audience but hardly have any aesthetics within them (*Ibid.*, 05). Elaborating this point, Deshpande calls them:

.....merely devices of communication, not theatre.... much like school textbooks, they are lifeless, boring as if learning cannot, should not, be fun. And the audiences, therefore, regard them as objects of difference, not sites of engagement –to be received in solemn, temple-like silence, and then.....forgotten (*Ibid.*, 05).

The political or agit-prop theatre in India, on the other hand, has different goals and an aesthetic approach to theatre. According to Deshpande, “Street theatre of the left is not advertising, it may be of uneven quality, it may at times be marked by proselytizing zeal, it may not always be aesthetically rich, but it is not advertisement” (*Ibid.*, 5). What then is the aesthetics of this non-advertising street theatre? There is a connection between the movements of political theatre by theatre activists like, Piscator, Brecht, Eisenstein and Meyerhold and the birth and development of modern Indian political theatre. It can be said that, there are various stages and ways through which politics entered Indian theatre and then developed further through innovative techniques and approaches by modern playwrights like, Prasanna, B. V. Karnath, M. S. Sathyu, Dharmavir Bharti and Badal Sircar (*Ibid.*, 08).

However, there is an interconnection between this development in modern Indian theatre and the emergence of modern Indian street theatre. Safdar Hashmi argued that street theatre is not in opposition to the proscenium theatre, but it is a different form of theatre than the proscenium theatre which has

different modes of expressions. According to him, existing street theatre of India has been depicted in identical measure from our folk and classical drama as well as from Western drama. It is a twentieth-century occurrence, born of the explicit needs of the working people living under capitalist and feudal victimization. It is essentially a revolutionary political theatre of protest. Its purpose is to agitate the people and to organize them behind struggling organizations (*Ibid.*, 5).

The above definition points out that the political street theatre has its roots in popular cultures like folk theatre forms in a manner similar to the way Dionysian festivals of ancient Greece were re-appropriated modern western theatre (*Ibid.*, 06). This re-appropriation claims the ancient folk forms as peoples' forms. Here, the term "people" has a specific meaning. Deshpande explains this following Marxist theory in class terms: "...the people now meant all those classes, sections and groups which rallied around the urban and rural proletariat to affect a revolutionary capture of state power (*Ibid.*, 06). From this point of view, it is important to see that in India too popular folk forms were always re-appropriated for the purpose of street theatre, as exemplified in the use of Tamasha in Ambedkari Jalsa, or the use of Jatra forms in Utpal Dutt's theatre.

The second point that the definition above shows is that, theatre plays a crucial role in society for consciousness rising and protest. Street Theatre in India has always been looked at as the theatre of the Left which reflects its ability as a resisting art form. However, it has been used by several communities other than the Communist Parties to resist. Street Theatre in India has always been treated similar to the progressive theatre in the world which has two tasks to fulfill: Entertainment and Instruction. This makes street theatre performers to establish a rapport between the aesthetics and propaganda which again leads us to the debate regarding the aesthetics of political or agit prop theatre. As Ghosh says, "Theatre groups of the Left are a necessity to sustain a faithful connection with the working people, the non-elite segments of the populace and organizations that drive among them. In this development, the performers must deal with economic and aesthetic slabs that could avert proper communication" (Ghosh 2010: 80).

Moreover, there are several aspects of this debate which includes art, economics, aesthetics and political sharpness of these popular forms of art. The writers of the Progressive Theatre and the activists of the left cultural movements have responded to this debate massively. According to Brecht, the debate regarding the aesthetics of political or agit prop theatre itself is a politics of power which represents the values of aesthetics through the dominant forms of the art. As he says, "rotten convention only is attributing good taste to the people who know how to wear beautiful clothes and not to the people who make

them” (Brecht 1965: 38). Thus, the resisting art which comes generally from the oppressed and has propaganda in it is weaker in front of the hegemonic elite arts and culture (Singh 2009: 1-6).

However, Rutwik Ghatak in his thesis entitled “On a Cultural Front,” presented to the Communist Party of India, talks about the cultural wing of the Left which is ineffective and needs improvement due to several reasons. Two major questions he raises are: (1) the commercial use of Theatre for extracting money for the party and (2) the use of Theatre for mobilizing the common mass. As he says, “The party usually perceives the cultural front in two ways—one, as a ‘money making machine,’ and, two, as a mobilizing tools in meetings and conferences to keep the mob (and not masses) engaged with whatsoever the performers can offer” (*Ibid.*, 14).

This is one of the reasons which made political theatre weaker in its aesthetic values. However, according to Sudhanva Deshpande, the major difficulty with the street theatre executed in India is its way of presentation. They have limited content and slogan with some serious problems which makes the play boring and aesthetically poor (Deshpande 1997: 3-13).

The points discussed above throw light on the form and nature of modern street theatre in India. From this point of view, Indian Street Theatre is the theatre of the people which reaches to them with a propaganda. However, a further distinction can be indicated between the revolutionary theatre and the anti-establishment theatre or what we know as avant-garde theatre. Subversive theatre looks for alteration through dealing those who have most to benefit from it while the avant-garde theatre articulates its fury amongst those who have a lot to lose if change happens (Ghosh 2012: 08).

Both these forms have a common question about the aesthetic form and function of theatre and content of theatre. As discussed earlier in this section, street theatre serves as a tool for raising political consciousness and as agitational propaganda.

As Deshpande also suggests, this theatre might or might not be aesthetically rich, however, that does not mean that it can be such that cannot grab the attention and interest of the audience (Deshpande 1997: 05-06). This problem can be posed, as Deshpande shows in his article with the extracts from Walter Benjamin...you know how faithless this discussion has been. For the fact is that this discussion has never got elsewhere a boring ‘on-the-one-hand’, ‘on-the-other-hand’: on the one hand, one must demand the right tendency (or commitment) from a writer’s work, on the other hand one is entitled to expect his work to be of a high quality. This formula is, of course, unsatisfactory so long as we have not understood the precise nature of the relationship which exists between the two factors, commitment and quality. One can declare that a

work which exhibits the right tendency need show no further quality. Or one can decree that a work which exhibits the right tendency must, of necessary, show every other quality as well (*Ibid.*, 20).

Explaining the purposes and nature of street theatre (of the left) Deshpande further writes: And street theatre (of the left) must serve at least two purposes: it must entertain, for class society robs the people of every means of robust, healthy entertainment; and it must simplify the phenomena of society for the people to change that very society. I do not wish to be misunderstood on this second point. I am using the term 'simplify' in a quite specific sense, and that sense is the very opposite of 'simplistic'. ...it is not enough for street theatre (of the left) to merely depict reality 'as it is' or 'as it appears', its task is to uncover reality, layer by layer, till we arrive at the deepest contradictions of class society, to lay bare these contradictions so that the people can commence the 'inexhaustible work of criticism in action'. And to be able to uncover reality and lay bare its contradiction, we must turn to Bertolt Brecht and access the revolutionary potentials of his dramaturgy. And why this potential is revolutionary becomes clear only once we understand that Brecht's dramaturgy is based upon the Marxist notion of history (*Ibid.*, 20).

After observing all these points, it can be said that modern Indian street theatre can be seen as the theatre of the Left in India from its birth. The street theatre practiced by the groups does not do theatre with an explicit aim of changing the social and political situations of India, but, they react radically with deep and novel insights into the problems. It is rather a response to the situation rather than a service with the purpose of social change. Street theatre is not in opposition to the proscenium theatre and has its own aesthetics. Indian Street theatre also uses some elements of traditional theatre and took inspiration mostly from Brechtian theatre (*Ibid.*, 20).

Conclusion

The genesis of street theatre in India has passed on through a long back tradition; it has been started through the popular cultural movement in the colonial and post-colonial period. When this movement was being underway, it firstly encounters with western theatrical tradition. In the early nineteenth century, British theatre laid the foundation of a new cultural tradition in Bengal and some other prominent urban spaces in India and it had been flourished under their patronage. In the late nineteenth century, a stable dominant elite culture of Anglo-European theatrical tradition was being established. It has recognized the prominent entertainment places in urban midpoints such as Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras and attracted a large number of middle and upper middle-class audiences.

This form of theatre faced the first resistance through marginalized popular culture in the form of folk arts and which is the help to develop their own, forms, style and content. In their initial days, these marginal voices were largely suppressed, unheard and unseen. Later on, this alternative cultural expression raises various critical issues such as caste, class, gender, poverty, women issues, alcoholism, etc. and emerges in the form of robust resistance voice. When Indian National Congress was formed and then took a meaningful swing and used several metaphors to spread nationalism through their performances. Under such conditions, various mythological plays based on India's glorious past have been performed to promote nationalism and to mobilise people towards the attainment of Indian Independence. Subsequently, most of these kinds of production had been banned under colonial British government.

In early 20th century, the new idea of political theatre had emerged after the advent of Gandhian and socialist idea. This was the major impact and outcome of the rising socialism in the global political sphere. This was triggering factor for the emergence of Left political theatre movement in India, and it was the major factor for the formation of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the support of Communist Party of India.

The IPTA has played a significant role to make this art form more people oriented and taking ideological shape and more broadly emphasize the anti-fascist and anti-imperialistic performances and using the various symbols to largely sketch the working classes struggle. In between, the first decades after independence, the IPTA has played a significant role through street plays to raise political consciousness the people across India. After the disintegration of the IPTA, many theatre groups were established due to their ideological inclination and commitment for the resistance voices. The period of emergency was the significant phase of development of street theatre activism thanks to a bunch of revolutionary theatre artists who raised the voice against the undemocratic function of the state. In the period of the 1980 and 1990s, socio-political activism through street theatre touched its paramount position due to the political instability of the time.

And this was an important phase when government and NGOs also started to use street theatre for the social awareness and community development. This was an also important period when street theatre bifurcates in two distinct stands: first one is for advertisement and awareness and the second one is political and agitprop street theatre. After all, modern Indian street theatre is being considered to be the appropriation of Left theatre from its emergence. Finally, we look in present scenario street theatre of India, it's largely outcome of the Left theatre movement. Furthermore, several street theatre groups performing street plays, few of them serious for the socio-political change and

most of them taking as awareness tool through entertainment explicitly addressing the problems of the common masses.

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