

Evenings Out

# Attending Political Theatre in West Bengal

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Nothing is irrelevant to society and its affairs. The elements that are clearly defined and can be mustered must be presented in relation to those that are unclear and cannot; these too have a place [in our theatre].

Bertolt Brecht: *The Messingkauf Dialogues*

**T**he experience of theatre starts long before the curtain rises and the play begins. Our theatre exists in the world in which we live, and our theatre experience, shaped by that world, rises from it and returns to it. The world of theatre is not sufficient unto itself. Neither art nor its experience is a separate reality.

Towards the end of the 1930s, and especially since the foundation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (1943), there developed among the middle classes of Bengal a political theatre movement which was centred in Calcutta. This movement, which originated and continued to develop in the context of a growing Marxism and communism in India, created a new tradition of explicitly political theatre which has become dominant in non-commercial theatre in West

Bengal and thrown up figures who are considered the most important theatre producers of West Bengal in the post-independence (1947) era. These playwrights see their theatre work as a form of conscious intervention and a part of the overall revolutionary process, and as such they are entirely preoccupied with representations of class and class struggle. My attempt here has been to describe the audience of two actual performances of such plays. These two evenings out are meant to capture the cross-currents of social relations which structure the audience's experience of the mainstream political theatre in Calcutta, West Bengal.

The two descriptions are meant to reveal certain features which are crucial both to the construction and study of this theatre. If we look at them closely, it becomes apparent that they arise in relation to an ex-colonial capitalist economy and a bourgeois socio-cultural environment. They display certain dramatic forms and social-political relations which are peculiar to these realities. On the one hand, we have the direct political intention of the playwright-directors, on the other, equally political, through indirect and unstated, the pressure of the existing social relations and dramatic conventions which shape the representational efforts. These mediational aspects of theatre production shape indirectly the final politics of this theatre, as they also shape the way reality is represented.

## An Evening in an Auditorium

It was 5:30 in the afternoon. I was waiting at a bus stop going to see a play that started at 7 p.m. The bus-stop, as usual, was very crowded, and each time a bus came people rushed to get in. I missed three buses, then spotted a taxi, hurled myself into it before it quite stopped, and arranging clothes, bag, hair, said, "Academy of Fine Arts please."

We sped through street filled with vehicles and people. The crowd of buses, cycles, rickshaws, cars, taxis and pedestrians parted and swerved and made room for each other. Through the taxi windows I looked at the houses that we passed by—two to four stories high, old, shoulder to shoulder, every balcony jammed with people, clothes drying. They could all do with repairs and a coat of paint. And the ground floor of each had a small or a middle-sized shop. Shop keepers sat on chairs at the door of the shops. No electricity because of "load-shedding"—a term for eight to ten hours of power cut every day. Small kerosene lamps and big petrol lamps were being lit. Some better off shops had private electrical generators roaring away. Hot and humid weather. Clothes stuck to the body. Everywhere on the walls people had put their politics in bold letters, colours and images. Bright red hammer and sickle signs with "Vote Communist Party of India (Marxist) for a better life" confronted the amputated right hand of Congress (Indira) raised in benediction. The taxi sped through this towards the Academy of Fine Arts.

As we went toward the Academy the streets changed. Sidewalks had walking room and the stalls and vendors disappeared. The houses were



big, set back within a garden. They had high walls, topped with pieces of broken glass and often gneading tobacco in their palms. Parks were filled with flowers, not hovels and clothes drying on bushes. The poor featured now in some service roles and every house had electricity, meaning their private generators. The few shops there featured expensive goods. We passed by the Calcutta Club, with a Victorian fat-bottomed opulence, and the housing complex of the American consulate with its 12 to 14-foot-high walls topped with electrified wire. Now I had reached the edge of the huge "maiden", an open stretch of parklands and trees, containing Fort William, the race course, and the golf course. Rising out to a sea of dark green foliage, against a shell-pink sky, was the cupola of the Victoria Memorial Museum. The angel on the dome, now a silhouette against the evening sky, raised her head to blow her trumpet.

There it was, the Academy of Fine Arts, across the tree-flanked street, a place of new culture facing the old culture of colonial India. It stood among a cluster of what could be called "cultural buildings," such as the Nehru Memorial Museum, Calcutta Information Centre and Ravindrasadan, a huge auditorium, complete with fountains, murals, mirrors, red carpets, chandeliers and plush seats, named after the nation's poet, Rabindranath Tagore. The grounds of this building are going to be shared by the West Bengal government's new cultural complex. To the left of the Academy there is the huge neo-gothic Anglican Cathedral of St. Paul's. The grounds are laid out sumptuously and spires of the church soar out of a huge clump of trees.

The Academy of Fine Arts is a two-story building but relatively tall, dove grey, with brick-red trimmings and terra-cotta friezes. It occupies a large compound filled with tall flowering bushes and flower beds, with a fountain at the entrance and old, massive trees beside the high wall that surrounds it. It has both an auditorium and an art gallery. In the left section of the grounds there is a small two-story bungalow, which belongs to Lady Ranu Makherji, the owner, who has taken the private initiative to create a public space for art.

In front of this cultural edifice I got out in a hurry. I had neither booked nor bought my ticket, but my hope was that a few university teachers that I know, who are also theatre critics and writers, would have got here earlier and bought them. I rushed over to the box-office windows and found that indeed my friends had bought the tickets, and what is more, the director, who is a friend of some of us, was standing there. With my friends there were three men, whom I knew slightly, who are novelists and critics. I greeted these people. The director said that he had to go in, to put on his costume and make-up. He was both the lead actor and the writer of this play. As we walked towards the entrance of the auditorium, we ran into many people we knew. They were all somehow connected with writing, teaching and theatre. The editor of the well-known left theatre magazine, *Group Theatre*, was with us.



He stopped every few steps to chat with someone. At the three other box-office windows which sell tickets for shows on other days, people were buying advance tickets. I passed by the greenest of lawns strewn with sculptures that looked ancient and uncanny in the evening light. I overheard conversations about a film by a young left filmmaker, about the new German cinema, about bits of politics. There were a few women walking past me, who looked as though the chauffeured cars waiting outside the gate belonged to their families. The theatre producers were not themselves rich.

As I stood there thinking, waiting for the first bell to go, someone tugged the end of my sari. I looked around and saw this young person, an urchin, he could be called, a little vendor's boy, who said eagerly, "Didi (older sister) do you want tea or coffee?" He was a great contrast to the well-clad people, who bustled around the place or stood in small groups, the men smoking. He was very thin, contrasting with the pudgy softness of many of the others, his skin lacked their smoothness. It was dry and ashen looking. He was very short, probably small for his age, and his collar bones stood out sharply. Around his young bird-like scrawny neck he wore a sweat-soaked twine from which hung a copper amulet. His large eyes stood out in the dark small face like two pale shells on a dark surface. Now he was projecting a great intensity through them. He was eager, expectant and pleading. He varied his address for me and said, "Buy some coffee, or fanta or thumbs-up, *mem Sahib*." The word "mem Sahib" was originally used as an appellation for white women, and by now applied to westernized and upper class Indian women. "You think I am a *mem sahib*?" I asked. "No, *didi*," he said, "But I try everything. Do you or your friends want tea or coffee?" I asked him to bring four coffees and two teas. He ran up to the snack bar, filled with covered boxes of snacks and kettles of tea and coffee. A very thin man who was a thin as the boy, with tight lips and oiled hair, stood at the bar. He was better off than the boy, having a pair of intact trousers, and a graying and stained shirt. He and another similarly dressed man standing by him, unlike my companions, were not "gentlemen," *bhadralok*. They were only "men". When I went to pay he spoke to me in the honorific "you" and I should have used the familiar form. His teeth were stained with *pan* (betel nuts and leaves). They surveyed this theatre scene and culture-seeking people calmly—only interested in their business.

"Have you seen this play?" I asked.  
"No," said the thin man, "we don't go to shows here."  
"Why?" I persisted. "Too expensive?"  
"No," he said rather curtly. But his companion was more loquacious, "These things are for you people, for the gentlefolk. Don't understand what's going on, what's being said."  
"More fun," said the boy.  
"How do you know what it is like if you haven't seen it?"  
"Oh, we've been inside once or twice, and he," pointing to the boy, "goes in with messages

all the time. But why do you want to know all this *mem sahib*?"

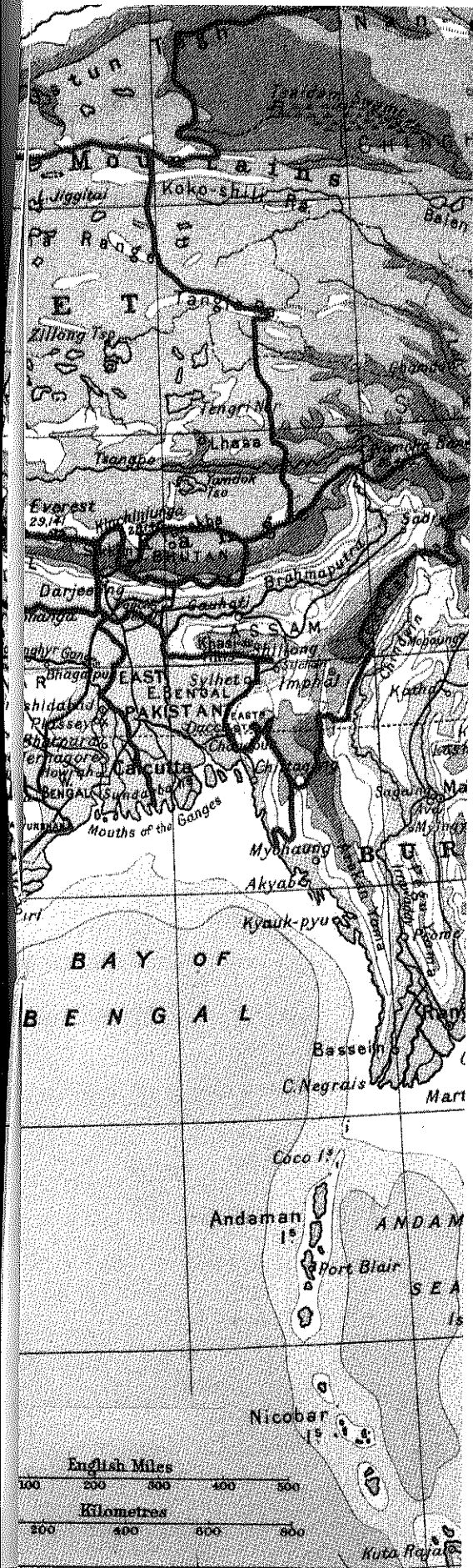
"Oh, just curious. Never mind. Here's your money."

His palm was broad and the line of fortune had been rubbed out by callouses, his nails were dirty and broken. I could hear the first bell, I walked toward the entrance, past the mural and the statues. The play, called *Jagannath*, was about to begin. It is about a landless peasant who has become inadvertently mixed up with nationalist politics. The poster at the door showed a man in a torn undershirt, thin, with sharply pointing collarbones, not unlike the vendors themselves.

Unlike the outside, the air-conditioned auditorium was cool and dry. I sat in the second row of an auditorium which holds 850 people, including the seats in the balcony. And before the light went out I looked around at the audience. They were people like myself, genteel and middle class—no flair, no flash. Educated men and women—office-workers, teachers, writers, critics—"cultured" people, who have been the backbone of Bengali culture since the last century. People of modest or even low income who attend political theatre—plays about the peasantry. The same people would also go to plays because it was "art" rather than "entertainment." It is their patronage that developed the non-commercial theatre of Calcutta from the early 1940s. They had some understanding of the non-commercial theatre's project of connecting public education and art. Many of them seemed to be coming from work. They had briefcases with them. The women wore no make-up. They wore nice cotton saris, not silk, nor many ornaments. They were "decent" Bengali women. They were probably among those in the cities and the countryside of Bengal who had voted the communist-led left front state government into power, and helped to maintain it there. Plagued by inflation and unemployment, it made sense that they would be there, trying to understand the role of the peasantry in Indian politics. Like them, I was here as well, waiting for the curtain to rise.

And the curtain did not rise as the lights went out. We sat in a pitch darkness which only auditoriums can have, and people waited expectantly. Someone said, "Oh bother, its load-shedding here too!" People coughed and fidgeted and a voice, over the amplifying system, very clearly enunciated the following lines—"Jagannath Das has been hung by the British government as a terrorist. We will now observe a minute's silence to show our respect for him." The voice had a magical effect, the audience stopped fidgeting and whispering. Without expectation, even those who had not realized that this was the beginning of the play, fell into a deep silence. A minute felt endless, and having produced the necessary attention, the lights at the foot of the curtain slowly went into action and the curtain began to rise. At this point we noticed a man standing on the outer edge of the apron of the stage. In a prisoner's striped clothes he stood, framed by a circle of light, isolated by that light as though in his prison cell.

The stage had minimum properties. A raised



platform at the back with a sacrificial block that is used in temples, a barred door on the right-hand corner, and a door frame on the left side, that was all. A little group had formed in the corner of the stage, of three or four men. They discussed the British government's curious freedom struggles in India. Why hang Jagannath as a freedom fighter, they asked? Born in the lowest caste and the lowest class, a cowardly, landless peasant, something of a slave and a buffoon, an opportunist that knocks on any door, including that of an informer. Why was he hung in an exemplary punishment by the British state as a political activist? This great unknown, the poorest of the rural poor, how had he become mixed up with our nationalist politics? Who was he really, this Jagannath Das?, asked the most militant of the freedom fighters, upon which one of the other men stepped out of the group and came to the very edge of the stage.

Facing the audience, talking to them directly, he said, "I have known Jagannath since his childhood. He is from my village..." The rest of the play was an attempt to answer the question of the freedom fighter—not however as an individual's biography, but rather as a display of a set of social relations to the lives of such people as Jagannath. It was interesting that it was the middle class ex-freedom fighter who had initiated this long-awaited question about the peasantry. The play was more an exploration of a problem rather than a story. The story, if one can call it that, through extremely fragmented narrative techniques, was inspired by the True Story of Ah-Q by the Chinese novelist Lu Hsiang-shan.

The people sat, as though mesmerized, throughout the play. Combining different acting styles, using a great deal of the lead actor's body, using Grotowsky-style physical acting—the play came to a conclusion when Jagannath slowly climbed up to the steps of the gallows, smiled at the audience, took up the noose and put it around his neck. The audience broke into a thunderous applause. All through the play they had been very quiet, and the auditorium had no children, nor frequent getting up and coming back.

During the break I sat out and smoked with my friends. They felt that it was a very well-done play, very well acted, with evenly paced movement from scene to scene, but that the episodes with women characters smacked of sentimentalism and the acting style of Bengali commercial cinema. There were also questions to be asked about the representation of the nationalist movement. People sat and chatted in small groups or stood around smoking. When the bell rang they trooped back in and some people, returning to their seats just as the curtain rose, lowered themselves so as not to obscure the view of the stage. Altogether it was a theatre-trained, or rather an auditorium-trained audience.

What, I asked myself in my journal, happened that evening between me/us, the audience and the stage? The play, having begun in this abrupt way, drew us right in, but again pushed us away by using the stage in a stylized, non-naturalistic way. The groupings/blockings on the stage, the enactment in sketches of the main/formative

episodes of Jagannath's life, the expansion of each of them into a scene, all made it apparent to us that this was theatre, not life—that this was a problem, not a biography. And yet, and for that reason perhaps, the play carried us relentlessly to the end. The director was playing with both what is probable and what is possible. The multiplicity of enacted possibilities, and not only the excellent acting (particularly that of the director/lead actor Arun Mukherji), outlined some of the roles for peasants in politics and the relationship between them and the middle class. Class became palpable as a social relation in each episode between this cowardly, abject, yet imaginative and angry peasant and his superiors and equals. I, and all the other members of the audience, sat at the edge of our seats and saw ourselves and our ancestors, members of the middle class and landed gentry, and we saw in Jagannath a man with whom our contact through centuries has been only through exploitation and servitude.

We saw him as our silent servants, the squatting obedient voter or the bussed-in rally-attender, the rickshaw puller who won't meet your eyes, the street vendor who sells roasted maize, the coolie at the railway station whose back is prominently bowed from carrying massive weight. Many faces, many functions—all of servitude. His body itself is humble, thin, straining at each muscle, like a weak buffalo harnessed to a heavy cart. And we also saw his anger—which we glimpse in the ferocious struggle with the coolies at the railway station, the cold ruthlessness with which they will cheat you, the angry eyes of the rickshaw puller when you, by mistake, don't give him the union rate, their servant as he stands at bay in front of the master unable to balance his account because he can't count, with his eyes smouldering.

Jagannath's ineffectual fantasies of power, his cheerful fantasy massacre of the landlords, showed the sleeping, smoking volcano in the peasant's mind. What are we, the middle class, supposed to do? After all we do want to engage in a revolutionary communist movement, and with people like him, about whom our knowledge is at best incomplete, mostly inaccurate. It became clear that this man's servitude will not make him a valid political agent, but his anger will. But that anger is directed towards our class, us as employers or servants of the class, us as urban, educated middle class—rational and civilized. If we want to be part of this politics, or more accurately want him to be a part of ours, then we must learn to deal with his anger and our fear. And here we were—actors, director, playwright, audience—all middle class, asking and trying to answer, without a peasant audience or peasant actors or any form of input from the peasantry—what is a peasant's state of political consciousness? What can be his contribution to a revolutionary movement and how must the middle class leader of a movement conceptualize the peasant? We have the right and the necessity to ask the question, but do we have the ability to answer it? Throughout the evening my head buzzed with questions. The play had a Brechtian quality to it, and had made us think. It

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people like myself.  
"Cultured" people,  
last century.

A Calcutta street. Photo



Before the lights went out I looked around at the audience. They were people like myself, genteel and middle class—educated men and women. “Cultured” people, who have been the backbone of Bengali culture since the last century.

A Calcutta street. Photograph by Michael Kuttner.



also had a lyrical touch to it, a sadness that moved us. For me, there was also a sentimentality and lack of clarity about women's roles, which bothered me a great deal. I was moved, critically stimulated, irritated—all at once. Who is representing whom and to whom, this was my main thought or concern. After the play was over we went to the “green room.” In the lighted mirrors, I saw the illusion being stripped. Old torn shirts, dirty *dhotis* were replaced by trousers and “bush” shirts or *punjabis*. Eyes and faces with pancake make-up, shadow and eye-liners were being rubbed off with vaselined rags. Another face was emerging from the peasant's face—that of the Bengali *bhadralok*, a *Babu*, a middle income, genteel gentleman. The vendor's boy that I met earlier in the evening was now serving tea busily. Arun, the director/lead actor/playwright—my old friend—met my eyes in the mirror and smiled. “How was it?” was the question that came next. A man's answer silenced me: “It was amazing what you did,” he said, “such a typical peasant. You were more authentic than what we see nowadays. Now they are all gentlemen, you know, with their bikes, watches and transistors!”

What do they mean, his words? From where did he know what a peasant “typically” is?, I thought as I sat in the bus on my way back home. This evening had given much to me, to all of us. It was a very complex set of thoughts and emotions that had been stirred up in me. What went into our responses? What shaped the theatre? How could we see clearly into what we call our experience?

#### An Evening in a Field

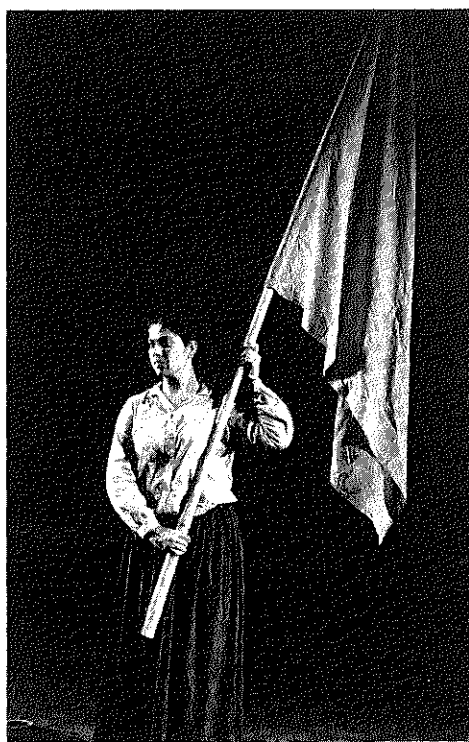
8 March 1983—*Chetana* is putting on a production of Brecht's *Chetana* is putting on a production of Brecht's *Gorki's Mother*. So we have a production which moves from Gorki (Russian) to Brecht (German) to Bentley (English) to Arun Mukherji (Bengali). It was part of a week of festivities—part of the National Convention of the student wing of the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI(M)).

It was taking place in the open grounds near a college where the conference was being held. Something must be said about this locality (Garia district), both sociologically and politically, if we are to place the audience for this theatre. The people living there were mainly displaced by the partition of Bengal at the independence of India (1947). The 1970-71 disturbances in Bangladesh brought in a fresh spate of people. They were either indigent or had very little money, they were of petty bourgeois origin, some urban some rural, and they were not able to find a secure niche for themselves in the economic organization of the new country. They were “gentle folk” (*bhadralok*) however, and unable to do work of the working class. Later there were others who moved into the area—businessmen, professionals, etc. who were forced by inflation to move out of the inner city. Now it is a densely populated area with isolated pockets of well-to-do people—with small factories and businesses. Once itself a hinterland for Calcutta's markets, supplying vegetables and fish, it still supplies maid-servants and day labourers who come from the

dispossessed rural people and the outer edges of this area. This combination of a population of the somewhat educated thread-bare gentry, generations of clerical workers and the working class (with peasant traits) make up the people that are the CPI(M)'s constituency. It is for their entertainment and edification that the play was going to be put up.

At six o'clock I appeared at the place where the play was going to be shown. They had fenced off a big field where the local youth usually play soccer. Now they had constructed a wrought-iron gate with red flags with hammer and sickle flying all over it. On either side of the gate, on two sides of the road, were tea stalls, push-cart vendors of all kinds selling fried chick peas, ground nuts, cigarettes, etc. Extending from either side of the gate, hugging the bamboo fence were display stalls, or exhibition booths as they were called. They exhibited different aspects of rural and urban development and public welfare undertaken by the left front government. The stalls displayed photographs taken at different projects and some gave information about different types of small technology used in agriculture and urban projects. There were also booths with art work by the Democratic Writers and Artists' Front—which is a coalition of creative/cultural producers with left/progressive sympathies—in particular CPI(M)-related. These booths were arranged in circles, each touching the other, forming an inner wall—leaving in the middle a circular open space which was supposed to be the auditorium. Red flags on high bamboo poles flew everywhere and there were several huge microphone speakers tied atop of other high poles. The place was teeming with people—the microphones were blaring out songs of struggle from the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA), and a beautifully draped stage with blue cloth had been constructed at the north end. The stage was quite high, about four feet above the ground, presumably to be visible to a crowd of about 5,000 people. The ground, which had been walked bare in the course of the last few days and was hard as rock with packed, dry clay, was now covered with cotton rugs. There were no chairs—as is common with large outdoor performances. Many people were already sitting in clumps, smoking, etc. Everywhere people talked, shouted. The air was full of dust. A vast movie-like sunset in purple and orange overhung this scene. A Bengali version of "At the Call of Comrade Lenin" played on the microphones while the actors prepared themselves behind the scene.

The audience was probably three to four thousand in number and seemed to be mostly women and children. A great many seemed to be of working class origin. One could tell this by the way they dressed—either wearing their saris in the way women wear them in villages, or wearing them in the urban style but too high. Tucked in the wrong places, they lacked that impractical, flowing, graceful touching-the-ground look of the middle/upper middle classes. The women looked thin (middle class people are sort of plump), angular, awkward by middle class standards. Their hair was well-oiled, slicked back, the ver-



The women look thin, angular, awkward by the plump standards of the middle class. Their hair was well oiled, slicked back, the vermilion put on thick and bright on the part at the middle, big red spot in the centre of the forehead, with lots of plastic and imitation gold jewellery.

million put on thick and bright in the part at the middle, big red spot in the centre of the forehead, with lots of plastic, imitation gold jewelry. They had put on their best clothes, and dressed their children too in bright clothes with hair tightly braided. The men that sat or stood about dressed in the usual pants—frayed at the edges, cheap—also with hair oiled and slicked back, seemed lower middle class, and working class. Some men were in *lungis* (like a *sarong*) which no gentleman would wear out for the evening. There seemed to be a student youth population floating about—of threadbare gentility, most likely unemployed. They came from the local "refugee" families. CPI(M) has a very strong base among this part of the population. But the majority of the people, while generally positive to CPI(M), certainly not afraid of communism, were there because it was their neighbourhood, and every evening there were songs, movies, plays and speeches from the different departments of government and the Party.

The directors of the play asked me to keep an ear open to audience reaction. They had distributed a questionnaire at some previous shows at the Academy of Fine Arts, but since the method of a questionnaire-based opinion survey seemed to make no sense here, and since he had no part in the play, the director Arun Mukherji decided to

plant himself and some of us in strategic places to talk with people during the break and after the play. So about six of us—members and friends of the group—spread ourselves in the audience.

I found myself sitting in a group of women—two or three old women and a few young ones—as well as a child who was fidgeting all the time. The women seemed to be of the social status of maidservants—actual/potential—and called me *didi* (older sister—an address of respect) and used the honorific "you." But on the other hand, when I used the same honorific "you" to them, they were uncomfortable. One woman—an old one—said, "Why call us *Apni* (vous/usted)? Call us *Tumi* (tu)." We started talking. Initially they were uncomfortable, not used to nor trusting of social exchange with superiors. My clothes, accent, way of holding myself, my vocabulary all show my class as well, as an employer of women like themselves. A kid who was driving her mother and us insane provided something to talk about. But at the same time parts of the conversation were somewhat disturbing for me. "See this *didimoni*," they said to her, "keep quiet or she'll get really mad at you." This of course had an effect on the kid because she had accompanied her mother to the employer's house—where the ladies of the house—the powers that be, had told her to keep quiet, to sit still, or had probably even

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given her a candy sometimes. "How come you are here at this time?" I asked. "No cooking for the evening?" "Aunt here cooked in the afternoon, while we were at work," said one of the younger women. "Nothing much to cook anyway. They can heat that up and eat later." "You are sisters?" I ask. The two young women sitting with the kid laugh—how could we be together if we were? How foolish of me—married women living together in a family were sisters-in-law of course! "So you like plays," I continue. "Well, we saw more *palas* (indigenous plays) when we lived in the village, I still see quite a few during the Puja season when I visit my father," said one of the young women, "but here in the city there is not much by the way of *pala*. Kids from the neighbourhood put on one in the field of the library during Saraswati Puja—but now what we see are movies in Aleya (nearby movie theatre)". "Hindi movies?" I ask. "Hindi and Bengali both." "Do you understand Hindi?" "Very little—but there are songs, dances and lots of fights—if you look at what they do you get it sort of." "Which do you like best?" "Hindi," said a couple of women. Of the old women who were silent so far—one said, "I saw a Bengali movie some years ago. It was a holy picture—about visiting some distant shrines in the Himalayas." She touched her folded palms to her forehead. "*Didima* does not like songs and dances," explained someone. "But you do?" "Well I do—but also I like Bengali films—more feelings, very sad—I saw one the other day and I cried a lot. I really liked it." At this moment they announced the play was beginning. "Please quieten down now," said the voice, "and mind your kids. Don't let them run around wildly or scream." At a distance I saw a friend, she heads the Democratic Women's Federation for this area, dragging two urchins by the arm.

The play was about different stages of revolutionary development—the story of a mother's love for her son slowly changing into an understanding of the revolutionary process. Firmly established within the frame of class struggle Brecht traces a movement from the immediate and the local into that of class consciousness. The protagonists of the play are working class. The main protagonist is a woman, and there are quite a few women in the play. The world portrayed is that of the poor and the problems dealt with were the everyday worries of the working class—strikes, lay-offs, etc. In terms of content and concerns, there was quite a lot for the audience to identify with, including the beginning point of the transition, in which a mother gets involved with politics—not to be politically engaged but as an act to protect her son—and agrees to take the chance of being caught. She is an illiterate, god-fearing, unpoliticized working-class woman. Many of the women there could identify with this woman, at least more than I could. And yet the play seemed to happen even farther away than that—at a level which was not higher, but more abstract. It seemed distant, artificial; stiff, and yet sentimental. It had a kind of ideological blindness to everyday life that was all the more emphasized by the posters of Lenin, the slogans on placards or cloth banners, the red flag of the

strikers, and the heroic stance of the dying worker. The play seemed like a garish, over-coloured political poster. The performance was both rigid and timid, as though the director did not know the terms of the play or the politics, but had copied the stances, sequences and groupings from a Soviet poster book. The image of the working class came from book to life, not the other way.

And of course this problem was heightened because not only was there an established convention of acting, but also the names of the characters, their clothes (not so important for men, but for women) and their food were alien. But the most important distancing device was that of language. The workers, in the play as a whole, spoke in the language of "political literature," in the language of pamphlets and posters. And finally there was the stage—the raised proscenium stage—which in this field, where the audience was on the ground, made the action seem to happen at a literally "elevated" level and marked it off from "life." This was didactic theatre to educate the masses, to inspire them to class consciousness to expose them to the different elements of revolutionary struggle, and to hold before them a typical example. It was a highly normative theatre.

What did it really tell the audience about class relations and organization? How did it organize the relations during this performance, in this setting itself? How did it depict class and gender relations, for instance?

During the break and even during the performance I spoke to people. The director had great expectations of this production. The Party had approved of it—that is why they were invited here—and later in the year he was taking it to the industrial workers. So whether or not the "masses" actually related to this play was an important thing to find out.

My impression was that people were watching the play intently. This audience of three to four thousand people was very quiet. The women I sat with never talked, except to ask me at times what was being said (the microphone was not always working so well) and also to quieten the kids. During the break I asked the young woman next to me how she liked it. She pondered a bit and then said, "I like it—I don't know—it's different from the *palas* we see at home. It's got less story—no kings or queens—it's not about the gods. In fact it's hardly got a story at all except that he (Pavel, the son) dies and she is sick and then she gets up to go out and gets into a fight with people—they hit her. I can't get what that's all about, the copper (Russia and World War I). To be honest I can't get this story, but I like some of it. I think they are kind of communist." "Why?" I ask. "What makes you say that?" "The flags," she says, "they have flags like that in front of the Party office in our neighbourhood." "Are there communists in your village?" I ask. "Many," she said. "The cultivators are turning communist." "Why is that?" "Because they help out the poor," she replied.

During this conversation others were listening with a keen interest. Now I got offered a *pan*

(betel leaf) from a little box tied at the sari end of one of the elderly women. The other young woman who was in a green sari and liked Hindi movies now spoke up. She said, "I knew they were communists from the very beginning—way before they brought the red flag. Remember they were speaking about strikes. I have seen a lot of strikes. When they closed the Usha Company and laid off workers, I worked at a house near there. Every morning I saw people at the gate—they spoke—god, so loudly!—like everyone around them was deaf! They kept on saying, "You have to accept our demands." "So did you like the play?" I asked. "The pieces I understood, but they were not speaking like we do. When people speak like that I don't understand. I get something of what is going on—the old woman got something into the strike somehow—and then some fights, but I don't get what happens, they want a *biplab* (revolution)—but there are all these words. For instance, what does 'bourgeois' mean?" I said, "Well, the rich—the *malik* (the owner)—rich businessmen." "Well why don't they just say that?" An old woman says, "They were saying it's a play about Mother—but where's the mother in this?" "There is a mother—you know that woman in the blue dress?" replies another. "That's a mother! She's dressed in a frock like a little girl." "Grandmother," said one of the girls, "that mother is not like you and me. It's white people's mother."

These two descriptions speak for themselves, because they are not simply an expression of an immediate experience, but to quote Brecht, they each record an experience with "something equivalent to comment being incorporated in it." But there are a few points to which the reader's attention must be drawn, because these are basic issues of socialist/communist cultural practices, at the heart of the project of revolutionary social transformation. Since socialism/communism matures in bourgeois society, we have to watch out for contradictions, both in terms of maintaining or smuggling in bourgeois social relations and cultural values, and in terms of overturning them. The contradictions operate mainly at two levels: a) using bourgeois dramatic forms and physical or social locations and bourgeois social relations to perform socialist/communist theatre; and b) at the level of agency, implicating the social relations between the classes which are represented and representing. It is obvious that those who are being represented by the middle class cannot take part in creating their own version of life or offer their own political analysis. Yet the overt political intention of the producers is socialist/communist, and within this political framework the lower classes are seen as the historical protagonists for class struggle and revolution.

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