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Staging the Revolutionary Propaganda in the Political Theatre of Bengal: A Study of Utpal Dutt's *Nightmare City*

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Abstract:

Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) was a versatile genius who made significant contributions to the proscenium theatre, the street plays, the traditional '*jatra*' and the art of cinema as a playwright, a director and a prolific actor in the post-independent phase of India. Being a supporter of the Leftist politics of West Bengal, Dutt used his 'Revolutionary Theatre' as a weapon to expose the double standards and ideological hypocrisy of the Congress-led governments both at the federal and the State levels. This paper attempts to study Dutt's *Nightmare City* (*Duswapner Nagari*, 1974) and analyze his conception of the 'political theatre' which intended to deliver his revolutionary propaganda against the emerging trends of capitalism, imperialism and fascism in the post-independent Indian society and construct a voice of resistance against the oppressive nature of the bourgeoisie ruling class during the early 70s.

Keywords: Proscenium, *Jatra*, Revolutionary Theatre, Capitalism, Imperialism, Fascism, Bourgeoisie.

In all my publications and declarations, I have always made it unmistakably clear that a theatre for which I am responsible must be revolutionary (within the limits that its commercial situation prescribes) or nothing at all. Any theatre I manage, serve neither to produce 'art' nor to do 'business'.
(Piscator 320)

– Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre: A History 1914-1929* (1978)

Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) was one of the eminent theatre personalities of modern India. Dutt's anti-imperialist approach and anti-fascist ideology focused on staging the political plays in order to propagate a popular communist uprising against the bourgeoisie government in New Delhi and West Bengal in the post-independent phase of Indian drama. Dutt borrowed extensively from the theatrical ideologies of Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and contextualized the Western theatrical conventions in terms of the Indian drama. Piscator's notion of 'political theatre' intended to incite revolution against the bourgeois ruling class by making a stage spectacle, involving the mass audience and evoking the public consciousness. Like Brecht, Dutt wanted his audience to think for themselves about their respective social situations. He realized that he would have to adopt Brechtian stage conventions in order to involve the audience. Dutt writes,

The Brechtian style interferes with our people's responses because they are used to another kind of theatre, and all forms must come from the people's understanding... As I understand it, epic structure advances the action to a certain point and then halts, cuts it entirely and proceeds with another episode, or with the same episode in a different light. This directly contradicts our people's expectations. They're accustomed to the dramatic atmosphere getting thicker and thicker, until it becomes almost unbearable. (Bharucha 92)

Utpal Dutt's plays, notably *Coal* (Anagar, 1959), *The Runaway Soldier* (Ferari Fauj, 1961), *Waves* (Kallol, 1965), *Unconquered Vietnam* (Ajeya Vietnam, 1966), *Barricade* (1972), *Nightmare City* (Duswapner Nagari, 1974) and *Enter the King* (Ebar Rajar Pala, 1977) represent his notion of the 'political theatre'. His plays explored his contemporary social issues like the consequences of the Naval Mutiny of 1946, the Scottsboro trials of 1951 and the oppression of the Congress Government of West Bengal during the early 70s. Dutt's political plays intended to stage his revolutionary propaganda in order to resist the impact of the emerging trends of capitalism, imperialism and fascism in the post-independent Indian society.

Nightmare City is one of Dutt's most intricately structured play containing 'political satire, physical violence, vaudeville routines, melodrama, and farce' (Bharucha 110). The play opens like a film sequence of life on one of Kolkata's busy streets with '*its dung-heap, lamp-posts, shop-signs and writing on the walls*' (224). In the background of the strains of loud melodious music, the lights brighten and twenty to twenty-five characters enter casually and walk around the stage. Amongst the swirling mass of characters, the audience can identify the intellectuals, the clerks, the executives, the lovers, the beggars, the gangsters and a blind man. The music transforms slowly, as the police suddenly break into action while the other characters start to move abruptly. A violent mob rushes downstage and surrounds a young couple sitting on a bench. They hit the couple and throw them on the floor. This violent action is followed by the murder of a policeman. By staging the grotesque at the exposition of the plot, Dutt introduces his audience to the themes of social disharmony, physical violence and political unrest in his *Nightmare City*.

The opening sequence is followed by a passionate song about Kolkata which justifies the tragic significance of the title of this play. Swapan, the CPI(M) worker sings the song directly to the audience. He performs the role of a choric commentator by informing the audience about the chaotic social conditions which constitute the background of *Nightmare City*:

Song of the City

How long will you call her names, how long call her a slut?
 She is dressed in rags, grey with dust,
 Sells her body, trades in lust,
 But I love love her so
 And Calcutta's her name...
 The bastards came in the night and raped her – bad news!
 And killed her kids in front of her.
 So she's dressed in battle-green,
 Submachine-gun in sling, and fights like the devil.
 Calcutta's her name. (224-225)

This song is followed by the introduction of Lakhan Palit who is a formidable businessman, a black marketer and employer of gangsters. He is the antagonist of the play. He is a representative of the oppressive force of the Central Government which has discriminated the people of West Bengal by not giving them sufficient food and adequate financial support. In the essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) writes:

The ‘State’ is defined in the Marxist tradition as a ‘force of repressive execution and intervention in the interests of the ruling classes in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat’. This is its basic ‘function’. It is, in that sense, an apparatus or instrument by which the ruling class cements its hold on power. (Althusser 128)

In *Nightmare City*, Dutt’s portrayal of a formidable businessman, the policemen, the gangsters and an absurdly sanctimonious editor of Bengali newspapers like *Jugantar* and the *Anandabazar* reminds one of Althusser’s notions of ‘Repressive State Apparatus’(RSA) and ‘Ideological State Apparatus’(ISA). While the former functions predominantly by repression (including physical repression) and the latter functions by ideology. In analyzing the complex social structure that asserts its hegemonic dominance through various instruments of power in Dutt’s *Nightmare City*, one may refer to Michel Foucault’s observations in *The History of Sexuality* (1978):

Power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. Power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession. It is the name we give to a complex strategic situation in a particular society. (Foucault, 1978: 93)

Dutt shows his unique dramatic craftsmanship by juxtaposing the world of the bourgeoisie ruling class and the underworld of the gangsters. He introduces the audience to Monibhushan, a mentally disturbed character who seems to suffer from schizophrenia. The conflict between the self of a gangster and that of an essentially virtuous man results in a kind of hallucinatory frenzy as Moni soliloquizes to the audience:

A grey horizon, a flooded field. I was sailing by on a raft and saw a million briefcases packed with calculations, floating away into a nameless chaos. I saw the wet leaves of a tree bleed. A child sat on an island and a black dog by her, hunger in its eyes. Wide yellow sand, scarred by reptiles that have passed this way. There was a man buried in it up to his neck and he winked at me, called me over. I pulled him by the hair, and he head came off – just like that. It was only a head, a mass of red and green telephone cables hung from its raw, festering neck. On the rocky valley of a dried-up sea, under the arches of a forest of dead seaweed, a girl gave me a rainbow. (230-231)

In the book, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (1983), Rustom Bharucha makes interesting speculations regarding Dutt’s sympathetic study of the character of Moni, who seems to suffer from severe disillusionment. In this context, Bharucha writes:

Was this a political strategy? Was he pandering to a certain section of the *goondas* by making them believe that they were more sinned against than

sinning? Did he hope to persuade them to support the CPI(M) party (for even the Communist Party needs *goondas*)? Or did he want to vindicate those Communist *goondas* who had been accused of murdering policeman? (Bharucha 112)

One may justifiably assume that the characterisation of Moni is the playwright's deliberate political strategy. It exposes the state of despair of the helpless youths like Moni, who have to indulge in crimes due to their financial constraints even at the cost of sacrificing their own ideologies. One can locate the depth of despair in the following words of Moni, which serve as 'an encapsulated biography of the Calcutta gangster' (252):

We were the down-and-outs, beggars without work,
 Insulted at home and pitied in the street,
 Pursued by coppers like queers on heat...
 Then came a bunch of political snob:
 'Finish the Marxists and you'll get jobs'...
 'As soon as the elections are successfully over and
 You've put us in a position of absolute power.'
 So we fired the booths where votes were to cast,
 and with grenades chased hopeful voters home fast,
 and stamped the ballots with our own hand,
 for universal suffrage is the law of the land,
 And so you came to power
 And we are still beggars without work. (252)

After the painful recollection of Moni, the action of the plot returns to the world of Lakhan Palit. Interestingly, Palit and his employees are seen to examine the photograph of a national hero:

KINKAR: Do you think this is the leader? Face like the moon, two
 drooping eyes –
 CHATTERJEE: That happens to be a wheel of the aircraft.
 GOSWAMI: If you are suggesting our leader looks like a wheel – (237)

Dutt creates a farcical situation because the photograph is so dark that the identity of the leader cannot be located. Palit had employed a photographer who squints at the photograph inches away from his face and declares that the leader has disappeared. Everyone who attempts to spot the leader in the photograph ends up with hilarious consequences. Dutt's farcical interlude ironically hints at the fact that there is no real leader in contemporary India. The socio-political condition of the country is also dark and confusing as the photograph.

Juxtaposed with this sequence, Dutt presents the audience with the false propaganda of the Central Government on the radio. Palit switches on the radio to hear the announcements and Dutt uses this situation to communicate with his audience directly to expose the ideological hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie ruling class:

RADIO (VOICEOVER): Though it must be admitted that India's standard
 of living is among the lowest in the world, it is also true that India's
 progress has astonished the world. Although we cannot deny that poverty
 has increased over the last five years, no one can deny that our struggle to

remove poverty has been gloriously successful. Although United Nations figures show that 78 percent of the people live below the subsistence level, who can deny that there is democracy and freedom of speech in this country? (239)

After this announcement, there is a sudden intrusion in Moni's hallucinatory world as 'a pleasant-looking man' (245) appears mysteriously from nowhere and introduces himself as Devdutt. It is natural that this figment of Moni's imagination should speak an appropriately ornate language.

DEVDUUTT: I am solely, exclusively yours, my friend. You have fashioned me with bits of your mind as a sculptor builds his work of art, and now I am possessed with my own beauty. All that you desired and never attained are gathered in me in an abstract defiance of convention. You gave me being, O poet. In the ballad of your life, I am an immortal simile. (248)

Devdutt is the external manifestation of Moni's 'Other' – 'an apotheosis of his suppressed virtues' (Bharucha 114). In the essay, "The Double as the 'Unseen' of Culture: Toward a Definition of Doppelganger", Milica Zivkovic observes:

The 'double'...is... an imagined figure, a soul, a shadow, a ghost or a mirror reflection that exists in a dependent relation to the original, the double pursues the subject as his second self and makes him feel as himself and the 'other' at the same time... It can be complementary, as in the Platonic conception of twin souls which seek each other in order to make a whole out of their sundered halves. Sympathy between individuals, even human love, can also be seen as one aspect of the dialectic between 'I' and 'non-I', the subject and his double, upon which the possibility of wholeness and integration within the self rests. (Zivkovic 122)

In *Nightmare City*, Dutt used the technique of 'Doppelganger' to enhance the theatrical effect and dramatize the agony of Moni by projecting Devdutt as his alter ego. Devdutt is not only a psychological dimension of Moni's disillusionment, but a possibility of what Moni could have become. In the end of the First Act, Dutt creates the climactic situation through the verbal confrontation between Palit and Moni. There is an aggressive exchange of words as Moni refuses to accept the criminal assignment of the murder of Swapan, the CPI(M) party worker. However, the intrusion of Devdutt with his characteristic playfulness made a mockery of the dramatic situation. The First Act of *Nightmare City* ends in fiasco. In the final moments, Moni is seen attempting to attack Devdutt while a panic-stricken Palit runs wildly around the stage.

The second half of *Nightmare City* opens on a sombre note. The audience finds a group of lower-middle class people listening to a political speech delivered by Goswami, with their arms raised.

GOSWAMI: Another policeman stabbed. Another Congressman bombed. Is this the Communists' reply to our indefatigable efforts at peace? ... Whereas the Naxalite and Marxist anti-social elements have raised their heads, it can be said with certainty that they have raised their heads. In the complication of this perspective, it is a murder of a policeman. It cannot be

denied that prices are rising, but those who in the perspective of the situation are provoking the elements are complicated traitors. Unless we smash these heads which have been raised, become perspectives in prices and kerosene... Since the more we remove poverty the sharper the price-rise, therefore in China's perspective we are the raised heads. (*Puzzled and totally confused*). Whatever that may mean. (257-258)

While commenting on the dramatic significance of the meaningless speech by Goswami, Rustom Bharucha opines that, 'the speech, which exploits every rhetorical device in demagoguery, signifies nothing' (Bharucha 116). Among the audience, a genial old man named Krishnachura asks the gangsters and the police surveying the spot, if they can lower the hands. Krishnachura says:

KRISHNA: Mind you, I am not protesting. I am too loyal to do that. But a forest of raised hands naturally leads gullible people to the conclusion that there is no democracy in India, which, of course, is vile Chinese propaganda. On the other hand, medical science explicitly states that mandibles held aloft for any length of time obstruct the natural circulation of blood and begin such a symphony of buzzing and droning in the ears as prevent audition. (258)

Krishnachura's words reveal the dark humour and political satire which is intended to portray the social sordidness and turbulent political scenario of Kolkata during the early 70s. The characters of Krishna, Dwijen, Shiv, Janak and the blind-boy, Pallav seem to form the collective conscience of the middle-class section of the society, who had dreamt for a better Bengal and even a brighter India. However, their dreams have faded with the realization of the futility of the false promises of the present ruling party both in the Centre and the State. One can trace their bitter disillusionment in the following conversation:

DWIJEN: I voted for the Congress because they promised jobs for all. But jobs are as scarce as the hair on Khrushchev's head. Everywhere they want age: between 20 and 25 and experience: 30 years.

SHIV: All I could scrounge from the bazaar is a bunch of green bananas as hard as the toe of a policeman's boot. And I'll have to munch them raw like a cow, because there's no coal in the house.

KRISHNA: I know of a fellow so far gone with hunger that he began munching bran, cow-fodder, until he started mooing all over the place. (261)

The veteran Bengali actor, Satya Bandyopadhyay played the role of Krishnachura in Dutt's *Nightmare City*. Dutt in the character of Krishnachura portrays a conventional middle-class morality that appealed the Bengali audience of his times. In the course of the plot, Krishnachura protects Swapan, the CPI(M) worker from the police and the gangsters, on two successive occasions. Much in the manner of Dutt's portrayal of Moni in the first half of *Nightmare City*, the character of Krishna in the second half represents the true essence of humanity, who is not motivated by any political ideology, yet feeling the urge to protect the life of the young revolutionary like Swapan. Along with the scenes of social deprivation and intense suffering of the proletariat class, Dutt in *Nightmare City* has shown how the ruling party effectively uses the resources of power through the functioning of the police. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) analyzed the functioning of the police

as an instance of the type of decentralized, capillary power. Significantly, Dutt's portrayal of the police in *Nightmare City* reminds one of the Foucauldian notions of the 'Police Power'. Foucault writes:

But, although the police as an institution were certainly organized in the form of a state apparatus, and although this was certainly linked directly to the centre of a political sovereignty, the type of power that it exercises, the mechanisms it operates and the elements to which it applies them are specific. It is an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extremely limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with (Foucault, 1977: 213)

The play, *Nightmare City* ends with the scenes of brutal physical aggression and political violence. Girin and his gang brutally stabs Swapan's brother, while Monibhushan who had desired to disclose certain evidences against the exploiter to a reporter, had been strategically killed by the police. Two of Lakhan Palit's employees, the editor and the Youth Congress leader, step in front of the stage and mourn Moni's death in a hypocritical manner. Dutt concludes the play with Girin and his gang terrorizing the helpless Krishnachura, whom they consider to be a supporter of the Communist Movement. In *Nightmare City*, the 'State' seems to assert its political and ideological hegemony through the several agencies of power like the police, the press and even the gangsters. Dutt explored the fact that through the brutal aggression and ruthless violence, the ruling party has exposed their own vulnerability. They are against any individual or any institution that refuses to conform to their dominant culture and ideology. While analyzing the mechanisms of power executed by the 'State' to control its people in Dutt's *Nightmare City*, one may refer to Michel Foucault's observations in *Power/Knowledge* (1980):

Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possess or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. Certainly everyone doesn't occupy the same position. Certain positions preponderate and permit an effect of supremacy to be produced. This is so much the case that class domination can be exercised just to the extent that power is dissociated from individual might. (Foucault, 1980: 156)

In the book, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (1982), Dutt opines:

A revolutionary theatre is noted by the number of attacks it has faced from the agents of the ruling class. No amount of sophistry can obscure the truth: that if a play is genuinely revolutionary; the ruling class cannot possibly tolerate its performance and in the long run must necessarily seek to wipe it out. (Dutt 43)

In *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*, Dutt recollected that his play, *Nightmare City* was attacked fourteen times by the agents of the ruling party. Media never highlighted the news of the intense state oppression that his theatre group had to resist while performing the play. While the CPI's organ stated that, 'It was a peaceful demonstration which everyone has the right to stage' (Dutt 110); the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mr. Siddhartha Ray opined, 'Political plays will naturally be dealt with politically' (Dutt 110). Ray's conception of political dealing was to break up the performance of a play by violence. On the other hand, Mr. Bibhuti Chakraborty, the Deputy Commissioner, Detective department had filed sedition

charges under section 124-A against Utpal Dutt and his group. Surprisingly, the prosecutor continued to postpone the hearings for this case, even though Dutt had legal evidences with him of what actually happened. However, the ruling party with its legal and illegal forces could not prevent the phenomenal commercial success of *Nightmare City*. Significantly, the play does not contain major theatrical and philosophical complexity for it to be categorized as the revolutionary theatre that Dutt advocated. However, he had succeeded in exploring the popular assumptions regarding the brutality of the police and the corruption of the ruling class which made *Nightmare City*, the most important political play in Bengal during the early 70s. In this context, one may refer to Dutt's observations:

The power of the revolutionary theatre has sometimes created barricades in Calcutta... A 'barricade' in political language is synonymous with 'resistance'... When the government and the ruling class mobilize legal and illegal forces to crush a play, we can be sure that people's resistance is gathering round it. A play can, and has through history, repeatedly become a rallying point for the people's resistance. (Dutt 43)

In the year 1950, Utpal Dutt joined the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which was the cultural unit of the Communist Party of India. However, he was soon disillusioned with the kind of political plays that the IPTA was staging. In the article, "Theatre as Weapon of Revolution", Dutt writes:

The people's theatre-movement in India owes its origin to the Communist Party... One would imagine that a movement initiated by the Communist Party would be politically sound and deeply rooted in the working-class. But unfortunately the IPTA failed to acquire a proletarian standpoint, failed to move beyond the frontiers of anti-imperialist mass-sentiment, failed to politicize its leading cadre. While acknowledge our debt to the pioneering work of the IPTA, in retrospect now we cannot help noticing the IPTA's almost naive portrayals of poverty, sorrow and famine under British rule, and its neglect of calls to armed resistance. But the great IPTA legacy survives in numerous groups throughout the country, and the struggle still is to overcome political weakness, to find roots in the toiling masses, to take the movement from a stage of 'progressive' platitudes to one of revolutionary propaganda. (Saha 113)

Dutt wanted the oppressed proletariat class to take up arms against the oppressive forces of the 'State', much in the manner of the characters like Swapan and Krishnachura in *Nightmare City*. In the book, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*, Dutt observes that, 'We have seen plays which begin with a fierce attack on the ruling class and end in a whimper of complaint for better treatment, as if the ruling class is basically kind and will listen to this plea' (Dutt 74). He categorized these plays as the semi-bourgeois or the anti-establishment plays. According to Dutt, 'the revolutionary theatre must, by definition, preach revolution' (Dutt 74) to execute 'a radical overthrow of the political power of the bourgeois-feudal forces, a thorough destruction of their state machine' (Dutt 74). He considered it crucial to depict the ruling class as a ruthless enemy and to focus on the urgent need for revolution in order to transform the contemporary social system. In this context, one may refer to Rustom Bharucha's observations in *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal*:

Lectures on dialectical materialism and sermons on illustrious comrades were of no use to a working-class audience. He [Utpal Dutt] realized that the Bengali labourers were prepared to see their imperfections reflected on stage. At the same time, they wanted to see their enemies – the sacrosanct figures of the ruling class – humiliated, lampooned, and ultimately crushed on stage. Instead of emulating the perfect proletarian hero, so distant from the confusion and squalor of their lives, they wanted to participate in a fight with their most familiar oppressors. Even in the most abstract plays of the IPTA, Dutt was amazed to see how spontaneously the audience responded when an oppressor came on the stage – the moneylender, the landlord, or the police officer. A villain, Dutt realized, was indispensable for a political play not only because he had to be crushed, but because he provoked the audience to jeer at him. (Bharucha 60)

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