

BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND DEMOCRACY: BENGALI THEATRE 1965–75

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1

The roots of representation of violence in Bengali theatre can be traced back to the tortuous strands of socio-political events that took place during the 1940s, virtually the last phase of British rule in India. While negotiations between the British, the Congress and the Muslim League were pushing the country towards a painful freedom, accompanied by widespread communal violence and an equally tragic Partition, with Bengal and Punjab bearing, perhaps, the worst brunt of it all; the INA release movement, the RIN Mutiny in 1945-46, numerous strikes, and armed peasant uprisings—Tebhaga in Bengal, Punnappa-Vayalar in Travancore and Telengana revolt in Hyderabad—had underscored the potency of popular movements. The Left-oriented, educated middle class including a large body of students, poets, writers, painters, playwrights and actors in Bengal became actively involved in popular movements, upholding the cause of and fighting for the marginalized and the downtrodden.

The strong Left consciousness, though hardly reflected in electoral politics, emerged as a weapon to counter State violence and repression unleashed against the Left. A glance at a chronology of events from October 1947 to 1950 reflects a series of violent repressive measures including indiscriminate firing (even within the prisons) that Left movements faced all over the state. The history of post-1964 West Bengal is ridden by contradictions in the manifestation of the Left in representative politics. The complications and contradictions that came to dominate politics in West Bengal through the 1960s and '70s came to a restive lull with the Left Front coming to power in 1977.

Representation of violence in Bengali theatre, linked inextricably to the turbulent political situation found expression in two distinct, yet often overlapping strands: representation of State violence; and valorization of violence against the State. For the purpose of this study, I have specifically chosen to focus roughly on a ten-year period from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies because this period traces, in significant ways the complex underpinnings of violence and its reflection in theatre.

2

In 1965 Utpal Dutt wrote and directed for his theatre group, the Little Theatre Group (rechristened People's Little Theatre from 1971) a play called *Kallol* [lit. 'The Call of the Waves'; premièred 29 March 1965, Minerva]. This was the first time that a direct avowal was being made of a whole line of political violence against marginalization. The play opens with the Sutradhar narrating the other history of the freedom movement that has remained denied in a history commissioned and documented by the State. He upholds the tradition of militant nationalism and valorizes the martyrs whom history has marginalized:

SUTRADHAR. The country has achieved Independence without any bloodshed
 Only on the path of non-violence.
 As if Independence is a child's candy
 Or some freebies—just waiting to be picked up.
 Is revolution just a shaft of snug, winter sunlight
 Pouring into an alley-corner?
 For anyone to stand and bask in? . . .
 The country—a disrobed Draupadi—
 Has been drenched in the blood
 Of fratricidal civil wars
 and the innocent blood of Hindus and Muslims. . .
 And then, in the darkness of the night
 Received like a beggar's alms from the hands of the white master
 The smallest of coins—
 Independence . . .
 History is false, revolution false, false the selfless sacrifice of men.
 The ultimate truth is non-violent revolution . . .
 The blood that the Rani of Jhansi spilled
 Was no blood.
 The alpana of blood on Titumir's bamboo fortress
 Was perhaps water, vermillion-hued.
 Khudiram died on the scaffold—no blood oozed.
 Bhagat Singh, Surya Sen and Kattabomman from the South,
 Maniram from Assam,
 Workers and peasants gunned down all over India,

People from the lower depths—no wealth, no property,
 No expensive khaddar to drape their ugly bodies.
 Did they go on hunger strike
 In Agha Khan's towering palace in Pune?
 No wonder their blood is no blood.
 No wonder their names won't figure in history.¹

An account of the mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy in 1946, it makes conscious departures from history at certain points to valorize the tradition of armed struggle in the Indian freedom movement that has commonly been undervalued and forgotten. Moving between the barracks of the ratings on the shore and one of the ships in revolt, it also plays out on another level, the contradictions in a revolutionary (Sardul Singh), who risks his life for the cause of human dignity, but refuses to concede freedom to his wife (Lakshmibai). Sardul's mother, Krishnabai, however supports her daughter-in-law's decision to take another man, a rating (Subhas), who has been maimed in the war and has been her saviour. The gender question assumes a whole new dimension with the older woman taking a more tough and practical stand against a son she loves very much.

In fact this scene (I, *ii*) begins with Krishna visiting a 'seer' who claims her son is alive; that he 'can hear his voice', and he is sure to return home soon. We have already come to know (earlier in the scene) that she had been routinely visiting such 'godmen' over the two years that her son has gone missing.

LAKSHMI. What if he suddenly returns? What'll I do?

KRISHNA. What'll you do? Tell him clearly, on his face. That it was not possible to wait indefinitely for a man who has gone missing for two whole years. Who would keep the home fires burning? They've even stopped sending in wages. The *firingis* send no word about whether they're dead or alive. Where's Subhas? Where is he?

LAKSHMI. Coming.

KRISHNA. I know Sardul won't return. He's dead.

LAKSHMI. Why are you saying that, Ma?

¹ *Kallol*, I, *i*. This, and all translations of play excerpts mine.

KRISHNA. I mean, it's better this way. We've managed without him. You and Subhas have bonded. Now if he drops in all of a sudden, we'll have to start from scratch all over again.

LAKSHMI. But he's your son, after all! Aren't you dying to see him?

KRISHNA. And what about you? Tell me the truth?

LAKSHMI. Can't wait to see him.

The play created ripples in the already tense atmosphere prevailing in the state. Dutt was arrested; the vernacular press, under pressure from the government refused to carry advertisements for *Kallol*, prompting Tapas Sen to draft and spearhead a whole new advertisement campaign. He created a slogan: 'Kallol cholcche cholbey' ['Kallol continues, and will continue']; and the city was plastered with thousands of small posters inscribed with these words. 'Cholchhey cholbey' was to become a standard slogan for any movement, and continues even to this day. This was the first time that violence and its representation did not cease within the confines of the theatre alone; it became an issue, with the entire organizational structure of a theatre group facing violence from the State, and countering it. This however became a routine drill in several of Dutt's plays that were to follow. As Utpal Dutt would reminisce in an interview:

When we produced Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the '70s, we knew that we couldn't find a better play against autocracy and the Emergency. We knew at the same time that the Congress didn't have the intelligence to recognize it as a play against Indira Gandhi. . . . But in 1972 we all felt that we had to take the offensive. Then we staged *Barricade*. They were making a Reichstag Fire trial out of the murder of Hemanta Basu. They were trying to put guilt on the communists and hoping to win the elections that way. They couldn't win the elections however. But they came to power by rigging. We tried to give a reply, as much of it as we could in a play.

When we did *Duswapner Nagari*, we knew we'd be attacked. But we decided we had to do it. It was no time to retreat. After this direct assault we could again . . . [SB. How did they attack you?]

They attacked us openly for the first time at Star Theatre where they stopped people from coming to theatre by force, right in front of the armed police.

Bibhuti Chakrabarty, the police chief, sat in his jeep as it happened before his eyes. Then the police filed a suit under Section 124A for sedition. We submitted a long list of witnesses, including the former Governor of West Bengal and the Police Commissioner Ranjit Gupta. For they had all made statements at different points of time, and some of these had appeared in *The Statesman*. There had been articles too. These were the sources from which we collected our information. Ranjit Gupta, for example, had written in an article that there were such horrible screams in the night from within the police station that nobody in the neighbourhood could sleep. Obviously it couldn't be the police officers screaming. . . . Our lawyer told the court that we'd call in all these people as witnesses. For all that we had put into *Duswapner Nagari* was true. And a sedition case could not stand if it was all true. The police started withdrawing from that point. They wouldn't start the case at all. But the play got virtually banned. But we went on staging it under different names.²

The political atmosphere in the state had become even more tense with the impending elections in 1967. The last three years of Dutt's Minerva phase were marked by plays highlighting explorations of State violence and people's resistance with *Ajeya Vietnam* in 1966, a moving account of American aggression and Vietnamese resistance; *Teer* in 1967, an account of the peasant uprising in Naxalbari in the late sixties, and the betrayal of their cause by the newly ensconced leftwing government in the state, and *Manusher Adhikarey* in 1968, Dutt's take on the Scottsboro Trials using the failure of bourgeois justice to legitimize violence against the state. Between *Manusher Adhikarey* and *Barricade* (premièring in Kala Mandir, Calcutta on 24 September 1972) Dutt had shifted his position from his CPI (ML) affiliation and had moved on to a defense of democracy. Based on Jan Petersen's almost documentary account of 1933 Germany, *Barricade* chronicles the rise of Fascism and its attempts to stifle all opposition—leading liberal, non-partisan intelligentsia to take a stand for democracy at the barricades, where the workers have already gathered; with clear parallels with the circumstances leading to the declaration of Emergency in India. In the Emergency

² Utpal Dutt in conversation with Samik Bandyopadhyay in Rajinder Paul ed. *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors*, (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi 1989), pp.17–18.

years *Barricade* served as a rallying point for spectators who dared not protest against the Emergency but felt an inner resistance to it.

3

If *Kallol* questioned the whole line of political violence against the marginalized on a national level, another dimension of the marginalized popular voice in revolt was being explored in a play written and produced the very next year. On 21 February 1966 in Wellington Square, Calcutta, Bijan Bhattacharya (1915–78) produced and directed *Debigarjan* for the historic National Integration and Peace Conference. Set in a poor, remote village in Birbhum district of West Bengal, the play tells the story of the exploitation of peasantry and resistance rising from within the village community to a revolutionary violence resulting in the overthrow of the corrupt, villainous landholder. The landholder Prabhanjan in collusion with his political operator henchman grabs the meagre plots still held by the farmers, forcing them to go back to their pre-agricultural ways of life and to send their women to work in his granary, where they are systematically raped, till the young hero Mongla mobilizes the entire village to rise in revolt over the death of his young wife driven to suicide by the landholder's advances. In the play, the unsparingly scathing, critical voice of Mongla's mother, Giri [Reba Roy Chowdhury in a memorable role], rings out loud and clear against the unfair demands of the landholder Prabhanjan, and also against the abject submission of the men.

Bhattacharya, often described as the progenitor of the post-World War II Bengali theatre with his 1944 play *Nabanna* [which he co-directed with Sombhu Mitra for the Indian People's Theatre Association], hit on an indigenous 'epic theatre' form in his *Debigarjan* 'in which a slice of life representing a marginal, deprived community is elaborately conveyed through intimate, casual details to the point of suggesting a seamless, impregnable continuity, firmly entrenched in the structure of social relationships and beliefs . . . till the cracks show . . . bringing to light the hidden forces, social and economic, that exploit the community and delude it into submission and acquiescence. The sudden exposure amounts to a seismic fissure that either erupts into revolutionary violence (as in *Debigarjan*) or rises to a quiet enlightenment / end of delusion (as in *Garbhabati Janani*).'³ The *dharmagola* in

³ Samik Bandyopadhyay, 'Seventies to the Nineties: An Overview' in Nimai Ghosh, *Dramatic Moments: Photographs and Memories of Calcutta Theatre from the Sixties to the Nineties* (Calcutta: Seagull Books 2000), pp. 88–89.

Debigarjan—a paddy reserve for the community, to serve / feed the community at one level; with the community feeding the stocks in return—becomes a symbol of triumph of the ordinary farmer / villager as he rises from his marginalized, deprived state to reclaim his right to food that he has grown with his own sweat and blood; and with it comes the triumph of the restoration of the community that has been disrupted by the forces of greed and lust, and the ruthless power of the oppressor. The power of the collective, the community—that gives a source of sustenance and strength to the common man—is reaffirmed in the celebratory ending.

4

If Bijan Bhattacharya was exploring violence at the level of the native historical continuity of violence set against violence; and Utpal Dutt treating it in a more documentary style, bringing history—national and international—into play, Mohit Chattopadhyay (b. 1934) was consciously bringing into his dramatic idiom a more abstract, almost expressionistic projection of the forces operating within the system.

His play *Rajrakta* [published originally as *Guinea Pig* in *Bohurupee*; premièred 25 January 1971 at Rangana, directed by Bibhash Chakraborty for Theatre Workshop] broke new ground in terms of its unique dramaturgy. In the play a young man and a young woman go through all the experiences of persecution and repression by the Establishment, operating through different institutions, till they confront the Rajasaheb, an embodiment of authority, and challenge him:

There are certain stages in the development of a political situation when a clinical analysis reveals the complexities of the problems lying under the surface. The situation takes a dramatic turn which stirs up everyone. This is exactly what happened in 1970-71. There was the Naxalite upsurge, the peasant movements, strikes in industries, agitations among students and the middle classes. In almost every corner of society, waves of political movements reached a crest—a blood-soaked political environment of state repression, party feuds. . . . Everyone had to face the question: ‘What do you think?’ ‘What do you want?’ It was difficult in those days to put blinkers over your eyes, to close your mind. That was the time I wrote *Rajrakta* . . .

During those days, because of the theme of the play, there was a great risk in staging it. The Raja Saheb in the play represents autocracy, which keeps the people as puppets. He appears in a variety of roles—as the head of the family, the autocratic paterfamilias, as the teacher bullying the students, as the political leader manipulating the masses, as the businessman cheating the people. For me the theme had important dimensions. It was not confined only to rulers but extended to every facet and level of our society. And this brought forth the all-round desperate urge to destroy this autocracy, to rebel against it.⁴

Consider, for example, the violence and lyricism of the climax of the play that is built up almost to the intensity of a scherzo.

BOY. Very well, we're going. But deep in our blood there is hate and resistance. You will have to stand face to face with that some day. Maybe this experiment will bring that final moment closer.

THE FIRST ONE. I know, I know! Think of the last moments of your life instead. I'll draw whatever blood's left in you with this syringe and collect in this bowl. Then probe into the blood and figure out the exact reason why you rear your heads. If I can't isolate that microbe and destroy it, I'll be on a rather sticky wicket in the final war. Come now—I don't have much time. Let's go.

As the three disappear, the stage plunges into darkness. Heart-rending screams. Suddenly a dog barks in the distance. A single red light on the door. A little later THE FIRST ONE [as Rajashaheb] enters, through the door, a terrified, scared expression on his face, red bowl in hand. The felt cap on his head is missing. He wears a black robe over his costume. A red light pins him down. The other side is completely dark. Addressing the audience he says

THE FIRST ONE. Blood. Very little blood. Two bodies, yet so little blood. Even Lucy can't have her fill! You are waiting for the blood report. But this time too, I'll have to disappoint you. I sifted and searched their blood, but couldn't hunt out the microbes—the microbes of their disease. Their blood—so cunning, so shrewd, so slippery! My fingers elude its grasp, the microscope

⁴ Mohit Chattopadhyay in conversation with Sumanta Banerjee in Rajinder Paul ed. *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors*, (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi 1989), p. 29.

eludes its reflection. When I swirl the blood in the bowl, the blood froths in mirth. My last war is with those horrible blood corpuscles. I must win. Must win. That's my reflection in the blood—what a lovely crown! (*Screaming*) What's this! So many maggots crawling all over my crown! Maggots leaping from the blood to my crown! My crown! (*Tries to clasp the invisible crown with both hands, and the bowl of blood crashes to the ground. Grasping his head, he turns, scared, then jumps to one side*) The Blood is flowing on, chasing me. (*Voice choked with tears, clasping his head with both hands, doubles up and looks here and there stealthily*) The Blood is flowing on, chasing me. Lucy! Lucy! Save me! Lucy! (*Suddenly notices Lucy—a mere hallucination—is reassured momentarily; but dead scared*) Lucy, my Lucy! Drink, Lucy, drink! (*Fondling Lucy*) Lucy, my honey! Yes, lap it up. All of it! (*Suddenly notices something and screams in anguish*) Lucy, get up. Run. Lucy run. The blood's chasing you as well. Run, Lucy, run. The blood's chasing you. Run!

THE FIRST ONE *runs away, terrified. A score, steadily building up into a tense music of a chase—as if it is chasing RAJASAHAB. Normal lights return to the stage. Music stops.* THE BOY, THE SECOND ONE, and THE GIRL *enter one by one. They sometimes speak one at a time, sometimes in chorus.*

THE BOY. This game continues. Every day—

THE BOY and THE SECOND ONE. This game continues. Every day—

CHORUS. This game continues. Every day! Within—Without—Afar.

THE GIRL. But this can't continue forever.

THE BOY. The knife in my hand: how can that forever remain invisible?

THE SECOND ONE. The royal retainer must wake up, How can he sleep eternally?

CHORUS. The end of this game is war. The last war. The war of men united is a necessity. It is necessary to have a last war.

THE FIRST ONE (*as if making an appearance*). The last war is truly essential. My last weapon! May the human chains of numerous hands joined together, tear asunder! May the numerous sights united in pain and joy be rendered

blind! May the footfalls of the masses cease. My last weapon? Standing on the edge of destruction, I shall give a cruelly fitting reply to their challenge. (*The three approach.*)

CHORUS. Standing on the edge of destruction, we shall give a cruelly fitting reply to their challenge.

THE FIRST ONE (*Screaming*). Is the final moment near?

CHORUS. Yes, the moment of revolution approaches! Revolution! Revolution! (*They encircle Rajashaheb.*)

THE FIRST ONE. What do you want?

CHORUS. Rajrakta!

THE FIRST ONE. Rajrakta? But that's a lot. Stored in iron containers in so many rooms. So many doors have to be broken.

THE BOY. Come, let the festivities begin. Strike on barbaric pride—strike for the sake of history.

THE GIRL. Strike on the tyranny of the throne—strike for the sake of honour.

THE SECOND ONE. Strike on the shackles—strike for the sake of freedom.

CHORUS. Strike for the sake of life—Strike—Strike.

*Rajashaheb seems to cower and crumble in the face of their confrontation. His defeat is evident. They are all preparing, with their weapons drawn, to strike that final blow on Rajashaheb, when the curtains come down.*⁵

The Theatre Workshop team braved several risks, fatal coincidences (one of the actors, Satyen, was killed during its production) and violent obstacles during the run of the play. Their rehearsal rooms were ransacked, posters destroyed, and even death threats issued to the playwright himself. Produced in a Hindi version by Rajinder Nath as *Guinea Pig* in 1975, the play stuck to the original ending, with the triumphant new power that had overthrown the old dictatorship resorting to the same measures set by him. While this ending perhaps pointed

⁵ Mohit Chattopadhyay, *Nataksamagra* [The Complete Plays], Vol. 1, Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers Private Limited 2001, pp. 457–59. Translation mine.

undeniably to a more real, a more practical truth, the circumstances in Bengal, with the Left consciousness, were looking towards a more tangible, a more potent change. Justifying the need to write a new ending for the Theatre Workshop production, Chattopadhyay explained:

We felt that the surrounding political situation in Bengal demanded a more aggressive, more positive ending. We felt that it was time now to speak out, to allow the characters to come out more openly in a rebellious gesture, in a ritualistic display of attacking Rajasaheb. The change was made in the context of the prevailing political situation. Today one may dispute the ending. But in those days in West Bengal, the change was a necessity.⁶

5

Meanwhile, a new theatre of concern and conscience was being formulated by Badal Sircar (b. 1925). In a radical departure from his repertoire comprising comedies and mood plays, plays of unregulated encounters, plays capturing the doubts and passions of a recent time-span (all written between 1967 and 1970), Sircar began addressing issues like the rural-urban divide, foregrounding the pauperization of villages by the blood-sucking metropolis (*Bhoma*, 1976); slavery and revolt in history (*Spartacus*, 1972) and tribal revolt in Bengal in 1855 (*Basi Khabor*, 1979); visions of emancipation from the stranglehold of capitalism (*Prastab*, 1973; *Bhanga Manush*, 1976; *Hattamalar Oparey*, 1977; *Bhul Rasta*, 1989); violence, particularly State violence and war (*Tringsha Shatabdi*, 1974; *Khat-Mat-Kring*, 1983).

Moving out of the conventional proscenium space and rejecting its economics, Sircar had begun performing with his group Satabdi in the *anganmancha* space, a large room with inexpensive flexi-seating for the audience, doing away with the artificial distance between the performer and the spectator; and open spaces like parks in the city. In July 1974, just before the state of Emergency, the authorities were trying in vain to stop the performances at Surendranath Park, a park in the heart of the business district of Calcutta. In a brutal attack by the police one Saturday afternoon, an innocent young spectator, Prabir Dutta, was killed, and some members of the theatre group who had initiated the performances in the park were arrested. Five weeks after the incident, on another Saturday afternoon, a rally of ten thousand citizens and personalities from theatre and films went on a massive protest, reclaiming the

⁶ Chattopadhyay in conversation with Sumanta Banerjee, op.cit. pp. 29–30.

right to perform in the Park. The shows continued until the declaration of Emergency, and then went on after Emergency was withdrawn.

Badal Sircar chose a level of abstraction starker than Mohit Chattopadhyay's to focus on slavery in a historic context to offer reverberations in contemporary reality, climaxing in the dead slaves who fought under Spartacus reborn in the intimate space of his theatre to challenge from the floor level, the seated viewers in their backless benches with a visionary warning, almost whispered: 'We'll come back.' In *Basi Khabor* [Stale News] he evokes the tribal Santhal rebellion in 1855 to highlight the continued marginalization of the adivasis, and the seeds of violence rooted in it, no longer as something in the past, but as a threat; which naturally draws in echoes of the movement still simmering in the tribal belt of eastern India as a fallout of the Naxalite movement.

6

At a time when the State with all its powers had reduced democracy to a mere culture of status quoism, when elections had become a travesty and the State was employing all its mechanisms to uphold and justify the brutal and ruthless decimation of young lives in the name of ridding the country of radical elements, the enlightened middle class youth were provoked to resist, critique and to take up arms against the brute force unleashed by the Establishment. There was an urgency to cultivate a culture of critique that followed almost as a corollary from a culture of resistance. It was a time of crisis, when the lines had been drawn, provocation had crossed all limits and one had to take a stand. The concluding lines of *Rajrakta* echoed the sentiments of the many protesting voices that were seeking an alternative, that would restore the humane values in society once again: 'Strike on barbaric pride—strike for the sake of history . . . Strike on the tyranny of the throne—strike for the sake of honour. Strike on the shackles—strike for the sake of freedom . . . Strike for the sake of life—Strike—Strike.'

One such voice found expression in a pathbreaking play *Kolkatar Hamlet* by Asit Bose [premiered 16 August 1973, Kalamandir, Calcutta]. Bose (b. 1943), considered Utpal Dutt's most talented protege, began his career in the theatre with Little Theatre Group (LTG) and People's Little Theatre (PLT). Provoked by the cowardice of a theatre that did not have the guts to even give an insertion in the papers condoling the death of Satyen Mitra (1934-71), a Theatre Workshop actor, who was shot dead, or of Prabir Dutta [killed by the police in

Curzon Park on 20 July 1970], and Sombhu Mitra refusing to join the protest rally because he preferred to trust the official version, Bose wrote a play with characters who became icons of a whole generation of educated, sensitive youth who had risked their lives in a movement they thought had the power to change the system. In an emotionally charged interview, he recounted:

I was not expecting anyone to attack a police outpost to register protest. But when people in theatre do not shed a drop of tear for a colleague killed, I do not find any sense in their doing theatre. Theatre is for humanity. If it abandons humanity, and turns into a free-for-all for pimps and suckers, then it is better to give up theatre altogether. It was Satyen-da's killing that was the immediate provocation for my *Kolkatar Hamlet*. I conceived a situation where someone I had met and talked to the evening before is killed at midnight, and when I discover and stand before the dead body the following morning, Satyen-da stands up and challenges me, 'So nobody did a thing, nobody said a word?' The silence was a symptom of a degeneration, a test case that demonstrated how a half-educated middle class had brought the dream of a people's theatre down to the level of a theatre for personal gain.⁷

Set in the seventies, against the violence of protest and state repression that characterize the period, a theatre group rehearsing a new play conjures up and encounters a Naxalite fugitive and Shakespeare's Hamlet. The play laid bare the doubts and contradictions that plagued young, sensitive minds, prompting some of them to take steps that proved fatal. Immediately after the fugitive leaves the shelter of their rehearsal room and goes out into the streets, he is shot dead. Abhi, the protagonist / director of the theatre group bursts out in anger and helplessness:

ABHI. . . . my helpless pain and anger keep dripping, endlessly. And every leaden drop with its dead weight gathers right here, in my chest, choking it up. All the Abhimanyus in this world, killed with lead bullets in their chests—all that lead is piling up right here (*touches his heart*). Slowly and steadily I start feeling so very heavy—all because of the lead! Stuffed with lead! Can't even stand with those boys and lend them moral support! Just go round and round

⁷ Asit Bose in conversation with Samik Bandyopadhyay. Transcribed and translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay. *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 29-30, p. 182.

endlessly in a vicious circle of brains, logic and tradition! What were those lines in that poem: ‘Where do you find shelter / Where do they live—next of kin’. Poem by Manik Bañdujey⁸: ‘The native land is almost like an alien territory/ And masked friends become intellectual creatures. / How can one distinguish between friend and foe / In the constricted confines of the nation? / The demon, baring his fangs and claw / Ravages the earth. / The poison has seeped in deep.’⁹

Breaking out of realism when the immediate reality is brought to a direct confrontation with something anti-realistic or superior to the realistic, the play was a resounding success, with the common Bengali theatregoer responding wholeheartedly to its political charge at one level and to the confrontation of the different theatric idioms at another.

The tempestuous political scenario of West Bengal during this period, fertile ground for a vibrant, critical theatre germinating from several kinds of distinct dramaturgical concerns and styles dominated by a strong Left consciousness, sadly lost its edge, when the Left came to power, cynically and brutally crushing the radical voices within it. In a summing up of the situation, Asit Bose said rather bitterly: ‘The present government has destroyed the guts of this theatre by distributing awards and favours to those who kowtow to them, and by leading those engaged in theatre to promote one another within the coterie of the favoured. Theatre in West Bengal had traditionally taken pride in its leftist orientation and its spirit of protest. Nothing remains of that theatre, once that core of protest is nationalized. I am not suggesting for once that theatre is synonymous with protest. But all those young men like us, the best of their generation, who had scorned the temptation of cushy jobs, not given a thought to their own sustenance and came to theatre, neglecting their obligations to their families, had come to a particular kind of theatre. Where did we stand in these changed circumstances?’

The representative works I have chosen illustrate a few of the possible modes of the performative or theatric inscription of violence determined / provoked as the changing

⁸ ‘Bañdujey’, colloquial corruption of ‘Bandyopadhyay’. The reference is to Manik Bandyopadhyay (1905-56), India’s first important Communist novelist and poet, who offered in his stories a penetrating insight into the changing times that saw the disintegration of colonial rule in India, in a setting of famine, communal riots and peasant uprisings. With his uncompromising commitment to realism, he studies an urban middle class losing its older values in its struggle to survive, and rural masses driven by ruthless exploitation and deprivation to virtual marginalization and dehumanization.

⁹ *Kolkatar Hamlet* in *Ei Dashaker Shera Natak*, Kolkata: Jatiya Sahitya Parishad, p. 33. Translation mine.

perception of violence in a given historical phase in a particular state of India ranging from historical evocation and representation in *Kallol*, to symbolic evocation and projection in *Debigarjan*, to expressionist-analytic dissection in *Rajrakta*, to a passionate apotheosis of violence in *Kolkatar Hamlet*, ironically registering a trajectory that moved farther and farther away from a straightforward avowal of violence, even as violence as the only positive possibility remained in perspective; which could be, after all, the inevitable fallout of the theatricalization of violence.