

CHAPTER 3

Institutionalization of the Leftist Political Ideas through the Vibrant Group Theatre Culture in West Bengal.

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The term "Group Theatre" was coined by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg in 1931 who formed the first ever Group Theatre in New York to create a theatre cooperative, a group of actors skilled in a cohesive technique and devoted to performing contemporary plays. Among others included in the said group were Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, John Garfield, Luther Adler, Will Geer, Howard Da Silva, Franchot Tone, John Randolph, Joseph Bromberg, Michael Gordon, Paul Green, Clifford Odets, Paul Strand, Kurt Weill and Lee J. Cobb who use to subscribe to left-wing political views and sought to produce plays that dealt with crucial social issues.

While working at the Group Theatre Lee Strasberg cultivated the method of group acting based on the schemes of the Russian director, Konstantin Stanislavsky. It was an approach of schooling and rehearsal for actors which centres a performance upon inner emotional feel, determined largely through the means of extemporization and improvisation. The Group Theatre staged many noteworthy dramas like *The House of Connelly* (1931 by Paul Green), *Success Story* (1932 by John Howard Lawson), *Condemned* (1932 by Marc Blizstein), *The Black Pit* (1933 by Albert Maltz), *Men in White* (1933 by Sidney Kingsley), *Gentle Woman* (1933 by John Howard Lawson), *Awake and Sing!* and *Waiting for Lefty* (1935 by Clifford Odets), *Johnny Johnson* (1936 by Paul Green and Kurt Weill), *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937 by Marc Blizstein), *My Heart's in the Highlands* (1939 by William Saroyan) and *Native Son* (1941 by Richard Wright and Paul Green).

The Group Theatre broke up in 1941 as after the World War - II, the majority of the group members were investigated by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Of them, Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets and Lee J. Cobb became a government witness under pressure and exposed the other members of left-wing groups. Those who refused to do so, such as Stella Adler, John Garfield, Will Geer, Howard Da Silva, John Randolph, and Joseph Bromberg were immediately blacklisted.

Emergence of Group Theatre in West Bengal was fostered both by the spirit of Indian Peoples' Theatre Movement and its decay. The IPTA wave was at its hue till 1947 by way of agenda setting, organizational strength, splendid aestheticism, and above all connectivity to the commons. No sooner the Communist Party was declared forbidden in independent India and the party went 'underground' split appeared in the IPTA and many dispersed from the organisation on various personal, ideological and political grounds and the theatre scene began to change radically. The wave of IPTA began to wane. Entertainment theatre faced a severe impede due to the contest of the more popular variety of cinema. Amateur theatre continued by concentrating in big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore.

Shambhu Mitra, in 1948, founded Bohurupee, to be the first Group Theatre in West Bengal. He departed from IPTA advocating a distinguished stance in aestheticism and theatre named Sat Nattya (Honest Theaterism) that preached pure artistry at liberty from political dictums to claim that the creativity of an individual or an intellectual is spontaneous and must not obey any limits or restrain itself to any politically designed framework. If one intends to do so, he is dishonest to himself/herself and the artistry as a whole. In other words, he preferred the standpoint of "Art for Art's sake" rather than "Art as an instrument". However, it should also be noted that the initial productions of Bohurupee like *Nabanna*, *Pothik*, *Ulukhagra*, *Chhnera Taar* contained serious social and political messages. Bohurupee incessantly staged plays, having a repertory of nearly seventy major productions, balanced between original plays and adaptations, like that of Rabindranath Tagore's *Char Adhyay* (1951), *Raktakarabi* (1954), *Visarjan* (1961),

Raja (1964), *Malini* (1986) and *Muktadhara* (1996), one after another, and thereby disproved the prevalent allegation that Tagore's plays were non-performable. Bohurupee's production of Tagore's dramas were a surprising realization to many. Besides, Bohurupee has produced creations of great foreign playwrights like Sophocles, Ibsen, Chekov, O'neil, Brecht, Anouilh, Sartre and Sanskrit classic Sudrak's *Mirchchakatik* along with the works of established Indian post-colonial playwrights like Tulshi Lahiri, Manmatha Roy, Sombhu Mitra, Badal Sarkar, Vijoy Tendulkar, Manoj Mitra, Girish Karnad, Sisir Kumar Das, Budhdhdeb Basu and also of the new generation Bengali playwrights.

Although, in most of the evident literatures testify that Bohurupee was the pioneer Group Theatre in West Bengal, the factuality suggests that the Little Theatre Group of Utpal Datta was far advance a Group to be founded to produce the dramas by William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen in English. May be due to his lately produced vernacular productions like *Ekei Ki Bole Savyata* by Modhusudan Dutta, *Sadhabar Ekadoshi* by Dinabandhu Mitra, *Buro Shalikhher Gharer Rno* by Madhusudan Dutta again , *Chhayanat* by Utpal Dutta himself since 1953, Little Theatre Group is not recognised as the foremost Group Theatre in West Bengal. Little Theatre Group, however, could attain huge fame by producing 16 Shakespearian scripts into Bengali. *Macbeth* (1954), *The Merchant of Venice* (1955), *Julius Caesar* (1957), *Othello* (1958), *Romeo and Juliet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* (both in 1964) were produced hundred times throughout West Bengal. Utpal maintained closed relationship with IPTA for quite some time. Little Theatre Group took Minerva Theatre Hall in lease to produce *Angar* (1959).

3.2. GROUP THEATRE CULTURE IN WEST BENGAL

Under the mutual influence of creative and commercial success of both Bohurupee and Little Theatre Group, several other such Group Theatre sprang under the leadership of noted theatre personalities and scholars during 50s. Famous Singer-Actor Sabitabrata Dutta founded Rupakar in 1951. Although Rupakar could not

produce any remarkable dramatic productions during its early days, but in later phase of its career it could attain fame by producing *Chalachittachanchari* (1956) by Sukumar Roy and *Byapika Biday* (1960) of Amritalal Basu. Rpakar was formed after a split in Bohurupee when Sabitabrata Dutta with several others like Tulsi Lahiri, Kali Sarkar, Md. Israil, Shibu Mukhopadhyay walked out, but could not sustain very long.

Shoubhanik was formed in 1957 by Biresh Mukhopadhyay and Nibedita Das, the lead actors of *Rahumukhta* (1956) produced by IPTA South Calcutta wing. They divorced from IPTA to form Shoubhanik to spread the spirit of Mass Theatre or Community Theatre or Open Theatre that culminated scientific methodology with traditional folk form of performance in theatre. The group produced many milestone production like *Rahumukhta* (1957), *Maa* (1958) by Maxim Gorkey, *Gora* by Rabindranath Tagora and *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen (both in 1959), *Mrichchhakatik* (1960) by Shudrak. Shoubhanik was the pioneer to host the first Theatre Festival in 1958 named Gana Rangmahal. (The concept of such a festival was, however, first proposed at the Bombay Session of IPTA). In 1960, Shoubhanik built a theatre hall of its own in Calcutta named Mukta Angan. The group also took initiative to built 12 such open theatre halls at other sub-divisions of the district, publish a theatre journal at regular basis, develop a library of dramatic literatures, and most importantly a theatre school to train the young minds. Therefore, their efforts and approaches can be marked as epoch-making.

During 1958-59 section o students of Maharaja Manindra Chandra College of Calcutta formed a cultural forum called Khasara under the inspiration of Ajitesh Bandopadhyay to enact one act dramas every Saturday after the regular college hour. Later, in association with Amitava Sen, Subandhu Bhattacharya, Subarna Raha, Deependranath Sengupta and others, Ajitesh founded the Nandikar in 1960. The group produced *Setu Bandhan* (1960) written and directed by Ajitesh Bandopadhyay as its debut appearance at Biswarupa Hall in Calcutta. Nandikar remained as a branch of IPTA, primarily to avail the rebate on the Amusement Tax to be paid to the government for theatrical production. But in 1962 the group

withdrew its linkage with IPTA after an ideological clash over producing *Nattayakarer Sondhane Chhoyti Choritro* by Luigi Pirandello (translated by Rudra Prasad Sengupta), as IPTA claimed the production to be 'reactionary'. In subsequent years Nandikar has produced and is producing major productions like *Manjori Amer Manjori* (1964), *Sher Afgan* (1965), *Tin Poyshar Pala* (1969), *Bitangsha* (1971), *Bhalo Manush* (1974), *Antigone* (1975), *Saudagarer Nouko* (1976), *Football* (1977), *Khorir Gondi* (1978) etc. Nandikar hosts one of the largest Inter-national Theatre Festival in India every year since 1984.

Gandharva was established in 1957 and produced *Dalil* (1958), *Thana Theke Aschhi* (1960), *Baikunther Khata* (1962), *Moroger Daak* (1963), *Shankha* (1964). Bijan Bhattacharye, the acclaimed playwright of *Nabanna*, formed his Calcutta Theatre in 1960 and in subsequent years produced dramatic presentations based on his own scripts like *Gotrantar* (1960), *Mora Chaand* (1961), *Kalanka* (1962), *Jiyon Konyo*, the musical opera (1964) etc. Sekhar Chattopadhyay founded his Theatre Unit, Jochan Dastidar formed Rupantaree during the same period to produce theatrical productions that left some effect in the minds of learned middle-class audience of Calcutta.

The 70s decade was seemingly the pinnacle of the accomplishments of the Group Theatre movement. Yet it characterized and ensnare all the contradictions and inconsistencies, not only of the Group Theatre movement, but also the whole historical ambiguity of the aesthetics models applied in the Indian context. The 70s saw, post-Sambhu Mitra, Bohurupee under the supervision of Tripti Mitra and other near deputies of Sambhu Mitra still coming up with new plays and productions; the People's Little Theatre was at the height of its reputation; Nandikar and Ajilesh Bandopadhyay, even after his break up with Nandikar, continued with experimentations of adaptations; Theatre workshop, Chetana, Theatre commune, Sudrak were all performing at a regular basis with wide level of success.

In 1967 the 14 actors who left Nandikar to figure Theatre Workshop, Bibhash Chakraborty, Maya Ghosh, Ashok Mukherjee, Satyen Mitra, Ajoy Ganguly, Chinmoy Roy were some of them. The first production of Theatre Workshop was

Rajrokt staged in 1971. Most of the productions from Theatre Workshop was based on original scripts and was highly acclaimed. *Chak Bhanga Modhu* (1972), *Ashvathama* (1974), *Tringsha Shatabdi* (1975), *Narak Gulzar* (1976) etc. are name some of these.

Chetana started its theatrical journey since 1972 with its all time hit *Marich Sangbad* (1973) in the backdrop of Vietnam War under the direction of Arun Mukherjee. In following years Chetana went to produce *Ramjatra* (1974), *Bhalo Manusher Pala* (1974), *Spartacus* (1974), *Jagannath* (1977), *Kabir* (1989), *Tista Parer Brittanto* (2002), *Mephisto* (2002) etc. Arun Mukherjee's elder son Suman Mukherjee, who once use to act as the lead actor in the group, later started giving direction in the group.

Theatre Commune came into being in 1972 to produce theatres under the direction of Neelkantha Sengupta. Theatre Commune produced several adopted scripts like *Bibhur Bagh* (1972), *Paraborti Biman Akramon* (1974), *Daansagar* (1976), *Julius Caesar'er Sesh Satdin* (1983) and also contributed in original script based productions like *Swadeshi Noksha* (1978), *Jibika* (1981), *Mohamas Toilo* (1986), *Sadhabar Ekadoshi* (1988) etc. The group gradually faded after the untimely demise of Neelkantha Sengupta in 2010.

Sayak, through its journey of more than 44 years, having assumed the formation in 1973 with the objective to nourish progressive modern theatre. Sayak, has roused to a place of honour and admiration in the hearts of theatre lovers through making productions of various original plays as well as translated or adapted from remarkable works of great playwright which carries a clear evidence of a rendezvous of reputation and popularity. *Avishapta* (1974), *Naramedh* (1978), *Dui Hujurer Gappo* (1979), *Sonar Mathawala Manush* (1983), *Gyan Briksher Fal* (1985), *Daybaddha* (1991), *Karnabati* (1996), *Badhutantra* (2002) etc. are some its best known productions. Meghnaad Bhattacharya remained the director of the group since last 40 years.

Founded and led by theatre activist, actor, playwright, and director Usha Ganguly since 1976, Rangakarmee is one of the celebrated theatre group in Kolkata. Although Rangakarmee have produced a few Bengali plays, they are mainly known for producing Hindi theatre in the city. The group has a repertory theatre with one of the largest assembly of activists in the country. They also facilitate a section consecrated to children's theatre termed "Rangoli" as well as a musical troupe called "Ranga Suravi". With a talented troupe of artists and a colourful theatrical experience in India and abroad, Rangakarmee uses the stage to raise its voice against social issues, oppressions and evil. *Mahabhoj* (1984), *Holi* (1989), *Vama* (1990), *Rudali* (1992), *Beti Aayee* (1996), *Maiyaat* (1997), *Himmat Mai* (1998), *Shobhajatra* (2000) are few amongst the highly acclaimed productions of Rangakarmee.

Charbak started its journey from 1976 under the leadership of late dramatist and director Jochhon Dastidar. Charbak's list of Bengali plays include *Padya Gadya Prabandha* (1976), *Thengarey* (1977), *Aajker Spartacus* (1977), *Karnik* (1978), *Bhuter Begaar* (1978), *Uttar Purush* (1980), *Otho Shikkha Bichitra* (1980), *Kortar Bhoot* (1980), *Shaarey Nota* (1982), *Ashol Jinish* (1983), *Atmar Shanti* (1984), *E Ek Itihash* (1984), *Sitaar Agniparikkha* (1985), *Sati* (1987), *Pratyasha* (1989), *Banjara* (1991), *Aaloye Phera* (1993), *Mukhomukhi* (1996), *Par Mile Nai* (1999), *Thikana* (2001), *Kande Keno Behula Shondori* (2003), *Cholo Potol Tuli* (2005), *Apsara Theatre-er Mamla* (2007), *Dudh Kheyeche Myao* (2012), *Ekhon Tokhon* (2013).

Shudrak, established in 1977 is a theatre group based in Calcutta that has had patrons like acclaimed movie director Satyajit Ray and famed painter Ganesh Pyne, among others. Shudrak has many acclaimed production to its fame like *Amitakshar* (1977), *Samabartan* (1979), *Asamapta* (1981), *Chandalini* (1982), *Ishabasa* (1984), *Pratinidhi* (1985), *Swapna Santati* (1986), *Rangamati* (1999) *Dahananta* (2000). Debashish Majumder is the founder director of Shudrak and is a noted playwright to have conferred the prestigious Sangeet Natak Academy Award. All the productions of Shudrak is his script and design.

In 1979, a bunch of young, enthusiastic artists started a theatre group called Sanglap to produce impressive theatres under the direction of Dr. Kuntal Mukhopadhyay. The best known productions of the group are like *Disha* (1993), *Sudrayan* (1998), *Hay Ram* (2002), *Bhavam Cholechhe Juddhe* (2004), *Astaraag* (2006) etc. Sanglap has also been organising an annual drama festival named Sanglap Natyotsab since 1993.

In the same year Nandipat appeared to produce many remarkable plays including *Mrityu Na Hotya* (1999), *Ramani Mohan* (2005), *Shrinwantu Comrades* (2010), *Ballabh Purer Rupkotha* (2007), *Manasa Mangal* (2006) in recent years. The group also hosts regular workshops, seminars, exhibitions on theatre.

The saga of splits in Group Theatres is almost old as its origin. Perhaps this is the most creative division in the world to have multiplied its productivity. Bohurupee split apart to form Rupakar (1954), Theatre Workshop (1966) was an outcome of rift in Nandikar, Little Theatre Group was parted to Chalachal (1964) and Peoples' Little Theatre (1965), Gandharba was divided to build Nakshatra (1967). Almost in all the splits the conflict between headman of the group and a fraction thereof has been the dynamics behind the faction walking out to form a new Group Theatre. This is such obvious that it became proverbial to have marked that the number of Group Theatres in West Bengal can be attributed to the number of theatre personalities per head, each individual having mastered, through experience and learning, the art of building a theatre forms a Group thereby. And by 1980, the number of Group Theatres in Kolkata and surrounding grew up to around 110, as of today there are more than 932 registered and non-registered Group Theatres operating from the remotest part of Kakdwip to Kurseong and from Dubrajpur to Dalkhola.

But it was no soothe before a storm as inharmony and deterioration were above intrinsic and were gaining in colossal proportions. It was in the 70s that Sambhu Mitra, for no ostensible rationale left the doorstep of theatre and apart from a few infrequent guest appearances, the utmost acting genius of the decade went to hibernation. Nandikar come apart. Theatre workshop was torn by conflicts. The radical, fuming Utpal Dutta, occupied with steadfastness in cinematic shooting at

Bombay and Calcutta, was also compelled to become pro-establishment. The Peoples' Little Theatre's (the renewed version of Little Theatre Group) reputation in the 70s was established on the public craze for Dutta's anti-Congress dramas, some of which were even banned and Utpal himself got arrested. Since the arrival of the Left Front Government in West Bengal, the Peoples' Little Theatre performed those plays frankly all over West Bengal, yet the popularity and craze which was not to have a repeat.

Sl.	District	No. of Group Theatres
1.	DARJEELING	13
2.	JALPAIGURI	23
3.	COACHBEHAR	25
4.	UTTAR DINAJPUR	07
5.	DAKSHIN DINAJPUR	07
6.	MALDA	05
7.	MURSHIDABAD	23
8.	BIRBHUM	30
9.	BARDHAMAN	65
10.	NADIA	51
11.	PURULIA	20
12.	BANKURA	07
13.	PASCHIM MEDINIPUR	04
14.	PURBA MEDINIPUR	38
15.	HOOGHLY	81
16.	HOWRAH	54
17.	KOLKATA	324
18.	NORTH 24 PARGANA	126
19.	SOUTH 24 PARGANA	29
TOTAL		932

Table :: 1 District wise Distribution of Group Theatres

Political Emergency of 1975 brought the increase of Group Theatre in West Bengal into a unexpected fester. The entire contingent of existing Group Theatre was muffled by the government; drama censorship, hitherto unprecedented, was imposed all over the states; in each and every local Police Station, some government officials were assigned to scrutinize and supervise each and every script before production. [Sengupta, Barun; *Pala Badaler Pala*; Ananda Publishers; Kolkata; 1982]. Also, power cuts was wreaked on drama shows, mainly not so much to check

attempted insubordination but to facilitate the government to obtain spell to exercise modalities to put in force censorship [Palmer, Norman D.; India in 1975: *Democracy in Eclipse* in Asian Survey, A Survey of Asia in 1975 : Part II, Vol 16, No.2; February, 1976]. Greater part of the productions were compelled to campaign either in the favour of government or forced to remain silent on the critical social, economic and political issues; a theatre has to mandatorily be a theatre of the government, by the government and for the government. Thus, theatre could speak only what government wanted them to talk on. All form of performing arts virtually played into the hands of the Indira Gandhi Government who silenced every voice during the emergency. Not only were the anti-government sentiments curbed, all voices of dissent including that of the renowned theatre personalities were also put down from time to time and were arrested and taken to custody during the Emergency by the Government.

During the Emergency when Indira Gandhi's clout swelled to incredible amounts and slogans for instance 'Indira is India' gushed heavily, larger than life blow-ups of her image came into view everywhere, it was generally agreed that Mrs. Gandhi appeared rather distasteful in majority of these enormous visual depictions and she later had some of them pulled down. But the outcome was that the urban and semi-urban areas of the country were infused by horrific representations of the female leader of the nation, who had by then started to be widely hated for her candidly dictatorial ways of governance.

But West Bengal has been practically under Emergency since the depose of the United Front government and the engineered elections of 1972. These days were of great loom of white terror against the theatre. About 150 Group Theatres were broken up by hooligans and police raid. Dramas were banned, actors and directors were beaten up and draged to court. Unity Theatre of Uttarpara and the Workers Club of Batanagar were attacked at least for five times. The actors were pulled out of the theatre and hauled down the streets by the police. IPTA was rehearsing a play called *Kimlish* (1973) and gangsters heaved the director out and poured boiling

water over him from a tea-shop nearby and then they burned the rehearsal room. Peoples Little Theatre's play *Barricade* (1971) was attacked five times and *Dushapner Nagri* (1972) was attacked on August 26, 1974 at the Star Theatre. The actors were beaten up. Tapas Sen, well known theatre lights-man, was also thrashed on the street. Sets were burnt and even the audience was thumped as they tried to enter the theatre and the armed police was standing by protecting the gangsters.

In Sambhu Mitra's *Chandbaniker Pala* (1978) the goddess Manasha appeared as a monstrous and all-insidious female character. As a playwright, Mitra also explores gender relations in *Chandbaniker Pala*, but with a sort of misogynistic dismissal of 'woman' as reactionary, which leaves the male hero very much at the centre of political action at the end.

The Peoples Little Theatre's sensational input during the Emergency was a play *Ebar Raja Pala* (1975). This play is about a man who acts the king in a Jatra and really becomes the king and promulgates the Emergency and has the entire opposition into jail. After the Dushapner Nagri episode, the youth leader Priya Ranjan Das Munshi went around holding mass meetings to educate the public on the evils of the Peoples Little Theatre.

However, both these playwrights imagine in their texts a face-off between notions of the 'ideal nation' and the then degenerated form of the postcolonial state. In setting of the plots by these playwrights and their texts in dialogue, we can see how the cultural products of a postcolonial state that is locked in a near-fatal struggle with its own repressive visage at this time may strive to expose each other.

Samik Bandyopadhyay came across the theatre in its left-leaning energy to criticize state violence in the 1970s and the state's repressive policies to repress or silence it, and induced theatre workers to advance different communications of a counter-narrative about the worth of violence as a political weapon. Spotlighting on theatre in West Bengal, Bandyopadhyay reviewed a landmark production in 1965 that

openly contended that state violence required to be encountered with similar aggressive resistance since non-violence would not guarantee justice. Utpal Dutt's *Kallol* at the Minerva Theatre turned to the past to glorify the contributions of armed struggle in the Indian freedom movement and to challenge the recorded history of the nation that underestimated to showcase the achievement of the ideology of nonviolence in gaining independence. The play was fiery, and according to Sudeshna Banerjee, "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 organisational structure of a theatre group facing violence from the State, and countering it. [Banerjee, Sudeshna; *Between Violence and Democracy: Bengali Theatre 1965-1975*]

Staging productions that encouraged defiance to oppression at public spaces also became an irritation for the state. In the early 1970s, Badal Sircar, especially conscious of the urban-rural segregation and in need to create a more closer, more interactive connectivity between actors and audience, moved out of proscenium and started performing either into redesigned indoor spaces with flexible seating or outdoors into public spaces such as parks. In 1974, police tried to stop one such performance in Surendranath Park, Calcutta (Curzon Park), killing a young spectator, Prabir Dutta and arresting some members of the theatre group. Ten thousand artists and ordinary citizens protested at a rally against the police brutality and demanded the right to perform in the park. A theatre delegation went to meet chief minister Siddhartha Shanker Ray. Mr Ray's answer was extremely plain. "Political plays will be politically fought".

Finally, in 1977, in opposition to Emergency and with allegation of corruption against Indira Gandhi combined with serious economic crisis, the Janata Party (a coalition of several parties and factions of Congress) came into power. The new government overturned many decrees proclaimed during the National Emergency and opened formal investigations into the complaints of abuses during Emergency period. However, the new government had its own troubles to meet good like corruption, inner contradictions among the allies etc. that was making it difficult for the government to introduce effective reforms. Theatre artists who expected a markedly enhanced situations, were disappointed. Asit Bose, who had a long association with Peoples Little Theatre, wrote an impassioned play *Kolkatar Hamlet* (1973) insisting on the contrast between a people's theatre with ideological and political objectives and theatre produced to meet personal economic gain. He was disillusioned about the Janata government period as it was changing the character of the left theatre as well, causing it to lose its dynamic focus and force. About this period and its fallout, he commented, "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." [Basu, Asit; *Kolkatar Hamlet*; Jatiyo Sahitya Porishad, Calcutta, 1989]

This point of view, that being artists in opposition is more radical and productive than being linked to those in power, is an unique axiom of the Group Theatre movement in West Bengal. In the face of political repression different attempts on the part of Group Theatres to foster and maintain a counterculture were common. Sometimes these were radical and explicitly political, but other strategies were dissident too, though not overt in nature and in either position these counter-culturalism fell under the radar of state vigilance.

However, since its inception with the formation of Bohurupee in 1948, the Group Theatre culture has evolved much in the next three decades to develop some distinguished feature of its own in comparison to the IPTA movement. These

contributed to its identifiable nature as well. Firstly, while IPTA was a dynamic organisation and emphasised on building productions those would be mobile in nature to reach any destination as and when instructed, Group Theatre was moderately dynamic and active with in a particular section of audience, if not invited for a call-show. Secondly, the organisation of IPTA was based on few whole-timers and majority number of part-time activists, whereas Group Theatre is combined of part-time activists and that too temporary in tenure (as very often they float among groups as per their individual choice). Thirdly, IPTA was strictly committed to the communist ideology and politically associated to the Communist Party of India, but Group Theatre do not subscribe to any specific political ideology neither is associated to any political party (however, individual members are at their liberty to support or associate themselves with party-politics). Fourthly, IPTA, while selecting scripts to construct dramatic productions, has targeted the working mass, peasants and labours to communicate, while Group Theatre has their target audience among the middle class population. Fifthly, IPTA considered theatre in particular and cultural activism as a whole has an aim to spread the message of revolutionary reconstruction of the society, whereas Group Theatre consider theatre as an activism motivated towards spreading social awareness and experimentation in aesthetics of drama making.

Although the Group Theatre movement is not a uniform or homogeneous sum and includes within it activists from range of shades and hues, some of these groups supported the Left, more precisely the CPI(M) in particular and the Left Front in general in the face of assail from right wing political forces. Many of these groups or individual activists have frequently partook in the election campaigns with their street plays, poems and lectures, dance and songs in espousal of the contenders and parties of the Left Front. More significantly these groups persisted to perform Avant Garde experiments and supplemented to a vibrant theatre going tradition in West Bengal - a tradition which has in general windswept the contests of globalization. Group Theatre shared its experimental passion with theatre of the 1960s and 70s in almost all language of India.

This phenomenal growth of Group Theatre culture has been backed by at least three influential factors viz. firstly, planned and unplanned urbanization giving birth to sophisticated cosmopolitan culture in various parts of the state at different intensity; secondly, sprang of Naxalite Movement which was favoured by a section of theatre intellectuals who fled from Calcutta in the face of government repressive attitude to spread revolutionary basis of contemporary theatre all over West Bengal; and thirdly and perhaps most importantly, the attitude of the Left Front Government towards vibrant Group Theatre culture in the state and the policies taken thereof to nurture the same.

3.3. SPREAD OF URBANIZATION AND GROUP THEATRE CULTURE IN WEST BENGAL

Although the recent trends of Urbanization in West Bengal is in evolution and this, along with the persistence of a 'top heavy' urban arrangement and slow but sure deindustrialization, is distinguished by speedy expansion of informal employment, a diminishing tendency of urban-ward migration of male workers, the decelerate in the growth of cities and towns and the emergence of new urban centres. The processes and emerging forms of urban transition in West Bengal exhibits its longstanding history of 'mono-centric' urbanization. Where sub-urban conglomerations and settlements use to develop as satellites of the metropolitan centres following the British legacy of urban development. The cultural and social ethos and practices of such suburban settlements was, then, highly influenced by the 'centre', if not dependent. The observation is similarly applicable in the emergence and growth of Group Theatres in the district headquarters adjoining to Calcutta. Popular Group Theatres of Calcutta were being invited to these towns and semi-urban localities to perform at temporarily decorated stages with rented infrastructures brought from Calcutta. Although IPTA worked to spread the socialist cultural spirit through mobile campaign and establishing the branches of the organisation throughout West Bengal, it remain limited, again, to the district headquarters.

But since 1970s it revealed that urbanization in the state is no longer confined to a few pockets, as many new urban centres have emerged away from them and small towns are growing at relatively faster rates compared to the cities. Durgapur in Burdwan district, Kalyani in Nadia, Baharampur in Murshidabad, Balurghat in South Dinajpur, Siliguri in Darjeeling, Haldia in Medinipur emerged as grown urban centres with gradual expansion of civic infrastructures like universities, medical colleges, wholesale markets, administrative offices etc. and due to 'pull factor' of urbanization people migrated from outskirts to settle down in these areas. Sooner these areas were elevated to be served under Municipal administration from their previous status under Panchayat system. These settlements became the melting pot of traditional folk and educated middle class culture and sophisticated urban post-colonial culture brought in by professionals like university teachers, doctors, administrators, bank officials and many such persons who returned to their homes after pursuing higher studies in Calcutta and brought back their experiences of remaining associated with the mainstream cultural activism there. Since these small locality grew crowded, few dynamic gentlemen use to take initiative to produce a drama getting youngsters together on the occasion of Vijaya Dashami, the final eve of the worship of goddess Durga along with other cultural performances. These amateur ventures gradually became an annual ritual and quit popular. Most of the productions were recreational comedy or based on certain social issues. Initially for the female casting young men use to make up and act like women, however, in later periods women from respectable families were invited to take part in these roles under the careful observation of their in-laws, yet unmarried young girls were debarred of such opportunity. All these gave the impetus to a theatre enthusiasm amongst the new generation organisers of various clubs and associations and the dramatic productions increased in numbers in different occasions like celebration of Tagore's Birthday, observing the Annual Day of the organisation etc. Donations from elite families were available to fund the productions. As soon the vital input of Calcutta-bound 'Director' for the theatre was available in these small towns, who brought with them modernised language in theatre being experimented and improvised at Calcutta a serious boost came in. Associations and clubs took initiative

to built permanent stage and hall to rehearse and perform theatre at regular interval. Number of Group Theatres appeared in the district headquarters and surroundings. The number increased rapidly as their productions could attain large viewership.

Few such instances can be cited in this context.

Shri Hari Madhab Mukhopadhyay took his Master's degree in commerce from Calcutta University and started his career as a lecturer in commerce at Balurghat College in 1967. During his formative years he learnt the skills of theatre working under the guidance of directors such as Jagamohan Mazumdar and Ajitesh Banerjee. In 1969 he established the Triteertha theatre group at Balurghat which produced many plays including *Teen Bigyani, Jal, Galileo* and *Devanshi*.

Asit Bandopadhyay, a veteran actor of Nandikar who accompanied Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, the stalwart of modern Bengali theatre, in many plays came to Siliguri during 1971 on official assignments as sub-registrar of land settlement department of West Bengal. He became associated with Mitra Sammilani, the oldest dramatic club of the town and directed productions like *Bitangsha, Kobi Kahini, Ek Je Chhilo Ghora*.

Sandip Bhattacharya graduated from National School of Drama, New Delhi specializing in Design and Direction in 1994, that too after doing Spl. Honours in Dramatic Arts at Rabindra Bharati University. As the director of Rangashram, a renowned group theatre from Baharampur he has produced many acclaimed dramatic productions like *Madhyanya Surya, Mobarak*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's Macbeth, *Monideepa, Protarak, Santaap, Aamar Mukher Ancholkhani*, bio-theatre based on the life of Zohra Saigal.

Santanu Das completed his graduation in Dramatics from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata and later obtained Diploma in Dramatics from National School of Drama, New Delhi. He started his career as director in Kalyani Kalamandalam to produce Leo Tolstoy's *Power of Darkness*, Badal Sarkar's *Ebom Indrajit*, Bertolt Brecht's *Aiin*, Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Charit Manas*, Jean Anouilh's *Romeo Jeannette*,

a Bangladeshi Ballad *Malua Sundarir Pala* based on Moimansingha Gitika, and his own *Asangati, Raisin in the Sun, Paglir Danga, Manush - Manushi, Oedipus Turranus, Ghare Baire, Seturam, Durghatanabasata and Gollacuht*.

The underlying factors of this transition are associated with the dispersal of economic activities and employment opportunities away from the metropolises. Until recently, trade and commerce were the mainstays of these settlements' economies. Since the beginning of the last two decade, real estate developers and private industrial and mining companies have begun to show a keen interest in these settlements, as they are outside the purview of the stringent rules and regulations applicable to statutory towns. In these marginal urban territories, access to and transformation of land is far easier. Some of these towns retain their 'census town' status for decades without achieving an urban status, even if they fulfil the threshold conditions. Furthermore, such sporadic urbanization fuelled by the growth of small cities and towns which have a weak economic base, a crisis of urban governance and inadequate access to basic amenities within a short period face several civic, criminal, political, and lifestyle-value crisis. The traditional ethos of semi-urban localities were being greatly challenged by an outgrowth of cosmopolitan mode of socio-cultural affairs and critical mixture of cross-community values.

A resourceful band of indigenous playwrights emerged to highlight and seek solutions to the surfaced and perpetuating problems of common middleclass in the growing towns. Mohit Chattopadhyay, Manoj Mitra, Chandan Sen, Ramaprasad Banik, Indrashish Lahiri, Debashish Majumdar, Shyamaltanu Dasgupta, Amal Roy, contributed to the plethora of original plays. In fact, the brilliance of the restricted number of worthwhile plays and productions made people aware of the generally inspiring theatre prospect. During these decades, we find new group of actors and directors who held out pledge of trailblazing imagination and originality appeared in these growing cities. Many of them showed enough competence and innovation in their productions even to the extent that talented actors from small towns were being pulled to the theatrical affairs in the metropolis. Rita Dutta Chakraborty from

Balurghat, Bindia Ghosh from Kalyani, Goutam Haldar from Ranaghat, Sanjib Sarkar from Gajol, are few names that readily came into mind. But such number has remained sadly small. But back in the growing urban areas, this affluence of actors, directors, playwrights favoured the plenty naissance of group theatres.

There was a favourable growth in the viewership of these theatres also, among various sections. Following the commendable endeavours of Shoubhanik to establish an alternative stage at the makeshift Mukta Angan in south Calcutta during the sixties and seventies, when several important experimental productions were performed there, number of Group Theatres came together to form platforms to popularise theatres and had the conviction to establish Mukta Mancha or an open air theatre shows at the weekend constructing temporary stages made of wooden planking and back curtain fixed from two bamboo pillars. Associated groups used to perform there at regular basis in rotation before the audience free to watch the shows. Little by little the increase of number in audience was visible as there were limited sources of entertainment available to these localities. Slowly but steadily Group Theatres could attain the central position of mass-entertainment during this transition period and men associated with theatre activism were being considered progressive cultural workers dedicated to the emancipation of public taste from mere recreational need to thoughtful viewership.

Group theatres gained a position of leadership since the late 60s, but this did not mean that the commercial Bengali theatre went to decline. Seasoning periods of uncertainty, crises and temporary closures it tried to bounce back to recover during the same period, its lost ground of lack of patronage of the general audience. Astutely, it introduced in its menu of sentimental blend, melodrama and spoonful of sex, fake orientations to social purposes and gimmicky stagecraft. Group Theatres spoke loud against such denigration of social values and culture. A stormy wave of protest emerged in the leadership of Group Theatres when *Samrat O Sundari* was launched at Sarcarina in North Calcutta that contained some seductive content and luring cabaret dance in 1980.

Another aspect of the then Group Theatre culture was a renewed questioning mood about the nature of social problems and searched for the answer even to the springs of individual motives and behaviour. There has been a shift from excessive fixation with politics, on the whole. Group Theatre in its long history has shown a surprising resilience. But when there was an disturbing plunge in social values and standards in, it would be unrealistic to expect resurrection of social ethos by the creative enterprise of Group Theatres only.

There was no scarcity of talent. Therefore, the willingness of Group Theatre to accept risks and venture into untried but well-thought-out experiments was of course a affable ambience for nurturing talent. The boast of enterprise which is symptomatic of dynamism have been compounded by patronage from the government and institutional or corporate bodies. It was a phase when Bengali theatre has no more been prone to rely on foreign plays and ideas, but also sources other than the sustaining support of ticket-buying discerning viewers in various theatre festivals.

3.4. NAXALITE MOVEMENT AND GROUP THEATRE CULTURE IN WEST BENGAL.

The Naxalbari peasant insurrection of 1967 was the dawn of a new thoughts that left a profound, pan-India impression on art, culture and literature. The creative imagination of movements stimulated by Naxalbari, and the firmament of their ambitions are far more immense than their geo-political scope.

The very traits of Charu Mazumdar, the engineer of this upheaval, was genuinely cultural. Since his youth Charu Mazumdr along with his political work in Siliguri, took initiative of organizing innovative cultural programmes on occasions like the 'Ravindra-Nazrul-Sukant-Jayanti' (celebration of birthdays of three most prominent poets of Bengal) and the 'Poila Baishakh' (first day of the Bengali calendar year) at the Mitra Sammilani club. During 1967 uprising, journalists from national and international media used to frequently visit Charu Majumdar's house. A journalist

from Dharmyug once asked him, "There is a photo of Rabindranath Tagore in your home, do you believe in him?" Charu Majumder replied, "It is not a question of believing or not believing. It is a question of interpreting the positive aspects of a great craftsman". He then melodiously went on to recite Rabindra's poem 'Mrityunjay'.

The pioneer Group Theatre of Siliguri, Kotha O Kalam used to rehearse at his residence. While staging Utpal Dutta's *Kallol* in 1968 at Mitra Sammilani under the direction of Asit Guha, the actors as rebellion sailors of Naval Mutiny (1946) shouted the slogan "Naxalbari Zindabad". In 1964 when doctors detected Charu Majumdar with a critical heart ailment and his Party was unresponsive to take responsibilities of his treatment, Katha O Kalam staged performances to collect money to raise fund for his treatment. Charu Majumder did not attend the CPI's 6th Vijayawada Congress in 1961, as in those days he remained busy in directing plays. He spent his time conducting rehearsals for 'Katha O Kalam' preparing Manik Bandopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* to play.

His friend Saroj Datta was not only a revolutionary but also an exceptional Bengali poet. Sameer Mitra, Murari Mukhopadhyay, and Dronacharya Ghosh were also Bengali poets who took part in the Naxalbari insurrection and died due to atrocity of the police. Malayalam poet Satchidanandan, Telugu poet Jwalamukhi and Bengali playwright Badal Sarkar had given statements against such violence and noted down their protest in writing to the Governor of West Bengal. Srijan Sen's 'Thana Garad Theke Maake', Ranjit Gupta's 'Open Letter' and Mahashweta Devi's novel 'Hazar Churasir Maa' are also some esteemed rendering of this feeling of pain. Besides, Vinay Ghosh, Kamlesh Sen, Partho Bandopadhyay, Virendra Chattopadhyay, Amit Das, Kesto Podel, Shobhan Som, Anindya Basu, Satyen Bandopadhyay, Tushar Chand, Sameer Roy, Arjun Goswami, Amiyo Chattopadhyay, Manibhushan Bhattacharya, Indra Chaudhury and Alok Basu left their ineffaceable mark on the Bengali poetry of the 70s and 80s in the spirit of Naxalbari Movement.

"Theatre was another space in this cultural milieu where Naxalbari emerged as a major theme. The subversive potential of theatre - of representing an alternative reality through performances - has always appealed to the political activists. The significance of this space could be felt when Utpal Dutta [...] wrote and produced *Teer* (Arrow) in December 1967, based on the Naxalbari uprising, and was arrested even before he could appear in its first performance. Several other plays were written at that time with Naxalite protagonists, for example Anal Gupta's *Rakter Rong* (Colour of Blood) (1978) and Amal Roy's *Aat Jora Khola Chokh* (Eight Pairs of Open Eyes)(1970), and their political ideology has been analysed, questioned and appreciated from various perspectives. The Government Reactions to performances of these plays was predictably repressive." [Sinha Roy, Mallarika; *Gender and Radical Politics in India : Magic Moments of Naxalbari (1967-1975)*; Routledge; New Delhi; 2010]

The indomitable guts of Naxalbari struggle, both directly and indirectly, spirited the Group Theatre movement for quite a long period. The productions of various Group Theatres became the mirror of a turbulent time. Other than Little Theatre Group of Utpal Dutta, Charbak, under the direction of Jochhan Dastidar produced **Amar Vietnam** (1967) and Theatre Workshop produced *Vietnam*(1967) under the direction of Bibhash Chakraborty to show solidarity to the revolutionary guerilla fighters hailed by the Naxalites, Theatre Study performed *Samadhan* (1967) by Bertolt Brecht under the direction of Anal Gupta. In 1968 Little Theatre Group of Utpal Dutta staged *Manusher Adhikare*, Anamika under the direction of Shyamananda Jalan produced *Evam Indrajeet*, Simantik produced *Palabadal* directed by Chiraranjan Das. Utpal Dutta joined Bibek Jatra Samaj to compose *Shon Re Malik* (1969) while his Little Theatre Group produced *Leniner Dake* (1969), Mass Theatre produced Manik Bandopadhyay's *Haranaer NaatJaamai* (1969) directed by Jnanesh Mukhopadhyay, Charan Dal staged *Laal Lanthan* (1969) directed by Indrajit Sen. These years experienced remarkable allegiance of Group Theatre movement with the radical spirit of Naxalbari movement.

Many other popular groups also revealed their sympathy, if not directly, to Naxalbari movement in different ways. Like in Chak Bhanga Modhu produced by Theatre Workshop and written by Manoj Mitra loudly pronounced the line of killing of class enemies. Nandikar, passively protested against the cruelty of the police over the Naxalite political workers in the publicity of their production Antigone saying "Up in the sky, vultures are flying over Kolkata in search of dead bodies, down there on the stage we are producing Antigone". (my translation) [Mitra, Partha Pratim; *Naxalbarir Fulki - Sanskritir Ful Ki ?* (Is the sparkles of Naxalbari blooming flower in cultural world?); Uttarbhumi; April Issue; 2005]

Playwrights like styled their dramatic creations in tune with the Naxalbari movement. Manoranjan Biswas wrote *Padatik, Ranaskhetre Achhi, Ekmatra Ashtra*; Shyamaltanu Dasgupta scripted *Sheeter Aagun, Agnigarva Hekempur, Teerbiddha Shikar*; Amal Roy penned *Biplaber Gaan, Bastil Bhangchhe, Bidroher Theatre*; Jochhan Dastidar composed *Gadya Padya Prabandha*; Amitava Gupta wrote *Himalayer Cheya Bhari*; Satyen Bhadra developed *Jabanika Kampaman* and many more. Amal Chakraborty wrote and directed *Shatabdir Pare* to be produced by Damama, followed by his other productions like *Tajmahal, Pratishruta Abhimunya* and *Pother Dabi* based on the novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay.

Rustam Bharucha writes that in 1970 Calcutta was a city almost under cordon as the presence of paramilitary troops and police search parties could be experienced almost everywhere in the city, and yet the audience would multitudes to gaze at dramatic productions on Naxalbari movement. [Bharucha, Rustam; *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theater of Bengal*; Seagull Books; Calcutta; 1983]. Under the threat, many political radical activists and intellectuals escaped from Kolkata on the advice of the party to go undercover or were sent to form grass root level organization or consolidate the cultural spirit of villages and suburban areas to the spirit of revolutionary culturalism. Thus, a boost was received in the Group Theatre culture in the growing towns throughout West Bengal. That also helped in the

growth of Group Theatres in number. And among all form of cultural activism, Group Theatres took the leading role towards ideolizing the performing spaces. Charu Majumder, consecrated to revolutionary songs and drama, was in opposition to the formation of people's theatre organizations as he felt that these would become middle class hubs. But several cultural and literary associations were born as the self-styled cultural front of the revolutionary movement he led.

When Kanu Sanyal headed a mass gathering to affirm the party's severance from the CPI(M) in May 1969, he chose Calcutta's largest open area, Maidan, to do so. Certainly, public spaces such as the Maidan and alike urban playgrounds such as the Azad Hind Park in College Square were the most commonly used spots of accumulate and amass before the party was proclaimed to be illegal. The Naxalite activists also utilized public squares and avenues for other forms of Agit-Prop, such as disseminating leaflets, writing on walls to announce solidarity with Vietnam and China, and metaphorically glorifying the martyrs who died in police encounter. It was perchance within these common spaces that the Naxalites and their enthusiasts also retained their most creative designs of mustering urban populations – by means of street theatres and performances. At Curzon Park in Kolkata where Prabir Dutt was victimized during the show of *Mukti Ashram* (1974), Badal Sarkar staged his play *Juloos* in his memory at the same place exactly one month later on 24 August 1974. Badal Sarkar founded the Third Theatre in the 70s. Third Theatre was less expensive, extremely flexible and could be easily taken to remote countryside. His debut production to have experimented with the new form was the play *Sagina Mahto* in 1969. In subsequent period he went on producing *Juloos*, *Voma*, *Basi Khabar* and *Khat-Maat-King* in this genre from his group Shatabdi . The image of resistance of the 70s can be seen in many excerpt from *Voma*. Often symbolic and always moralistic, Third Theatre had the competence to create a center of attention and address a big and diverse audience. This is because of their non-institutionalized nature, as they were extemporized performances in public areas and allow in audiences free of expense. Their most significant purpose of their capability to actively connect audiences was to involve them with the fundamental ideology of

the movement and to provide visual presentations of the ideal proletarian hero or heroine, whose actions preempted the formation of a revolutionary society.

3.5. EFFORT TO INSTITUTIONALISE THE GROUP THEATRE CULTURE BY THE LEFT FRONT GOVERNMENT.

The first ever non-congress government to have come to rule in any province of the nation were the Lefts at Kerala that showed the path and possibilities of breaking the myth of personal influence over the population by the gigantic nationalist leaders of Congress. Facts have shown that the cultural activism played a pivotal role in the installation of the Communist government in Kerala. Although the experience was not much similar in the case of West Bengal, the cultural activism worked as a stimuli here as well. The Lefts in West Bengal had been associated to many anti-incumbency movement of the people like Te-Bhaga Movement (1946-47), Anti-Tram Fare Hike Movement (1953), Teachers' Movement (1954), Movement against proposed merger of Bengal and Bihar (1956), Food Movement (1959), Second Food Movement (1966) along with their attempts to intense political mobilization on the issues since independence and partition of the nation. There can be hardly any denial of the fact that the Lefts could retain the ruling power for such a long period due to their longstanding record in labour and peasants movement backed by the strong mechanism of propaganda through its cultural wings.

Sooner the Left Front government came to power, the millage the Lefts took from the committed cultural workers' relentless campaign and propagation was to be recognised and acknowledged. The Left Front government made no mistake to extend its patronage and support to nurture the revolutionary cultural activism to virtually turn it to pro-establishment advocacy. This gradually led to institutionalization of what was predominantly a movement and activism. But the task was not that easy. The variety of cultural activities from a range of Folk Cultures to Group Theatre was a complex arena to deal. There were sustained difference of opinion, ego-centric contradictions, charges of nepotism and much more melodrama. But in

ultimate, the highly regimented and cadre based organisation of the Lefts took an effective control to stabilise the situation and bring it to their favour as the government on the other hand was extending institutional support in the form of establishing co-ordination organisations, funding, awards and honours to the activists, study and research facilities etc.

Amongst the popular theatre groups working towards excellence in theatre, Bohurupee was the first to have received production grants from Sangeet Natak Akademi, regularly. Since 1956 Bohurupee received financial assistance in lakhs. One probable ground behind this special treatment to Bohurupee might be the closeness of its mentor, Sambhu Mitra, with the governing Congress Party at the centre and the state [Chaudhuri, Darshan. *Theatrewala Utpal Dutt*; Sahitya Prakashan; Kolkata; 2007; p. 381].

In 1965, *Sanjukta Ganashilpi Sanstha*, a joint forum of Groups Theatres protested against such discrimination on the part of the central government in distribution of grants and issued a public avowal which proclaimed that "A comprehensive conspiracy has been initiated by the government to take advantage of the poverty of artists and theatre groups by luring them with grants and awards and turning them into sycophants by dissociating them from common people. But this forum will carry on its continued ideological struggle against those opportunist, compromising theatre groups, dramatists and theatre workers who today are showing extraordinary zeal to create Nabanatya by totally ignoring Gananatya movement and trampling on its great heritage" [Sarkar, Pabitra; *Natmancha Natyarup*; Dey's Publishing; Kolkata; 2008; p.302].

As the Left Front government arrived to power in 1977, the foremost steps of Ministry of Information and Culture of the government was to streamline the rapidly increasing alternative cultural activities in the state. To that purpose, *Jatra-Natak-Lokranjan Advisory Council* was constituted on 12 August 1978 and the ministry decide to extend an annual financial grants of Rs. 1,15,000 that would be given to

groups as well as individuals operating in the field of jatra and group theatre. But within a while a massive controversy surfaced with the allegations of deliberate nepotism against a few members in the advisory council by a section of the print media. The media brought into light that the panel of the advisory council that included the mentors of Theatre Workshop, Mass Theatre and Charbak, decided to award onetime production grants of Rs,10,000 (each) to their own groups. The panel which selected Chetna, People's Little Theatre and Theatre Commune as the recipient of best production awards of Rs.8,000(each) constituted of Arun Mukherjee, the director of Chetna, Utpal Dutt, the headman of Peoples' Little Theatre and Nilkantha Sengupta the mentor of Theatre Commune. Bibhas Chakrabarty and Rudraprasad Sengupta were also the members of the selecting committee who were adjudged to be the best director and best actor, respectively, in the individual category. Furthermore, no single award in the individual category was conferred to any artist from outside Kolkata. The government, however, tried to save its face by submitting that "the committee [could] not leave out such experienced theatre people" and that "their mere presence" as members of the expert panel hardly proves charges of "nepotism" [Ghosh, Dharani; *Towards a Rich Theatre; The Statesman*; 5 Dec. 1983].

However, on 14th May 1980 through a gazette notification issued by Ministry of Culture of the Government of West Bengal, existing committee was announced to be 're-formed' and reconstituted as a course correction measure. Yet the indictments of alleged 'error of judgment' by committee members prolonged to stumble the public sphere. Eminent journalist Dharani Ghosh wrote in the article referred earlier published in the Statesman that, although Arun Mukherjee won the award as best director in the individual category for the year 1981-82, "his last production, Jagannath was produced in 1977". It was rather unfortunate to have observed that groups theatres led by famous directors or actors like Bohurupee, People's Little Theatre, Chetna, Theatre Workshop, Sudrak, were being favoured in two ways like firstly being chosen over other smaller groups operating from small provincial

towns in distribution of grants and secondly being represented by their mentors in the committee to decide the distribution of funds.

In a letter to the Minister for Information and Cultural Affairs written on 16th August 1979, Tapas Sen a veteran theatre artist and a member of the *Jatra-Natak-Lokranjan Advisory Council* expressed his mental languishment and disappointment over the activities of the council that could achieve very few of its objectives within the span of an year of its constitution. He indirectly charged the bureaucratic way of thinking of the Ministry for such a stalemate in making decision to have received a rather impolite reply on 21st November 1979 by Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, the Minister in Charge for Information and Cultural Affairs countering that the way the matter was brought to him by a member of the council " was neither necessary nor desirable". [Bhattacharya, Buddhadev; *Letter to Tapas Sen :: 21 November 1979*; Natyashodh Sansthan Library; Calcutta. 1979].

Tapas Sen issued a press statement on 16th September 1980, wherein he held the Left Front government responsible for assuming a careless move towards working out the hindrances of progressive theatre movement in the state saying "The Working Committee and the two other Sub-committees took up their work in right earnest and met quite frequently, going into various problems in the field. But within a year they had lost their earlier enthusiasm with all their initiatives virtually suppressed by the bureaucracy. Decisions were taken at the meeting after great deliberation, the recommendations were forwarded to the Minister concerned, but they were never implemented..." [Sen, Tapas; *Press Statement: Theatre - Jatra - Folk Entertainment Advisory Committee and other activities*; 16 September 1980. Natyashodh Sansthan Library; Kolkata].

The most elaborated enterprise implemented by the Left Front government to actualise authoritative control over the group theatre movement by the mechanism of the state was accomplished through the establishment of Paschim Banga Natya Akademi in 1987. Soon after its establishment it extended special production grants

of Rs. 1,62,950 and Rs.3,61,000 was given to Peoples' Little Theatre in 1989 and 1990 for producing *Chaitali Rater Swapno*, based on the translation of A Mid-Summer Night's Dream of William Shakespeare by Utpal Dutta and *Balidan*, a Rabindranath Tagore's play. In 1996 seven veteran directors from various theatre groups were given one time honourarium of Rs. 20,000 each for their outstanding contribution to the cause of Group Theatre movement. During March next year more than 61 such veteran actors, directors, dramatists, production artists and critics were felicitated by the government for their commitment and role in the progress of group theatre movement.

Since 1970s the vibrant group theatre culture in West Bengal has been hegemonized by the Left Front with an organized manoeuvring of amateur group theatres through grants, awards and other formats of benefaction and patronage. Furthermore the bureaucratic machinery functioning under the Ministry of Culture have extended its absolute throttlehold on less popular group theatres by sustaining a scrupulous dictate on allocation of theatre halls like Rabindrasadan, Girish Mancha and others that run under the state subsidies.

The present study conducted throughout 19 districts of the state where 932 Group Theatres are regularly performing to produce theatrical productions has someway been facilitated by the Left Front Government during decades under scrutiny. Some has received the production grant from Paschim Banga Nattya Academy, majority of these Groups has been invited to produce dramatic shows at theatre festivals in various districts at terms on rotation and were paid lump sum production cost and travelling expenses, some received special grants to host theatre workshops where all resource persons were paid handsome remuneration by the Department of Information and Culture, mentors of many of these Groups remain associated with Nattya Academy as members representing their respective districts or region, many of them were awarded with prestigious awards named after the doyens of modern Bengali theatre. Following are the distribution of benefits by Left Front Government availed by the Group Theatres.

Recipient of State Govt.'s Production Grants	369
Recipient of State Govt.'s Asset Development Grants	473
Recipient of State Govt.'s Theatre Workshop Grants	118
Invited to State Govt. sponsored Theatre Festivals	873
Recipient of State Govt.'s Awards for Theatre	614
Member of the various Govt. Committees on development of Theatre	199
Resource Person in Theatre Workshop	118
Total number of recipient Group Theatres	932

Table :: 2 *Distribution of Government Grants and other benefits to Group Theatres (1977-2007)*

By means of this the mainstream Group Theatres were tamed to act pro-establishment and as a machinery to champion the cause of public policies adopted by the Left Front Government from time to time like Land Reforms, Panchayat system etc, and many of these Groups even went to produce electoral street plays in favour of the Left Front during electoral campaign.

As the Group Theatre were participating in the in the electoral campaign process of the state being a influential mechanism of propaganda, the unease of the ruling government heightened further, by mid 50s. A group of Leftist theatre performers both from Group Theatres over and above disintegrated sections of IPTA's Bengal faction underwent producing and performing street plays filled with political messages on behalf of the Communist Party of India as effective apparatus of election campaigns. The majority of these street shows were developed to visualize and predict a definite adherent ideology, the central theme being the "class-conflict" yet bespoke according to the requirement of the local conditions and concerns.

Two general tendencies was visible within the subject matter of such 'election drama'

- (a) to reveal the rampant corruption, enormous torture and communal conspiracies of the imperialist forces and their bourgeois agents as anti-Left ruling political parties; and
- (b) to implant the very fundamentals of communist ideology in the mindset of the electorate.

Like Panu Pal's *Vanga Bandar* (1951) and *Voter Vet* (1952) or Utpal Dutta's *Janatar Afim* (1991) numerous such explicitly propagandist 'election drama's were produced and performed by Leftist campaigners through theatre activism that played a momentous job in the installation and consolidation of Left Front's rule in West Bengal. Utpal Dutt contributed a lot in the scope of this "election drama" with his *Naya Tughlak* (1955) and *Special Train* (1961) and many more in later years. Dutta's *Din Badaler Pala* (1967) was the first of its kind street theatre in West Bengal, that portrayed the court case scene against a Communist leader who was wrongly blamed by the state machinery of assassinating a policeman during the Food Uprising in 1966. This short span play is regarded as a genuine trend setter in the history of Bengali street theatre. Pramode Dasgupta, the front rank leader of CPI(M), acknowledged the role of this street play, *Din Badaler Pala*, in achieving the espousal of voters in favour of the Left Front.

During 1960s and 1970s abundant such dramatic pieces scripted and acted by a range of Group Theatres played a imperative task in strengthening the political perceptions of the working class of the pastoral in addition to municipal area on the side of Leftist political parties. It was obvious, then, that the course of the progression of an artistry branded for its spirit "of resistance" in postcolonial Bengal, at this very critical juncture of the history, came to be seized by particular brand of political ideology. But the previous generation of theatre activists, particularly the vigorous splinter group allied with IPTA, deliberately refused to accept the barefaced intrusion of politics in their artistic creations. It was clearly visible that during the late 1970s and 80s the issue of belonging or not belonging to a specific kind of political creed became dominant zeal to debate among the Group Theatre performers. Thus came the famous saying of Sri Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the then Minister of Information and Culture, Govt. of West Bengal, " We have numerous group theatres [sic] in the state [West Bengal]. They are primarily perceiving the dialectics and problems of this social-system and explaining them in their own way. To them our question is that in this cultural revolution there are two rival camps

Congress and Left Front...to which do you belong" [Mukherjee, Kuntal; *Theatre O Rajniti: Ekti Samajtattik Bislesan*; Natyachinta Foundaion; Kolkata; 2002].

As a matter of the fact, the promising variety of 'progressive' Group Theatres, spirited high in Leftist ideological cultural tradition, harbingered a marked deviation from the essence of political theatre of IPTA in pre-independence and next-to-independence period, that gave a clarion call for a radical conquering of the bourgeois political system. One may note the most fundamental fixations of cultural agitation of the Leftist political theatre of the IPTA paradigm as to stand in protest against colonialist legal system, the rural-urban socio-economic divide, the hegemonic domination of fascist/imperial forces on administrative power etc. Gradually these ultimate had been toned down to a momentous extent through the post-independence Group Theatre movement. Involvement of the Leftist political parties in a election-oriented, quasi-liberal parliamentary politics created an inexorable bearings on the kind of party line propaganda plays that were being developed to serve the immediate political interest of the Left political party, and not the ideology at large.

Majority of the plays of such election campaign theatre endeavoured neither at an absolute denunciation of the existing political edifice nor does it demand a revolutionary deposing of the bourgeois state machinery. Rather such theatrical adventures were aimed at a 'constructive criticism' of the intrinsic shortcomings in the contemporary socio-political systems. As the first Left Front Government was formed in 1977 in West Bengal, the time-honoured characteristics of the Leftist theatre activism towards a 'resistance theatre' was, ultimately, terminated. This was a critical phase of grave ideological predicament for 'resistance theatre' in West Bengal because, for the first time in its convincingly drawn out history, the very reason of its origin and existence, that is the removal of the government of the bourgeois parties had become a reality.

Since that phase of its span Group Theatre movement momentarily became the 'instrument of apology' for the lacunas in public service of the ruling coalition rather than an 'instrument of protest' for the downtrodden. [Majumder, S. S; *Political Theatre in Calcutta : Bertolt Brecht in Context*; Unpublished dissertation; Department of English, Guahati University; 2009] The ideological stalemates on aesthetics encountered by the theatre activists ever since the Left Front came to power in West Bengal has been summarised by Harimadhab Mukhopadhyay, one of the leading actor, director, playwright from North Bengal - "Before the Left Front came to power we thought we were moving towards a definite ideological stand (even if we shelved direct ideology and direct politics) which would herald some kind of a change – a social change, a progressive change...This was before the Front took over. When the desired change in politics came through, with the Front coming to power, the relationship started changing and dilution set in"[Ghosh, Nema; *Dramatic Moments: Photographs and Memories of Calcutta Theatre from the Sixties to the Nineties*; Seagull Books; Calcutta; 2000].

Noted playwright, director Asit Bose, also expressed his frustration as is experienced by a segment of group theatre practitioners, who are already totally disheartened by the policies of Natya Akademi. To quote him - " If I have to go to Writers' Buildings, to plead for the basic facilities for my theatre, I'd rather give up theatre. The present government has destroyed the guts of this theatre by distributing grants, 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 the core of that protest has been nationalized" [Bose, Asit. *A theatre idiom of my own*; in Anjum Katyal (ed.) *Nine Lives*; Special issue of *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*; 29/30 June 2001; p. 76-96]

It is proved that extreme intercessions of political leaders in affairs of organization and routine operations of the Group Theatre had a calamitous and tragic effect on

their augmentation. Sooner the Front government began erecting stress on the Group Theatre by means of the interference of party leaders, for example, in course of the campaign for the state Assembly Election of 1988 leaders of Left Front urged the Group Theatre fraternity to "...showcase the achievements of the Left Front Government...and...expose the torture and the reign of terror of Congress rule...and inform people about what we [Left Front] are doing", and the Group Theatre started to comply with such irrelevant propositions, the movement gradually derailed. [Mukherjee, Kuntal; *Theatre O Rajniti: Ekti Samajtattik Bislesan*; Natyachinta Foundaion; Kolkata; 2002]

As long as the left was in the opposition, it seems, the activists thought there was a point to it. After 1977, and more so after 1982, it appeared to many among them that the exercise had lost its raison d'etre... the crisis in the Group Theatre as a fallout of the much bigger crisis in the constitutional left movement of the country. The rhetoric began to sound empty, meaningless, as a political practice inevitably veered round towards pragmatism with all its unpalatable consequences. One of them was that the romantic 'bhadrak' fantasy of a revolution gradually faded away. [Ghosh, Parimal; *Rise and Fall of Calcutta's Group : Theatre The End of a Political Dream*; Economic and Political Weekly; Vol. XLVII No. 10; March, 10, 2012]

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