

**An**  
**ABSTRACT**  
**of Doctoral Thesis on**

**POLITICS OF GENDER IN PERFORMANCE :**  
**A STUDY OF GROUP THEATRE PRODUCTIONS**  
**DURING LEFT FRONT RULE IN WEST BENGAL**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE**  
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The cultural history of West Bengal reveals the note that for more than three decades the themes of the mainstream theatrical activities in the state has been predominantly pro-leftist in approach. A strong Leftist cultural tradition, like I.P.T.A movement, had set forth the backdrop of the genesis and augmentation of Group Theatre activities, which was further nurtured and patronised by the Left Front Government. Therefore, this mutually reciprocal relationship between the two major aspects of the present study has contributed to a unique politico-cultural symbiosis in West Bengal.

The transition of Bengali Theatre from People's Theatre (I.P.T.A) to Neo Theaterism (led by some departed stalwarts of the I.P.T.A movement like Sombhu Mitra) to the contemporary Group Theater had been an influential shift in paradigm in the cultural history of Bengal after the partition. Amateur theatre in the form of Group Theatre in West Bengal became the mainstream of Bengali theatre almost at the same span of time that the Left Front regime was installed and consolidated in the state. To a greater extent majority of the Group Theaters plotted their dramatic productions as to give passive support to the 'friendly government' in the power. Some of these groups even strongly propagated the gospel of Leftist political views through electoral campaigns. As courtesy to such a stance by the Group Theaters they received great endowment from the Left Front Government. Almost each of the towns theaters were established under the state sponsorship, the government also set up Paschim Banga Natya Academy to encourage the theatrical activities throughout the province, frequent Theatre Festivals, Workshops, Exhibitions were organized under the government patronage and government grants were pouring in for theatre. However, critics point out the silent process of bringing the Bengali theatre into the fold of an establishment. And the Bengali theatre had shown no will to expose on stage the oppressive face of the 'state power' maintaining the orthodox Marxist class-view. Gradually the dramatic productions of the Group Theatres of Bengal turned its face towards exploring the fragmented "personal crisis" of the individuals. And this trend has opened up a new vista for the Feminism in respect of the Bengali theatre. From the city of Kolkata to the mofussils, the life and the crisis of



the woman became the concern of Bengali theatre. Char Adhyay (1951), Voma (1976), Putul Khela (1977), Nathbati Anathbat (1983), Maa (1985), Vama (1990), Rudali (1992), Jejon Achhe Majhkhane (1995), Beti Ayee (1996), Jara Brishtite Vijejhilo (1997), Sanu Roy Choudhury (1998), Himmat Mai (1998), Mukti(1999), Suprova (2000), Natir Katha (2003) -- woman as the victim of semi-feudal exploitation; woman subjected to the attack of global consumerism; women of the epics improvised in the reality of the date; woman towards iconisation -- since 1978 till date 'the woman' is being developed from all possible creative perspectives in the contemporary arena of mainstream Bengali Theatre.

The proposed study has taken an empirical investigation in the interior of the contemporary Bengali Theatre and has collected the possible anecdotes of the theatrical productions of the leading Group Theatres spanning across the districts of West Bengal, i.e period of the performance, directorial improvisation, thematic discourse of the script (if the production is a manuscript-play), interconnectivity of the play with the contemporary social background, suggestions and messages conveyed through the production and the major critiques on the play as available. Based on the gathered primary data, the study has tried to locate all possible traits of the Leftist political regime in the conceptualization of the 'gender issues' in the modern Bengali theatrical constructs. The study has also tried to reach at a conclusion that may facilitate future researches in enriching the pool of interdisciplinary studies in other aspects of cultural life in other parts of our country.

The study has been historical, analytical in perspective and comparative in nature to be ascertained by both qualitative and quantitative methodology. All the relevant reports, government and other institutional sources, interviews, documents, books and articles was consulted to develop the study. Besides, several open ended interviews were undertaken to ascertain the qualitative inputs into the theme of gender, performance and politics. For the purpose personalities in the domain of art and performance, critics and academic experts in the field were interviewed.

The chronicles of theatre reveal a prosperous tradition of dramatic performances concentrating on socio-political agenda and currents that has deep or considerable impact in public life to seek attention, consciousness and reaction of the people. The Satires performed by the comic poets at the amphitheatres played influential role in the articulation, aggregation and exposition of public opinion in Hellenic democracies. Although the performance of Drama had ritualistic significance in the then Athenian society, the dramatists enhanced the scope of such performances towards examination of political issues and their relevance in the running of Polis or city-state centric rule. The splendours of such open-minded criticism of politically controversial and critical themes are drafted in the works of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Agathon and many others.

In the age of Renaissance, Shakespeare's plays were challenging the Christian traditional morality and ethos. "In his critique of *King Lear*, Swinburne valorizes Hellenic aestheticism over Christian morality, and argues that this play proves Shakespeare's sympathy with radical political causes. Indeed, Swinburne's rhetoric in *King Lear* inverts traditional reading of the play by promoting agnosticism over Christianity, aestheticism over morality. Critiques also observe the portrayal of struggle between various social groups in the Roman republics was central to Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, which is amid the minority of Shakespeare tragedies proscribed in a democracy in modern times. The drama was temporarily censored in France during late 1930s on the allegation that it exhibits certain fascist aspects, and Slavoj Zizek, recorded its embargo in Post-War Germany on the ground of its content of severe militarism.

In subsequent centuries, political theatre has evolved in depth and range. Eventually political theatre has associated itself with cabaret performances and indigenous folk theatre. Under the semblance, political theatre has cultivated itself as an agency of authentic alternative interaction inside the civil societies that are being ruled by oppressive governments and worked to proliferate the critical judgmental thought.



Political theatre, therefore, is a conscious attempt to endorse specific political stand or ideals, the most organized and comprehensive endeavour in this regard may be traced, in the recent history, in the left wing culturalism called Agitprop in erstwhile Soviet Russia, which gradually appeared as a methodology of phenomenal development of Marxist aesthetics amongst the global Lefts. Agitprop theatre as a highly politicized left-wing approach originated in 1920s to feature cardboard characters of flawless righteousness and absolute evil and its uncouth deride. Later the term became operational in any context whereby highly agitational contents were being performed in the arena of theatre.

Marxist aesthetics in theatre found further highly elaborate and sophisticated impetus in Bertolt Brecht's methodology of Epic Theatre. Brechtian approach to theatre methodology was far more rational than Agitprop. He introduced the mechanism of Alienation (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in theatre where an actor or group of actors suddenly use to start active communication with the audience, putting a halt in the story-telling, to wake them up from their involvement in the entertainment of the storyline and follow the inner ideological message of the dramatic content. This method emphasizes the socio-political content of drama, rather than its emotional manipulation of the audience or on the production's formal beauty. Brechtian approach became highly acclaimed in the Indian sub-continent and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Augusto Boal built on the Brechtian construct of *Lehrstücke* into an internationally admired technique of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, with its pervasive varieties of 'forum theatre' and 'invisible theatre'. Boal intended to break the four walls of a theatre hall, which he considered, elitist, and built theatre with portable, flexible and inexpensive components and items. In the perspective of those less-represented in a society, his style is effective as arms against tormenters. For Boal, there are three attributes of the aesthetic plot. First, is Plasticity, means that one may be somebody or something without actually being that entity. Objects can obtain diverse meaning like a piece of long cloth can substitute a river. He avows that just the duration and location of the object matters, rest all its features are counted as temporal and location can be

changed. Second, is the Dichotomy of the Space, i.e. the performing arena may conceive several layers of aesthetic spaces. This scheme insinuates that there are spaces within a space. The stage is in front of the audience is a space as a whole, yet the actors may create a market, a royal court, a roadway in between, a forest at a time within that whole space by means of suggestions and communications in theatrical language. Third, is Tele-microscopic. This idea denotes that it is difficult to put out of sight while some one is on the performing space. Each part and property of the space is visible and it may assemble the distant things in close-up views. Boals contribution ignited the emergence of Third Theatre movement across the world and the minimalistic approach, based on less properties, less stagecraft, less costume, less arrangements and more of choreography, more of bodily suggestions, more active participation without achieving much acting skill, became predominant methodology of political theatres. Theatre, then, moved out of its regular spaces and halls to be performed on streets, open spaces at the factory gates, market premises and places of public attention.

Political theatre in India has a profound legacy since 15th century when Bhakti Movement sprang out as a protest to typical domination of Brahmanism in the traditional Hindu society. Bhakti poets and saints spread and sustain the spirit of assimilative and inclusive religious culture as against the mainstream Varna system prevalent in India throughout the length and breadth. The Kirtana and the Krishna Katha acts introduced by Sri Chaitanya in Nadia district of Bengal can be marked as a pioneering effort in this regard. Researchers have shown that at Vijayanagar in 1504, the ruler Veer Narasimhadeva Raya, sentenced some Kuchipudi dancers to death after their performance enacting the gruesome sufferings used by the oppressor king to extract taxes from the poor peasants.

The more prominent and impactful phase of political theatre in India began in the late 19th Century when dedicated patriots took theatre as an instrument against the suppressive restrictions imposed by colonial rulers on the publication and performance of anti-government dramas. Dinabandhu Mitra published *Neel Darpan*



in 1860 depicting the agony of the Bengali indigo cultivators being ruthlessly persecuted by the British planters. The play provoked strong public sentiment in Bengal against British rule and opened the way for a host of nationalist literary and dramatic works along similar lines elsewhere in the country. *Neel Darpan* was staged in Dhaka in 1861 and in the same year Reverend James Long translated the play into English for which he was imprisoned for a month under the charge of sedition. Great National Theatre, chaired by noted Bengali dramatist Girish Chandra Ghosh, produced *Neel Darpan* at Kolkata in 1872. In subsequent years plays like *Jamidar Darpan*(1873) based on peasant rebellion against the land-owning babus by Mir Masarraf Hossain, *Cha-Kar-Darpan*(1873) dealing with the poor working conditions at the British tea-estates in North Bengal and *Jel Darpan* (1875) depicting the terrible life of prisoners in the jail houses of Bengal by Dakshinaranjan Chattopadhyay, *Gajadananda O Jubaraj*(1876) by Amritalal Basu, a satirical account of a barrister named Jagadananda who had entertained the visiting Prince of Wales in his house and allowed the womenfolk of his family to meet him breaking the traditional practice of veil, *Surendra Binodini* (1876) by Upendranath Das on the similar spirit. Both the plays were promptly closed down by the government after the second night.

In the milieu of political theatre in India, the influence Socialist and Communist ideologies became prominent since late 30s. The accomplishment of Socialism in Soviet Russia thrilled the Indian playwrights and dramatists to design theatre to incite the spirit of both anti-colonial struggle as nearer objective and class struggle as the distant yet final goal. Thus, appeared in 1942, the most significant organization, Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA). IPTA initiated its move as a modest associate of the Left-wing Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Fraternity based in Calcutta. All legendary stalwarts in the arena of creative writing, painting and performance folk together to tour the country performing to aid the victims of the ruinous famine in Bengal in 1943 under the banner of IPTA. The famine took lives of more than two million people, moreover the rampant corruption, black marketing worsen the situation to catastrophe.

Gradually, theatre became an useful tool of propaganda for various programmes and manifestations by Left Trade Unions, Student Organizations, Peasants Associations in collaboration with the cultural wing of the party. With the installation of Left Front government in West Bengal and its adoption of Land Reforms policy and Panchayat System for rural development, theatre became a major agency of preaching the gospel of success of public policies of the government. Government, in return, extended resources to the theatre activists to fund Lokoranjan Shakha or the field publicity wing of the government under the Information and Cultural Ministry. Lokoranjan Shaka produced several dramatic productions like *Gulshan* (1975), *Amar Mati* (1982), *Hiseb Nebar Pala*(1983), *Dena Paona* (1984), *Rahumukta* (1985), *Rather Rashi* (1986) some of which were noted works of Rabindranath Tagore.

IPTA worked as the first largest platform for the women to participate in theatre since 1943. Dina Pathak, Shanta Gandhi, Gul Bardhan, Sova Sen, Geeta Sen, Reba Roychoudhury, Rekha Jain, Tripti Mitra, Preeti Banerjee, Chitra Sen were the stalwarts who travelled and performed extensively throughout the country with the Central Squad of the IPTA. Although, in fact, IPTA considered women's issues was only a part of a cluster of a range of social, economic, political and aesthetic problems.

All though the discourses on Feminist Theater has been largely Eurocentric and has ignored the possibilities of a Third World version of Feminist Theatre, there has been a consistent process of gendering the theatre in India and band of women playwrights, directors, actresses, critics and commentators extended vigorous efforts to surface women's issues through theatre since late 80s. Dramatic scripts have been developed based on the literary works of Maitreyi Devi, Ashapura Devi, Leela Majumdar, Mahasweta Devi, Bani Basu, Nabanita Dev Sen, Suchitra Bhattacharya, Tilottama Majumder in Bengali; Balamani Amma, K. Saraswati, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Asitha, Indu Menon in Malayalam; Malati Bedekar, Kamal Desai,



Gauri Deshpande, Girijabai Kelkar in Marathi; Varsha Adalia, Esha Dadawala, Dhiruben Patel in Gujrati; Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Indira Raisom Goswami in Assamese; Ismat Chughtai, Saliha Abid Hussain, Zahida Zaidi in Urdu; C.S. Lakshmi, Raghavan Chudamani, Manjula Padmanavan in Tamil; Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury, Ajita Kaur, Nirupama Dutt in Punjabi; Mridula Garg, Anju Makhija, Chitra Mudgal in Hindi and many more.

While the Indian women authors persisted in writing on complex concerns such as sensuality, suppression, isolation, exodus, identity crisis, free sex etc. they were being criticized to be inferior to their male counterparts for their projection in canvas that was still narrow and they for the most part limited themselves to the portrayal of the household space and their encounters with it. Notwithstanding the inadequacies they have explicitly inflated the awareness about the woman's position, role and responsibility in the society. The exposure of women as an individual through a women writer's creative depiction remain always practical, accurate and as such authentic. Representation by women of their issues by male playwrights is inclined to be a insignificantly unpersuasive as they fail to comprehend the female psyche and viewpoint, at the outset. Female author's writing strive to oppose the male supremacy, despotism, partition, alienation and marginalization and in doing so argues from an altogether distinctive angle and attitude. Women performers were habituated to perform, in the earlier phases of political theatre in India, awfully contentedly with the scripts developed by gents playwrights. They had been vocal to what has been written by male dramatists and expressed their own choices as was intended by male directors. The status of women on stage was nothing more than a creative imagination of male artists.

In the context of modern Indian theatre, the women's theatre is largely concerned nowadays with social change and feminist ideology. There is a fundamental difference between Western feminist theatre with that of India's in agenda setting. While the feminist cultural politics and theatre in West, according to Susan Basnett, is based on demands like Equal Pay, Equal Education and Opportunities; Financial

and Legal Independence; End to Discrimination Against Lesbians; Women's Right to Define Her Own Sexuality; and Freedom Against Violence.

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.

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.

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 instutualization



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.

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.

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.

During period under study, i.e. the rule of Left Front Government in the state since 1977 up to 2007, three decades at the most, there has been considerable growth of participation of women in the mainstream Group Theatre, although not as an universal phenomenon all over the state, yet this has broaden the scope and framed a perceived factor behind the number of theatre productions on women's issues to be increased. The study was initiated to understand whether the genuine spirit of feminist theatre has developed in the mean time in the state within the rich tradition of protest theatre or in visualizing the women's issue through theatre the Group Theatres maintained its left political bias to a large extent, and in either cases how far the participation of women in numbers at the decision making body of Group Theatres is a fundamental factor.

Whilst passion for acting and longing for self- manifestation were commonly the prime intention for several of these female artistes to join organisations of Group Theatre which was characteristically presided over by patriarchal standards, for few others of them, theatre became a dais for acquiring a required livelihood, although time and again irregular. Behind the increased participation of female performers in Group Theatre during early 1980s and 1990s, ideological commitment played major role. Although they lacked proper training and experience, it was the ideological zeal that played havoc as a dynamic in the participation of women in Group Theatres in notable numbers. However, it is only during the early couple of years of



twenty first century that only some woman practitioners have appeared impressively enough at the vanguard position of the Group Theatre movement.

With the advent of a perennial globalization and its tentacles in the Group Theatre culture in West Bengal, a potential makeover has been evident in the making of theatres on women's issues. Several women director, dramatist came to surface featuring the required USP while reflecting women's issues through their works. They were no Catholics to conform their outlook with the patriarchal attitude and set up of Group Theatres, rather they challenged it stoutly. It would, therefore, appear as no flabbergast that even in the sphere of performing arts, the field that holds a testimony of generating alluring sale and money-spinning profit precincts, would be undoubtedly and effectively globalised. Thus, the reach variety of Group Theatre productions came into the notice of multi-national corporations. Abandoned sponsorship and financial supports were extended to popular Groups who hold large scale sale of their productions across the nation and abroad. Amongst the stimulating ambience of the mid to late-1990s, socially relevant theatres based on women's issues embark on to open the way forward. Several tabooed and proscribed issues discovered manifestation and articulation through theatre. By the mid-1990's, women's question loomed large in Bengal's theatre scene in a diversified language and presentation. In the form of the experimental theatre, the agenda of the women's movement shaped the content of plays by prominent Group Theatres in West Bengal.

Group Theatre's effort towards building dramatic production around women's issues has, therefore, remained an area of ambiguity in West Bengal. While there was a genuine underlying demand within the Group Theatre movement to replace the patriarchal ethos and modes of operation inside organizations and drawing conclusions to theatrical production as both this aspects of Group Theatre movement was found to be highly influenced by the Leftist political bias during the early phase of Left Front rule in the state, surprisingly enough, when the influence of globalised market economy, in the latter half of the Left Front rule, quite swiftly washed out the

Leftist political prejudice in the Group Theatre culture, and more women with great spirit came to join the camps of theatre, formed their own associations to build theatre of their own, they simply rejected any conformity to feminism to such an extent that they denounced any identity in the limits of 'women director'.

Ever since 1991, Jana Sanskriti has moved itself extreme from conformist and typical Group Theatre activity to widen the exercise of *Theatre of the Oppressed* to distant and secluded rural areas of the Sunder ban region in southern most West Bengal. The *Theatre of the Oppressed* has the finest attributes to be a feminist project as it proves that the 'gender' is an artificial construct and can be consciously denied once radical stimulations are added to instigate the spirit of opposing the gendered roles sooner it becomes oppressive to an individual. Theatre of the Oppressed has contributed in both the ways in aesthetics and activism, as a methodology of building theatre and pedagogy of feminist activism as and where required.

“Experiencing” and “Living through” are the parameters that the performers of Janasanskriti Centre of Theatre of the Oppressed use when they try to define the problem the women face at the grass root level. Through the performance the integration of the theme and the viewers are built through easily flowing dialogues and physical acting. Moreover they use the methodology of interventions by means of bringing the narrator in between the progress of the theme. This imparts a handy training to the audience about how to intervene and why to intervene. Through such interventions the theatre works to develop the individuality and community feeling among the women, and *the theatre of the oppressed* introduces them to a collective space. They, then become a group, and detect diverse ways of discussion and sharing within the group, and most essentially they find the opening to exercise what they obtain as ‘real life’ solutions.

Thus, from the Colonial Theatre to a Nationalist Theatre, from there to the Peoples' Theatre (IPTA), from IPTA to Group Theatre and from Group Theatre to the Theatre of The Oppressed, the dialectical development of Indian theatre continues to sustain.