

## Chapter 2

### The Restless City: A Theatre of Unrest

“The ultimate answer however is not a city group to prepare plays for and about the working people. The working people—the factory workers, the peasants, the landless labourers - will have to make and perform their own plays. We have deprived them not only of food, clothing, shelter and education, but also of self-confidence. Here we can also help by demystification, by assuring them that theatre is not the monopoly of the educated” (Sircar 56)

For Henri Lefebvre, that seminal theorist of social production of urban space, the city “revealed the contradictions of society”. Terror, global warming and inequality are only a few signs to suggest that humanity desperately needs a momentum for reform. More than ever it has become important now to create art that counts. Engaging in research that explores the power of art as an instrument for social change is extremely important. The aim of street theatre is to build a theatrical experience that will lead performers, actors and viewers alike towards some kind of personal involvement in the cycle of peace and justice, be it new conceptual knowledge, a potential emotional reaction to the performance, making awareness and debating a vital component of the project and an important means of assessing its impact.

One of the goals of performance and drama, among others, is to serve as a voice for social justice, and to challenge injustice and offer the hopes and means of a new world to the oppressed. Though movies and television could be watched by many more people, theatre has the advantage of providing the highest degree of impact because of its audience involvement. In addition to protesting against wrongs, theatre frequently incites the audience to action. The word 'protest' is often used to mean political theatre, but it also has a broader meaning. Socially aware theatre may concentrate on societal problems that require action on the part of people rather than that of the state. Both political and social theatre is discussed in this chapter as both of them constitute a theatre of unrest on their own. Although theatre has been very popular in various places throughout history, and has emerged as a social critique it does not simply aim to raise social and political concerns, but sometimes it may attempt to alter the views and attitudes of the audience and the

society at large and in the process inspire social and political change. The main goal of expressing unrest through theatre is to challenge the influence of the powerful: political, religious, or social. Even in cases where it does not try to alter views or call people to action, such theatre is always profitable in getting a fresh infusion of intellectual and emotional support for people who are already believers of reform. Thus, it may play an important role in social and political reform.

In India, leaving out a handful of plays, protest through the theatre has considerably been an urban phenomenon, developed and mastered by the middle-class intelligentsia mostly for middle-class viewership when initially performed in proscenium theatres, but with an all-inclusive audience when moving out as street plays in open spaces. Theatre groups and developmental agencies are increasingly turning to theatre as a tool for conscientisation among the disadvantaged, and in this effort trying to involve the disadvantaged themselves in performance; but these efforts are yet far from materializing as a protest theatre where the initiative comes from the exploited. While the chapter investigates the urbanity of the protest theatre in India, it becomes imperative to know when and where such theatre started, who the participants of such a protest are, how such theatre impacts political and social change, what are the reasons for its prevalence in certain areas as compared to others, whether or how theatre and protest are mutually inclusive or exclusive. In India, literature has represented non-conformity since ancient times but the emergence of protest through theatre has been rather late. Pushpa Sundar says, "Protest through theatre has been significant only in three periods: (a) 1870-1930, (b) 1940-47, and (c) 1960-80. In the first two periods, protest was directed against an alien rule as well as social evils in Indian society; in the last, theatre gave voice to discontent regarding political corruption, economic poverty and social oppression in independent India." (Sundar125). In the last phase however, the kinds of theatre practiced in the pre- and post-Independence periods differed largely: in the pre-independence period, protest theatre to a great extent followed the traditional Western proscenium theatrical practices. On the contrary, the latter period exhibited the new trends in world theatre, and used the agitprop street genre widely, though not exclusively.

Marxism became a new and resurrected power in the Indian political scene only in the 1940s and about the same time theatre as a medium of protest regained popularity after the stagnation in the 1930s. A sizeable segment of India's middle-class youth, developed leftist leanings and were drawn to the Communist Party, in search of a new, constructive theory of battling the colonial force. The influence of World War II and its opposition to fascism gave rise to the Progressive Movement in cultural circles. Anti-imperialist and anti-fascist authors came together to form an anti-capitalist/anti-feudalist alliance that formalized in the birth of the Progressive Writers Association. Soon after, in 1943, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was created. For the first time, authors and artists were directly concerned with issues of hunger, poverty, the harsh working conditions, and subservience of the working classes. Inequalities and injustices prevalent in the society were discussed in the in relationship to class dynamics. It is important to note here that almost all members of the IPTA were educated urban intellectuals and most of their theatre was performed in the urban and semi-urban areas of the country. Gradually urban lower classes and especially those who had migrated to the cities in search of employment became involved in their association. The audience also comprised large numbers of such urban poor.

That the IPTA was created with the specific purpose of protest in mind has been underlined by its redefining of theatre in India, both in terms of themes and performance styles. Taking theatre out of the hands of a privileged class and the luxury of the proscenium it made theatre readily accessible to a segment of society which was previously ignored or was prevented from seeing it. It used many forms such as the *Jatra* and the folk theatre of Bengal, and the *Burra Katha* of Andhra Pradesh and *Tamasha* of Maharashtra in revising plays. Costly set pieces and typical prosceniums were no longer considered to be essential; a new theatrical idiom was created. In the late 60s moving on to the 70s, translations and adaptations of Brechtian dramas became popular as a means of expressing a wider range of sociopolitical issues and have continued to be used to this day.

When the exhilaration of a hard-gained Independence was over, one realized that the achievement of freedom did not solve all problems of India. The equal opportunities pledged by the law-makers regardless

of religion, color, caste, gender, or sexual orientation was not delivered in practice. The untouchable castes were routinely discriminated against, poor and socially disadvantaged as also the peasantry yearned for better land reform policies and better compensation for crops. Workers wanted justified wages for their labour. Communalism remains a major challenge to the society till the day. The theatre of unrest in India was born and established against this historical backdrop. As would be expected, it reflected dissatisfaction as well as a cultural efflorescence. The 1970's was a time of upheaval for several reasons. The adoption of mixed economic policy, the rapid spate of industrialization which drew in large number of people from villages to the cities, the Naxalite Movement, the Autonomous Women's movement, refugee influx from Bangladesh, and several wars brought in drastic changes to the social, economic and political order. Such changes readily caught the attention of playwrights of the naturalist-realist mode who did not hesitate to make theatre a weapon of protest against social and economic exploitation and inequities. The unrest of the 1970s, the People's Revolution with strong Marxist inclinations, produced among other things, a theatre of protest in the urban and semi-urban areas of the country. Urban, educated intellectuals spearheaded this movement. This theatre broke several conventions. Keeping up to its revolutionary name, it moved out of the proscenium, into the streets, nukkads, factories, slums, temple-courtyards, railway platforms etc in its attempt to reach out to the public at large. In most cases this audience comprised factory workers, unemployed youth, labourers who had migrated to the city in search of jobs. But life in the city had not been very kind.

Marvin Carlson said in *Places of Performance*, "places of performance generate social and cultural meanings of their own which in turn help to structure the meaning of the entire theatrical experience" ( Carlson 2). In a nutshell, protest theatre in India had this aim in view when it moved to these alternative venues and out to the streets of the city. It was a revolt against any kind of orthodoxy and class hierarchy in theatre. It was an inclusive theatre which paralleled the vision of an inclusive society. Writing about the dream city of London in his seminal essay, "*The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844*", Friedrich Engels writes,

After roaming the streets of the capital a day or two, making headway with difficulty through the human turmoil and the endless lines of vehicles, after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realizes for the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilization which crowd their city; that a hundred powers which slumbered within them have remained inactive, have been suppressed in order that a few might be developed more fully and multiply through union with those of others. The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels (235).

What is true of London is perhaps true of any other city. Omnipresence of a nasty indifference, high egotism on the one hand, and despondency on the other has become the mundane reality of urban life. Almost everywhere there is a social war and a reciprocal plunder and more often than not shamelessly under the protection of the law. Inequality is woven deep into the fabric of urban reality in any city across the world; post-independent India is an excellent case in point.

Bengal remains at the top of protest theatre in India (and much of it is concentrated in the city of Calcutta), Marathi and Hindi theatre following it closely. Given its political and economic conditions it is not a much unexpected fact. In the late sixties and early 70s, political theatre became the preoccupation of a great number of professional artists and authors, who wrote on suffering, apathy, and political instability in Bengal. Bengal is a highly populous state and has a considerable literacy rate. Lack of industries and employment remains the cause for large number of people migrating to the other metro cities of Mumbai and Delhi. Although the workforce is predominantly Bengali, the ownership remains in the hands of non-native capitalists. The Partition of India in 1947 had badly weakened the economy of Bengal. Its finances were and still are insufficient for a major reconstruction of its economy. Finally, Calcutta, the city of joy as it stands today and as it was in the initial years after independence is both a liability and an asset. It is one of the most heavily populated cities in the world, with almost a third of its residents staying in some of the poorest slums ever discovered. Many people are jobless, and unemployment is rife in the city; schools and

colleges are crowded, and the public transport is old and overburdened, and wage earners are paid poorly. To add to its contradictions, however, is the existence of an urban middle-class intelligentsia who has emerged as a significant voice of protest. These urban educated intellectuals formed a coterie of playwrights who speak about the dislocation of life in the city. Though not committed to any particular ideology, they tried to change the structure of society by raising consciousness. Again, political theatre is largely performed by these middle- or sometimes lower-class intellectuals, for the middle class or for the oppressed. Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar provide significant examples of such plays. However, Sircar and Dutt follow different political philosophies and have different theatrical strategies as well. Sundar says,

Dutt adheres to Marxist Leninist precepts and believes that theatre must do more than merely expose injustice and exploitation; it must also lead to revolution. Sircar does not subscribe to any political ideologies nor seeks revolutionary solutions. One works on an epic scale and does not hesitate to use the conventions of the commercial theatre in order to draw attention; the other prefers to work intimately for greater impact and uses spartan productions to make theatre available, either free or cheaply, to the masses (Sundar 177).

As a theatre personality, Badal Sircar is equally famous for his 1960s proscenium plays as for his turn to non-proscenium theatre in the 1970s. In 1967 Sircar formed his own group of theatre, Shatabdi. Post 1970, Sircar rejected several of the practices, the fundamental techniques, the traditional features of the art of playwriting and performance, which he himself used in his initial phase. He probably wouldn't care about rejoicing in his success story and tried to appropriate innovative ways to make his theatre a movement for people. Shatabdi's actors were laymen, not experts; they saw the theatre as a zest for life, a cause, not a means of living. Shatabdi relocated to a room or courtyard (angan manch) from the proscenium, then to open air (mukta manch), and at last to the street. Village tour (gram parikrama) was the final stage of Sircar's novel enterprise. This was to break away from a few selected viewers to the broader audience that included a massive number of the working class, peasant farmers, migrant workers, the urban lower middle class. Freed from financial constraints, his theatre was 'Free Theatre'

Being a city-bred man, Sircar felt the need to break away from both the indigenous folk styles widespread in India before colonization and the genres "imported" by the British, which were the two predominant theatrical strains in post-Independence India. Sircar's solution was what he called "Third Theatre," a theatre that would employ an idiom unique to the postcolonial urban environment, drawing on the foundations laid by the first and second theatres that so far had peaceably coexisted in India (Mitra 62).

This turn to non-proscenium plays with the intention of bridging the gap between the actor and the viewer and eliminating any class divide between them makes him a significant writer for our research. Sircar aptly captures the ethos of urban Bengal, especially the city of Kolkata, with all its disparities and snobbishness to the people migrating from the suburbs in search of a better life. Sircar's background as an urban planner and civil engineer give insight to the theatre actor and director in him. It is said that he has seen a dream city being built and at once being destroyed. The urban-rural divide tempted him as much as he would write his doctoral thesis on the synthesis of the rural-urban link. Being heavily influenced with the philosophy of Richard Schechner's Environmental Theatre and Julian Becks' Living Theatre, combined with the local social contexts, Sircar's theatre group *Shatabdi* passed a resolution to discard the proscenium permanently in favour of the non-proscenium.

*Shatabdi* not only rejected the proscenium under Sircar's leadership, but also renounced artificial aids such as elaborate costumes, props, make-up, lights and sound. Instead, the group relied on an indicative environment where a strong message would be conveyed through physical acting and the considerable use of chants, suggestive sounds and alternative music. Sircar said that "live communication" is the key to the new language of theatre that he wanted to establish.

Born in the evolutionary phase of engaged theatre in India, the purpose of *Shatabdi* was to create awareness rather than effect a change in the urban scenario. Sircar would rather raise people's consciousness than to tell what form this process of change should acquire in order to raise a rebellion. What he tries to convey through his theatre are clear facts, hard realities about what's going on in the city, the complexities of

industrial and agricultural exploitation, the urban control on rural economy. He believes his mission is to make people aware of the situation. For him, the theater was similar to a fieldwork which should be done effectively in order to accomplish the set goal. His aim was to sensitize people about the incompetent and corrupt system. He wanted to create a change among the wider audience consisting of non-descript individuals. His plays focused on contemporary India's socio-political environment, the state of life and the humdrum of daily routine encountered by the urban middle class.

Sircar had long had the idea of making a sort of montage on Calcutta: Calcutta street scenes, people chatting in makeshift tea shacks and coffee houses, the babu culture and daily scenes in the offices. Instinctively the image of Calcutta as a 'city of processions' suddenly came upon him. That was the birth of *Micchil (Procession)*, a play with a distinct taste of Calcutta and its staunch urban sensibility. Sircar replaced the self-agonizing middle-class individual with a prototype of the ordinary citizen in this play. The stage directions of the play clearly state its unsuitability for the proscenium stage. It is to be staged in an open space and audience seats are arranged in structure similar to a maze. The actors move through this maze and the audience appears just like crowds gathered on streets to watch a "micchil". Sircar was of the opinion that this would give them a real feel of the city's streets. There are no individual characters in the play. The dialogues are delivered by a chorus of five men who do not have a name. The concept of Khoka's recurring death is not an abstract idea, detached from urban middle class perceptions, but something that they could well relate to given the socio-political realities of the time. The image of the Guru, the Master and the Police expose the role of money, religion and power to create an atmosphere of violence. Sircar was skeptical of the suitability of its performance in rural areas, but denying expectations the play performed very well in both the city and its suburbs. Sircar concluded that predetermining what would go well down in cities and what would better communicate to villagers was not right.

As the name suggests, the play is about processions, the many processions that have become part and parcel of life in a city; in this case the city of Calcutta. Sircar calls Calcutta a "city of processions". *Micchil (Procession)* tells the story of the Calcutta of 1970s where police atrocities were on the rise to curb the

Naxalite Movement. Every now and then young men would disappear, never to be found again. Any form of protest was curbed. So a procession is a form of protest. In our daily lives there are processions for food, vote, death, marriage, unemployment, religious processions etc. It is also a way of claiming one's 'right to the city'. The play's prototype hero shows the lack of individuality and creativity in a sterile urban landscape. As Henri Lefebvre says in 'What About the Street?' in *The Urban Revolution*:

It (the street) serves as a meeting place (topos), for without it no other designated encounters are possible (cafes, theatres, halls)..... The street is a disorder.... the disorder is alive. It informs. It surprises.....revolutionary events generally take place in the street (Lefebvre 18-19).

One of Kolkata's common features, procession, becomes an easy political ritual for registering protest against the State. The play focuses on the manner in which the procession has lost meaning and intent over the past few decades and closes on a hopeful note, with artists and onlookers standing in solidarity to form a procession, believing that an era of hope and change will be initiated by the instinctive coming together of people. The last scene in the play serves to highlight the dramatic act as a real event in people's lives. Finally the cast walks out with people who join the procession with them. Shayoni Mitra says, "Both the closing image and the tune are powerful testimonials to the possibility of social change"(Mitra 62). Like other haunting images of death and absence in his plays, the city of Kolkata also haunts him like a broken dream and his plays try to bring about order in this chaos.

*Evam Indrajit*, written in 1963, is a unique play in Sircar's theatrical oeuvre. Apparently it is only an existential play. It examines the Writer's quest for a suitable subject of his play. What makes it unique is that it does not bring out the unrest that goes on outside, but the unrest that goes on inside the minds of Indrajit and several others like him (implied in the 'evam' in the title meaning 'and') who bear the burden of the failed promises of independence and the false dreams of big cities. They stand for the urban youth, full of possibilities, educated, bright but defeated by the turbulent times of the 70s. A close reading of the play therefore would make it an appropriate play under the unrest theme. He is caught up between inspiration and creative sterility, and is completely ripped between his Mother and his love Manasi. Evam He summons

Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit who are part of the audience, to be the characters of his play. Amal, Vimal and Kamal, follow the repetitive pattern of middle-class routine and the monotony it entails. Theirs is a completely uneventful life. Hence they are inadequate entertainment for a dramatic work. Indrajit apparently is different though. He is always restless, looking for ways out of his humdrum life. Manasi, the girl of his dreams is his first cousin and so he cannot marry her. He thus ends up marrying someone else. Exhausted by a life of meaningless substitutions, Indrajit discovers that every attempt he makes to break away from his predestined middle-class life leads him back to the predictable pattern he was running away from. In the final pages of the play Indrajit is made to fall in line with the rhyming chorus and is called Nirmal ; Amal, Vimal, Kamal, Nirmal. The Writer rejects this. While everyone else imitate each other in their trivial existence, the Writer declares that Indrajit like him is special in various ways. Indrajit says:

INDRAJIT: It's your job to write. So write anyway. What have I to do with it? I am Nirmal.

WRITER: But you are not looking for a promotion-or building a house- or developing a business scheme. How can you be Nirmal?

INDRAJIT: But...but I'm just an ordinary man.

WRITER: That doesn't make you Nirmal. I am ordinary too-common! Yet I am not Nirmal. You and I can't be Nirmals.

INDRAJIT: Then how shall we live?

WRITER: Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road. We shall walk. I now have nothing to write about-still I have to write. You have nothing to say-still you have to talk. [...] For us there is only the road-so walk on. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top-even if it just rolls down.(Sircar.56)

*Evam Indrajit* is an existentialist play in the tradition of Camus and Beckett. It is modern not only in concept but also in technique. It rightly appropriates the angst of the average middle-class youth who is lost in an existential crisis, searching for an identity. The fragmentary nature of the script and the frequent back and forth movement in time creates a perfect montage of the past and present. The language used by Sircar

is the colloquial speech of actual life, “ Badal Sirkar's [sic] Bangla is radically different from the pre-Sirkar theatre speech in Bangla. That it came close to actual speech is not its only achievement. The economy of words was unknown to several theatre traditions in India”. (Deshpande ii)

By investigating its possibilities to function as popular art within the framework of social structures, Sirkar added a new layer of complexity to the concept of protest theatre. He gave theatre a new definition, poetry and purpose. His artistic endeavors were wrapped in his socialist agenda. He agreed to give up everything to work for the masses- “his career as an engineer and town planner, the bourgeois patronage of art, the professional glory of the proscenium and the achievements of a conformist. His theatrical sensitivity, his work, his passion to free art from narrow confines, his sense of responsibility for the destitute bear ample witness to the fact that he was not Amal, Vimal and Kamal; he had carved out a role for himself that gave meaning to his life” (Khanna 34). What sets him apart is the manner in which he uses art to serve society. It is the intent which animates forms and mentors his art. The best theatrical art to him is the something that strikes a chord with the people. By making it sensitive to people's needs, he evolved a new dramatic language. A social cause must be sponsored by art; and the path of achieving this goal should give an aesthetic appeal to it. Badal Sirkar was completely aware of the ‘what’, 'why' and 'who' of his art. It was the oppression, discrimination and isolation of the ordinary man, the peasant, the proletariat, the urban middle class, the landless worker etc. to whom he was bound by self professed commitment. Sirkar's content, concern, and art abandon the typical ideal of perception of life and society, as well as the notion of the playwright being a visionary; rather, it is doing something with an urge for immediacy that should effect a change in the people and society in practice and rationale. His theatre was founded on the ways and means of heading towards a brighter future, not on the vision of an ideal life. The realization of the common experience of the common people, qualifies him as a reformer and an activist exposing the system's inherent contradictions. His art continues to evolve in both cases, drawing inspiration from the real life experiences.

⋮ His long theatrical life and influential work continued to acquire different colors and shades in terms of ideas, presentation, location, technical innovation, dialogue and skill; each change occurred in a gradual way

and developed a method to adapt to conditions defined by his socialist perspective. Sircar writes about the situation of the world he lived in:

Enormous wealth and immeasurable poverty, a devastating flood ruining hundreds of thousands in the villages and a huge crowd of fans gathering to see the film stars raising donations in Calcutta for flood-relief. Construction of the underground railway in Calcutta and 90 percent of the underground water remaining untapped, rendering most of the arable land mono-crop. Satellites in space and 70 percent of the population under the poverty line. Democracy and police brutality, the stupidity of man, the cruelty of man, the achievements of man, the callousness of man— not just in this country, but in the whole world. (Sircar 53)

Utpal Dutt, contemporary of Badal Sircar, was another playwright who gained considerable popularity with his political theatre in urban Kolkata. As mentioned earlier, the kind of protest that Dutt was registering was not only limited to creation of awareness of the injustices but to bring about a revolution. His plays *Angar (Coal, 1959)*, *Kallol (Sound of the Waves, 1965)*, *Din Badaler Pala (Song of the Changing Times, 1967)*, and *Tiner Talowar* are some of famous protest plays, dealing with the exploitation of coalminers, the ruthless and authoritative administration of the Congress Party, and the plight of individuals caught in a vicious political system, respectively. In *Dushapaner Nagri (City of Nightmares)*, Dutt presents a sad picture of terrorism and police brutality in the city of Calcutta. Charges of sedition was labeled on Dutt for this play and the performance venues were also attacked by Congressmen. “ The Little Theatre Group (LTG), which came into being in Calcutta in 1949 (from its earlier incarnation of Amateur Shakespeareans), could have continued successfully as a repertory company of bright young Anglophile thespians in the city - just as its counterparts have survived and are thriving now in Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore and other Indian metropolises. But the brain behind the LTG - 20-year-old Utpal Dutt - had other ideas” (Banerjee 1848). Dutt with his marked political activism was becoming increasingly frustrated with the elite bourgeoisie, proscenium theatre or urban Bengal. He found that English theater of the day was completely detached from the significant social changes that had influenced the newly formed nation. He believed that his theater

was designed to appeal to the privileged group that was still trapped by the Raj's influence and had failed to connect with the public at large. In 1950, Dutt joined the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA) branch of Bengal which was known for its Communist affiliation. He was soon disenchanted with the kind of political theatre produced by the IPTA. While the group comprised renowned directors, performers, and scriptwriters, Dutt sensed that the IPTA did not produce what he called "revolutionary theatre." Dutt wanted a young hero who would be the inspiration for the masses to rise up in revolt, but who was also one among them. Dutt's short association with IPTA ended after only ten months. It was then that he started to gain popularity with his political theatre in urban Kolkata.

Arnab Banerjee writes in *Rehearsals for a Revolution: The Political theatre of Utpal Dutt*,

Hoping to see the workers take up arms against the oppressive forces of society, he considered it crucial to depict the ruling class as a ruthless enemy and to emphasize the urgent need for revolution. The hero in his plays was mostly a young, urban, proletarian hero who was aware of the failings of society, but also aware of his own human failings, such as drinking and gambling. Through his plays Dutt launched his political assault on the bourgeoisie government in New Delhi and West Bengal. He made the audience realize that the oppression depicted on stage is a feature of their own lives and that the rulers have changed but their tactics have not ( Banerjee 223).

Dutt in his plays sought to move the urban educated middleclass to revolt against the bourgeoisie rulers. He chose ordinary urban youths as heroes, but wanted these ordinary men to realize their extraordinary potential to force a change in the urban milieu. Dutt was also against any kind of opulence in theatre, or the use of expensive props and settings. He used props which his heroes used in their daily lives, props such as tin-hats, swords-sickles, hammers etc. The language was the everyday language of the rustic folk, not the refined speech of the city, the language of people who had migrated to the city but had been unable to shed their local dialect, the city talk of factory-workers, labourers, slum-dwellers. In the same

essay Arnab Banerjee says, “The use of this slice-of-life language would give an ‘authentic’ picture of the real people of Bengal to the urban middleclass intelligentsia.”(224)

The city as discussed earlier is a conglomeration of people from different walks of life. The city belongs as much to the ordinary as it does to the elite. However, ordinary people such as slum-dwellers are always accorded the status of an ‘outsider’ in the mainstream urban society. This division of the city on the basis of economic class is an issue discussed by Dutt in his play *Tiner Talowar* (1971). The play thus is an attempt to blur the differences between the working classes and the educated middleclass who share the urban and semi-urban areas of the city. Dutt's *Tiner Talowar* was supposed to be a tribute to Girish Chandra Ghosh, the great thespian of the Bengali stage. This play was a big hit and is regarded by critics and audiences as his masterpiece. However, even in a play whose main inspiration was to pay a tribute to a veteran, Dutt refused to give up his political focus. Kaptan Babu (Mr. Captain), the plays hero, declares a battle against the British empire by symbolically swirling the tin sword, the 'tiner talowar'. Dutt's critique was aimed against the authoritarian regime of the Congress, guised under the historical context of the play. The political attack on the oppressive government in the centre and the state becomes obvious to the audience who can very well comprehend that the repression portrayed on the stage is a function of their own existence even today. The central hypothesis evolving out of it is that only the face of the rulers has changed not their ways or intent. Dutt underlines the likelihood of running away from this authoritarian regime by stressing the need for a powerful communist rebellion. Like his protagonists who are extremely enthusiastic regular human beings, the ordinary masses must become furious enough to push for a change of situations. Dutt incorporates elements of *Jatra* in this play by using loud costumes, songs and exaggerated dialogues. The two songs used in the play almost act as a mouthpiece of the playwright and ridicule the urban middleclass of Kolkata.

However, the most important contribution of Dutt to the advancement of a theatre of unrest in India is the politicization of the *Jatra*. Dutt revived this form and modified it to the needs of his political theatre. *Jatra* is a typical Bengali style of theatre. It is very common among countryside viewers, who crowd the

performances by the thousands. "Jatra" literally translates into "traveling", an obvious reference to the travelling performers who have historically moved through the countryside presenting shows there. It is typically characterized with loud costumes and make-up, melodrama, heightened action on stage; a spectacle on stage. Mukunda Das who was the first playwright in Bengal to tap the possibilities of *Jatra* for a modern audience said:

Topical political figures and situations gradually crept into the mythological framework of the *jatra*. The gods and goddesses became freedom fighters and patriots. The devils and villains were transformed into members of the ruling class. The chorus continued to sing devotional songs but for different reasons. Theirs was a political litany rather than a meditation on the cosmos (Das 91)

Inspired by this idea, Dutt used *Jatra* a weapon for mobilizing the masses to rise up in revolt against any form of dictatorship or oppression in society. He understood and appropriated the suitability of *Jatra* to integrate modern subjects and a contemporary idiom. Traditionally, *Jatra* performances would extend overnight due to its long scripts including lengthy dialogues and songs. When Dutt used this form for a semi-rural, small town target audience comprising workers in factories who had to join duty early in the morning, Dutt was compelled to reduce the length of the performances. It is the impossibility to remain detached in a *Jatra* play that gives it immediacy. The environment is fraught with anticipation as the play unfolds, and a massive crowd reacts to it. The use of popular myth and folk-lore creates an air of familiarity and the audience immediately connects to the drama on-stage. Dutt was overwhelmed at the manner in which *Jatra* mirrored the present while evoking the resonances of historical the past. Dutt claimed that, "this made *Jatra* the true peoples' theatre".

Dutt's most famous play in the *Jatra* tradition is the *pala* (as it is called in rural areas of Bengal) *Sanyasir Tarabari*, (*The Crusade of the Monk*). The play dramatizes the eighteenth-century anti-British Sanyasi Rebellion. The reception of the play was huge and the viewing public quickly made sense of the work's contemporary political ramifications. The suppression of the Sanyasi uprising and the Naxalite insurgency in Bengal were not culturally and chronologically abstract occurrences for his viewers; they

acknowledged the comparison being made and responded accordingly. Dutt reasserted his faith in the kind of theatre he practised by saying that had the play been performed in a proscenium setting it would not have had the same impact. Arnab Banerjee writes about Utpal Dutt:

It would seem that his idealism stemmed from his strong confidence in his own art and the revolutionary potential of his audience. Such a conviction was no doubt subjective and to an extent romantic. However, the popular appeal and political ramifications of his work suggest the possibilities of revolutionary theater. At the very least, his theater made the Congress-led governments at both the federal and the state levels sit up and take notice as it garnered popular support for leftist politics in West Bengal. Dutt was the last great political theater activist who was also commercially successful. In spite of his commercial success, Dutt was always steadfast in his theory of the revolutionary theater. Even if he was not able to incite an actual social revolution, he did create a politically subversive theater of a kind that was previously unseen and unheard in Bengal (Banerjee 229).

But perhaps, being a sensitive intellectual, Utpal Dutt faced a dilemma. He seemed to be torn between the principles and value-system he was brought up with, and the disintegration of such a system. Such a dilemma can be seen in Dutt's portrayal of the character of "kakababu" in *Agantuk* (The Stranger). He will be recalled as an exceptional Bengali political theatre architect, one who responded aggressively and impressively to the demands of his time.

After independence, street plays as a form of protest theatre was very well received by the public in the '50s and '60s. However, it became popular during the era of political instability from the late 1970s to early 1980s. With the emergency proclaimed by the government, repression unleashed against Communists and the Naxalbari rebellion in Bengal, the stage of revolutionary street theatre ended. Performers were attacked, and almost always by the police. Yet Jana Natya Manch, created in 1973 by Safdar Hashmi, continued the journey.. Hashmi described street theatre as "a militant theatre that provokes the public and mobilizes them to the benefit of uprisings." Street theatre is devoted to promoting theatrical techniques for

social reform. It fuses art and advocacy and combines the two with its use of artistic creativity.

Generations of theatre artists, have believed and argued that theatre has the power to make a difference in the world. The playwright Bertolt Brecht wanted to teach through his plays. He intended performance to be a mature interplay between performers and viewers in his "epic theatre". Not mesmerising or untrue, not meant to feel but to think. He dedicated himself to the idea of theatre as a societal transition. Brecht said, "Theatre is an ally to traditional justice. Art restores meaning in making us responsible human-beings face to face with undeniable facts and circumstances." (Febres 12). The collaborative bonds formed in theatre can save lives. Leadership in this arena requires contemplating aspects in which radical dramatic restructuring can impact personal and social transformation in an authentic manner. The ultimate commitment in this undertaking is to uplift the art to brilliance when assessing its use as an instrument of awakening and societal change. Theatrical function can be easily used as such in achieving this end. Theatre can be a form of resistance, too. "Social theatre, which often takes the form of participatory theatre, is of a non-commercial character and is not always aesthetically concerned. It takes place in various places— from prison cells, refugee camps, and hospitals to older people's schools, orphanages, and homes. It invites people to take part in the performance by creating discussions based on the issues raised" (Lavrinienko 2014). Political theatre does not necessarily involve audience participation. A play can hypothesize on social, political and economic issues and arouse the viewer to come up with new ways of understanding. However, political activism and theatre may be tied together around the common goal of adding value to social change. . . .

Street theatre, however, can be seen as an "agit-prop". The focus on the intentionality of the exchange differentiates this type of theatre from other forms of political theatre, and from mere propaganda. Street theatre performed amidst an unsettled crowd, is a theatre of grim and ashes, noise and colors.- the actors speaking specifically to the audience. It is a sort of conspired confusion in theatre, a replication of the confused reality of the city and its unpredictability. The success of street theatre lies in its performance. The script is precise and depends on the present. Rehearsing the script isn't enough; being in the scene itself is the only way the actors can prepare for action. Indian street theatre is the story of a tale thriving in an Indian

city's streets and roads. Street theatre is a standing testimony of the fact that life is a bricolage of identities formed by practices and roles. One is at once an artist, an activist, a healer and an educator. Richard Schechner the great theorist of Performance Studies says, “The four great spheres of performance-entertainment, healing, education, and ritualising are in play with each other.”

Henri Lefebvre was of the opinion that the present constitution of societies is highly oppressive and capitalistic in nature. It isolates particular classes of citizens to get a stable supply of labour in the days to come. Lefebvre called them “dormitory communities”. Jen Harvie writes, “...he (Lefebvre) like Situationists believed that the city’s streets offered opportunities for genuine social interaction, resistance and disorder, for play rather than work and for (social) use rather than (economic) exchange. In the streets people could reclaim a renewed urban society and their right to the city” (Harvie 52). Street theatre in India, in the 1970s, served precisely the same purpose of reclaiming the citizen’s ‘right to the city’. This politically motivated theatre that flourished in the lanes and by-lanes of Indian cities found its idiom in the problems of the urban populace ranging from class, caste, unemployment, peasant uprisings, industrial strikes, gender issues etc. Street theatre took up the job of shaking the audience from their slumber and their indifference to things happening around them; in other words the city became ‘restless’ in revolt. The pioneer of street theatre in India is Safdar Hashmi. Street theatre experienced a watershed moment in 1989 when Hashmi was killed during a play. In the early afternoon, Janam staged a play, *Halla Bol*, for a large crowd of employees at Japur, on the outskirts of Delhi, in support of the CPI (M)’s local campaign.

The initial roots of street theatre in India were deeply inspired by the leftist anti-fascist and democratic ideologies of the '40s. It originated as a means to liberate the working class and empower a revolution. However, the question remains as to why the plays were moved to the streets rather than being performed on a conventional stage. The most important reason that prompted such a move was that street performance artists wanted to involve the audience in social problems addressed by their performances in the open. Additional considerations included bringing about a social and economic inclusivity in theatre as most of the common masses couldn't afford to purchase a stage ticket for their entertainment. However,

most importantly, street theatre emerged in India as a political movement for the poor. Such plays with clear activist propaganda such as poverty, drought, feudal/colonial subjugation, and communal abuse bring to light the social divisions exacerbated by class and religious disparities.

As mentioned earlier Safdar Hasmhi, the founder of JANAM, the pioneer of street theatre in India died when a mob attacked him with iron rods during a performance of his play *Halla Boll!* At Ambedkar Park in Jhandapur, Sahibabad, a semi-rural, semi-industrial area in the outskirts of Delhi. Delhi, where Janam is situated, is an area of contrasts. It is a town of engineered distinctions where a naive city tourist is not likely to see the invisible quarters of misery, poverty and the struggle for existence. It is in these concealed pockets of the city that street theatre burgeoned in India and found its true idiom. Delhi is not just Janam,'s homeground, but also India's political capital. It has grown into a major trade and transport hub. Delhi has a high percentage of migrants, due to its growing importance and flourishing job industry. As a consequence, Delhi is also a rapidly expanding city. Delhi represents a strong example of economic disparities. The migrant arrives here with a fancy imagination of wide roads, posh vehicles, shopping malls, in short, the promise of a better life. However that is only a part of Delhi, a facade held up to the world. With all its chaos the lower middle-class localities reject all such descriptions. ¶ It can be compared at best to any small town in India. Janam deliberately chose these localities on the periphery of the city i.e. localities with mazy lanes, overhead wires, the conundrum of human voices and the humdrum of machines. It presented the unpresentable city hidden behind the posh bungalows and green lawns.

The post-partition period in India has seen the highest wave of migration to Delhi. Since then, Delhi continues to be a place with possibilities, rendering it a popular destination for migrants. In Delhi there are two worker groups, the white collar-jobs and the agricultural workers. Because of their economic viability in the city the white collars are the more privileged class. The other class lives in extreme insecurity in slums or *jhuggi jhopries*. Engels says, “Every great city has one or more slums, where the working class is crowded together. Poverty often dwells in hidden alleys close to the palaces rich; but in general, a separate territory has been assigned to it, where removed from the sight of the happier classes, it may struggle along

as it can.” The laborers are denied healthy living conditions, proper wages, made to work in inhuman and unsafe conditions, without the basic facilities. Life of industrial workers in the city is extremely pitiful. *Machine* was born out of a controversial work-related issue that in the last years of the 1970s shook the industrial complexes in Delhi as well as in many other parts of the country. The emergency, which was 21 months old, had suppressed and hushed all kinds of opposing voices from Indian civil society. Janam after a hibernating phase in the emergency period came back with a more assertive commitment to social and political causes. Though it stayed away from direct association with any political party, its political goals especially in its association with Marxist trade unions became more than apparent. The Emergency regime's final electoral defeat in March 1978 brought back democratic activities in all regions. This is particularly true on the trade union front. Delivering a mortal blow to the Emergency government, the people voted in a new government, the Janata Party-led government. But this new political assembly showed its anti-worker attitude within a quick span of time. The new government declined any intervention in industrial disputes between the owners and the factory workers. Labor unions failed to find agreeable ways to change the inhumane conditions of existence in the factories. Private armies of mill-owners under the guise of guards treated labor strikes with a firm hand. In one such event, Herig India's workers, a chemical plant in the suburbs of Delhi, were on strike when the stubborn management clearly refused their basic demands of a bicycle stand and canteen where they could eat their lunch. *Machine* draws its context from this particular strike. Not only did the management refuse these demands but in a most brutal manner fired on the protesting laborers killing six of them. This was enough to set Janam's imaginative genius on fire at the same time endorsing its revolutionary art.

*Machine* was first performed to a gathering of 700 odd trade union delegates in Talkatora Stadium, Delhi, who had assembled there to protest against the proposed Industrial Relations Bill. The union leaders who were somewhat skeptical of allowing a play performance in a serious meeting were surprised with the overwhelming response received by the play in the very first performance. By now they realized what a street play could do to a serious trade union session. The incredible success of the play's premier production

prompted the delegates to talk about its political prospects, and subsequently an invitation was extended to the artists to perform at Boat Club, Delhi, where a rally was to be held the next day. The next day they performed to an audience of 1, 60,000 workers. Machine was an instant hit with the urban factory workers and the innuendo used by the performers was more than clear. The workers could instinctively relate the machine to their own lives. The play is a potent example of the oppressed working class' relentless resolve to pursue its struggles despite all obstacles and difficulties. The smooth running of the (human) machine indicates the presence of a positive relationship between the multiple means of production, i.e., money, labor and all other supporting systems. That Hashmi's machine develops snags and friction from the very beginning is a proof of the fact that there are operational and functional blocks in the system. As each component separates the machine, they introduce themselves to the audience. The component parts of the machine are the mill-worker, the security-officer, and the factory-owner. The underlying message in the play is that the whole capitalist system is dependent on the workers to keep their mills going. However, the worker is the most ignored component of the system. As shown in the play, the system will collapse even if one component stops working. Therefore the workers' rights in the city should not be ignored. Such dramatic interference in a proletarian labor dispute presents the striking workers with a symbolic affirmation, thereby motivating them to wage a war for the right reasons. Brecht's influence cannot be denied here, the only point of departure being that Hashmi does not recommend direct call for political action, but only exposes the urban cityscape of Delhi and describes the situations leading up to the same.

In keeping with Janam's anti-elitist and pro-proletariat political credo, Janam staged *Halla Bol!*, a play in which its founder was mercilessly murdered. While Safdar was brutally and mercilessly murdered, it's obvious that he wasn't the assailants' sole target. They'd murder Janam's other performers if they could grab them. Their cold-blooded desire to kill, in full view of the public and in the midst of massive number of workers and their families, was more than an invitation for the moment when their path was stopped. It was a message to all involved in the staged drama leading up to the drama of life, that they must not be

participants in the play on the streets that seek to honor and equip the working class to campaign against the city's power structures. The act of killing has been inspired by a desire to choke all voices of dissent.

*Gaon Se Shahar Tak* was performed by Janam in Delhi in the year 1978. It is about a villager who is forced to become an industrial worker in the city as he loses his small piece of land in the village. It addresses the issues of identity and belongingness faced by the internal diaspora of migrant labours in Delhi. In most cases they are accorded the status of an 'outsider' within the city. In this play, Kalua, is a village peasant who is burdened by debt, a failed crop, and the death of a bull. Left with no option he migrates to the city where he meets several others like him. Soon he is frustrated by the exploitation meted out to them and realizes that there has been no qualitative improvement in his life after coming to the city, only the face of the oppressor has changed. The message was to move the self-centred urban middle-class to shed their complacency and join the urban working class in their struggle against a common enemy. In the play same actor was used for playing the part of the landlord, the money-lender and the policeman. This reinforced their nexus in real life. A sutradhar was used in the play to tie the several scenes together.

A major manifestation of popular street theater today is seen in colleges, universities across cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai, Chandigarh etc. Drama and theater societies composed of a substantial number of people can be located in these institutional groups. These clubs and societies take an active part in cultural events and theatre-festivals. These theater societies are currently engaged in performing some kind of street theatre on issues of current importance and social awareness such as AIDS awareness, Voter awareness, family-planning etc. The spontaneous growth and survival of such theatre groups is proof of the popularity of street-theatre till the day. The content of contemporary street plays does not make a strong political statement as it was in the 1970s; they can at the most be called to address social issues. The government is also using street theatre nowadays to propagate its own agenda. In doing this, government is basically trying to reduce its ability to bring about a social rebellion by appropriating street theater to project own policies. NGOs working towards social change have played an important role in the transition of street theatre to popular theatre. NGOs are actively involved in producing street theater in cities

such as Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata to speak on women's issues, children's issues, environmental issues, and health conditions. The guiding philosophy of several NGO's using street theater has been to use it as a propaganda tool to raise social and personal awareness in the field of their interest. This NGO-ization of street theatre seems to have, as Manjul Bharadwaj stated, shifted the purpose of street theatre from revolution to awareness.

However, with the changing dimensions of street theatre in India, what has remained unchanged is its democratic structure. Actors in street theatre can be anyone out of any background. This easy access of street theater as an art movement has enabled people from the most marginalized segments of society to use it as a platform to voice their concerns. Street theater, in any form, is most impactful when it encompasses poor people actually speaking about their own subjugation, in its ambit. Likewise, the public viewing street theater can also be anybody and everybody. While all cities, big and small, have economically stratified neighborhoods, the city's streets are fully accessible to one and all. So, while a rich billionaire may steal glimpses of street theatre from the window of his luxury car, a complete nobody can also watch the same simultaneously. The language used in street-theatre is the language used by the common man, the colloquial speech of everyday life. Be it vernacular or English, it knowingly discards the use of poetic diction and jargonistic words in order to maintain its slice-of-life approach. Also, by abolishing the stage for the streets, this kind of theatre breaks the physical gap between the audience and the actor. This aspect of physicality of street theatre is another aspect of its democratic nature.

The chapter thus focuses on the conditions for protest theatre to evolve, and articulates why it appears in certain areas and at certain times. One of the conditions is the existence of political and social problems that is the necessary fuel for any theatre of unrest. This in fact underlines the urbanity of protest theatre in India from the 1970s to the present. The turbulent times and the problems faced by large scale migration to cities after independence and the economic crisis in the country made urban India conducive to a theatre of unrest. In the pre-independence period, the protestor's main concern was an alien government, as well as corrupt caste practices in Indian society led by the Brahmins; after independence it was against the

promises of an authoritative government and the promises it failed to deliver. Sundar says, “It is clear that protest theatre develops in those regions where political and economic conditions are the worst and change most desperately needed, though it is not necessary that every severely deprived region will develop a protest theatre. Other necessary preconditions are that (a) through education both political consciousness and literary attainments are high; (b) there are differing political ideologies vying for power; and (c) a strong theatrical tradition exists.”(136). All such conditions are fulfilled by the major cities of India especially the metro cities of Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay. Quite obviously these form the hotspots of protest theatre in India. The plays of Sircar, Dutt and Hashmi are typical examples of theatre where the restlessness of the city and its citizens are put up for audiences to see and in the process connect it to the perceptions of their individual urban realities. In the protest of its citizens, the city becomes restless in revolt.