

Political Theatre in India-A Weapon of the Proletariat: An Analysis of Utpal Dutt’s lecture “What is to be Done?”

Sumaiya Sanaullah Khan

Research Scholar, Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Abstract

Utpal Dutt, one of the most important figures of Indian theatre, propagated the idea of theatre as a tool for revolution. In his lecture, *What is to be Done?*, delivered on January 1986, he talks about the need for political theatre in India. The paper is an in-depth analysis of the lecture to highlight Dutt’s idea of political theatre. Political theatre is talked about as an ideological weapon of the proletariats against the bourgeoisie. The paper talks about how Dutt formulates the concept of a theatre that is used to awaken the conscience of the proletarians.

Keywords: Utpal Dutt, Indian Theatre, Political Theatre, Bengali Theatre

"Revolutionary theatre is essentially people's theatre, which means it must be played before the masses. The audience is our first concern; matters of form and content come second."

-Utpal Dutt (Dharwadkar, 114)

Utpal Dutt (29 March 1929 – 19 August 1993) is one of the best known and most respected figures in the history of modern Bengali theatre. A committed leftist, Dutt wrote, directed, and acted in commercially successful and politically challenging plays during a career of nearly fifty years from the early 1940s until his death in 1993. Dutt became a

pioneering figure in Modern Indian theatre by founding the 'Little Theatre Group', which enacted many Shakespearean and Brecht plays, in a period now known as the 'Epic theatre' period, before immersing itself completely in highly political and radical theatre. His plays became apt vehicle of the expression for his Marxist ideologies, visible in socio-political plays like, *Kallol* (Sound of the Waves, 1965), *Manusher Adhikar* (Of People's Rights, 1968), *Louha Manob* (The Iron Man, 1964), *Tiner Toloar* (The Tin Sword) and *Maha-Bidroha* (The Great Rebellion, 1989).

Dutt delivered a lecture entitled 'What is to be Done' at the Shriram Memorial Lectures, Shri Ram Center for Art and Culture, New Delhi on January 1986. Dutt named the lecture after Vladimir Lenin's 'What is to be done?' a "celebrated work on the degenerating influence of economism on the proletarian movement" (Dutt, "What is to be Done", 2). Here Dutt proclaim the need for political theatre in India and criticize the bourgeoisie love for art for art sake. Dutt explains, "I propose to talk of the political theatre in our country- its tasks and the various means the ruling class adopts to corrupt and deflect it from its goal" (3) Dutt harangued the bourgeoisie and criticized the idea of art for art sake:

There will be no attempt to address those who consider the theatre a 'pure' art, who it for its own sake. They remind me of those rich young men in affluent countries who seek to relieve their boredom with drugs. I do not think we can afford such expenses in a country like India, where 40 per cent of the masses still do not receive two square meals a day... I think we can do without such a homicidal love of art.

(Dutt, "What is to be Done", 3)

In 1950, Dutt joined the Bengal branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which was the cultural front of the Communist Party of India. He was soon disillusioned with the brand of political theatre that the IPTA was creating. Dutt felt that the IPTA was not producing what he considered revolutionary theatre. Thus, he departed from IPTA but did not give up his Marxist beliefs (Lal, 14). His 'Little Theatre Group' (LTG, subsequently People's Little Theatre), formed in 1947, started performing one revolutionary play after another, revealing Dutt's enormous talents as actor, director and playwright. It held the lease of the old theatre house Minerva for nearly ten years staging plays in favour of the Communist Party.

For Dutt the political theatre is the "ideological weapon" of the working-class or the proletariats, against the ruling class or the bourgeoisie. Through the political theatre he wants to awaken the "consciousness... awareness... and militancy" of the proletarians. He proclaims: "The political theatre tries to restore to the masses their revolutionary traditions and exposes non-violence for what it is today- a hypocritical mask to hide the hideous face of the ruling class" (Dutt, 4).

Dutt criticizes the condition of political theatre in his time, which had been reduced to "barren intellectual gymnastics in empty city halls" (8). He wanted the political theatre to unite the working class by projecting themes dear to them. According to Dutt the ruling class or bourgeoisie in India falsifies history, by projecting India as always being a non-violent nation. Political theatre in response helps to rediscover the truth, proving that 'violence has been the midwife of all social change in the past and will continue to be so in the future.' by highlighting the history of anti-imperialist armed struggle in the country, political theatre attacks the distortion of history by the ruling class.

Like many intellectuals of his time, Dutt looked – with glasses that were too rose-coloured – not to the West but to the Soviet Union as the crucible where the future of humanity was being shaped. Following Marx and Lenin, he abhors the bourgeoisie, claiming “Their unity is the unity of exploitation. They are afraid of the unity of the exploited”(13). Dutt verbally attacks the ruling class, by claiming that they ‘have no interest in the unity of people of India’ (13). He can be heard trading against the bourgeois society for peddling crude superstitions instead of standing up for independence of thought.

Dutt occasionally appears to be too rigid in his war against the bourgeoisie. He proclaims things like “There are always at least two truths involved in every issue: the truth of the bourgeoisie and the truth of the proletariat” (Dutt, 14). Dutt constructs bourgeoisie and proletariat as the two opposing poles of a society. For Dutt, political theatre is primarily the theatre of the proletariat with ‘a proletariat philosophy as a guide’ (15). Thus, he encourages the working class to use theatre as a means of raising their issues. He asks people to “take those questions which the rulers shy away from and turn them into public debate” (17).

A major component of Dutt’s political theatre is the theory of ‘alienation.’ Echoing Marx, Dutt writes:

Marx, in his *Manuscripts*, showed conclusively how, in a society where the fruits of labour belong to someone else, all men are increasingly alienated from other men and themselves. Man loses his faculties of love, mercy, enjoyment of beauty-all these being replaced by the single urge of acquisitiveness. He is also alienated from his past, from his language, from his heritage.

Dutt fears that this phenomenon has gripped our nation too. It is increasingly becoming difficult to capture the attention of the audience. In order to sway local audiences, Dutt thus adapted the techniques of Brecht. The motive was to gauge public response, turn public opinion, and ultimately incite revolution against the bourgeois ruling class. Like Brecht, Dutt wanted his audience to think about what they were seeing and reflect on their own social situations.

In talking about the mobility of political theatre, Dutt emphasis the fact that now companies don't wait for people to come to theatre, but take the theatre to people. Accepting Bertolt Brecht's description of spectators as "co-authors" of the drama but rejecting the orthodoxies of epic theatre as impracticable in India, Dutt embraced the widest variety of venues (and form) to reach the "revolutionary masses" (Dharwadker, 114). Dutt played an important role in popularizing Indian street theatre, as he started performing at street-corners or `poster` plays, in open spaces without any aid or embellishment before enormous crowds. His transition to *Jatra* or *Yatra Pala*, a Bengali folk drama form, performed largely across rural West Bengal, signalled his experiment in politicizing a form that was already recognized as a potent "people's theatre" (Dharwadker). His political *Jatra* dramas too were often produced on open-air stages, symbolizing his commitment to communist ideology. For Dutt: "Theatre cannot by definition, be restricted to a coterie of intellectuals; if the masses do not flock to it, it need not exist at all." (Dutt, 20)

Dutt condemns the 'realist' drama of the bourgeoisie. He criticizes the characters as well as the box set of the realist drama. He calls for the need for 'epic elements' in presenting political theatre in India. Dutt writes:

The Indian masses have been nurtured on epics and myths and would respond far more readily to today's social and political truths if they were presented in the grand style of an Indian epic. Our theatre should re-discover its heritage, its links with the classical Indian tradition, and learn from its supra-real epic style if it seriously intends to reach a mass audience. (Dutt, 30)

Dutt was the last great political theatre activist who was also commercially successful. In spite of his commercial success, Dutt was always steadfast in his theory of the revolutionary theatre. Even if he was not able to incite an actual social revolution, he did create a politically subversive theatre of a kind that was previously unseen and unheard in Bengal.

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Bio-Note:

Sumaiya Sanaullah Khan is a research scholar at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. Her research topic is "Street Theatre of India with reference to the *Oeuvre* of Badal Sircar and JANAM." She has a keen interest in the genre of drama with special focus on post-colonial performances, modern drama, culture studies and translation studies.