

Introduction

Why Utpal Dutt? Why Now?

On 17 January 2023, Theatre Formation Paribartak, a West Bengal based group, staged *Titu Mir* (1978) (See Figure 1), at Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata. The play, written by Utpal Dutt (1929–1993) (See Figure 2), is about Islamic religious reformer Mir Nisar Ali, also known as Titu Mir, who organized and led a peasant revolt against the British East India Company in the Barasat region of Bengal from 1827 to 1831. It challenges existing conservative historical accounts, dependent on colonial archives, that portray Titu Mir as an anti-Hindu zealot, and focuses instead on his subaltern vision of anti-colonial struggle where the rural dispossessed of all religions could come together.

About an hour into the play, as the contradictions between colonial forces – both militarized and cultural – and Titu Mir’s guerrilla band of peasant rebels intensify, a critical moment arrives with the possibility of a monumental historical moment of struggle. The stage space is dominated by a huge bamboo structure. A horizontally slanted bamboo rostrum divides the stage space between an interior and exterior. Titu Mir doubles his long robe, baring his legs from the knee to give a sartorial-symbolic gesture of militancy, and ties it to his waist and walks up the rostrum. Roaring with the desire for vengeance, Titu Mir sways his bamboo staff, and finally leaps out to the front of the stage. The lights concentrate on his leaping figure, making him larger than life.

As the curtain closes for the interval, the full house applauds in unison. It is a spontaneous response which might seem to indicate that the twenty-first-century Bengali audience has found a mimetic connection with a two-hundred-year-old peasant rebel; but because the scene emphasizes the inevitable death of Titu Mir, the unmaking of this connection is built into the staging of the heightened moment. The audience knows that the end will come in the form of defeat, but the presentation of a historical moment unfolding right in front of them creates a connection which is both informed and exhilarating. This is a classic example of Utpal Dutt’s dramaturgy – political theatre that never allows its audience to immerse in reliving a moment of the past, but rather, continuously compels reflection on its significance for the present.

Let us remind ourselves that the play was written in 1978 and Dutt died in 1993. The full house indicates a triumphant return of Dutt’s work on Bengali stage with a new relevance in the second decade of twenty-first century as the right-wing government of India had returned to power for the second consecutive term with an increased majority, and Hindutva become pervasive in nearly every aspect of Indian public life. The relevance lies in exploration of people’s collective emotions to combat the fascist propaganda in contemporary India



Figure 1 Titumir, 2019, Theatre Formation Paribartak



Figure 2 Utpal Dutt

(Bhattacharjee 2019). The return to his work is, in fact, not limited to *Titu Mir*. Several other of his plays are running in Kolkata in 2023.

Utpal Dutt's engagement with political theatre, his reliance on history to comment on the contemporary and his craft as a theatre-maker provide us with a timely and important opportunity to reflect on a postcolonial cultural politics that invested in the process of decolonization. Dutt's political theatre is well placed to avail this opportunity because his output – from 1959 to 1989 – coincides with a period of energetic negotiating with and challenging the legacies of colonial modernity. Drawing from Partha Chatterjee's discussion of 'Our Modernity' (1997), I would

like to argue that colonial modernity refers to the ways in which the British colonial rule had its impact on deciding the shifts and changes in the social, economic and cultural life in India. The introduction of English education has been quite central in defining the features of the cultural life where theatre as a form of public entertainment as well as a mode of disseminating messages of history became a primary site of practicing modernity. The biography of modern Indian theatre in the post-independence period is replete with debates on defining tradition and modernity, on identifying contact points between politics and culture, and on extrapolating the nature of engagements with nationalism and socialism. This Element seeks to show that contextualizing Utpal Dutt within this historical canvas can open up distinctive ways of thinking through political theatre in a postcolonial condition.

The Voice of Decolonization: Utpal Dutt in Post-independence Modern Indian Theatre

Modern Indian theatre, as we have come to know it, bears a colonial legacy and there is plenty of scholarly work on the specific trajectories through which the legacy manifested itself in representational conventions, stagecraft, acting styles and the imagination of theatricality (Bhatia 2004; Dharwadker 2005; Chatterjee 2016). Keeping in mind the multiplicity of languages, locations, traditions of performance and cultures of orality in Indian theatre, it is equally important to remember that in the post-independence period (after 1947) the idea of the modern in Indian theatre relentlessly interacted with, negotiated with and at times, struggled against, the tradition of pre-colonial ‘folk theatre’ on the one hand, and the tradition of classical Sanskrit drama going back to two millennia on the other. Indian playwrights and theatre-makers have engaged intensely with the various forms and styles of the ‘folk theatre’ and re-articulated the classical tradition to create a framework that might support the notion of the national modern as an assertion of the simultaneous coexistence of multiple modernities. This idea of multiple modernities imagines different outcomes for different histories in different spatio-temporal contexts and allows us to conceptualize the modern beyond colonial modernity, and also to think of decolonization as a process, not limited by the singular event of achieving national independence at a specific time.

The inspiration for decolonization, as a philosophical term, writes Achille Mbembe, was the ‘active will to community’ which can be translated as something like ‘to stand up on one’s own and create a heritage’ (2021: 2–3). The impetus for decolonization in theatre, as it moved from re-instituting indigenous traditions in place of colonial modernity, to retrieving indigenous systems through ‘provincializing Europe’ as Dipesh Chakrabarty aptly defines

(2002), came from different quarters. The Cold War context provided a range of influences, from western European and north American theatre experiments to socialist realisms and socialist internationalism, as well as the intercultural practices emerging from Asian–African alliances. The modern Indian theatre drew on these multiple modernities. The outcome was a significant shift away not only from traditional forms of folk theatre and classical Sanskrit drama, but also from the modern colonial theatre in terms of canon formation, actor training, circulation of texts and performances, reception, patronage and criticism. Institutionally, as part of the ‘will to community’, a new cultural bureaucracy, often functioning closely with the administrative one, sustained this shift from the local to the national level. This cultural bureaucracy involved setting up of national bodies like the Sangeet Natak Academy in 1953, which took up the responsibilities of preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of dance, music and performing arts.

Utpal Dutt (1929–1993) embodied this shift. With the exception of direct involvement in cultural bureaucracy, he straddled the process of decolonization, forging a political theatre of the postcolonial contemporary for modern India. When he emerged as a promising theatre-maker and performer in the city of Calcutta in late 1940s, the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA henceforth), as part of the communist movement in India, had already established itself as a formidable force in cultural politics and the idea of progressive political theatre had started to gain ground. Before his inevitable shift towards IPTA in 1950–1951, Dutt was a member of British thespian Geoffrey Kendal’s touring Shakespeareana International, which performed Shakespeare’s plays in metropolises and *mofussil* towns across India. Theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay notes that the democratic nature of this travelling theatre troupe was crucial in shaping Dutt as an artist (2017). After touring with Kendal, Dutt started his own English theatre group in Calcutta, The Amateur Shakespeareans, and won critical acclaim for modernized productions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1948) and *Julius Caesar* (1949).

Let me pause briefly and focus on the 1949 *Julius Caesar* production. Dutt had begun to read about the Russian Revolution in school and graduating to college had also meant graduating to reading the political philosophy of Marx. The result of this political engagement was evident in the production of *Julius Caesar* which was costumed in twentieth-century Italian Fascist uniforms. Caesar wore with a felt hat and his senators, clad in red and black, greeted him with the raised one-arm salute. The Forum speeches of Mark Antony and Brutus were represented as radio broadcasts, and the scenography of the battle scene in Philippi referred to a war-damaged town with the sound effects of bombing and machine-gun fire (2005: 443–444). Without changing a word of

Shakespeare's text, the production made the history of dictatorship and democratic struggle against totalitarianism relevant for theatre of a post-colony, still reeling under the aftermath of the Partition. It staged apprehension about the rise of demagogues at a critical moment at the beginning of Indian democracy. The processes of decolonization had found a powerful voice.

Dutt's acute sense of the need to engage with the process of decolonization was also the reason behind his abandonment of English theatre even after such bravura productions. English theatre in Calcutta was a decidedly elite practice and he turned away from it to begin his stint with IPTA, joining the central Calcutta squad of IPTA as a director and actor and performing in different productions like Tagore's *Bisarjan* (performed in 1952) and Ritwik Ghatak's *Dalil* (1951) as well as in various street-corner plays like *Bhoter Bhet* (1951). This period was an exhilarating one for Dutt as he writes in *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* that he met:

Panu Pal, the creator of street-corner plays; Ritwik Ghatak, lanky awkward, fiercely puritanical and therefore critical of my decadent habits, thinking cinematically all the time; Mrinal Sen, wizard with shadow-plays, forerunners of his wonderful films ... Hemango Biswas, discovering fantastic melodies from the depths of the countryside; Nirmal Ghosh, organizing, cajoling, threatening, even lying and tricking to keep the great organization going. (2009: 39)

He also met Nirranjan Sen, who headed the organization. However, his youthful enthusiasm for ideological debates on Marxism was not received well in IPTA, 'When the twenty-one-year-old Dutt marched into the Party office on 46 Dharamtala Street with a copy of Trotsky's *Permanent Revolution* in his hand', Rustom Bharucha observes, 'he was asking for trouble' (1983: 58). He was branded a Trotskyite, which Dutt maintained was quite untrue, and accused of smoking and drinking, which he confessed was quite true. He was expelled from IPTA after about eight months.

The experience of making theatre with IPTA while engaging with communist politics and Marxist philosophy, though short-lived, became foundational in Dutt's subsequent journey as a political theatre artist. He created his 'Little Theatre Group' (LTG) and, in 1953 leased the Minerva theatre in Calcutta as its permanent home. LTG began with classic Tagore plays, translations of Shakespeare and Russian theatre, and social farces by the nineteenth-century playwright Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Their production of *Macbeth* (1954) became particularly successful and received invitations for performances even in remote villages, smaller towns and working-class areas (Sen 2017: 39). LTG finally found its feet on the Bengali stage with Dutt's *Angaar* (1959), a play

about the lives of coal miners that culminates in a mining disaster and references a recent catastrophe in the Baradhemo coal mine. *Angaar* became hugely popular not only for its intensely political theme but also because of the sophisticated scenography, sound and lighting design employed. The climax of *Angaar*, an exemplary feat of stagecraft depicting the despair of seven miners trapped underground waiting to be drowned, is described by Bharucha as an ‘epiphany of grief’ in which the spectacle of a calamity becomes a source of entertainment and is applauded (1983: 68). Dutt, in his later assessment of his own work, was critical of *Angaar* because it could not represent the truth of miners’ resistance, but was limited to displaying the facts of their huge exploitation.

This tension between truth and fact shaped Dutt’s vision of political theatre, which he called revolutionary theatre. He differentiated between fact and truth by focusing on their connection with social conflict and argued that fact remains mere bourgeois truth when abstracted from the context of continuous social conflict between the haves and the have-nots and conversely that fact can become a revolutionary truth when it intertwines the realities of conflict, and sides unerringly with the have-nots (2009: 60–67). His aim was to represent revolutionary truth because, in his view, presenting only impartial facts risked reifying bourgeois power, and he wanted his theatre to be an agent of change, and thus a factor in the revolution. This meant recounting as many instances of such change as possible, especially historical moments when exploitative regimes are challenged by the poor, the colonized and the ‘native’. He aspired to portray the full complexity of power relations at intersecting points in the context of social conflict. This is the reason Dutt so often revisits histories of anti-colonial revolts against the British in India, revolts against other imperial powers in other geopolitical contexts and rebellions against experiences of domination. His stint in the Bengali folk theatre form Jatra, from 1971 to 1988, bears the same marks of revolutionary intent in highlighting historical moments of resistance against colonial/authoritarian regimes.

Dutt’s description of Jatra as a form suited to ‘immediately reflecting the social conflict of its time in vigorous, violent terms’ indicates his interest in the political efficacy of popular folk theatre (2009: 170). He became directly involved in the early 1970s when he started writing play-texts for different Jatra companies and directing them. His growing familiarity with the form resulted in a deeper understanding of its potential for shaping any content according to its own conventions and presenting its huge urban and rural working-class audience with new interpretations of social conflict within an intelligible grammar of actions. Beginning with *Rifle* (1968), which focused on the anti-colonial armed revolutionary movement in the 1930s, and *Delhi Chalo*

(1971), about the anti-colonial war of Indian National Army (INA) led by Subhash Chandra Bose, Dutt went on to write several *Jatra* plays including *Bhuli Nai Priya* (1970), *Jallianwallahbag* (1969), *Sannyasir Tarabari* (1972) and *Mukti Diksha* (1974). *Bhuli Nai Priya* is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Jallianwallahbag* deals with the killing of hundreds of unarmed Indian nationalists by the police in Jallianwallahbag, Punjab, in 1919, *Sannyasir Tarabari* tells of the Sannyasi-Fakir rebellion against the British East India Company in late eighteenth-century Bengal, and *Mukti Diksha* of French revolutionaries in the Paris Commune of 1871.

It may be useful, at this point in the discussion, to consider certain critical reflections on the nature of post-independence modern Indian theatre to situate Dutt's engagement with history, especially colonial history (Bharucha 1983, 1993; Bhatia 1999; Dharwadker 2005). Rustom Bharucha, from his early writings on Bengali political theatre (1983) to his critique of simplistic interculturalism (1993), has repeatedly focused on the specificity of history – language, location, tradition as well as everyday struggles of the people of a particular location – in any form of writing about Indian theatre, more specifically post-independence Indian theatre. His commentary on Dutt is, thus, scrupulously contextualized through the ideological and political legacies that influenced Bengali theatre from the colonial period. Bhatia, in her long essay on Dutt's history play *Mahavidroha* (The Great Rebellion, 1973), meticulously tracks Dutt's challenge to the 'Western' or colonial interpretation of the rebellion of 1857 through narrative strategy and character formation (1999). For Dharwadkar, however, Indian theatre-makers have both embraced and rejected the colonial legacy 'in terms of form, language, ideology and conventions of representation' (2005: 11). Rather than focusing solely on anti-colonial critique or experiences of exploitation, she argues, post-independence Indian theatre has made efforts to engage with the full spectrum of India–West encounter. This broader perspective is evidenced by the fact 'the vast majority of contemporary plays are not concerned with colonialism at all but with the intersecting structures of home, family, and nation in the urban society of the present or with the configurations of gender and desire in the reimagined "folk" cultures of an unspecified past' (2005: 11). Dharwadker references a wide range of playwrights, including Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, G. P. Deshpande and Mahesh Elkunchwar as well as directors like Shombhu Mitra, Ebrahim Alkazi, K. N. Panikkar, B. V. Karanth, Vijaya Mehta, Satyadev Dube, Usha Ganguli and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and Dutt, himself. She also observes that the use of two narrative forms – myth and history – constitutes the major thematics of postcolonial modern Indian theatre.

I will refer to Bharucha's work on Dutt extensively in the following sections and also reflect on Bhatia's reading of Dutt's imagining of history. It will suffice, consequently, to mention here that in response to Dharwadker's characterization of post-independence modern Indian theatre, I would like to point out that the colonial legacies are very much part of the post-independence modern Indian theatre even when the 'majority' of practitioners were not explicitly engaging with them in the first three decades after independence. If the contemporary urban family, nation, home and the re-imagined 'folk' are indeed the major themes of modern Indian theatre, then it must engage with colonialism because decolonization as a process involves all these sites. Myth, in such a context, is not an 'unspecified time' and 'folk' not a timeless continuity. The constructive elements of myth are historical and folk as an idea as well as a set of practices has a material history and demands rigorous historiography. Situating them in the postcolonial contemporary inevitably involves 'grasping the political present' paying 'close attention to historical continuities, repetitions, and reactivations' (Wilder and Watson 2018: 1). Utpal Dutt's sustained engagement with history, as a complex network of relations of power and anti-colonial/anti-imperialist resistance, and his reflections on working with myths in revolutionary theatre firmly locate him in the pantheon of postcolonial Indian theatre-makers but his vision of revolutionary political theatre also distinguishes him. My effort in this Element is directed towards exploring this particular distinguishing feature of Dutt's practice.

Exploring a Self-confessed 'Propagandist': Revolutionary Theatre of Utpal Dutt

As Dutt stepped into the Minerva Theatre (built in 1893 at Beadon street, which was the veritable theatre district of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Calcutta) with his LTG, he also entered into conversation with the history of Bengali theatre from the nineteenth century, reinventing it and giving it new direction. The popular success of *Angaar* gave him scope for developing elaborate stagecraft and collaborating with leading figures from different fields to develop a specific understanding of theatre beyond spectacle but not without it. These included the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar (1930–2012) who composed music for *Angaar*, the lighting designer Tapas Sen (1924–2006) and the scenographer Nirmal Guha Roy. He later worked with the renowned folk singer Nirmalendu Choudhury (1922–1981) on the production of *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* (1963) and the singer, composer and political activist Hemanga Biswas (1912–1987) on *Kallol* (1965) and *Teer* (1967). Dutt's dramaturgy found greater and more acute expression as his political consciousness began to significantly inform his work.