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| **Art as a form of protest: Brecht and the Indian Street Theatre.**  (With Special focus on Theatre forms and their evolution) *“It is clear that certain forms of social relationship are deeply embodied in certain forms of art.” -Raymond Williams*  No work of art can claim to be apolitical. In fact, all forms of art have continuously evolved with the politics of the society. Art has been used as a medium of protests both consciously or unconsciously by artists over the years. For instance, the Romantic poets in the 18th-century were not just writing about their isolation but were also critiquing the politics of the time. Art need not be necessarily political but it would be a useless endeavour to look at art as outside politics. Moreover, the mutual change in art forms and society also reflects a sort of a complementary relationship at play.  The evolution of theatre form can be studied and the changes in the form can be traced along with the changes in society. From Greek tragedy, the earliest theatre form to Brecht’s epic theatre of the early 20th-century, there has evidently been a massive transformation in the theatre form.  Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre is considered to be a landmark in political theatre. Brecht synthesized several theatre techniques and practices into what popularly became ‘Epic Theatre’. In ‘A Short Organum for the Theatre’, Brecht wrote about these practices and specifically about the theatre for the ‘scientific age’. The theatre practices proposed by Brecht were also in direct contrast to the popular theatre form ‘Naturalism’. Rejecting the practices of Naturalist theatre, Brecht proposed that theatre is for entertainment. It should not adopt an explicitly moralistic tone. Theatre should not aspire to present a ‘slice of life’ but rather be conscious of itself as a mere representation of life. Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’ sought exactly to do this. The audience should never identify with what is happening on the stage. There should be no catharsis because it is only then that the spectator will be able to engage with the play on a critical level.  Further, according to Brecht, the potential of theatre in a changed political climate could only be realized if the theatre was to reach the masses. And for that, it had to do away with the caricatured styles and tropes like “beautiful embellished language, elegance in narration” and so on. Songs, chorus, dance and simple colloquial language was to be the ingredient of this new scientific form of theatre. The Brechtian theatre also took inspiration from Chinese theatre in their usage of masks to facilitate the distancing between the actor and the spectator. This is most notably observed in his work ‘The good person of Szechwan’.  *“The bare wish, if nothing else, to evolve an art fit for the times must drive our theatre of the scientific age straight out into the suburbs, where it can stand as it were, wide open, at the disposal of those who live hard and produce much, so that they can be entertained there with their great problems.” -Bertolt Brecht*  A committed Marxist, Brecht aspired through epic theatre to generate political awareness amongst the masses. Brecht’s theatre has a profound impact on not just the form of theatre but in cinema as well. Works of popular playwrights like Dario Fo have many parallels with the Brechtian epic theatre. In India, Safdar Hashmi’s plays have interesting grounds of similarity. Brecht’s aesthetics helped evolve theatre as a concrete medium of protest.  Post-Independence, Safdar Hashmi and his theatre company Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) have been instrumental in evolving street theatre in India. JANAM managed in many ways to take the theatre to the masses and dismantle the hegemonic institutions of caste, class and gender in its plays. The plays by JANAM were performed in all sorts of public spaces such as colleges, middle-class colonies, factories, slums and so on. In a time when the street theatre was often confused with social theatre and was used by the government to raise awareness about social and health concerns such as AIDS, family planning and so on, JANAM’s attempt at democratizing the street theatre is worth lauding. For Hashmi, the street theatre was a way of mobilizing the masses. The political desire of theatre form was thus materialized by street theatre under Safdar Hashmi. His theatre was in more than many ways quite similar to Brechtian models of theatre. About his theatre, he even once said that,  “*I am temperamentally opposed to any kind of theatre, cinema or act that manipulates the consciousness of the people or which gives them an experience by proxy. It is like taking someone by his collar and shaking him until he accepts your viewpoint. In that sense, I’m more a Brechtian. I would rather appeal to the people with reasonable arguments and make them reflect about what is going on.*”  The performances of JANAM’s plays are a testament to their achievement in bringing the theatre from the strongholds of the middle class and upper classes to the masses. The premiere of *Machine* was held in 1978 at an All-India Trade union meeting in Talkatora Stadium and was a thumping success. It is primarily because JANAM’s performances rely on creating an atmosphere of engagement with the audience. The performances of *Machine*held over the years demonstrate the success of the theatre group in reaching out to a wider audience and performing with a spontaneous authenticity. This kind of creativity can be expressed through the use of space in different contexts among different audiences and can happen only if the play uses subversive techniques to hold an audience who are not used to watching plays or in other words are not “receptive to the theatre”. JANAM’s plays use simple language and present what is most relevant and dear to their audience. Laughter is also used in order to subvert the figures of authority.  As successful as it may be, there are many challenges to using theatre as a form of protest. There are many critics who view street theatre as devoid of theatre aesthetics. In fact, the street theatre has always been viewed as “aesthetically weak”. However, this analysis can often prove to be wrong and misleading.  Arjun Gosh observes, “Political art and political theatre need to be judged by a different set of aesthetic standards since the aesthetics itself serves the interest of the elite.” The danger is only when the street theatre is reduced to presenting social ideas, campaigns, sloganeering or worst as propaganda.  JANAM’s play *Yeh dil mange more, Guruji*was a response against the communal riots in Gujarat. But the theatre group never enacted scenes of carnage, gore or violence. The reason can quite simply be traced back to the aesthetics of Brecht. Such a depiction would only arouse passion and not a critical judgment from the audience. The use of poetry, Bollywood songs helped in bringing the message home. The title of the play itself was a play on the popular commercial jingle of Pepsi (Yeh Dil Mange More) to depict the unrestrained ambitions of the Right-wing politics.  Furthermore, the same play was even revived again and many changes were made to it so that it could be relevant to the contemporary political climate. In a post-globalized world, access to art and theatre is only limited to a very exclusive class of society. For street theatre to fill this gap, it has to be versatile and accessible. Street theatre has to move with the masses. Where the masses are, the street theatre has to be. Yet, the challenge of financing such endeavours is always there.  As Arjun Ghosh again puts it brilliantly, “Political theatre cannot afford to lose its audience’s enthusiasm, both toward the play and toward the change it proposes, for the task of political theatre and, indeed, all forms of political art, is not only to shape a consciousness for change, but also to create space for a robust and democratic cultural alternative.”  But the biggest challenge for theatre is to fight the presence of other far more easily accessible forms of media like Television, songs et cetera. “Mechanical production” of art, as Walter Benjamin called it, could be dangerously applied to “homogenize” people’s taste. Malini Bhattacharya explains this cultural capitalism perfectly, “Rapid urbanization is creating a situation where the middle and the labouring classes migrating to newly built-up satellite townships are facing a complete cultural vacuum. Most often the TV is the exclusive means of recreation that they have. Traditional popular forms of entertainment for which there is still some space in rural areas are often appropriated by cultural entrepreneurs and sold to immigrants to urban areas in commercial packages. The urban poor has no longer any access to these.” This is already an intervening point for street theatre. Yet, there is still a need to incorporate street to a political movement on a mass scale. There is more space to evolve the techniques of street theatre form. While street theatre does democratize art in more than one way, it is also up to theatre form to create a form of entertainment that is more liberal and more open to debate and dialogue. |  |  |