

Resistance to the Neo-liberal Economy and the Life of a Play: The Jana Natya Manch and Theatre Activism

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For left cultural activism, 'theatre' forms an important 'worksite of democracy' which allows theatre activists to provide creative intervention within the existing 'field of forces'. Cultural organizations and theatre groups of the Left – like the Delhi-based Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Forum) offer a critique of neo-liberalism through theatre. First performed in the year 2000, the street play Nahi Qubool (Unacceptable) was designed to expose neo-liberal policies undertaken by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government. The play continued to be performed even after a change of government with suitable modifications for changed circumstances. This genealogy of performance demonstrates the contours of politics and activist performances in contemporary India. It reveals that theatre as a 'laboratory for democracy' can also perform a diagnostic role to enhance the effectiveness of political strategy.

Motorists who crossed the border between the states of Haryana and Rajasthan near Sajahanpur during the months of the farmers' agitation, when thousands of farmers had camped out on the outskirts of Delhi, would have noticed red as the predominant colour of the banners and flags that were on show from the tents, tractors and trucks that blockaded the Delhi–Jaipur highway in the winter months of 2020–1. Farmers across the country, particularly from the northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, had been sitting in protest demanding the withdrawal of three farm-related laws that were enacted by the Indian parliament in September 2020. The farmers feared that the laws, if implemented, would make them pawns in the hands of private buyers of farm produce and significantly reduce farm incomes.¹ The large presence of red banners and flags at the various protest sites near Delhi spoke of the role of left-wing farm unions in helping organize the farmers against the farm laws. However, despite the grass-roots mobilization that formed an important backbone of the movement, the left-wing farmers' unions, like the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), stayed shy of media events related to the agitation. Certainly, the leadership of the AIKS refrained from identifying too closely with political parties of the Left like the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), allowing the protests to remain largely 'faceless' for a very long time.²

The communists in India have been opposed to neo-liberal economic policies and their impact on various sectors of life like agriculture, education, food security,

employment and healthcare. Since the liberalization of the Indian economy was undertaken in the late 1980s and early 1990s, left parties and their mass organizations have been on the forefront of movements against such policy measures. Consistent resistance to policies of liberalization and privatization of the economy was one of the key factors that caused the left parties, led by the CPI(M), to achieve their highest ever tally in parliamentary elections in 2004 – sixty-one seats. On the strength of this mandate, these parties supported the government of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Indian National Congress. In doing so, left parties hoped to arrest the acceptance of neo-liberal policies and consolidate their support base. Yet due to a certain turn of events, as discussed later in this article, left parties suffered a severe setback in the parliamentary elections held in 2009 and their electoral strength has declined since.³ From a position where the CPI(M) was aggressively attempting to project its influence in the early years of the UPA government following 2004, a decade and a half later, in 2020, it was seeking to refrain from projecting its association with agrarian movements which it had helped build. In this article, I argue that for organizations of the Left that seek to effect radical transformation of social and political relations in favour of what they identify as have-nots, the goal is to deepen democracy through widespread acceptance of egalitarian values. Performative and cultural responses to their interventions reveal as much about responsiveness to their policies and strategies as they do agitational and electoral fates. *Nahi Qubool* (Not Acceptable) (2000), a street play performed by the Delhi-based theatre collective Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Forum) (abbreviated as 'Janam' or 'Birth'), between the years 2000 and 2008, has formed the site that allows me to examine the varying articulations of politics across the decade that formed a crucial turning point in the fortunes of the Left in India.

In situating the making, remaking and performance of *Nahi Qubool* as a site where we can witness the shifting of the field of meanings, it is useful to adopt Janelle Reinelt's proposal to include theatre as an additional 'worksites of democracy'.⁴ Reinelt expanded on Etienne Balibar's concept of 'laboratories of democracy' in certain 'worksites' where democracy is 'under construction'.⁵ Balibar developed the concept in the context of the desire for an inclusive European citizenship from within a multicultural space and against the backdrop of uneven development.⁶ The objective of democratic forces who seek to use the 'under-construction' worksites is to create a unified community to build a constitutional society that can offer equal opportunities to all citizens. Balibar identifies four worksites, the first three – justice, the convergence of trade union struggles and the democratization of borders – being 'constitutional' goals. The final worksite identified by Balibar – the 'language of Europe' – and 'theatre' as added by Reinelt, concerns culture. The versatility that theatre and performance offer exists in the dialogue between the performers, the spectators, the performance space and time, as well as between 'tradition' and 'experimentation'. Works in the domain of culture have the scope of operating in two concerted directions. The first is an educational role. For Reinelt, the theatre is a worksite that can be employed to present and make available for analysis the contradictions that may exist in the structures of lived reality. It has the tools for exposing exploitation, raising consciousness and thus preparing its

participants for a radical transformation of themselves – a step that must be the precursor to any movement for radical transformation of societal existence. The goal of such education is to wrest hegemonic control from common sense and lay bare the road to a new, emancipatory knowledge. The second is a battle over meanings. According to Pierre Bourdieu, works of art are embedded in a field of meanings which is acted upon simultaneously by a *field of forces* and a *field of struggles*. He claims that ‘the essential explanation of each work lies outside of each of them in the objective relations which constitute this field. The task is that of constructing the space of positions and the space of position-taking’.⁷ At stake in the *field of struggles* is the contest to wrest control of the dominant meaning. The artist or activist does not operate autonomously in this *field of struggle* as they need to contend with other agents in the *field of forces*. In this dynamic *field of struggles* the same articulation or position could have very different reception or effect – ‘every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field’.⁸ The artistic intervention, therefore, needs to be constantly recalibrated to respond to changes in the *field of forces*. The malleability of theatre as a form is one of the factors that makes it a suitable tool in the *field of struggles*.

Silvija Jestrović and Ameet Parmeswaran identify the ‘[l]eftist thought-in-action’ as a position that would be significant in such worksites. They define the ‘Left’ as an umbrella term for a ‘range of progressive cultural productions, ways of living and political positions’.⁹ Given its stated endeavour to transcend the current state of social relations and work towards a society the contours of which exist in the realm of thoughts and principles, the Left would find theatre, and indeed the performative space, to be versatile. However, within the ‘range’ of the possible manifestations of leftist thought and action, Jestrović and Parmeswaran distinguish between ‘official and unofficial Lefts’ – the official having the Left in control of state power and the unofficial being the ‘emancipatory cultural and activist practice that advocates equality and solidarity’.¹⁰ They see the ‘unofficial’, emancipatory Left as one that not only exists in opposition to capitalism and the politics of the Right, but also is in a position to offer a critique of the ‘official’ or establishment Left. These terms – ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ – assume very different connotations in contemporary India. The Indian Left has been fractured between several factions primarily on ideological differences. Parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the CPI(M) sought to combine agitational modes of struggle with participation in electoral politics. Certain other left parties like the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) (CPI(ML)) stressed the importance of agitational methods of struggle over the parliamentary path. In polemical conversations, organizations like the CPI(ML) and CPI(Maoist) and other leftist figures independent of party affiliations often critique the CPI(M) as the ‘official’ Left which suffers from parliamentary cretinism.¹¹ Much of this criticism was based on the experiences of the CPI(M)-led government in the state of West Bengal where the party enjoyed an unbroken stint from 1977 to 2011. Being a state government under a system that heavily privileges the central government, the CPI(M)-led government of West Bengal had to function under

severe resource and administrative constraints. Thus the CPI(M) found itself in an in-between position of neither enjoying full state power nor being able to escape criticism for following the parliamentary path and accepting working within the constraints of an administrative structure where neo-liberal forces held the hegemonic position. This was the predicament that organizations like Janam had to confront in the period following 2005. Thus, even though the critics of the CPI(M) labelled it the 'official' Left, its position was very different from the 'official' Left in the European context, as identified by Jestrović and Parmeswaran. In fact, in the period under study – 2000–8 – there was a great heterogeneity of views within the rank and file of the CPI(M) in the form of disagreements that were nonetheless reined in from public revelation due to the constraints of inner-party discipline.

The Jana Natya Manch was established in 1973 by a group of student activists who were inspired by the ideals of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). In the early 1970s they performed full-length plays on makeshift stages in Delhi and neighbouring areas. The period of political emergency that engulfed the country in 1975–7 crippled Janam's fraternal organizations – principally the trade unions. This curtailed Janam's ability to perform full-length plays. The group took to performing self-scripted short plays – what came to be known as 'street theatre'. Thereafter, the group has continued to perform theatre for over four decades and counting.¹²

Janam is allied to the CPI(M). Bearing a fraternal relationship with the CPI(M), a large number of long-standing members of Janam identify ideologically with the CPI(M). However, the collective has an open membership where many theatre enthusiasts work with the collective for periods that can vary from a few weeks to a few years. Such members bear varying degrees of allegiance to the ideology of the CPI(M), while most of them may not be formal members of the party. In practice, Janam functions autonomously. While it does choose the themes of its plays independently, it also very often performs to support the CPI(M) or other allied organizations in their campaigns. In turn, Janam benefits from the organizational support that can be material in terms of rehearsal space or audience outreach. Support also extends to creating an organic outreach between the collective and lived realities around which Janam tells its stories, learning from the experiences of the working class and the urban poor, most of whom have migrated from their villages, fleeing agrarian distress, though still maintaining very strong links to the rural economy. Hence, though Janam functions autonomously, its organizational and ideological proximity to the CPI(M) means that the policies and predicament of the CPI(M) form one of the *fields of forces* within which Janam creates meanings. This article examines the mediation which theatre as a worksite of the Left undergoes when it is operating within a *field of forces* involving close proximity to a communist party – a communist party that neither is in control of state power nor operates away from the constitutional boundaries defined by the state. The street play in question – *Nahi Qubool* – was performed in a period when the CPI(M) rose to its highest strength historically, and then plummeted in sharp decline. A study of Janam's recalibrations of the play through this period makes visible the workings of theatre as a 'worksite of the Left'. I argue that in addition to being a laboratory of democracy,

where the Left seeks to transmit ‘political knowledge and common sense’,¹³ the theatre can also serve as a diagnostic tool to receive early signals of a policy position or a strategy that fails to resonate among the community with whom it communicates. Performance being a dialogic process – not only for ‘transmission’ but also for reception – between performers and spectators, and indeed multiple participants, allows for multimodal communication. It allows the performing collective to learn from the exercise of performance.

***Nahi Qubool*: making the play**

Usually, Janam has in its repertoire several plays addressing a range of themes and issues that it performs at a variety of locations, from working-class slums and busy bazaars to educational institutions and political rallies. It usually prepares a new play to respond to the needs of an upcoming campaign, fresh political developments or a decision to address a *longue durée* issue, such as child sexual harassment or caste-based discrimination. When Janam began work on the play that was to become *Nahi Qubool* it did so keeping in mind the needs of a specific campaign. At that time, it did not have a clear idea of the longevity of the play. The idea of creating a play which helped illustrate the capitulation of the Indian government to US strategic interests was first mooted when it became clear that the union government of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was keen to host a visit by US president Bill Clinton in March 2000. This was the first visit by a US president to India since Jimmy Carter visited the country in 1978. The play would form an opportunity to encapsulate the Indian Left’s critique of the growing alliance between India and the United States – which the Left perceived as a mark of abandoning the long-standing Indian foreign policy of non-alignment. As history would have it, this marked a strategic shift in Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War period, a shift that was to concretize in the form of the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2006–8.

Most of Janam’s plays are collectively scripted through a process of guided improvisations, with certain dialogue and songs being specifically scripted by a writer from within the collective. The script continues to be revised heavily during the play-making process and until the first few shows, and thereafter every now and then to respond to changes in the political scenario, to recasting or to aesthetic challenges. Very often, before they begin work on a new play on a certain issue, the group invite activists or political leaders who have worked in the relevant field to share their experience with the actors. In this case, they invited Prakash Karat – then Politbureau member of the CPI(M) – to speak to the actors. After discussing the issue with Karat, the actors of Janam decided to zero in on three key areas where neo-liberal economic reforms most affected the poor and underprivileged sections of the Indian population. The issues were those of the increasing withdrawal of the state from the fields of agriculture and education, and the dismantling of the Public Distribution System (PDS) for food. The Left looked upon these policies as imposed by international economic regulators like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank,

which in turn were tacitly controlled by the United States. Education and the PDS were areas which saw massive withdrawal of public support under the influence of policies of fiscal conservatism followed by successive governments over the 1990s. Agriculture was another fallout of the withdrawal of public pricing support for farmers and the lifting of restrictions on importing food items under the neoliberal economic regime. Karat concluded that the growing Indo-US affinity was detrimental to sovereignty and to the security of the livelihood of millions of Indians. That, then, was to be the fourth issue in Janam's play. In fact, Karat spoke in December 1999 at the dawn of the 'new millennium', and he used the phrase 'Nayi sadi mein gulami nahi sahenge' ('We shall not tolerate servitude in the new century'). This phrase found its way into the final slogan of the play – 'Nayi sadi ki nayi gulami, nahi qubool' ('The new servitude of the new century is unacceptable'). Hence the title of the new play – *Nahi Qubool*.

Once the issues before them were clear, the actors started the work of improvising and dramatizing the ideas. Throughout the process, the actors continued to seek the feedback of activists and other experts; the decision on what formed part of the play remained that of the actors. The process of the collective 'sculpting' of the play was shared, although the contributions of various actors varied to different degrees.¹⁴ The process of 'guided improvisations' allows actors to bring into the rehearsals their imaginations and interpretations of a particular situation. The acceptability and the adaptability of such raw action depend on two quotients – the dramatic qualities and the ability to encapsulate or illustrate the ideological viewpoint. Experience does play an important role in an actor's ability to suggest scenes which would be incorporated in the play. In Janam's process of making a play, the actor not only enhances her acting skill, but also sharpens her artistic, analytical and ideological understanding. The director plays an important role in guiding the play to a stable form, and also in training actors.

The early improvisations for *Nahi Qubool* took the form of a conducted tour for the US president organized by the ministers of the BJP-led government in which they would showcase various flagship policies which demonstrated their credentials as effective flag bearers of the neo-liberal project. Like most agit-prop theatre, street theatre usually has an episodic character. Loosely structured scenes become tableau illustrations of specific aspects of the issues that a play may be addressing. In *Nahi Qubool*, various scenes illustrate the hardships brought about by the economic reforms, the play being held together by the narrative thread provided by the metaphorical tour undertaken by the US president.

Agrarian India is witness to the hapless condition of the poor peasant in the play who often finds himself at the mercy of village moneylenders who offer credit to peasants to initiate cultivation. Often the peasants are unable to repay the loan and with the steep interest rates they lose control of whatever crop or property they have. The levels of agrarian distress increased sharply in the period of neo-liberal reforms as farmers were lured towards cash crops, which reduced food security, while exposing them to vagaries of international agricultural markets. The scene of the agrarian crisis sought to depict this exploitative arrangement and focused on the inability of the government to create effective institutions for rural credit.¹⁵ The group tried improvising a scene to show the manner in which banks refuse to lend to

farmers who seek to borrow in distress. The scene stopped short of depicting the conditions due to which the farmer and his family were forced to fall into a debt trap with the Lala, the moneylender. Another aspect of the scene depicted the plight of the farmers who opted for genetically modified seeds and expensive pesticides being marketed by multinational corporations (MNCs) (Fig. 1). The government's withdrawal from agriculture causes the farmer to fall prey to the false promises of the MNCs. Terribly in debt, the farmer and his wife commit suicide. The farmer in the play was left with no option but to borrow more from the Lala to purchase expensive pesticides manufactured by the MNCs. Having done so, the farmer was able to harvest his crop but, in the absence of a government-determined support price, failed to earn enough to repay his loan. The Lala, who is also the local trader, has already fulfilled his requirements with cheap imports from world markets. The lifting of quantitative restrictions on food grain imports had exposed the Indian farmer to the vagaries of the world market. Though the exponents of the free market took pains to point out the advantages of competition, the Lala's remark about the impossibility of the farmer taking advantage of higher global prices illustrates the unequal nature of the competition. Janam's audience identifies the utter brutality of the situation. A vast majority of Janam's performances target the working-class population of Delhi. Most of Delhi's working class consists of migrant labourers from various villages of Hindi-speaking north India.¹⁶ The working-class audience of Delhi is able to relate readily to the plight of the peasant family depicted in the scene.



FIG. 1. *Nahi Qubool* in front of the Reserve Bank of India headquarters, New Delhi (2002). Photograph courtesy of Jana Natya Manch.

Within the episodic structure of the play, two more scenes present and analyse the adverse effects of the withdrawal of the state in two crucial sectors. The drive towards privatization of education placed students from poorer households at a disadvantage. In the play, the Student fails in a boxing bout with Bhari Bharkam Fees ('Hefty Fees'). Dressed in the attire of a boxer, complete with boxing gloves, Fees takes on the Student in a bout, in what is obviously a battle of non-equals (Fig. 2). Although the Student manages to scrape through the rounds of graduation and post-graduation, he is knocked out before registering for a research degree. The scene shows the withdrawal of government funding of higher education, which pushed an increasing number of students out of colleges and universities. The Public Distribution System (PDS), or the ration system, was devised as a universal food guarantee scheme in independent India. But in the move to change the ration system from universal to targeted for the 'poorest of the poor', it grossly underestimated poverty.¹⁷ In the play, the instance of food grains rotting in warehouses is represented through the Ration ki Bori ('Sack of Rations') that remains unmatched with any deserving 'poor'. The scene uses the metaphor of the *swayamvar* – a premodern Indian custom of a woman choosing her groom from a set of suitors. Here, of course, the Ration ki Bori – performed by an actor who wears an oversized jute sack-shaped poncho – is sought to be paired with a suitable groom – that is, the 'poorest of the poor'. But such a groom is not found. In one scene, while the 'poor' is 'deserving', he coughs vigorously, displaying his severe undernourishment, and therefore is disqualified as he does not have the wherewithal to store or even prepare the 'ration' for consumption. The scene mocks



FIG. 2. *Nahi Qubool* at Inderpuri, Delhi (2001). Photograph courtesy of Jana Natya Manch.

the alleged flaws in the government's adopted formula for estimating poverty and welfare targeting.

To string together the tableau of scenes and give it a political pitch, the actors of Janam undertook a series of improvisations. The improvisation exercises become a participatory field where the actors – particularly actors who are new to the collective – undergo both familiarization with the politics of the Left and training. The training is ideological as well as aesthetic – setting a challenge before the actor to devise a performative representation of an ideological position that would at once be instructive as well as entertaining. In the initial improvisations, the actors tried out the idea of a ramp walk, mocking the fashion industry – a symbol of elitist, upper-class culture. Walking the ramp would be Bhari Bharkam Fees, Videshi Beej and Ration ki Bori – figures that marginalized people associate with the hardship they regularly encounter. Taking a bow in the place of the designers would be the Ministers – 'Swadeshi' (indigenous) and 'Videshi' (foreign). The idea was later abandoned for the sake of brevity. That brevity was required due to the entry of the character of the US president – the Mahamahim ('Great Lord') – introduced to the audience by the Ministers as 'the great President of the greatest nation' in one of the early shows. The US president was attired as Uncle Sam. The play achieved much in terms of political analysis of the relationship between the Indian ruling class and what the Left perceived as their American overlords:

MINISTER 1: Sir, please join us in our song and dance.

MINISTER 2: As a partner, sir.

MINISTER 1: Equal partner, sir.

MAHAMAHIM: You dirty Indian. How can you dare to compare yourself to me? How dare you desire equal partnership?

MINISTER 2: No sir, junior partner, sir.

MINISTER 1: As an agent, sir.

MINISTER 2: We are ready to clean your boots, sir.¹⁸

Critique of US hegemony through the personification of an Uncle Sam-like figure had occurred in several of Janam's plays in the past, one of the more memorable being *Sangharsh Karenge, Jitenge* (We Shall Fight, We Shall Win) (1993), in which there was the character of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), who was invisible to all except the child Sangharsh ('Struggle'). IMF was attired in a T-shirt and an American top hat with 'stars and stripes' printed on them, a ruler and a belt with a pistol hanging from it.¹⁹ The caricature and suspicion of the US's strategic interests is not a viewpoint that has been restricted to left political circles in India. Anti-Americanism had been a long-standing sentiment within the Indian diplomatic and defence establishment because of the US's suspicion of India during the Cold War. US policies in South Asia, particularly in relation to India's nuclear weapons ambitions,

had thwarted the Indian government's own strategic visions.²⁰ Yet the figure of the US president itself was largely unfamiliar to the common person in India, who was quite oblivious to the inner workings of international politics. The first Janam play to have drafted a character that represented American state power was *Jung ke Khatre* (The Threat of War) (1982). *Jung ke Khatre* presented the grave danger of an imperialist war and the character of Ronald Reagan was seen turning the nations of the Third World against each other and supplying them with arms. However, the disconnect with the audiences was very apparent. As one member of the audience remarked, 'Par comrade, humare yahan jung ke kya matlab?' (But Comrade, there is no war here?).²¹ The inclusion of the Uncle Sam figure in Janam's plays is part of the strategy of ideological education that Reinelt identified. *Nahi Qubool* focused on certain episodes that the spectators could readily relate to. The challenge before the play was to expose the role of the BJP-led government in framing policies that were the cause of the hardships faced by the people and directing their ire against the government. However, as Prakash Karat mentioned in the initial interaction with the collective, the play also sought to link the chain of responsibility to the role of WTO and other Bretton Woods institutions that were perceived as being instruments of US hegemonic designs.²² The character of the Uncle Sam figure underwent significant transformation with the coming into office of George W. Bush as president of the United States in 2001. With him came a phase of US military aggression, and the attack on Iraq. By 2005, his many slip-ups had reached Janam's audiences. As Sudhanva Deshpande mentioned to me, 'Bush was a disaster for the rest of the world, but for theatre people it was a boon.'²³ The character of the US president – the Mahamahim – was now moulded into the figure of a man who thinks himself macho, and a warlord, but appears hilarious to everyone else. This figure worked most effectively when Janam travelled to the US, where the audiences were intimately aware of Bush's mannerisms. At the level of political reference, the issue of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was included. For instance, Bush likens the unequal bout between the Student and Bhari Bharkam Fees to the battle between the US Army and Saddam Hussein.

The tableau scenes present to the spectators – who indeed represent the Indian people – reasons to doubt the stratagems of the ministers – 'Swadeshi and Videshi'. Despite the 'sale' of sovereignty in agriculture, education and food policies, the Mahamahim demands that the Indian flag – a symbol of India's independence and sovereignty, be handed over to him. A giant tricolour is brought into the arena. The flag frame was prepared using a dismantlable structure of hollow pipes that made the prop portable. While the Mahamahim is assisted by the ministers in pulling down the flag, the rest of the cast – the Indian people – resist and hold it aloft.

***Nahi Qubool* in a changing political landscape**

Nahi Qubool was performed with great regularity throughout the tenure of the BJP-led NDA government in Delhi, as well as across the country, whenever Janam was invited to tour. The fact that organizations that chose to host Janam would request that this play be part of its programme is evidence that *Nahi Qubool* was received well by audiences and

also considered effective in communicating the political critique of neo-liberalism to audiences. The play's capacity for political critique that grips the spectator's attention depends on two factors – it should be able to resonate with the lived realities of the spectator and it should be able to invoke laughter. To be politically effective, such laughter needs to go beyond physical, situational laughter to a laughter of recognition or understanding. It is at that point that the spectator is able to connect her own condition to the analysis being indicated by the play. *Nahi Qubool* offered many such moments. The play outlived the initial campaign opposing the visit of Bill Clinton. In fact, it continued to be performed even after the BJP lost power in the national elections in 2004. The left parties used their parliamentary strength to support a Congress-led coalition in the form of the UPA. Historically, Indian communists have identified the Congress as a party that represented the interests of landowners and capitalists and hence opposed the interests of the working classes. Yet the CPI(M), the CPI and other left parties decided to support the Congress-led UPA in order to keep the Hindu nationalist BJP out of power even though they believed that the BJP and the Congress had similar approaches to economic policies. The Left's support was on the basis of a Common Minimum Programme (CMP). The CMP promised the adoption of an independent foreign policy and the reversal of some of the economic policies of the NDA. So the first phase of UPA rule did not see too many performances of *Nahi Qubool* as there was hope that many of the points of criticism in the play would now be addressed by the new government. But soon friction between the allies arose over a host of issues related to privatization and liberalization of certain public-sector concerns and services. Agricultural distress continued unabated, the universal PDS was not revived, and there was no effective increase in public funding for education. That was when *Nahi Qubool* started being performed frequently once again with certain adjustments in the play, particularly in terms of the characters of the two ministers. In the earlier version, the two ministers were named Swadeshi and Videshi. These names, while referencing the Hindu Right's emphasis on the Indianization of culture and polity, critiqued what the Left saw as double standards when juxtaposed with the growing bonhomie and – in the Left's view – supplication to the US. However, with the change of government, that symbolism needed to be changed. In the earlier version of *Nahi Qubool* the two ministers wore a saffron scarf around their shoulders to signify their allegiance to the politics of the Hindu Right. Now they wore white along with a white Nehru cap, as the attire associated with Congress politicians. Their names were changed to Minister of Privatization, 'National', and Minister of Globalization, 'International'. National was played by a woman, perhaps suggesting the figure of Sonia Gandhi, then president of the Congress. The actor playing International wore a blue turban suggestive of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Thus what changed was the costumes – from saffron to white – and the character names from Hindi words to English (Fig. 3). Despite the changes, the two versions marked a continuity which was consonant with the Left's view of the similarity of the economic policies of the BJP and the Congress.

Beyond 2006–7, the relationship between the CPI(M) and the Congress started to decline gradually. There were two routes to the decline. First, as already noted, the CPI(M),



FIG. 3. *Nahi Qubool* at Dharmanagar, Tripura (2007). Photograph courtesy of Jana Natya Manch.

along with other left parties, found themselves in a situation where they were running certain state governments while the overall economic policy was determined by the central government. Having ruled the state for about three decades, the Left Front government of West Bengal veered away from politics of confrontation with capital and adopted a path towards employment generation that brought it into confrontation with the peasantry. For its industrialization programme, it had to look towards private capital and seek to convert agricultural land to industrial use. Its efforts were faced with significant resistance from sections of the peasantry that were unwilling to give up agricultural land – which ultimately caused it to lose power in the state. The ensuing agitation against land acquisition and opposition to engagement with private capital had a nationwide impact on the functioning of the CPI(M) and its allied organizations. Their activists had to face questions that challenged their ideological commitment to socialism. It was a moment in which the CPI(M) and its allies were under great political attack. It was a moment that the prime minister of the Congress-led government, Dr Manmohan Singh, chose to loosen the shackles that the Left held over the economic and foreign policies of the government.²⁴ An opportunity to actualize this and other objectives came with the proposed nuclear deal with the United States under the 1-2-3 Agreement,²⁵ aimed at ending India's nuclear isolation in the world and cementing a closer strategic partnership with the US in a post-Cold War period. So, ironically, if a visit by Bill Clinton was the harbinger of a radical shift in India's foreign policies, the operationalizing of the nuclear deal was a significant step in concretizing such a shift. Prakash Karat, whom Janam had consulted before preparing *Nahi Qubool*, was now the general secretary of the CPI(M). The party,

already under attack over its commitment to ideology, opposed the nuclear deal, which it identified as an abdication to imperialism and a surrender of sovereignty. Under Karat's leadership the CPI(M) and other left parties withdrew support from the UPA government. The UPA government undertook a campaign in support of the deal, framing it as an answer to India's energy needs, promising to bring reliable electricity connection to the Indian people.²⁶ In a speech addressing the parliament, Manmohan Singh added,

Every day that I have been prime minister of India I have tried to remember that the first ten years of my life were spent in a village with no drinking water supply, no electricity, no hospital, no roads and nothing that we today associate with modern living. I had to walk miles to school, I had to study in the dim light of a kerosene oil lamp. This nation gave me the opportunity to ensure that such would not be the life of our children in the foreseeable future. Sir, my conscience is clear that on every day that I have occupied this high office, I have tried to fulfill the dream of that young boy from that distant village.²⁷

It was in this context that the left parties decided to launch a campaign to explain their viewpoint to the people. Consequently, the Jana Natya Manch also decided to participate in the campaign. Given that *Nahi Qubool* foregrounded an ideological critique of US hegemony, the group were able to adapt the play to include the issue surrounding the 1-2-3 Agreement. References to the nuclear agreement were introduced towards the beginning of the play in a sequence which fitted within the play's structure of exchanges between the Mahamahim and the Ministers. The rest of the play continued, as it were, with the audience reminded of the nuclear deal as another symbol of the Indian government's supplication to US interests. The new version was named *One-Two-Three ka Four* (2007). Other than referring to the 1-2-3 Agreement, the title reminded the audiences of a tremendously popular song from a Hindi movie *Ram Lakhan* (1989) – 'One-Two ka Four'. The lyrics of the song helped sketch the character of Lakhan in the film as a man who could succeed using his wily ways. As with many other plays, *One-Two-Three ka Four* also evolved through its performances. It became increasingly clear that any effort to explain the many legal and technical issues of the agreement to the people was proving to be quite complex. On the other hand, the arguments in favour of the nuclear deal spoke the language of 'cheap power through the exploitation of nuclear resources' – an argument which appealed to the people. The original version of *Nahi Qubool* carried off the attack on the character of the US president on the back of a sharp critique of issues that resonated with concerns of the everyday existence of the spectators. In the post-nuclear-deal version, however, their lived reality reminded them of the hardships of expensive, unreliable and often nonexistent electricity. Thus in the revised play there was an inversion of concerns, while the body of the play built on everyday hardships that the person on the street could readily relate to. These tableau sections were interleaved with a section that questioned the government's claims to provide cheaper and more reliable access to electricity. Hence the larger critique of the Indo-US alliance remained undelivered.

The revised *Nahi Qubool* had a short life. Though the Left's decision to withdraw support from the Congress-led government was designed to ensure a mid-term election and perhaps capitalize on a sharp ideological campaign, the government survived the vote of confidence in the parliament, as it managed to secure the support of some allies of the Left. Clearly the leadership of the CPI(M) had failed to gauge the extent to which it could use its position of influence over the central government to push the common sense of the people over the nuclear deal. Or perhaps it was the imperative of proving its ideological commitment to socialism in the face of attacks from other entities within the Indian Left that persuaded the CPI(M) to adopt a hard-line stance on the nuclear deal. Whatever it was, Janam used its performances of *Nahi Qubool* as a laboratory to build an anti-imperialist consciousness among its audiences through analysis of certain crises that they encountered in their experiences. In such laboratory practice, the collective kept altering the play in order to adapt it to changes in the *field of struggles*. Though the play did work well in the initial version during NDA rule (2000–4), as well as in the latter period of UPA rule (2006–8), the play failed to communicate its ideas effectively in its final version that critiqued the nuclear deal. I would like to clarify here that this analysis of *One-Two-Three ka Four* does not lead me to remark on the ability of street theatre or its audiences to engage with complex issues. Like many other open-space theatre groups, Janam in its long history has created effective plays that have creatively analysed complex and sensitive concepts, such as *Machine* (1978), *Apharan Bhaichara Ka* (The Abduction of Brotherhood) (1986), *Jinhe Yakin Nahi Tha* (Those Who Did Not Have Faith) (1997), *Voh Bol Uthi* (She Spoke Up) (2000), *Yeh Dil Maange More, Guruji* (This Heart Wants More, Guruji) (2002) and *Tathagat* (2016), among several others.²⁸ Every issue has a certain creative and political potential and politics is the art of gauging and articulating that potential. The Left's failure to communicate the reasons for its opposition to the nuclear deal extended beyond that of this play by Janam.

As a collective of the Left, Janam uses its theatre to 'transmit political knowledge as common sense', as it did with *Nahi Qubool*. Theatre, however, allows for multimodal communication and the responses of the spectators during and after performances are conversational, whereby the spectators enable the collective to gauge the 'reception' of its attempt at political education. This feedback makes space for a diagnosis of the policies of the CPI(M) – policies that it adopts in order to strengthen its influence over the political discourse and over the political imagination of the people. The reception that the updated *Nahi Qubool* received made it evident that audiences could not connect opposition to the nuclear deal with the possibility of improving their lives. Given that the play had worked very well under earlier circumstances, this could indicate a shortcoming in the CPI(M)'s strategy. Indeed, creativity or insight is not restricted to the domain of theatre or the arts. Activists of the CPI(M) working in other arenas like trade unions or student groups also received a lukewarm reception to the campaign against the nuclear deal, as acknowledged by the CPI(M) leadership several years after these events.²⁹ Though the performances of the revised *Nahi Qubool*, and indeed other campaign efforts by the activists of the

CPI(M), squarely diagnosed such strategy shortcomings, the CPI(M) leadership and the party as a whole were unable to engage in course correction.

Over the last couple of decades, India has seen a rapid shift in the *field of forces*, with the political direction veering away from a pluralist democracy towards a majoritarian state. Yet the country remains one that is multicultural and multiethnic and one which has been sliding on multiple indicators of development. There is certainly a tremendous scope for furthering a democratic agenda of struggles and indeed activating 'laboratories of democracy' that can help devise strategies to consolidate political action. Theatre as a 'worksite of the Left' can be the arena for communicating ideas and analysis from a left perspective. It can also serve as a 'diagonistic tool' where activists and those in leadership roles can calibrate their policy directions through concrete feedback from the people, who can be potential actors of change. However, until that happens, the rift between the CPI(M) that is looked upon with a degree of distrust, and the enormous goodwill that ground-level workers and activists in various mass organizations of the Left continue to enjoy among peasants, workers, women and students, is likely to continue.

NOTES

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- 3 The four parties that constituted the Left Front won twenty-four seats in the parliamentary elections held in 2009, twelve in 2014 and six in 2019.
- 4 Janelle Reinelt, 'Performance at the Crossroads of Citizenship', in Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt, eds., *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 34–40.
- 5 Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 7 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 30.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Silvija Jestrović and Ameet Parameswaran, 'Worksites of the Left', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 39, 3 (2019), pp. 217–23, here pp. 217–18.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Dipankar Bhattacharya, 'For a Left Resurgence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46, 47 (2011), pp. 71–3, here p. 73.
- 12 For more on the Jana Natya Manch see Arjun Ghosh, *A History of the Jana Natya Manch: Plays for the People* (New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2012); Safdar Hashmi, *Right to Perform: Selected Writings of Safdar Hashmi* (New Delhi: SAHMAT, 1989); G. P. Deshpande, 'The Life and Death of Safdar Hashmi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24, 1 (1989), p. 4; Sudhanva Deshpande, 'The Inexhaustible

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- 13 Jestrović and Parameswaran, ‘Worksites of the Left’, p. 219.
- 14 For a detailed discussion of the process of production of a play script through improvisations see Deshpande, ‘Sculpting a Play’.
- 15 See P. Sainath, ‘An Indian Farmer about to Commit Suicide Writes a Note of Clarification’, *Counterpunch*, 14 August 2006, at <https://www.counterpunch.org/2006/08/14/an-indian-farmer-about-to-commit-suicide-writes-a-note-of-clarification/> (accessed 30 May 2010); Jayati Ghosh, ‘Poverty of Policy’, *Frontline*, 10 May 2008, at <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/article30195908.ece#!> (accessed 30 May 2010).
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- 18 Jana Natya Manch, ‘Nahi Qubool (Not Acceptable)’, *Nukkad Janam Samvad*, December 2002, pp. 115–21, here p. 115.
- 19 Jana Natya Manch, ‘Shangarsh Kareng, Jeetenge (We Shall Fight, We Shall Win)’, *Nukkad Janam Samvad*, December 2002, pp. 83–92.
- 20 Sanjaya Baru, *The Accidental Prime Minister* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt., Limited, 2018), p. 131; Rajghatta Chidanand, ‘Indira Was a Bitch to Nixon – Times of India’, *Times of India*, 30 June 2005, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/indira-was-a-bitch-to-nixon/articleshow/1156121.cms> (accessed 19 March 2021).
- 21 Ghosh, *A History of the Jana Natya Manch*, p. 66.
- 22 The Bretton Woods institutions – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – were created out of efforts by the Allied countries to rebuild the international economy in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Bretton Woods agreement (1944) envisaged the creation of an International Trade Organization (ITO) which ultimately took the form of the WTO.
- 23 Sudhanva Deshpande, personal interview, 2010.
- 24 Baru, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, pp. 144–55.
- 25 The Indo-US nuclear agreement was known as the ‘1-2-3 Agreement’ as provisions for such agreements were established by Section 123 of the United States Atomic Energy Act 1954.
- 26 Baru, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, p. 137.
- 27 Manmohan Singh, ‘Prime Minister’s Reply to the Motion on Confidence’, 2008, at http://loksabhaph.nic.in/Debates/Result14.aspx?dbsl=10243&ser=&smode=t#10001*49 (accessed 10 April 2021).
- 28 Read more about these plays in Arjun Ghosh, *A History of the Jana Natya Manch*.
- 29 ‘Left Failed to Turn Indo-US Nuke Deal into Poll Issue: CPI(M) Head Yechury’, *Indian Express*, 10 May 2015, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/left-failed-to-turn-into-us-nuke-deal-into-poll-issue-cpim-head-yechury> (accessed 1 December 2021); ‘Left Parties Shouldn’t Have Snapped Ties

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