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Revisiting *Marich Sangbad* in Contemporary Bengali Stage: Revival of Resurgence in the Crisis

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Abstract

This article examines the contemporary revivalism of *Marich Sangbad* (1973), Chetana's landmark production directed by Arun Mukhopadhyay, as a 'worksite of the Left' that continues to intervene in successive political conjunctures. Situating the performance analysis within the framework developed by Bishnupriya Dutt and Silvija Jestrovic, the article argues that the play's minimalist Brechtian form – the secular *Khel* presided over by the Ustad-Sutradhar, three interwoven narratives of exclusion, and the indigenous song sequences – constitutes a perlocutionary political speech act in Tony Fisher's sense: its political effects are aleatory, produced through interruption and formal fallibility rather than direct proclamation. Through close performance analysis of the *Khel* structure, the Meribaba sequence, and the CIA song, the article shows how *Marich Sangbad* anatomises colonial, feudal, and capitalist structures of oppression across historical periods and geographies, transforming Left nostalgia into an active reconstruction of collective memory. The article argues that the performance text's in-built conjunctures – its three simultaneous narratives and aesthetic formation – allow it to avoid museumification and remain politically generative across successive crises, from the Vietnam War era to the proto-fascist consolidation of contemporary India.

Keywords: *Marich Sangbad*; Chetana; Left theatre revival; Perlocutionary political speech; Worksite of the Left.

Introduction

"Remembering is the greatest act of resistance in a world that wants us to forget." – Karim Wafa Al Hussaini

If, as Francis Fukuyama proclaimed, history has ended with the defeat of communism and the triumph of liberal democracy, what does it mean that *Marich Sangbad* (1973) – a canonical play of the Bengali Left – continues to find urgent, packed audiences more than four decades after its first staging? The paradox is not merely historical but political and aesthetic: the very play that Fukuyama's thesis would render obsolete keeps returning, with each return gathering a new political charge from a new crisis. What he did not account for was that neoliberalism, behind the mask of democracy and welfare, would pile up wealth for the few, destroy the environment, and popularise individualism and majoritarianism – while proto-fascism, far from defeated, would reassemble under culturalist cover. In India, as Radhika Desai has shown, this reassembly took the specific form of Hindutva: a hegemonic project that uses culturalism to displace material critique, valorising cultural difference while obscuring class relations and justifying inequality as the defence of tradition (695). It is this conjuncture that *Marich Sangbad* keeps returning to speak against – not because it was written for it, but because the structure of oppression it anatomises has mutated rather than disappeared.

This article poses the question directly: can the revival of urban popular Left theatre from the 1970s still summon audiences, cultivate a dialogic public sphere, and intervene in the crises of the

present? Two interrelated claims structure the argument. First, Left revivalism is not only a middle-class nostalgia but a dynamic mode of collective memory (Halbwachs; Hirsch) that transforms static longing into active, generative engagement with political history. Here, even nostalgia works differently from the rightist revelation of fabricated recuperation of past and glory. Second, the 'worksite of the Left' framework offers a critical methodology for understanding the contemporary revivalism of political theatre as a site where Leftist ethos, praxis, and cultural memory are continually recuperated and reimagined across multiple scales of performance and engagement (Dutt and Jestrovic 9–10). The article also examines what kind of political speech act theatrical performance performs, drawing on Tony Fisher's distinction between elocutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary modes to argue that *Marich Sangbad* operates in a perlocutionary register – with consequences for how we assess its political efficacy.

Marich Sangbad, first staged in January 1973 by Chetana under Arun Mukhopadhyay's direction, weaves three narratives of social and political exclusion through a secular, Brechtian *Khel* presided over by an Ustad-Sutradhar. Its revivals in 2012 and 2023 attest to an unfinished Left project. The article chooses this play because its minimalist Brechtian form and its blending of folk and urban theatrical idioms constitute the most sustained instance of Thik Theatre – 'right theatre' – in postcolonial Bengal: a theatre that refuses to subordinate form to ideological prescription.

Revival in Crisis: The Return of the Political Zeitgeist

A persistent and troubling feature of the contemporary Bengali stage is its tendency to obfuscate original scripts and innovative dramaturgical methods in favour of adaptations and translations carefully curated to meet the perceived expectations of audiences. As Abhijit Banerji has argued, this reliance on established forms has

produced a cultural stagflation – a recursive dynamic in which repetition and convention are privileged over invention, ultimately constraining the theatre's potential for sociopolitical intervention (63). Against this backdrop, *Marich Sangbad* stands as a significant exception, disrupting the prevailing pattern by foregrounding marginalised histories from urban Bengal's own theatrical trajectory, revisiting the group theatre as a political mise-en-scène to activate public memory.

The urgency of animating this article is inseparable from the present moment. As neoliberalism depoliticises the ambience of Left activism, provokes consumerism and individualism, and paves the path of neocolonialism, capitalism, and proto-fascist tendencies – particularly in the Global South – we are compelled to ask what space, if any, remains for Left theatre to intervene meaningfully. The crisis is not merely external: it is also internal to the Left's cultural formations. Fisher notes that when the 'social movement is weak, then the infrastructure on which cultural workers rely, provided by the organised Left, is invariably diminished' (167). This is the structural condition within which *Marich Sangbad*'s revivals must be understood: they are not supported by an institutional Left infrastructure but are performed through precarious, informal networks, funded by voluntary donation, disseminated through social media and word of mouth. Their survival is itself a political act.

Chandan Sen, an eminent theatre-maker and theatre scholar, argued in his book *Atmonepadi* that post-2011, after the political change in West Bengal, the theatre fraternity had to shift from their progressive, anti-establishment stance to mere surrender to the state's hegemonic cultural project. Sen could observe the 'hope' in the youthful theatre endeavour of some groups working in a progressive amateurist manner, reviving the flow of political theatre from the 1970s (39). *Marich Sangbad* is one such play that reminds us of the theatrical past,

which was progressive, emancipatory, and politically rigorous at a time we are nostalgic about. The (re)enactment of this play brings the charm of such nostalgia for the youthful (re)imagination around theatre and politics, and at the same time materialises the possibility of a theatrical public sphere which is politically vibrant.

Nor does *Marich Sangbad* stand alone in the recent wave of revivals of original Bengali political plays. PLT's *Barricade* (1972), Utpal Dutt's anti-fascist allegory set against the backdrop of Hitler's rise, continues to be revived as a commentary on contemporary authoritarianism; its title, *Barricade Theke Barricade* in PLT's current repertoire, signals the group's commitment to keeping its political heritage alive. PLT's *Titumir*, based on the life of the nineteenth-century anti-colonial peasant rebel Titumir, has similarly endured as a canonical work of Bengali political theatre – its narrative of subaltern resistance against colonial and feudal power retaining a pointed resonance in the contemporary. Suman Mukhopadhyay's production of *Mephisto*, based on Klaus Mann's novel, interrogates the moral compromises of the artist under a fascist regime and has been a signature production of Chetana's repertoire.¹ Chetana's own *Jagannath* (1977), adapted from Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* and directed by Arun Mukhopadhyay, is a portrait of an oppressed villager's slavish internalisation of injustice – a condition that speaks with renewed urgency to the depoliticised, individualised citizen of neoliberal India. These revivals collectively constitute what the present article theorises as the ongoing 'worksite of the Left': each performance is an act of cultural memory, a refusal of amnesia, and a provocation to political consciousness.

The 1970s Era: The Conjuncture

The 1970s in India, especially in the context of Bengal, witnessed a spark of political tumult. From Nehruvian institutional disillusionment to the crisis in parliamentary democracy, different political shifts occurred from the grassroots to the

national sphere: the fractions in the Left in the 1960s, the Naxalbari uprising, the coalition government – all of these preceded and delivered a strong political ethos to the Bengalis. Ray and Katzenstein showed that, with the disillusionment of the hegemony of the Congress government and the elite stature of parliamentary representative politics, different representations of marginalisation emerged through multi-stratified 'publics' in India. In 1972, the coalition government ended; the red sky of Naxalbari's dream gradually sedimented to both an ethos and pathos for urban political life: a living memory for the public. The group theatres started setting up stages with their voices in the contemporary crises independently, working through different dramaturgical aspects, autonomous, yet Leftist by practice. The passion working behind this group theatre's work, which Nicholas Ridout identified with amateur theatre, comes from a Leftist schooling of practising work beyond capitalist time, in leisure, identified as a collective action from the ethos of community life. The 1970s political memory fostered the theatrical medium to produce politically conscious performance texts through practice, process, and collaboration – a deliberate mapping between theatre and politics, dominated by provoking autonomy and fleshing out the kind of theatre which experimented with aesthetics.

Marich Sangbad: Performance, Form, and Political Conjuncture

Marich Sangbad was first staged in January 1973 in Kalamandir by the newly founded theatre group Chetana – yet its journey began much earlier. The director and playwright Arun Mukhopadhyay, a Howrah-based government employee, had long been associated with the IPTA coordination committee. He and his collaborators used a large space in the Mitra Building right behind the Writer's Building from 1967, when the coalition government of Congress and the Left Front came to power. In August 1972, *Marich Sangbad* was

enacted in the Writer's Building canteen. The huge red-brick colonial building – seat of the Bengal Secretariat since the East India Company era – became, under these conditions, a process space where artists from different regions and identities could collaborate, establishing a sphere of civil society that exceeded the hierarchical set-up of bureaucratic space.²

Once the group Chetana was formed, *Marich Sangbad* was staged at the basement of Kalamandir, in the small auditorium named Kalakunj. Notably, only one ticket was sold from the counter at 7 rupees; the rest were sold through direct, personal outreach, and yet the show was houseful (Chetana, file 1, 310). This remarkable feat attests to the effort of the theatre fraternity, their ideological coherence, and the camaraderie that characterised the Bengali theatrical public sphere of the period. The role of the sutradhar, or Madari, within the play's play-within-a-play structure was performed by Shiv Shankar Ghosh for a long time from the play's inception, anchoring the *Khel*'s secular, demystifying dynamic through his sustained and authoritative presence on stage.

Initially, the government employees tagged the performance text as 'too intellectual' for the masses, leading to a conflict between Mukhopadhyay's charismatic dramaturgy – experimental and transgressive to the IPTA's cultural strategy – and the IPTA coordination committee. The new group was founded overnight with minimal sets and budgets. Under the new theatre group, named Chetana, the rehearsal of *Marich Sangbad* began at Mukhopadhyay's Free School Street office building. The production's material conditions were themselves a political statement: the entire budget was 75 rupees. A second-hand dhol was purchased; the harmonium rented; the stage backdrop created with cheap colourful cloth; pin and paper-cutting coloured by the set designer Pinaki was used for set-design, minimal but politically expressive. The minimalism was not penury masking ambition – it was Thik Theatre, 'right theatre,' an assertion that political theatre does not require the resources of the bourgeois stage.³



Fig. 1. A production photograph of *Marich Sangbad* (p. 311). (Source: Natyasodh Sansthan Theatre Archive, Chetana Theatre Group File, Kolkata)

Mukhopadhyay's political consciousness and exposure to world literature, cinema, and theatre, especially his connectedness to Brechtian dramaturgy, reshaped his personhood filled with indigenous performance idioms. His family house was in Ramarajatala in Shibpur, Howrah – a suburban space famous for regular performances of *Ramajatra*, an indigenous performance tradition attended by audiences across class and caste lines.⁴ The secular space of *Ramajatra* had a fundamental formal impact on the play: it suggested a theatre of multiple stories, simultaneous temporalities, and democratic staging. Thematically, the character Marich came from one such episode, in which Mukhopadhyay witnessed an adamant Marich who refused to completely surrender to Ravana's proposal (Bharucha 183).

The formation of Chetana by IPTA actors under Mukhopadhyay's leadership did not only arise from internal conflict. During the confusion of IPTA's political and cultural activities following Naxalbari and the Bangladesh freedom movement, these young practitioners established a theatre group to express autonomous voices while remaining connected to the Left. This is what Bishnupriya Dutt and Jestrovic call the 'Worksite of the Left': a site that bridges affective voices from diverse spaces and cultivates a lineage of amateur group theatres in Bengal, extending 'actionable' cultural impetus beyond the party system or any institutional space.⁵ Mukhopadhyay described the making of *Marich Sangbad* in an interview with Sahapedia:⁶

That was for our Coordination Committee—we had to stage a play each year at the annual meeting of the Coordination Committee. And the leaders always wanted that I should write that play—a new play each time. Not one that has been done before. I have tried to write most of the times and this is where my—what should I say—author self developed and matured. That is a

contribution of the Coordination Committee, and, in some part, of the IPTA too. They forced me to write. It is not that I liked writing a lot, but I somehow managed to prepare a script and then the production process used to be very serious there. (par. 13, line 216-32)

Initially, the idea of three narratives woven by an Ustad came to Mukhopadhyay's mind during the oppression of West Pakistan on East Pakistan under the leadership of Ayub Khan –simply, the oppression was shown as a continuum of colonialism as an unfinished project in South Asia. However, post Bangladesh liberation, the text materialised through a new global scenario, situated in the tension between two blocs, Capitalist and Communist. The performance text is an on-demand writing against the Vietnam War; however, it led to the foundation and popularity of the newly formed theatre group Chetana amidst urban audiences who were mostly aware of the neo-imperialistic endeavour of America and the capitalist aggravation. Interestingly, *Marich Sangbad* structurally brought the oppressive hegemony on stage, which could further be seen as a subaltern studies architecture of oppression, beyond class, mostly hegemonic.

The *Khel*: Three Stories, One Stage

The stage opens with the Ustad entering a sparse performance space – a few props, visible stage machinery; musicians stationed at the side. He announces his *Khel* – Bhanumati ka *Khel*, a street conjuror show where the Ustad, with his magic bone, can summon any character from any time or space. This *Khel* is the play's fundamental political device: theatre exhibiting its own mechanisms, insisting on its artifice even as it makes emotional demands. The secular, demystifying performance space makes the *Khel*'s mechanics visible – a

localised *Verfremdungseffekt* in a recognisably South Asian performative idiom.

The Ustad summons three characters from different times and spaces. Marich enters robed in saffron with a mythical get-up, carrying the weight of Valmiki's *Ramayana* on his back. Gregri is an intellectual and journalist from 1970s America, son of a celebrated scholar of democracy, caught in the contradictions of the Vietnam War. Ishwar is a lethel – a bodyguard – of the local Zamindar in rural Bengal, indebted to him for the land received when his father, also a lethel, was alive. Their stories are not narrated but enacted, and they collide and dissolve into one another to expose the shared logic of oppression across historical periods and geographies.

The *Khel* is a theatre of productive failure. The rehearsal is full of fallibilities: musicians miss cues; actors add unscripted lines; the boundaries between performance and meta-performance are continuously blurred. In the *Khel*, the three characters are scripted to accept their deaths, but each refuses. Ishwar refuses to die obeying the Zamindar's order; he wants to join the Bagdi farmers he was assigned to kill through a fabricated riot. Marich wants to confront Valmiki, who wrote the *Ramayana*. Gregri finally understands that his suicide could be altered by revolting against the state that corrupts democracy in the name of national glory. The refusal of scripted death – the interruption of the predetermined narrative – is the play's fundamental political gesture.⁷

This dramaturgy is perlocutionary in Fisher's sense: the political effect does not arrive through proclamation but through the aleatory interactions of the three stories. Benjamin's concept of 'interruption' is precisely operative here: the disruption defamiliarises the audience from the 'life process,' the linearity of war, trauma, riot, and disaster imposed by capitalist oppression. When Ishwar melodramatically confronts the Zamindar – 'Where does your money come from? Is it your hard-earned money? ... I have found my people,

and I will join them' – the actor playing Ravana in Marich's episode interrupts the Zamindar's lines about land and police. The Ustad intervenes: 'That is not your line.' This suspension places two processes of marginalisation in conjuncture across centuries—not through argument but through the formal mechanism of the *Khel* itself.

When the Zamindar dons the hat of the policeman, the mask-switch is literal and visible: it exposes how capital uses the repressive apparatus of the police within a constitutional system supposedly unbiased. Ishwar's awakening is staged melodramatically, and this is crucial: the melodrama is the register of the subaltern voice excluded from urban theatrical conventions. Marich, robed in saffron, becomes insurgent when he stands with placards before Valmiki demanding explanation – blasphemous for Hindus, secular in postcolonial intervention. Valmiki is presented as a progressive intellectual, shredding cigarette ashes into his Kamandalu: a secular gesture that disrupts the nation's ideal body and the *Ramayana*'s nationalist discourse. This reversal and rewriting of the dominant discourse of the nation-state situates a postcolonial modernity from a secular purview, and the anti-establishment gesture certainly challenges the conservative reception of the Hindu grand narrative and its author. Moreover, it converts the sacred into the profane – a receivable and inclusive gesture for those marginalised subjects who were ostracised from the political plethora and cast out from their cultural agency or voices. In the current communal political spectrum, this is a radical scene: the frivolity is strong enough to invite dissent from conservatism and to spark controversy. Politically, the visual can also be cited as a progressive secular past and a Left reimagination of India's cultural heritage – in direct contrast to right-wing conservatism about antiquity that fabricates a discourse of Hindu cultural purity. The scene in *Marich Sangbad* thus instrumentalises interruption to create an aesthetic threshold on stage that converges the theatrical public sphere into a larger

public domain – inviting the possibility of ‘the political’ and, historically, attracting censorship from the state.

The Songs as Public Memory

Biplab Ketan Chakraborty’s portrayal of Meribaba constitutes one of the play’s most celebrated sequences. The performance text calls it Chaper Gunokirtan – ‘praising of pressure.’ Two actors step forward with placards as Gregri is manipulated by state agent John Williams to internalise state propaganda as patriotism. Meribaba’s face is highly stylised: a *Noh*-influenced register, with a fabricated smile enacted through controlled eyebrow and eye movements, embodying the propagandistic mask of capitalism and colonisers alike. The actor enters the stage in a gesture of marching. The word ‘Merry’ exploits a double etymology: cheerful in English with Christian connotation, used satirically to pinpoint Western colonialism.

The song was a tacit satire against neo-colonialism and capitalism, especially in the context of the Vietnam War – performed in a *Kirtan* music and the body movements of actors following the indigenous aesthetics. Musical instruments like violin and harmonium were accompanied on stage. However, what is interesting in the popular song is the ideating of censorship and hegemony of the neo-colonialist that expands from America’s neocolonialism in the Vietnam War context to the theatrical sites of Kolkata, showing how the capitalist and colonialist hegemony surpasses through different strata and regions, substantiating the Neo-Marxist worldviews. The song says: ‘whatever is there should be taken in the sack / Need the Gold, need the crops / the people should be hypnotized / the world should be within the hand ... take whatever you need as alms / but let us enter to your kitchen’ (my trans.). The song critiques the liability and its hidden colonial motif of America, the then hub of the Capitalist world-order to the third-world countries. In the mask of this liability, the song portrays how the neo-colonialist power

through their capitalist propaganda exploits the third-world countries and sets them under their panopticon. This song targets the middle-class intelligentsia through its indigenous aesthetic idiom and mobile theatre tactics to ‘redistribute the sensible’ and help them realise the structure of oppression.

The song performed by Chakraborty – and in the contemporary revival by Suman Mukhopadhyay – alongside a chorus brings a counter-memory materialised as remembrance. The standstill smile symbolises the mask of the state and the colonisers, subjugating the Left worldview of antagonism; at the same time, it enacts the desire injected through the capitalist worldview. Genealogically, the song locates Protestant ethics as the genesis of the capitalist worldview and traces the rhizomatic growth of capitalism as a cultural phenomenon beyond its geopolitical history, identifying colonial desire as inherently capitalist.⁸ The reason behind this rationale is the wording – ‘Meribaba’: if we divide it into two meaningful words; one is Merry, which has a Western connotation as well as a religious theological semiotics. ‘Baba’ translated as father strengthens the connotation. As per Adorno and Horkheimer, mass media and popular culture in Europe act as a manipulative tool that pacifies the public and promotes the capitalist worldview and prevents critical thinking and participation. The song, in the mask of satire, conveys how Western history, media, and the Enlightenment project colonised the ‘other’ and kept continuing in the South Asian political scenario through their capitalist dream. The song is itself popular but critiques the media and mediation of capitalism, planted by the colonisers and espoused by the post-independent statist project of assimilation of the ‘other.’ Here, I also argue, the performance, even emanated from the root aesthetics of *Kirtan* and other indigenous performance idioms, critiques the statist project of ‘theatre of roots’ as the project centralises the representation and instead of providing agency,

channelises the 'other' through consumerism and capitalist ideology.

The CIA song that follows deepens this critique of capitalist-colonial surveillance. CIA is uttered in the performance in a way that does not directly invoke the investigative agency: the playwright exploits the popular use of 'CIA' as a nonsense-word in Bengali, yet through performance the acronym comes to embody the powerful panopticon and to reference the surveillance society. Three actors hold three letters – C, I, and A – which collectively create the CIA, the American intelligence agency, which tried its best to dismantle any possibility of a communist ecosystem or political order in mostly the third-world countries. The CIA has been accused of spreading the propaganda of chronic capitalism and putting other countries' sovereignty under stake through their surveillance. In the case of Gregri, the state agent tried to compel him to write as a pro-state journalist through surveillance systems and blackmailing. This resembles the contemporary situation in India when the surveillance and blackmailing through state apparatus work towards shutting up the opposition. In this way, the song unveils a deep connection between colonialism, capitalism, and fascism.

The parrot's body is docile: it only mimics what it hears, without consciousness formed in or as language. Biplab Ketan's intonation of all the words with a hyper-sensitised manner and his appearance as a Hindu priest for reminding the duty and right of citizens to obey the state shows the loophole of constitutionalism of a semi-feudal/semi-colonial government. The aesthetic tactics provoked the fissure of the political system that developed on 'mimicry' of the West and ran through a feudal tendency in different strata. Ishwar's story of marginalisation, a subaltern narrative, is not a communist cliché on stage; instead, while being concomitant with the other narratives, it shows the conjuncture of the time that had the agony in the voice of the marginalised but also forecasts the

collective conspiracy of colonial and feudal nexus. The performance text dramatises how mimicry is both a colonial and a capitalist by-product – how consciousness, when it cannot locate its material genesis or the real history of exploitation, reproduces the master's voice without understanding it. Second, the parrot's speaking style produces no coherence with the communicative registers of human sociality: this political mouthpiece offers no explanation, holds no empathy, but invades the personal – crushing plea, activism, and dissent by framing narratives of polarisation. Censorship, the song shows, is not only repressive; it operates through consent, conspiracy, and above all through consumerism. In the contemporary moment, this resonates with the algorithmic short-content environment – WhatsApp forwards, yellow journalism, the individualised consumerist society in which people from different social layers consume manufactured content and are thereby disconnected from their material situation and its history. This is what the play invites us to call surveillance through abundance: a passive dispensation of political cognition from struggle, dissent, and the practice of active citizenship. Against this, the CIA song's Brechtian choreography – the placards, the clowning's expressive qualities, the indigenous musical idioms beneath the satirical verse – offers an ironic political commentary that refuses to let the audience remain passive consumers of the spectacle it depicts.

The gestures and actions of the production in various revivals did not change much, since the performance codes contain such political provocations that are relevant in different timescapes, as per Suman Mukhopadhyay, the son of Arun Mukhopadhyay, and a renowned theatre director himself. I argue the performance oozed out from the conjuncture of the 1970s as a text that focuses on the structure of oppression, rather than addressing a specific audience's 'horizon of expectation.' The text is dominant, however, as a public memory, and democratises the spectatorship

in the larger schema of Bengali theatre. However, *Marich Sangbad* travelled a long journey through time and space not only as a standstill public memory – it avoids its museumification by sparking its memory in different political conjunctures. The in-built conjunctures within the text through three woven narratives and its aesthetic formation register the performative voices of the oppressed and make it relevant with different necessitated political conditions.

The text travelled to different sites of Indian theatre as it was translated and performed in different locations. In 1976, the Bharatendu Drama Academy accommodated *Marich Sangbad*, where the character Gregri was played by the veteran theatre actor and director Suresh Sharma (Chetana, file 1, 308). Sharma's involvement not only validated the play's structural coherence within the

theatre-of-roots tradition but also heightened its historical importance as a canonical Indian performance in the post-independence theatrical trajectory. On 5 December 1977, *Marich Sangbad* was staged at the National Drama Festival in Cochin; the following morning, M. Radhakrishnan wrote in the *Times of India* that the display of posters was borrowed from Brecht's epic theatre, which seeks to "endistance" the audience from the performance, and that Arun had borrowed certain elements from Bengal's jatra tradition, with the play having been staged 300 times by the time of the Cochin performance (Chetana, file 1, 284). This press commentary is significant for understanding the play's Brechtian indebtedness and its reception as a landmark of Indian political theatre. In 1999, Utkal Mohanty translated the play into English and



Fig. 2. A newspaper review of *Marich Sangbad* featuring a production photograph (p. 283). (Source: Natyasodh Sansthan Theatre Archive, Chetana Theatre Group File, Kolkata)

it was published by Seagull, consolidating its canonical status beyond the Bengali-speaking world.



Fig. 3. M. Radhakrishnan's review 'Bengali play transcends the time barrier,' *Times of India*, Cochin, 6 December 1977 (p. 284). (Source: Natyasodh Sansthan Theatre Archive, Chetana Theatre Group File, Kolkata)

In a performance in Rajasthan, the songs were performed in Meera's *Bhajan* music instead of *Kirtan*. What is interesting in the performance codes is their political provocation, which even challenged the statist project of assimilation of the theatre of roots, while in a postcolonial context showing adaptability towards the mobility of theatre from a static stage. Thematically, the text is global whereas its aesthetics connects the roots through *Kirtan*, indigenous vocabularies of body movements, gestures, and scenography. The stage of *Marich Sangbad* is Brechtian in its episodic approach, interruption, gesture, and acting style, which is representative, and the defamiliarisation effect prevails. *Marich Sangbad* achieves what Fisher calls 'aesthetic mobility': 'its versatility is attuned to the overdetermined character of the conjuncture' (171).

The camaraderie of the cast is equally exemplary in its durability. Monoranjan played the character Valmiki from 1972 until 2022, an unbroken span of fifty years that is itself a testament to the political and affective commitment of the Bengali theatre fraternity. In the most recent production, the politically charged humour of Valmiki – controversial yet brave in the present conjuncture – was performed by the celebrated actor and comedian Subhasis Mukhopadhyay, a left-leaning artist who, in the changing dynamics of the political situation, stands with the Left's cultural directives. In the recent productions, however, another name introduces a telling contradiction: Kaushik Adhikary (Chetana, file 1, 308), who had shifted his inclinations towards the right wing, illustrates the ideological tensions that the changing political landscape imposes even upon the theatre fraternity. Chetana's response has been to reshape its cast and collaborators towards the Left or liberal ecosystem, foregrounding a conscious positioning against the rightist cultural upsurge in India and Bengal.

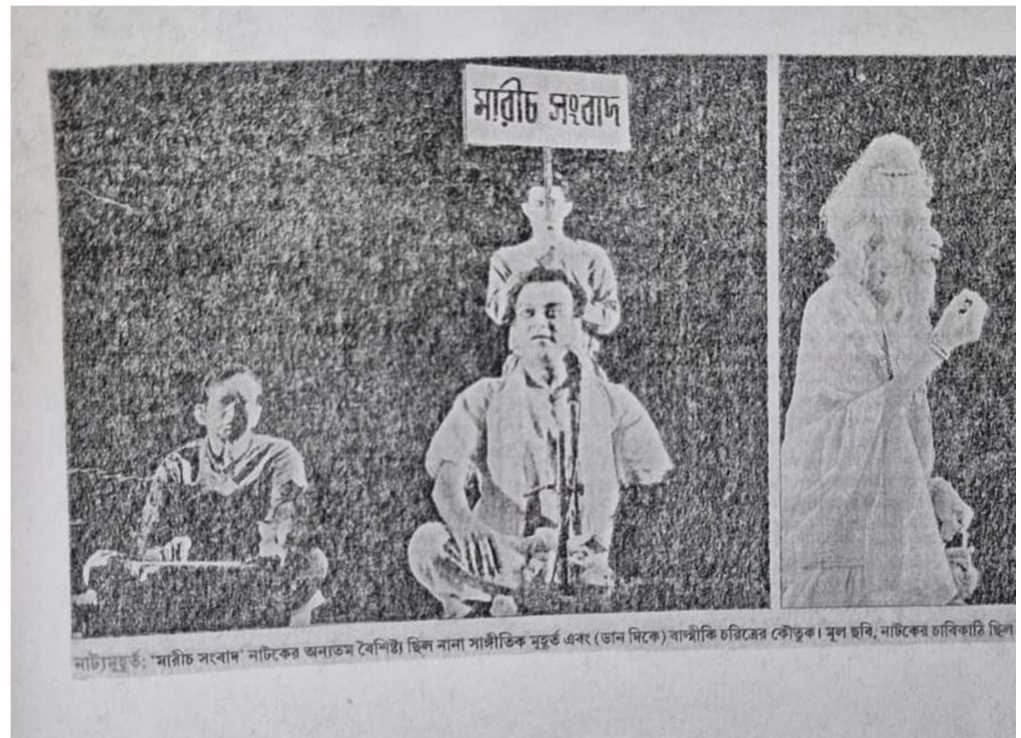


Fig. 4. Production photographs of *Marich Sangbad* with cast captions (p. 312). (Source: Natyasodh Sansthan Theatre Archive, Chetana Theatre Group File, Kolkata)

It is also important to situate *Marich Sangbad* within the broader trajectory of popular Bengali proscenium theatre of its era, which deployed episodes from the Purana-Itihasa tradition to articulate distinct political truths. PLT's *Pandober Agyatobas* (The Exile of Pandabas), based on an episode from the *Mahabharata*, depicted the heroic virtues of the Pandabas in their exile as an anti-feudal allegory. Nandikar's *Nathoboti Anathobat* drew on the figure of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* to foreground feminist struggle against feudal, caste-bound, and patriarchal structures. Yet *Marich Sangbad* stands apart from these peers: rather than merely representing political discourse through the idiom of popular epics, it provokes and interrogates the structural politics of theatre itself – its space, performance conventions, and reception—and correlates these to larger and contemporary political questions. The performance text provokes a necessary conjuncture that draws the audience into

a timeless exploration of repression, marginalisation, and manipulation. Through a concomitant admixture of indigenous performance vocabularies, Brechtian staging, and a thematic reach from the Indian political situation to the global, it anatomises the structure of oppression and activates its historical materialism in the moment of each staging.

Revival of Public Memory, Nostalgia, and Political Speech

Contemporary political theatre has increasingly come to understand the significance of various modes of performance as constitutive 'worksites of the Left' within which Leftist ethos and praxis might be recuperated and reimagined. As articulated in the framework developed by Dutt and Jestrovic, the concept of the worksite, linguistically rooted in the verb 'to do' (*delat*) derived from Lenin's foundational question 'What is to be

done?', functions as a site where various forms of doing, labour, and action take place, encompassing legal, political, social, artistic, and embodied dimensions (9–10). This conceptualisation enables contemporary theatre to engage with micro-histories and micro-practices of the Left within larger historical moments, addressing how performance in its various scales might constitute and model alternatives to dominant ideological formations. Simultaneously, the revitalisation of Left theatre has increasingly drawn upon nostalgic registers as a productive, rather than merely conservative, force. Parameswaran's analysis of the theatrical production *Mathi* demonstrates that Left nostalgia, far from constituting a simple yearning for a lost past, functions as a complex phenomenological strategy through which alternative temporalities and undervalued ethical dimensions of Leftist praxis can be materialised and made palpable in the present (163–72).

Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory and Marianne Hirsch's theorisation of postmemory, I argue that theatrical revivals do not simply evoke bygone eras; instead, they transform potentially static nostalgia into a generative, ongoing relationship with political history. This distinguishes Left revivalism from the nostalgia of the Right. The Left nostalgic mode, as Ameet Parameswaran identifies it, is the 'indiscreet charm' of 'reeking redolence': a simultaneously 'realisable' multiple experience of marginalisation and a way of holding the future open.

This leads to the theoretically complex move: Tony Fisher's taxonomy of political speech acts in theatre.⁹ Fisher distinguishes between three modes: the elocutionary (direct declaration and proclamation – theatre that announces its politics openly); the illocutionary (theatre that creates social binding through conventional performance, using norms to create consensus); and the perlocutionary (theatre that produces political effects aleatorily, indirectly, through affect and embodied experience in ways that exceed and sometimes contradict

authorial intent). Fisher argues that the illocutionary mode ultimately reproduces existing social relations, binding subjects to norms rather than subverting them. It is the perlocutionary mode—working in the 'surplus and remainder' of the speech act—that constitutes the deepest political resource of art (99–103).

Marich Sangbad operates primarily through perlocutionary means. The *Khel*'s fallibilities, interruptions, and staged failures create aleatory political effects: the audience is not told what to conclude but is placed in a position of productive uncertainty. In *Marich Sangbad*, martyrdom did not come as strongly as a statement. Valmiki rationalised the death of Gregri (suicide) not as a defeat of his journey: instead, he found that Gregri's death might generate more rebels against the state's manipulation and oppression. Ishwar refuses to die and lives for an insurgency in collaboration with the lower-caste, lower-class Bagdi peasants. Whereas Marich understands his death was scripted since his existence was only needful to lead to a battle between the elites, Rama and Ravana. Their refusal of martyrdom is opposite to the logic of martyrdom; however, the interesting itinerary here is the question – who were they dying for? The idea of revolt is not only associated with martyrdom, but aleatorically in *Marich Sangbad*, the 'Jihad' comes also in the refusal of their fate, their narratives of death. The provocation of changing the reality or reversing the flow of history is perlocutionary through their narrative juxtapositions: their refusal changes the subaltern reality into a futuristic dream to don the revolutionary praxis through ethos, a choice to life and a change to their script of fate. The pathos of the subaltern turns out to be an ethos, perlocutionary, and quite futuristic – the contemporaneity breathes through the insurgent statements of the multiple-publics in the vibrant theatrical public sphere.

The productions may not create a larger consolidation but showed the potential of creating

microsites as a current cultural memory in the sites of radical democracy as they produce a history of theatrical public sphere¹⁰ as a 'charm' and rationale for the youth in the 'post-memory,' 'post-truth' world of selective amnesia. The worksite of *Marich Sangbad* stirs the spectacle through the spectacles and at least questions the stagnation that has been produced through neoliberalism and the fascist promise of majoritarian order. History of oppressions shows the invisible sites of the contemporary scenario and provokes the political inquiry to know the truth of oppression as a real political crisis. The revival is not only a reurning of the 1970s public memory but also a process of creating a radical reception and public memory amidst the current political ambience – the memory comes as a challenge to the process of depoliticisation of the citizens' mindscape.

Historicity and Conjunctures

In continuation of the analysis of political speech, public memory, and the theatrical public sphere, I would like to enter the discursive space of public history and see how that provides conjunctural components to the contexts of this text in the 1970s and later. The history discussed in this article offers a materialist explanation of what *Marich Sangbad* demonstrates. It is the reversal of Marich(s)' fate, the subaltern structures' reversal to be precise, where the audiences receive the multifaceted history of manipulation, domination, surveillance, and new facets of colonialism through the unintended (perlocutionary) effect from the performance: the mistakes and fallibility on stage reveal the history through different conjunctures.

The societal framework of the 1970s was driven by the ethos of class struggle – a class-community consensus on material aspects of mundane issues, such as Roti, Kapda, Makan, and freedom of speech. The secular ethos was a binding force, primarily as the dominant Leftist virtue, to intervene in class problems. The song of the CIA in *Marich Sangbad*, performed in the manner of indigenous idioms, forms, and nonsensical verse, is

an important citation of the 1970s political climate against America's neo-imperialism. The idea of surveillance, conveyed through the song, the Brechtian choreography holding placards, and the clowning's expressive qualities, offers ironic political commentary on America's imperialistic panopticon.

Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* posits that the trajectory of history culminates with the decline of Fascism and Communism, both of which he positions as antagonists to Liberalism. Two central issues emerge in this reading: first, the presumption that Liberalism is an inevitable outcome, which underestimates the enduring and often coercive role of the state; second, the conflation of Communism and Fascism as equivalent adversaries of Liberalism elides the profound historical, ethical, and political distinctions between these projects, flattening the terrain of ideological struggle.

In *Marich Sangbad*, Marich(s) are subsequently portrayed as both mythical and historical characters, interpellated by Rightists, Social Democrats, or Nationalists as the villain in the *Ramayana*. Yet their marginalisation is layered: multiple intersections are theatricalised through the reconstitution of history and myth on stage. Through the staging of these tropes alongside other protagonists, there is a demand to reverse their destinies by changing the outcomes of their deaths. The process of decolonisation in the previous century is not merely political disengagement from empire but a complex, ongoing transformation of global modernity. Zhun Xu observes that neo-imperialism did not decline; it became ideologically invisible. The antithesis of colonialism and capitalism is obfuscated by its invasiveness. In postcolonial India, theatre became a cultural epicentre for a critical negotiation between modernity and tradition. The crossover between forms and aesthetics – Realism, Brechtian methods,

and indigenous traditional forms – is reiterated as theatre of roots.

I argue that diverse subjectivities, their experiences, and their action as a discursive space can co-create a ‘potential history.’ The revival of the performance is itself an event or historicisation of history – a double temporalisation through what Kear calls ‘creativity.’ What Rokem sees is the paradoxical notion of historiography, which contains history as real and its writing as discourse. Yet in the context of theatre as a historical site, ‘performing’ history emerges as an urgent ‘action’ by actors, who serve as ‘hyper historians.’ Indeed, this historicisation does not claim to be an objective truth; instead, it aligns with Brecht’s idea of the ‘witness’ – a bystander who (re)produces history as a process, challenging dominant discourse on stage through aesthetics, forms, and design.

Can the Subaltern Perform? Can the Subaltern (Be) Performed?

When urban actors stage *Marich Sangbad*, they attempt a decolonising effort – to let the subaltern speak through the theatrical apparatus. But Spivak’s canonical question haunts every such effort: can the subaltern speak, or do urban theatre-makers appropriate and sanitise marginal voices, reproducing unequal power relations under the guise of solidarity? Antonia Darder argues that decolonising practice must integrate the qualitative sensibilities of subaltern voices in anti-colonial knowledge production.

The danger is not ill intent but structural: the urban proscenium itself is a technology of the dominant, and the subaltern voice may be legible within it only after being translated into the affective and aesthetic codes that the urban audience is prepared to receive. Fisher’s analysis of Janam – another activist theatre of the conjuncture – is illuminating here. He cites Bharucha’s argument that street theatre is ‘not encumbered by a desire for ontological purity’—it asserts its affiliations and loyalties rather than concealing them (170). The

street theatre creates a *res publica*—a public space in which communities of solidarity appear, bound by the ‘phatic political affect’ of co-belonging (170). *Marich Sangbad*’s minimalist Thik Theatre strategies attempt to introduce this affect into the urban group theatre space, though the tension cannot be fully resolved through form alone.

What *Marich Sangbad* ultimately offers is not a resolution of the Spivak problematic but a performative enactment of it. The formal mechanisms of the play – the *Khel*’s interruptions, the gestus of Ishwar’s reversal, the Meribaba’s controlled smile – make the struggle for subaltern voice visible to the audience as a shared political condition. The play is most politically efficacious not when it tells the audience what to conclude, but when it creates conditions of perlocutionary uncertainty in which the audience must do the political work themselves.

Conclusion: Theatre as the Ferry Between Futurity and Historicity

This article opened with a paradox: if history has ended, why does *Marich Sangbad* continue to fill theatres and provoke political debate more than four decades after its first staging? The analyses offered here suggest several answers, each of which sharpens the theoretical claims with which the article began.

First, Left revivalism is not nostalgia. The theatrical revivals of *Marich Sangbad* are active reconstructions of collective memory – transformations of the archive into a living repertoire (Taylor) that speaks to new conjunctures. The memory they mobilise is not, in Parameswaran’s analysis, merely ‘indiscreet charm’; it is the active reconstruction of political imagination under the pressure of the present.

Second, the article has argued that *Marich Sangbad* operates in a perlocutionary political

register that Fisher's taxonomy illuminates. Its political force comes not from direct declaration but from the *Khel*'s interruptions and fallibilities – its aleatory, achieved effects that place the audience in productive uncertainty. This corresponds to a specific conjunctural demand: a theatre that operates in an age of manufactured consent cannot simply counter-proclaim; it must defamiliarise.

Third, the theatrical public sphere retains a specific capacity for hosting subaltern voices that the majoritarian public domain excludes. *Marich Sangbad* creates the 'phatic political affect' of co-belonging – a condition in which communities of solidarity appear on stage and, through the perlocutionary mechanisms of performance, in the auditorium. Whether these plays can generate the perlocutionary surplus that transforms political consciousness rather than merely confirming it; whether they can host subaltern voices without appropriating them; whether the theatrical public sphere they constitute can extend into the political public sphere beyond the auditorium – these are the questions this article has critically deepened but cannot resolve. Theatre is the ferry between the futurity and historicity of politics. *Marich Sangbad*, in its continued revival, keeps the ferry running.

End Note:

¹ Suman Mukhopadhyay first staged *Mephisto* in Kolkata in 2002, directly in response to the Gujarat riots of that year, drawing on Klaus Mann's 1936 novel alongside Ariane Mnouchkine's stage version and István Szabó's 1981 film adaptation. The production draws together talent from three different theatre groups – Chetana, Mukhomukhi, and Tritiya Sutra – signalling a broader coalition of the Left theatrical ecosystem. The play was revived in 2012 in a new production, again as a pointed critique of what was then perceived as political violence under the newly elected Trinamool Congress government in Bengal. A third revival followed in 2021, staged in the charged atmosphere of the West Bengal assembly elections, foregrounding the central question posed by Mann's

novel – whether artists should speak truth to power or allow themselves to be co-opted by it – with renewed urgency in the context of widespread actor defections to the BJP. The lead role of Hendrik Höfgen in the 2021 production was played by Anirban Bhattacharya. PLT's *Barricade Theke Barricade* – PLT's current restaging of Utpal Dutt's 1972 anti-fascist classic – similarly rewrites its staging of the Nazi rise in Germany as a continuous commentary on Indian electoral authoritarianism, and remains in the group's active repertoire alongside *Janatar Afim*, *Ebar Rajar Pala*, and *Kalo Panchali*.

² The Writers' Building (locally known as 'Writers') was originally constructed in 1777 by Thomas Lyon to house the junior clerks – 'writers' – of the British East India Company. Over more than two centuries it functioned as the effective headquarters of the EIC and subsequently the entire British Raj in the Indian subcontinent, serving as the seat of the Bengal Presidency and, after 1947, as the secretariat of the Government of West Bengal until 2013. In post-independence Bengal, the building acquired a charged political symbolism: it became a popular metonym for the unbroken thirty-four-year Left Front government of the state (1977–2011), and the rotunda inside served as the principal media space for Left Chief Ministers such as Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. The fact that Arun Mukhopadhyay and his colleagues rehearsed a politically subversive, anti-colonial performance text in the canteen of this building—the very nerve-centre of state power, still under Congress rule in 1972 – is itself a provocative act of spatial politics, turning a space of colonial and bureaucratic authority into a worksite of Left cultural production.

³ Bharucha's *Rehearsals of Revolution* is the principal scholarly source for the material and production history of *Marich Sangbad* discussed in this article, including the 75-rupee budget, the Thik Theatre aesthetic, and the details of Chetana's founding. The minimal production values were not

accidental but ideologically deliberate: Mukhopadhyay consistently argued that the bourgeois stage's production machinery was itself a political obstacle to theatre's emancipatory function.

⁴ On *Ramajatra* as a Bengali folk performance tradition.

⁵ The concept of the "Worksite of the Left" is developed in the Introduction to Dutt and Jestrovic (1–10) as a framework for understanding theatre as a site of collective political production and affective solidarity that exceeds formal political party organisation.

⁶ The extended quotation from Mukhopadhyay about the Coordination Committee and his development as a playwright is drawn from the Sahapedia interview; see Works Cited.

⁷ Benjamin's concept of "interruption" as the formal condition of political theatre is developed in "What Is Epic Theatre?" (147–54). The concept of *Haltung*—critical, politically inflected stance—appears in Benjamin's essays "A Family Drama in the Epic Theatre" and "The Author as Producer," both collected in *Illuminations*; see Works Cited.

⁸ See Adorno and Horkheimer for the argument that mass culture in Western modernity functions as a manipulative apparatus that pacifies the public and forecloses critical thinking.

⁹ Fisher's taxonomy of elocutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary political speech acts in theatre is developed in Chapter 4 of *The Aesthetic Exception*, with specific application to Left theatre on pp. 99–103.

¹⁰ Balme argues that the theatrical public sphere is a distinct formation within the broader public sphere, capable of hosting multiple simultaneous publics and generating forms of political deliberation not available in mainstream media or parliamentary democracy (Balme 1–30).

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