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Essays: Pedagogies of Citizenship: Performance, Institutions and Gendering

Introduction

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These three essays on distinct research areas and case studies cover a broad history of educational institutions in India, their focus on theatre and cultural education, and their role in creating citizens active in the public sphere and civic communities. The common point of reference for all the three essays is the historical transition from pre- to post-independence India, and they represent three dominant genres of Indian theatre practice: the amateur progressive theatre emerging out of sociopolitical movements; the State Drama School, which has remained at the core of the state's policy and vision of a national theatre; and college theatre, which comprises the field from which the National School of Drama sources its acting students, as well as new audiences for urban theatres.

The two locales, Calcutta (as it was previously known) and Delhi, are linked by the same historical frame as the two capitals of colonial India. As the original British colonial capital, Calcutta had enjoyed an active theatre culture from the late eighteenth century. Its practitioners participated in the anti-colonial movement with a nationalist repertoire. Following first the euphoria of independence and then the shock of disillusionment, they then embraced a criticality that sought to explore in theatrical terms the political, social and economic issues left shelved in the years of nationalist struggle. Meanwhile, the colonial capital had moved to Delhi in 1911, which lacked an active theatre culture. The new theatre emerging in post-independence India as part of the nation's vision and an elaborate cultural policy to nurture the performing arts came to be concentrated around the capital city, Delhi. In the ensuing debates around the significance of theatre in the postcolonial period, which included discussions of Indian dance reconstructions and nurturing precolonial performance genres, the presence of the word 'Drama' in the name of the National School of Drama was notable. A new generation of actor–citizens, many formerly students of elite colleges located in the capital and other urban centres, was to be nurtured by the state. Post-independence Indian theatre focused on imbuing citizen values both in its actors and in the public, who would be part of a growing, albeit exclusive, civil society. Partha Chatterjee writes,

> while the legal constitutional norm is that of theoretical equality of citizens, the political practice of democracy presupposes that people are always in the process of becoming citizens. Hence there has to be an unceasing pedagogical process through which an enlightened leadership must elevate the masses into the desired cultural standard of modern democratic citizenship.[1]

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The essays that follow unravel the tensions and anxieties between citizenship and nationalism, as well as the growing division between civil society and those who were, over time, excluded from this privileged sphere of exercising legal and political rights as citizens of a modern democratic state. They explore critically how theatre and performance cultures not only provided a mainly privileged youth access to public forums that allowed them to perform an active-citizen role, but also often led them to adopt a dissident role in contemporary India. All the essays in that sense have contemporary resonance.

Manjari Mukherjee's essay, 'From Classroom to Public Space: Creating a New Theatrical Public Sphere in Early Independent India', looks at the enthusiastic theatre activities of racial minorities such as Anglo-Indians and mixed-race Eurasians in combination with elite Indians, predominantly Bengalis, at the Jesuit St Xavier's Collegiate School and College in Calcutta from 1947 to 1950. The author argues that it was a deliberate choice to follow a British-style Shakespeare, reflecting the collective decision of the cosmopolitan student group. Their theatre activities unfolded against the backdrop of independence, which assumed that racial tensions were resolved with the end of colonial rule and made the communities suffering a sense of alienation and nostalgia irrelevant in the new nation's visions.

Indu Jain's essay, 'Feminist Processes and Performance: Interventions in Anamika Haksar's *Antar Yatra*', locates the stirrings of a feminist intervention into the National School of Drama in the late 1980s that continued until the first decade of the twentieth century. Jain reads this as a disruption of the state-sponsored 'conformist theatre that merely recycles the officially favoured political and social ideology'.[2] The case study of Anamika Haksar's *Antar Yatra*, which was produced and staged outside the National School of Drama by an ensemble comprising her ex-students using working processes first trialled in the acting curriculum, illustrates what Partha Chatterjee sees as a practice 'that can encourage experiment, taking risks with form and content, or going against prevalent styles and mindsets'.[3]

Promona Sengupta's essay, 'Sisterly Disaffection: Women's Colleges, Theatre and the Limits of Dissent', carries the feminist impulse forward through her case study of the premier Lady Sriram Ram (LSR) College, Delhi, which emerged out of the nationalist vision of creating the ideal woman citizen both as a symbolic manifestation of the nation and as a citizen who can participate with men on equal terms. The Drama Club at LSR is a typical college drama society in Delhi. It performs at college drama competitions, but is also known to transgress norms of bodily distance between the women participants, inviting censure from authorities. Known for its rigorous discipline and insistence on correct behaviour at the crucial stage between adolescence and adulthood, the LSR faced an unprecedented strike and a series of spontaneous protests that challenged the hallowed college space. This essay studies the dynamics of the college spaces and the potential disruptions that emerge from within them.

The three essays emerged out of 'Gendered Citizenship: Performance and Manifestation', a collaborative project between Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, and the University of Warwick, UK, involving both institutions' departments of theatre and performance studies and of political studies.[4] The three essays evolved out of research

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scholars' workshops held under the aegis of the project and were broadly developed through the framework of a critical gender analysis of citizenship debates.

The three essays refer not only to an education system that trains ideal citizens to comply with the authorities, but also, as is often the case with a good education, to the right to dissent. All three focus on examples where institutional projects have been subverted and reflect transgressions manifested through formal and informal performances. The tragedy of Indian citizenship and democracy lies not in the quality of education, which is available to a privileged few, but in the fact that in the seventy years since independence no effort has been made to make it more inclusive or accessible. The citizenship debates relevant in this context refer to what has come to be critiqued as a growing exclusiveness of civil society where only those with high levels of cultural capital are allowed to practise citizenship, and are persuaded in their own class interests to support the benevolent state.

Partha Chatterjee's work on contemporary India draws on this growing difference between what he calls civil society and political society, arguing that

> the space of politics became effectively split between a narrow domain of civil society where citizens relate to the state through a mutual recognition of legally enforceable rights and a wider domain of political society where governmental agencies dealt not with citizens but with population to deliver specific benefits or services through a political negotiation.[5]

Chatterjee is tracing the trend through the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Nirja Gopal Jayal, an influence on all three scholars, underscores this trend and attributes it to the erosion of the principles of social citizenship and a failure to address the equitable distribution of wealth in any form. This was the minimum requirement for any democratic experiment to work in an impoverished country like India. Jayal traces the systematic erosion of social citizenship to the emergence of neo-liberalism, and warns that the 'commodifying impulse' in governance over the past two decades 'has created a more stratified social universe populated by visible and duly labeled beneficiaries, clients, customers, and citizens – and a vast sea of invisible others'.[6]

Manjari Mukherjee's essay sees in the interpretation of the Shakespeare repertoire in post-independence India an attempt to envisage a democratic system that prioritized social citizenship. The subsequent political theatre that St Xavier's alumnus Utpal Dutt would lead in Bengal would deploy a theatrical language of social rights and welfare to critique the growing rapaciousness of capital growth and a state inclined more and more towards the rule of private property and privileges.

In Indu Jain's essay, Anamika Haksar's socialist dramaturgy and adoption of a Stanislavski method honed in the USSR were radical processes that encouraged the middle-class citizen–artist to seek to understand the lives of the marginalized. In Promona Sengupta's essay, the transgressions of the college theatre-making process challenge the male subjectivity and the heteronormative discourse that conventionally characterizes cultural capital in higher education.

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Feminist strategies split open these anomalies further. Despite the universal adult franchise, exclusion in terms of citizenship rights is based on class, caste and, particularly, gender. Increasingly dominated by religious and fundamentalist discourses, women located at these intersections are the most marginalized and deprived. All the three essays apply feminist critique and question representations, the use of women as symbols to personify the nation, and the violence that meets any transgression from the ideal heteronormative discourse.

Ultimately, however, the critical question concerns the efficacy of dissent and the disruptions expressed through theatre practice. Who does it impact and who are the publics that come within its communication network? All the examples exist to a certain extent within a limited and exclusive civil society, questioning its own utility. The authors' strategic choice, then, echoes Partha Chatterjee's argument:

> The task of a democratic theatre is to refuse the easy path of simplifying the complex realities of our social and political life … Theatre artistes who have now been abandoned by profit-seeking capitalists and are suspicious of the cultural agenda of state agencies would do well to address the pressing problems of our time by exploring the real complexities of democratic choice from the perspective of different sections of the people.[7]

The strategies on display as the essays unfold point towards intimate publics or even counterpublics who come within the network of the transgressive politics explored by the performances under discussion.

NOTES

1 Partha Chatterjee, 'Theatre and the Public of Democracy: Between Melodrama and Rational Realism', *Theatre Research International*, 41, 3 (2016), pp. 202–17, here p. 213.
2 Ibid., p. 209.
3 Ibid.
4 The project was funded by UGC and UKIERI.
5 Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011), p. 14.
6 Ibid., p. 177.
7 Chatterjee, 'Theatre and the Public of Democracy', p. 215.

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