Chapter 1

Utpal Dutt and the Historicised Subaltern

As discussed in the Introduction, Utpal Dutt, based on his Marxist belief, sought to explore subaltern agency on stage by dramatising different episodes of national and international history. Based on his notion of ‘revolutionary theatre’ he chose to highlight different aspects of subaltern struggles to instil a similar consciousness among the spectators so that they could rise up against various forms of postcolonial subalternization in India, based on class, caste, gender and many other determinants. The chapter will be subdivided into three separate sections, focusing on the three plays under discussion – The Great Rebellion, Hunting the Sun and Invincible Vietnam. All these plays strive to locate the historicized subaltern in different contexts to offer both a searching critique of contemporary maladies as well as an ideal towards which others may aspire.

The Great Rebellion:

The Great Rebellion focuses on the Rebellion of 1857 which has been variously interpreted by different historians from myriad ideologically inflected perspectives. As opposed to colonialist or nationalist-elitist narratives Dutt, in keeping with the insights of the Subaltern Studies Collective, focused on the subaltern actors of the rebellion and sought to foreground a vital sense of class-antagonism alongside the emergence of a nascent imagined community based on horizontal comradeship. Most significantly, as in his other historical plays, the past becomes yet another site through which he attempts to develop a template of subaltern struggle against the comprador bourgeoisie of the post-independent nation-state.

1857 and the Contestation of Colonial and Elite Narratives

The mission that Dutt had set for himself, which has already been discussed, obviously required creative explorations of the past in order to artistically address the
crises in which he saw his country being enveloped. Quite naturally, Dutt deliberately highlighted those neglected episodes of India’s colonial history that are marked by heroic resistance offered by subaltern agents who sought to thwart the colonisers on the basis of their own initiatives which often went against those elite natives who had aligned themselves with the British and ruthlessly exploited the poor. It is from such a perspective that Dutt chose to take up the unforgettable events of 1857 for a riveting drama and in doing so actively engaged with contemporary debates regarding the nature and scope of the events of 1857. These debates are still continuing and are being enriched with many new insights that further illuminate the mastery and success with which Dutt dealt with history and sought to use it both as a nostalgic ideal that demands repetition and also as a mirror that seeks to lay open the processes of betrayal and oppression which were supposedly being inflicted on the masses of the nation. In this sense, the exploration of history served important postcolonial political concerns which also meant a re-look at the official documentation of history itself which was also interrogated for its obvious blindness to certain aspects of the rebellion of 1857 that did not fit in with the narratives of 1857 written either by colonial or by mainstream nationalist authorities.

There is no doubt about the fact that 1857 represented a perilous threat to British colonialism in India. The virtual collapse of the Raj across a vast area of northern and central India involving the death of numerous Europeans, soldiers and civilians alike, signalled an almost catastrophic scenario for British domination of India and the upsurge of horror, panic, anguish, anger and ruthlessness it produced was indeed unprecedented. While it is absolutely undeniable that there was widespread resentment against the Company Raj because of its outrageous atrocities, leading to civil rebellions in many places, it is also true that the admission of that fact would have corroded the ideological foundation of empire-building as it would have severely dented the prospects of a so-called civilising mission. Therefore most British and European historians categorized 1857 simply as a ‘mutiny’ accompanied by ‘disturbances’ in various areas, mostly perpetrated by criminals and hoodlums who had tried to maximise the dubious benefits of an absence of the British rule of law. Charles Ball’s *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, J W Kaye’s *History of the Sepoy War in India*, G B Malleson’s *History of the Indian
Mutiny, T R Holmes’s A History of the Indian Mutiny are some of the notable historical accounts dealing with 1857 and the titles themselves emphasise the perspectives on which they are based which become all the more prominent when studied closely. Holmes in fact categorised the popular revolts as “quasi-rebellious disturbances” and went on to argue that just as the “lawless and tyrannical barons” of twelfth century England took advantage of King Stephen’s weakness or just as London “thieves and roughs” would instigate a “violent outburst of crime” if the Police were to mutiny, similarly the “‘budmashes’ of India have welcomed the first symptom of governmental weakness as a signal for gratifying their selfish instincts” (Holmes vii). Such interpretations were also continued by Indian historians like R.C. Majumdar who stated:

A scrutiny of these accounts reveals several prominent elements in these early risings. The first was the notorious goonda elements of the locality who never miss any opportunity of troubles or disturbances to carry on their nefarious activities…The ex-convicts and goondas were naturally joined by other elements of a similar nature, and there are some grounds to believe that most, if not the whole, of plunder and massacre was the work of these people who formed the scum of the population (Majumdar 107).

Majumdar’s remark was entirely in keeping with the consistent attempt of the Indian nationalist elite to devalue the rebellion of 1857 and any such popular violent resistance in order to privilege the Gandhian non-violent movements. Therefore, while Nehru only saw in it “all the inherent weakness of the old regime which was making its last despairing effort to drive out foreign rule” (Nehru 269), former President Abul Kalam Azad also voiced his objection against the use of 1857 for political polemic and described it as a time of sunken national character, leading to disorganized protests from disputing leaders who were also intent on recovering the lost privileges of the nobility (Sen vii-xv).

In the process both colonialist and national-elitist historiography managed to erase or dismiss widespread subaltern participation in an anti-colonial rebellion that targeted not just the British authorities but also their native collaborators in a major manifestation of explosive discontent against the political, economic and social consequences of the

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1 These are only some of the many such narratives about 1857 which constitute the bulk of colonialist historiography on the subject, replete with Orientalist stereotypes.
Company Raj. Some of the archival evidences documented by British officials, themselves testify to this fact:

The great feature of this rebellion here has been the universal ousting of all bankers, baniyas, Marwaraes etc., from landed property in the district, by whatever means they acquired it, whether at auction, by private sale or otherwise...This, however, must have been equally the case all over the country; but it is strange that in no instance do the classes so favoured by our rule, the bankers and other traders, appear to have been able to hold their own in the struggle... (Majumdar 122-23)

Such reports clearly emphasise the class orientation of the revolt in many areas which remained unexplored by traditional historians but came to the forefront following the emergence of the Subalternal historians whose researches have explored the dynamics of peasant mobilization in various areas and how agrarian crises combined with religious and political considerations led to violent upsurges against the Company Raj on the basis of autonomous agency and collective planning. These rebellions created a lasting model which even repeated itself in post-independence peasant uprisings. As Ranajit Guha explains, there evolved a paradigm of peasant insurgency in India from various peasant rebellions throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, including civil rebellion during 1857, that remained valid in postcolonial India as well (Elementary 336). One of the notable contributions in this regard was made by Gautam Bhadra, whose insightful essay “Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven” stressed the power of subaltern agency during the revolt and thereby challenged the old myths regarding the feudal aspects of 1857 which were highlighted to silence the voices of these marginal figures who asserted themselves vehemently through their anti-colonial resistances. Bhadra therefore writes:

They asserted themselves through the act of insurgency and took the initiative that was hitherto denied to them by the dominant classes; and in doing so they put their stamp on the course of the rebellion, thereby breaking the long silence imposed on them, politically and culturally by the ruling classes...The consciousness with which they all fought had been ‘formed through everyday experience’; it was an ‘elementary historical acquisition’. It was the perception and day-to-day experience of the authority of the alien state in his immediate surroundings that determined the rebel’s action. (Bhadra 274-75)

Such analyses obviously marked a new era in the understanding of the nature of the revolt as the roles played by ordinary individuals in this great rebellion began to be
excavated through recent historical researches that defied traditional, elitist paradigms and sought to create new frameworks which could incorporate these radical alterations. The works of Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Tapti Roy and others further emphasise this popular upsurge which have also made it possible to understand how the specific conditions of particular localities, combined with generalised notions created the consciousness that could instigate and sustain such a rebellion. Rudrangshu Mukherjee’s analysis of the revolt in Awadh\(^2\) is crucial in this context as it amply highlights how the revolt took on the shape of a general uprising in which the talukdars\(^3\) and the other elites were steadfastly accompanied by the masses, especially the peasantry. Not only does he show how most of the recruits of the Bengal Army belonged to those areas of Awadh that were marked by what he called “talukdar-peasant complementarity” intensified by exploitative land settlements ordered by the English administration, but also highlights the fact that the mutinous sepoys were really “peasants in uniform” (Mukherjee 78, 167) who used the rebellion to avenge the injustices inflicted on them by the Company Raj as the mutinous army offered them, in the words of Karl Marx, “the first general centre of resistance which the Indian people ever possessed of” (Husain 60). This was also stressed by Eric Stokes in his unfinished work *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Rebellion of 1857* where he modifies some of his own earlier opinions and states “In a real sense, the revolt was essentially the revolt of a peasant army breaking loose from its foreign master” (Stokes 14). And what is also significant to note is that these peasants did not simply follow the orders of their local superiors but that they voluntarily joined the rebellion to remedy their own miseries and in several places it was these peasants who continued the resistance even after the talukdars had surrendered or switched sides. This is why Rudrangshu Mukherjee stresses that despite being subalterns, the peasantry, especially in the context of the sepoy-peasant linkages, “did not have a completely subaltern role” and that “peasants and clansmen could and often did act outside the magnates’ initiative” (Mukherjee 166-67). The autonomous agency of the villagers is also stressed by Tapti Roy who extensively analyses archival materials to stress how villagers of the Bundelkhand region rose up in arms against the colonial administration and how waves

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\(^3\) The term refers to sections of the landed gentry.
of popular rebellion spread through the entire region with striking intensity\(^4\). Such popular rebellions represented volcanic outbursts of accumulated general resentment which fiercely targeted various elements of the colonial administration, including the native associates of the British who were repeatedly attacked and killed. These rural jacqueries were also accompanied by pillage and plunder which aimed at obliterating all vestiges of colonial rule. According to Tapti Roy, these were acts of “discriminatory violence” used not only as “effective means of challenging the contested order” but also as “articulations of … assumed power” (Roy 222-24). Such actions were neither committed by the people in accordance with the instructions of the sepoys, nor were they merely following the orders of their local chiefs. Instead, such actions were the results of collective attempts on behalf of the people which becomes evident even from the reports of Banda’s magistrate and collector, F O Mayne who repeatedly referred to “insurrection” being carried out by “armed men”, “armed masses”, and “people” belonging to the “whole country” who were equipped with such rural, domestically manufactured weapons as “spears and scythes, and iron-bound lathies, and extemporary axes, formed of chopping knives fastened on sticks.” This is why he concluded “Never was revolution more rapid – never more complete” (Roy, 197, 198 and 225). And as Mayne’s comments indicate, the architects of such a radical inversion were the people themselves who continued to express their resentment, even after successive British victories, either through tacit non-cooperation or through the extension of all possible assistance to the fleeing rebels. Tapti Roy therefore identifies the popular uprisings as being collective actions in quest of an “alternate order” (Roy 225).

This quest for alternate orders is also tied to the question of nationalism as the sepoys, the original force of the rebellion, were certainly motivated by, what Tapti Roy calls, the vision of “a centralized order that hoped to replace the colonial state with an alternate supra-local structure of governance” (Roy 256). Such a structure definitely required the imagining of the rebels as one unified collective entity, quite like what happens during a general nationalist movement. Though nationalism, as we know it now, was obviously absent during 1857, the rebels were indeed motivated by certain shared

mentalities and ingrained notions of commonalty which created inchoate feelings of nationality that eventually became consolidated in the form of Indian nationalism during the twentieth century. 1857 is an important landmark in the prehistory of the emergence of modern Indian nationalism and must be remembered for the way in which the rebels, leaders and followers alike, were able to imagine, however vaguely and rudimentarily, the possibility of a confederation of heterogeneous people whose differences were underlain with shared ideas and a common bond to their land of birth.

These bonds were based on a certain emotional togetherness which was able to evoke something resembling Benedict Anderson’s notion of “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 8). It is because of this sense of emotional togetherness that Rajat Kanta Ray has used the concept of the ‘felt community’ (Ray, 2003) to explain the bond between the people of a state derived, to a certain extent, from Max Webber’s following definition of the nation:

One might well define the concept of a nation in the following way: a nation is a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own.5 (qtd. in Ray 4)

This ‘community of sentiment’ implies a distinctive emotional bond developed through overlapping mentalities based on interlocking identities moulded by considerations of religion, culture and attachment to land. The last of these considerations is the root of that feeling of patriotism which constitutes the first step towards the evolution of a modern nationalism. Such patriotism basically implies the awareness of the people of a land as a united community whose sense of unity is all the more heightened by their shared antagonism to a foreign foe, colonialist or otherwise, which has repeatedly displayed itself throughout human history, whether during the Greeks’ struggle against Persian invasion or Joan of Arc’s war against the English or the uprising of the Vietnamese people against Chinese occupation. And as Rajat Kanta Ray has shown, it is this sense of patriotism, created by the ceaseless expansion of the English occupation throughout

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5 The entire following discussion has largely been influenced by Rajat Ray’s discussion on the topic and most of the quotations are taken from his book The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2003). Anyone willing to delve more deeply into this discussion should read the chapter entitled “The Mentality of the Mutiny: Conceptions of Alternative Order in 1857”, 353-534.
India, combined with religious fervour, historical memories and surviving indigenous socio-political institutions that culminated in the turbulent events of 1857 when the collective resentment of the sepoys and the masses unitedly hurled itself against the colonial administration and the attendant structure of power in order to not only eradicate all traces of colonial rule but also to establish a new order based on earlier modes of governmental organisations, the chief of which was Mughal sovereignty based in Delhi. While such a backward-looking anti-colonial resistance can never be equated with modern Indian nationalism, based on Western republican ideas, both these forces were animated by the same ‘community of sentiment’ which manifested itself during 1857 through numerous proclamations and pamphlets and actions that conceived the rebels as a united political entity, christened as the “Hindus and Musalmans of Hindustan” (Ray 469). The issue of the greased cartridge, together with the succession of bitter rumours regarding some supposed English conspiracy to convert all Indians to Christianity and destroy their religions and the memory of relentless oppression at the hands of the English led to the emergence of this new coinage which indicated the evolution of a proto-nationalist perception shared alike by emperor and sepoy. Therefore while a mutinous soldier of Meerut rushed into battle with an unleashed sword, crying “Brothers, Hindus and Mussulmans… We are going to a religious war. Be assured we will not harm those who join us, but fight only against the government” (Ray 366), the royal proclamation of Bahadur Shah stated:

All you Hindoos are solemnly adjured, by your belief in Ganges, Tulsi and the Saligram; and all you Mussulmans, by your belief in God and the Kuran, as these English are the common enemy of both, that you unite in considering their slaughter extremely expedient for by this alone will the lives and faith of both be saved (Ray 374).

Hindus and Muslims were thus conceived as one political entity comprising two different but allied religious communities pitted against the alien Europeans and their Christian religion which aroused in the rebels a passionate hatred that led to the widespread violence which characterised the rebellion as a whole. Surcharged by the ambience of colonial oppression and the menace to their faiths, people of Hindustan had

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6 It must, however, be remembered that although the sepoys’ conception of alternate orders was based on earlier modes of government they were not looking to exactly replicate those structures.

7 Used in a proclamation by Feroz Shah from Bareilly on 18th February 1858.
suddenly transformed themselves into a fearsome political entity animated with inarticulate, subconscious visions of a nation. The rebellion was therefore seen by Chris Bayly as “a series of patriotic rebellions” based on what Rajat Ray defined as “a confederation of two separate peoples bound together as one political unit by the shared perception of Hindustan as one land” (Ray 545). It is this shared perception which formed the crux of Indian nationalism during its heyday when the people were being mobilised by the Congress for its pan-Indian movements. Rajat Ray therefore concludes:

The emotions going into the making of Indian nationalism had a palpable presence in 1857, although still devoid of the conceptual form imparted by the modern political nation. What the people felt at the height of the mass movement of 1921 – the raw feeling itself – was not perhaps so very different from the way they had felt earlier in 1857. (Ray 395)

Despite the fact that such scholarly insights were unavailable to him, Dutt represented the revolt of 1857 in a similar light and used the “foetal nationality” (Ray 358) of the sepoys to fashion a pulsating drama that not only challenges colonial and elitist historiography but also seeks to develop a postcolonial nationalism from the perspective of the marginalised majority of India whose golden dreams of post-independence utopia gave way to horrible nightmares of poverty, famine, exploitation and oppression. Like most of Dutt’s plays The Great Rebellion (henceforth TGR) too uses the past to both mirror the present and show the way to emerge out of the darkness of desolation into a brave new future.

**Dutt’s Exploration of the History of 1857**

What becomes evident from the very beginning is that Dutt saw the rebellion of 1857 not just as a mutiny by resentful soldiers but as an anti-colonial popular struggle engendered by the hundred years of plunder, exploitation and violence which the East India Company had unleashed upon the inhabitants of India. Therefore, instead of referring to the immediate background of the rebellion and the issue of the greased cartridges he begins the play in 1840 to trace the general pattern of exploitation that the people had been subjected to and which led to the perpetual mounting of resentment in the hearts of the people and burst forth with unprecedented vehemence during the turbulent years of the rebellion. Just as he had talked about finding the socio-economic
factors which provoke a striking labourer into an act of violence which bourgeois factual documentation deliberately ignores\(^8\), so does he attempt to trace the roots of popular anger against the British by dramatising on stage the misery to which they had subjected the Indians which also serves to unmask that veneer of civilisation and culture that colonial discourse always used to justify the domination and impoverishment of the natives. Such impoverishment becomes obvious from the statements of Bishen Singh and Budhan Singh who abjectly reveal to Panjakush, their absentee landlord how they cannot find any wheat or salt to feed themselves and therefore must survive by grounding to dust dried mango stone to make bread and use the cinders from burnt trunks of banana trees as the substitute for salt\(^9\) ([TGR 1]). What is also remarkable is the fact such misfortune did not only afflict the commoners but members of India’s traditional elites were also subjected to similar plight. This is exemplified here through the sudden collapse of Panjakush whose fainting is caused by the fact that he had not eaten in three days. His weakened health and tattered robes testify to his own impoverishment and this levelling of hierarchies represents only one of the many changes that the Company Raj had inflicted upon India’s traditional social order which the rebels of 1857 desperately wanted to redress by obliterating all vestiges of colonial rule from their motherland. Panjakush’s plight, in fact, represents the plight of many such members of the former landed gentry who were dispossessed from their ancestral domains by the laws introduced by Cornwallis’ Permanent Settlement or various other settlements that the colonial authorities imposed throughout the land, leading to paramount exploitation of the ordinary peasants and sowing the seeds of that talukdar-peasant complementarity which Rudrangshu Mukherjee has stressed. Mukherjee has scrupulously examined the land records to show how areas which were most severely affected by such settlements saw fierce rebellion against the British during 1857-58 in which almost whole villages participated unanimously. In certain places, the talukdars’ former lands were voluntarily

\(^8\) Utpal Dutt, *Towards A Revolutionary Theatre* (Kolkata: M C Sarkar and Sons, 1995) 55-56. Dutt pointed out how a typical bourgeois factual report is thoroughly inadequate since “This report does not tell us that the workers had not been paid wages fro the last three months. It tells us nothing of the dead worker’s starving children and the little hovel where he crouches at night. It does not tell us of his consumptive wife. It does not tell us that the bourgeoisie who employ him regularly use gangsters to break the worker’s union.” According to Dutt, only such an analysis could highlight that class-truth which he sought to present.

\(^9\) All subsequent references are from this edition and the relevant page numbers are given in brackets.
returned to them by the new owners as they prepared to consolidate anti-British resistance under the talukdars’ leadership (Mukherjee 32-63). Panjakush’s plight thus gives a glimpse of the agrarian crisis induced by the Company’s policies leading to drastic changes in the rural world which the peasantry deeply resented. And all such changes are represented as the obvious consequences of Company’s policies regarding revenue and trade:

Bishen: …My lord, why is salt so dear? Where does it all go?
Panjakush: The East India Company has a monopoly on salt. They do what they please with it. They are making millions. (TGR 1)

The monopoly capitalism practiced by the company thus created a disastrous situation in the countryside which further worsened due to the deliberately plotted collapse of the native industries, especially the textile industry which employed thousands of people across India and was primarily responsible for the growth and developments of various towns which depended on this industry for its survival. The way in which the Company continuously increased tariff on the sale of indigenous clothes while offering more and more benefits on foreign imports signifies the calculated strategy of the colonisers to annihilate local industries in order to transform India simply into another raw-material supplying source, to make the economy entirely dependent on the colonising powers. Panjakush’s statements clearly emphasise this unfair policy as he informs the weavers how the Company has clamped a tariff of 10 per cent on Indian cotton, 20 on Indian silk and 30 on Indian wool while English textiles only pay three and a half per cent. His statements also foreground the ruinous impact it had had on various Indian towns and localities:

Panjakush: Bengal in the east has become a desert. There was a city called Dhaka…
Bishen: Yes, that’s where they make muslin.
Panjakush: They used to, but no more. The Englishmen have burnt down the weavers’ settlements. Dhaka had 150000 citizens, now it has less than 30000\textsuperscript{10}. I hear tigers prowl the suburbs now. The Englishmen are taking away cotton from this country, turning it into cloth on their own, and selling it back to us at a huge profit. (TGR 3)

\textsuperscript{10}Dutt’s statistics were directly derived from Marx’s article on India in the \textit{New York Daily Tribune} on 25\textsuperscript{th} June 1853. See, \textit{Marx on India}, ed. Iqbal Husain (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006) 11-17.
Panjakush’s statements reveal that programme of the systematic annihilation of the Indian textile industry because of which even Budhan Singh and Bishen Singh incur the Company’s wrath. Therefore when Budhan Singh decides to sell cloth at a lower rate than that of the Company, despite suffering personal losses, in order to voice his protest against the Company’s injustice, Fraser simply chops off his thumb to render him incapable of weaving in the future. Such barbaric actions emphasise the inhuman violence with which the Company imposed its will on the people and the enormous misery to which the people were subjected therefore. His actions, in fact, symbolise the constitutional violence of any colonising force, whatever guise it may adopt11. Such actions also lay bare the volatile reservoir of anger which had been spreading among the peasants and artisans of the land as a result of the incorrigible cruelty and rapacity of the Company officials which had been pointed out persistently in the articles written by Marx and Engels for the New York Daily Tribune12. Dutt was obviously aware of these writings and his own representation of 1857 was largely informed by the analysis and insights which Marx offered. Marx categorically stated that “The handloom and the spinning wheel, producing their regular myriads of spinners and weavers, were the pivots of that society…It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel” (Husain 14). And like Marx, Dutt too had realised that such colonial policies were a deliberate ploy to keep the colonies rigidly confined to a state of underdevelopment in order to perpetuate their domination and it is this realisation that he voices through Panjakush who scornfully reproaches Fraser and shouts: “You are destroying this country, wiping out the workmen…You are trying to set its history back by a few centuries, to destroy its civilisation” (TGR 6). Dutt’s dramatisation of such insights manages to represent a solidarity of suffering among peasants and artisans which prepared the platform from which the Rebellion of 1857 could spring into life like a raging conflagration that ravaged the British authorities like never before. And that is precisely what Panjakush’s parting shout signals:

11 Fanon therefore said: “It [colonialism] is violence in its natural state, and it will yield when confronted with greater violence.” Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of The Earth, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). It is interesting to note how Dutt and Fanon, separated by continents, were united in their thoughts because of their shared root in Marxist thought.
12 Marx had even written an article dealing specifically with the tortures practiced by the colonial administration which was published on 17th September, 1857. See Marx on India, 92-96.
You will get your answer, a terrifying bloody answer. And you will wonder then why such an outbreak should burst over this country. Many thousand corpses will bar your path to salvation. Only remember – you started it all. (*TGR* 6)

Contemporary historians like J.W. Kaye or J.F. Stephen, focusing on the immediate causes of the rebellion, had often failed to look at the entrenched processes of colonial penetration and domination which alienated the masses and created in them such a deep animosity towards the British regime. The memories of such violence lived on in the minds of the people and the rebellion of 1857 offered them an opportunity to avenge earlier atrocities. This process is further highlighted in the text by the family-history of Budhan Singh whose son and grandson grow up to be members of the Bengal Army who also take an active part in the rebellion. The oppression of subaltern inhabitants of India is thus portrayed through the age-old trope of avenging the murderer of one’s father as well as the popular motif of concealed identities which endows the story with another emotional dimension that only serves to strengthen the patriotic impulses on which the play is based. In fact, the fusion of the forces of family and land plays a significant thematic role in the context of the play as the concept of the nation itself is based on an extension of kinship that binds together different members of a family across the landscape of India. Placing the Singh family at the centre of the play’s human dynamics, Dutt not only offers centrality to the subaltern classes who generally occupy the peripheries of the elitist narratives of nation but also highlights the emotional roots that form the foundation of any nationalism anywhere in the world. The play thus ties together the macrocosm and the microcosm and lays the basis for the play being treated as a national allegory.

This fusion of the microcosm and the macrocosm also becomes evident from the brief second scene (*TGR* 7-8) that is situated between the first scene and the army quarters of Meerut which offers a short survey of the gradual expansion of British rule across the subcontinent through consecutive annexations which, however, was crucially based on the contribution of the Indian soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the benefit of the Company despite being subjected to perpetual ill-treatment and racial abuses. This entire survey is presented to us through the experience of Kalua, Budhan Singh’s grandson and the son of Bishen Singh and Kasturi who is shown to have become sapper.
Lachman Singh in the Company’s army, under the paternal guidance of General Nicholson, a feared and ruthless British soldier who was even regarded as a god by a particular mountain tribe\(^\text{13}\). The personal, however, soon merges into the collective as play shifts into the Meerut army garrison which describes the mentality of the rebels as perceived by Dutt. The whole of scene three, which culminates in the outburst of the mutiny, offers a brief description of that combustive combination of racial discrimination, religious anxiety, concerns regarding the plight of the land and its people as well as the frictions generated by the considerations of caste and community which constituted the various aspects of the rebels’ collective consciousness.

What is important to note however is that Dutt did not perceive the mutiny of the sepoys as being separate from the civil rebellions that raged throughout the various regions of northern India during 1857-58. The sepoys clearly proclaim themselves to be part of the ordinary populace of the country, belonging to the world of peasants and artisans and the personal history of Budhan Singh’s family further corroborates this link which is historically accurate as well. Not only were the soldiers ‘peasants in uniform’ but as Rudrangshu Mukherjee has shown, the flight of the defeated sepoys to their ancestral villages was crucial for the spread of the revolt to the countryside and its prolonged life even after the fall of Delhi and other such significant losses (Mukherjee 82-134). Just as the revolt of the sailors on board battleship Potemkin during the Russian revolution of 1905 or the actions of troops and naval warships during the October Revolution of 1917 were parts of a larger popular uprising, similarly the revolt of the sepoys during 1857 was seen by Dutt as part of the outburst of popular resentment against the Company Raj for its hundred years of organised oppression. And just as during the mutiny on battleship Potemkin the immediate causes of the sailors’ discontent – the misdemeanour of the officers, rotten food, inadequate facilities – merged with the misery of the general populace who too were suffering from similar problems of their own, similarly the specific causes of the sepoys’ disaffection merged with larger concerns regarding the land and the people which becomes evident from the conversations of the

\(^{13}\) It is important to note that despite noting this particular detail the play actually represents Nicholson as a barbaric British general, which contrasts the slavish eulogies offered by some so called nationalist historians, as noted in the introduction to the published text by Samik Bandyopadhyay. Samik Bandyopadhyay, introduction, *The Great Rebellion*, by Utpal Dutt (Kolkata: Seagull, 1986) ix.
sepoys. Therefore not only do the sepoys keep talking about their inadequate salaries, the inefficiency and greed of the British superiors, their prolonged alienation from their families or the ill-treatment they face from the British, but they also voice their resentment against the savage atrocities perpetrated by British soldiers or ‘tommies’ on the people of India. Therefore Heera Singh, Parantap or Zahir keep referring to the crimes against women in various provinces across the subcontinent such as Kandahar, Punjab or the eastern tribal belt inhabited by Santhals (TGR 11-12). Such reports emphasise the common bond of suffering which were antagonising the people against the British and they also stress the fact that the sepoys were in possession of a consciousness that transcended their specific local or communal identities based on the awareness that the British soldiers they so despised were also responsible for the suffering of fellow Hindustanis. And although we are not told anything about the past history of the other soldiers, the history of the Budhan Singh family is symptomatic of the pervasive oppression of the people by the British with which other soldiers too were either directly or indirectly acquainted. This is why Parantap vehemently identifies them as “Christian Beasts” and even raises a cry of “down with the Christian oppressor!” (TGR 14). However, his sentiments regarding the discrimination faced by Indian soldiers are amply corroborated by others. While Govind remarks “We fight and bleed while he [the tommy] gets fatter and fatter” (TGR 11), Nawab too complains about the absence of rewards for the native soldiers and narrates how in Sind the booty was shared only by white soldiers despite the fact they did not fight in the battles which were won by the native soldiers (TGR 19). These experiences create an entrenched sense of anti-British resentment which is provocatively stoked by Heera Singh who refers to the British debacle in Afghanistan and states: “The Afghans have proved that if you kick him hard enough, the tommy will run.” (TGR 19) These remarks indicate the deep anti-British solidarity among the sepoys, fostered alike by personal grievances and the awareness of general misery under Company rule.

However, Dutt was never in the habit of fondly idealising his rebel protagonists without pointing out their contradictions and limitations. Therefore, despite the apparent anti-British unity of the soldiers, they are also shown as being divided among themselves along the lines of caste and community. While Parantap condemns Prasad for being a
member of the lower-castes and for eating among “infidels and low-caste scum” (TGR 13), both he and Govind express their disgust for Lachman as they believe that everyone who drives a locomotive, as he does, is a renegade and that such renegades are bent on destroying the Hindu religion (TGR 15). The fact that Hindus and Muslims eat separately and are served from different vessels also emphasises the frictions and fissures that existed among the people at large which prevented them from unitedly confronting the British. Even during the mutiny, when people fought together against the British, the attempt was to restore, as Rajat Ray and others have argued, the former Hindu and Muslim kingdoms under Mughal suzerainty so that people can coexist peacefully while maintaining their separateness. Such attempts, even though they expressed a kind of foetal or inchoate nationalism, essentially looked to the past instead of looking at the future. A different approach is represented by Lachman Singh, whose affiliation with the British developed in him an intense revulsion for orthodox religious ideas:

Religion? When you burn widows alive to steal their property, you call it religion. In the name of caste you have reduced millions to penury and call it religion...The English have banned the burning of widows, they are destroying the power of the Brahmins and liberating the untouchable. If you represent Hindu society, I spit in its face. You have sunk so low that you worship cows and monkeys. (TGR 15)

As Samik Bandyopadhyay has pointed out, Dutt’s understanding of the rebellion of 1857 was largely influenced by Marx, who too had castigated the caste-system and the religious superstitions of India and despite denouncing England’s barbarity, identified English colonialism as the unconscious tool of history for bringing about a social revolution in Asia (Husain 16-17). Lachman Singh operates in the play as a confused embodiment of these ideas and opinions which are foregrounded through that paradigm of identity crisis which inevitably recurs in a postcolonial society. Fanon had earlier talked about the creation of a race of rootless natives, brainwashed by the colonial powers to such an extent that they neither learn to belong to their own culture nor manage to successfully embrace anything else (Fanon 175). Lachman is in a similar state and it may also be argued that Dutt, who had also celebrated such iconoclastic figures as Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, also sought to represent through him the emergence of those forces of rationalism and reformation which tried to dismantle the irrationality and
chauvinism associated with a stultified orthodox Hinduism throughout the nineteenth century in order to make it once again an unifying and elevating force, rather than a divisive one. And Dutt’s own plays, such as Titumeer or Sannyasir Tarabari, sufficiently prove that he did not see religion, despite being a Marxist to the core, as mere superstitious nonsense which is also used to perpetuate exploitation. He was very much aware of the power of religion to stir people against injustice and how it could sustain their motivation for a just struggle. And he also knew well how Christianity was used in the colonies as another tool of colonial domination to ensure the greater subjugation of the natives. It is therefore that Lachman’s rants against native religions are sternly opposed by Waziran who states:

"The Englishmen wish to break the back of the native, so that we lie happily at their feet and never raise our heads again. Hunger weakens the body; an outraged religion weakens the mind. With the nation prostrate, they can rob it without hindrance." (TGR 24)

And it is indeed true that the fear of the destruction of their religions was a strong motivation for the sepoys whose repeated cries of “Deen! Deen!” emphasised the significance of the issue to both sepoys and the people. The same war cries are used in the play as well (TGR 23) and as during the rebellion, this religious anxiety, far from dividing the people, brought them together against a common enemy – the Christian Europeans.

Such unity is also emphasised by the joint leadership of Bakht Khan and Heera Singh who together lead the sepoys into Delhi from Meerut and after massacring all Europeans forcibly enter the palace of emperor Bahadur Shah in order to obtain his leadership in the fight against the firangees, who were indeed perceived to be enemies of freedom and religion, as identified in the play by the character of Bahadur Shah (TGR 38). However, as history itself shows, Bahadur Shah was too weak an individual to ever

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14 In the published volumes of Utpal Dutt’s plays, the text of ‘Titumeer’ is preceded by Dutt’s translation of Engels’ remarks about the role of religion in class-struggle: “If the class struggles of that time appear to bear religious earmarks, if the interests, requirements and demands of the various classes hid themselves behind a religious screen, it little changes the actual situation, and is to be explained by conditions of the time”. Utpal Dutta Natya Samagra, vol. 6, 299.

15 The character of Bahadur Shah states in the play: “I shall not sheathe my sword, until the enemies of freedom and religion, the English are driven from Hindustan.” These words echo what he said in a royal proclamation quoted by Rajat Ray in The Felt Community, 374: “It is now my firm conviction that if these
undertake such an enterprise and it was only after he realised that he had no other option and that the entire city was being controlled by the British that he finally acquiesced to lead them. What is also highlighted in this context is the contempt and disdain of the courtiers for the mutinous sepoys who proudly declare themselves to be “sons of peasants, blacksmiths and weavers.” (TGR 36) Such a declaration effectively serves to identify the sepoys as an armed extension of the subaltern populace of contemporary British India who were indeed desperate to eradicate British rule from India, and the courtiers’ derisive attitude towards them emphasises that elitist opposition to the rebellion which was carried out by a number of native landlords and provincial rajas and chiefs. In fact, the success of the British in quelling the rebellion was largely due to the generous support that they received from such sections of the Indian society, both in terms of resources and soldiers. And characters like Asanullah, Tularam or Mirza Moghul represent in the play that element of native betrayal which had so bitterly destroyed hopes of a truly pan-Indian revolt against the Company.

At the same time, however, we must remember that a number of talukdars and zamindars, along with various deprived members of the erstwhile nobility did indeed play a heroic role in the struggle against the British. Not only did they actively support the sepoys and fight with them, but in many areas they were the ones who organised the anti-British resistances. However, this harmony and cooperation between the different classes was unsuitable for the purposes of Dutt’s own plays as he was trying to use the memory of such struggles to create the political ambience for an intensified class-struggle against the ruling classes in order to resist the processes of postcolonial subalternization which had been let loose in post-independence India. In fact, Dutt had repeatedly called the Indian National Congress a bourgeois party and harped on its nexus with merchants, landlords and industrialists which he deemed responsible for the government’s ongoing oppression of the people. Therefore in plays like Kallol, Ferari Fouj or Rifle he has

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16 The entire text of Towards A Revolutionary Theatre is strewn with vitriolic statements against the Indian National Congress and Gandhi himself. The following statement offers only one of many examples: “The revolutionary theatre must persistently and patiently re-tell the story of the freedom struggle, and reveal the role of Gandhi and his Kulak gang, carrying out orders from the Secretary of State for India, stabbing armed struggle from the back, betraying revolutionaries to the police, refusing to appeal against the
always castigated the bourgeois character of the Indian National Congress which he held responsible for betraying the ambitions and aspirations of the people which were entirely ruined in post-independence India, culminating perhaps in the Emergency of the 1970’s which trampled the foundations of India’s democracy and led to the perpetration of countless atrocities, not just against the members of the opposition, but against ordinary people as well.\textsuperscript{17} Dutt’s own experiences thus borne out the veracity of Fanon’s warnings about the nationalist movements led by a bourgeois leadership and they have been repeatedly exposed and criticised in Dutt’s plays.\textsuperscript{18} Asanullah, Tularam, Mirza Moghul and others represent an earlier version of this despised, treacherous, oppressive native bourgeoisie whose greed and megalomania is pitted against the relentless struggle of starving sepoys whose very misery makes them a historical equivalent of the post-independence Indian subalterns.

This equivalence is further emphasised by the fact that the sepoys suffer from acute shortage of food, medicine, ammunitions etc and it is repeatedly stated by the officers that all such materials have been cornered by businessmen who keep growing fatter as they make profits by selling the hoarded materials in the black-market. Whether anything of this sort did actually happen during 1857 is debatable. But such debates are rather irrelevant in the context of the play as Dutt was not merely trying to explore a particular historical event for its own sake. Like the Sannyasi and Fakir Revolts (\textit{Sannyasi Tarabari}), the armed rebellion of Titumeer (\textit{Titumeer}) or the revolutionary movements of Bengal (\textit{Rifle}), the rebellion of 1857 was for Dutt another instance of subaltern resistance against both native and foreign oppressors which he sought to use to inflame the revolutionary spirit among the people. He was trying to dramatise the sentence of death on Bhagat Singh and Gopinath Saha, supporting the British in the court-martial of mutinous Garwali soldiers, and a thousand concrete acts of betrayal. It will be our task to show that the country belongs to the working masses and not the bourgeois, and that the proletariat is the true patriot. It is he who has always done the real fighting….and the congress leader meanwhile sat sipping the Englishman’s wine (or a glass of goat’s milk) talking compromise with him.” 61-62.

\textsuperscript{17} Dutt’s anger against the Emergency becomes evident when he states: “And then Mrs. Gandhi and her clique, with the help of their playboy Siddhartha Roy tore up the Constitution of India an thus committed high treason. They proclaimed Emergency during peace and swiftly put all opposition leaders in prison…Democracy to the bourgeois is valid only as long as it helps exploitation.” \textit{Towards A Revolutionary Theatre}, 94-95.

\textsuperscript{18} Frantz Fanon, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness”, \textit{The Wretched of The Earth}, 119-165. The whole chapter deals with the numerous dangers in which a postcolonial nation may find itself if it allows the bourgeois to lead.
rebellion of 1857 to make people conscious of the long tradition of armed resistance against oppression so that there can be a united resistance by peasants, workers and other members of the contemporary Indian subalternity against the ruling classes who had been subjecting them to abject poverty and misery by relentlessly exploiting them. It is these circumstances which were responsible for the historic food movement of 1959 and consequent food riots during the 60’s and the 70’s in Bengal which saw an outburst of public anger against both the administration and the hoarders who profited by trading on people’s hunger and misery. Such movements and riots provided ample evidences of the people’s misery and the inability or reluctance of the government to take effective action to remedy the situation. And one of the biggest hurdles in this regard was obviously the dominance of illegal hoarders who continued their malpractices with sheer impunity by utilising their links with the politicians and thereby enhanced their profits while extending the misery of the people. These facts are also represented by Dutt in other plays like *Dushwapner Nagari* (*Nightmare City*) where too the collusion between politicians and hoarders is stressed and critiqued.

It is these contemporary realities which find resonance in *The Great Rebellion* where the struggling sepoys are forced to eat “weed curry” or “boiled grass” (*TGR* 39) as all the wheat and bread has been cornered by the businessmen. Later on Muhabbat also informs the soldiers that even medicine has disappeared owing to the machinations of the businessmen who have also cornered cloth, tents, salt, gun-powder, sugar, paper and such other required commodities. This is why Lachman sarcastically remarks:

What do you think of the Holy War now? I suppose you realise that you can’t worship God on an empty stomach. The more starve and die the fatter grow the businessmen, the more the princes drink. After all, you are only scum; it’s your sacred duty to die. (*TGR* 42)

Lachman’s remarks look back to Mirza Moghul’s earlier snipe at the sepoys and amply reveal the anguish and anger of the sepoys, which is further heightened by the sight of the Commander-in-Chief Mirza Moghul enjoying an elaborate dinner with a number of country-squires. The entire spectacle of the nobles gorging on whole chickens while the sepoys starve and feed themselves with boiled grass looks back to Bijan Bhattacharya’s *Nabanna* which juxtaposed a bunch of famished villagers, scraping dustbins to find food with members of the urban elite who were enjoying themselves in an elaborate wedding
which defied the shortage in food by serving finest delicacies to the guests. The sepoys find themselves in a situation quite like that of the migrant villagers and it is these circumstances that ignite their animosity against the elite who were supposed to lead them against the British. Therefore, while Govind suspects that “there’s something dirty going on behind this war” (TGR 43), Lachman even threatens to use one of his mines against the nobles. Such reactions do not remain confined within the particular historical contexts of the play but transcend the temporal barriers to become representative of the suppressed resentment of suffering Indian subalterns, waiting to burst out against their oppressors.

In fact, after the initial march of the sepoys from Meerut to Delhi and the subsequent murder of the English officers, the rest of the play deals specifically with the relationship between the sepoys and the members of the royal court, including Bahadur Shah himself, within the sepoy-occupied city of Delhi. The Mughal capital here becomes representative of the country in general and witnesses the developing conflict between the struggling sepoys, representing the suffering multitude and the conniving and cowardly nobles and also the consequences of such a conflict. The entire scenario becomes, in effect, an allegorical representation of the post-independence scenario where, despite the absence of the former colonial powers, the masses continue to suffer from exploitation owing to the Machiavellian machinations of the ruling classes, represented by Asanullah, Tularam and Mirza Mughal. While it is indeed true that 1857 witnessed widespread cooperation between various classes of people united by their shared hatred of the British, it is also true that various nobles and landlords acted as British allies and their active support to the British even provoked rebels to attack them as they were perceived to be traitors. The animosity of the rebels was perhaps most fiercely directed against traders, bankers and money-lenders like Tularam who were not only targeted and plundered but their documents, which were the sources of their wealth and power were also repeatedly burnt. Such actions continued to recur in postcolonial India as well, since peasants continued to be exploited by local money-lenders who, however, could perpetuate their malpractices with impunity as their social status and wealth allowed them to manipulate the administration and also muster enough forces to secure themselves. In fact, for many years after the independence the subaltern sections of the society, especially the peasants,
remained in a state of severe exploitation which was accentuated by their dependence on the landlords, mahajans and such other social superiors for financial assistance during emergencies. Even now, the growing agrarian crisis of India, as well as the insecurity of workers in the face of greater privatisation and the pressures of global economics continue to point out how the very existence of the subaltern sections remains dependent on the decisions of members of the ruling class, whose constitution, however, continues to evolve and modify (Dreze and Sen, 2013; Mishra, 2007; Reddy and Mishra, 2007; Rao and Reddy, 2008; Rao, 2006). It is this awareness of dependence and helplessness that is voiced by Lachman’s remarks in which he uses the metaphor of chess to emphasise the sepoys’ and by extension the Indian subalterns’ sense of resigned frustration:

> We are merely pawns in the hands of princes and merchants. Pawns can’t go backwards; but only forward; they made these rules. But the queen, the bishops, the rooks can go as far back as they wish. And the king only moves one square in drugged inertia. I say our real enemy is not the English but our own princes and merchants. (TGR 46)

However, just as the subalterns of postcolonial India did not just abjectly surrender to ongoing oppression, as evident from the insurgent movements of Kakdwip or Telengana or Naxalbari, so also the sepoys of 1857 fought resolutely against both native and foreign enemies with desperate courage, even when they were assured of their doom. Dutt deliberately sought to revive those memories of heroic struggle in order to inspire the contemporary subalterns to rise against injustice. This is why Heera Singh and Bakht Khan together launch a campaign against the rich banias to recover their hoarded wealth to feed the sepoys and provide them with the required resources. Such Robin Hood like tactics must have chimed well with Dutt’s contemporary audience who kept on hearing similar calls from the contemporary leftist leaders who demanded redistribution of land from the rich landlords who profited from others’ labours, to the poor peasants who actually tilled the land. It is in a similar vein that Heera Singh demands the warrant to ‘carry out a house-to house search’ to rediscover the ‘tons of gold’ (TGR 53) stacked away in the money-lenders’ vaults and even proposes to hand out exemplary punishments to merchants like Ramji Mull and Jamuna Das to ensure better cooperation from other traders and wealthy citizens and prevent illegal hoarding. In the process, the fight against

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British colonialism is combined with acts of ‘declaring war on the rich’ (TGR 54) as the sepoys accuse the rich of betraying the war against the British.

What Dutt does here is that he invests the characters with a class-consciousness which was being developed in contemporary Bengal through the rhetoric of the leftist parties and the growth and development of the Naxalite movement and this is a feature of almost all the historical plays that he has written and produced. It may well be argued that in the process he was endowing the characters with a dimension which was historically unavailable to them but such criticism mattered little to Dutt who was more concerned about the impact of the play than its historical authenticity. However, the division between the rich and poor is a perennial one and it does not require a developed class-consciousness to either understand this fact or feel animosity against those who stand accused of betrayal. This is exactly the accusation that are faced by the rich in the context of the play and these sensibilities are further heightened by the precarious position of the sepoys who had to keep on waging a war against the British despite their weaknesses and depleted resources. It is to meet the exigencies of war that Heera Singh demands a warrant to issue guns for the people of Delhi in order to mount a concerted mass-resistance against the colonial army. Such a demand visibly unnerves the nobles who feel all the more anxious about their own safety and security and even warn the emperors about the dangers of such a demand, especially in the context of the allegations of robbing shops, launched against the sepoys themselves. Heera Singh, however, sharply dismisses such accusations by asserting that such offences would have to be overlooked as it is the sepoys who are relentlessly fighting the British and sacrificing their lives despite being famished and homeless and wounded. He argues that since no one else have to face the kind of adversity the sepoys daily endure, nobody has the right to be critical of them on any grounds and thus belittle the heroism and endurance of these bravehearts. All such remarks are made by Heera Singh in a tone of vehement irreverence based on

Reacting against the charge of historical inaccuracy in Kallol, Dutt remarked “To us, the end of the RIN mutiny is the beginning of a revolutionary process that drove the British to begin plotting with Congress and the League leaders, a process that set India ablaze with rebellion, a process that still threatens the Indian bourgeoisie with armed rebellion, a process that will only end with their overthrow. That is why larger than the fact of surrender is the Truth of revolutionary transition, and that in theatrical language is symbolized in Khyber’s refusal to surrender. Khyber refuses to surrender for the same precise reason that Eisenstein’s Potemkin refuses to surrender, though in actual history it did.” Utpal Dutt, Towards A Revolutionary Theatre, 55.
his solidarity with the suffering sepoys which becomes evident when he states: “They are driven to robbing shops by hunger – by hunger. Does anyone here know what the word means? Has anyone here been hungry in the last thousand years?” (TGR 55). Heera’s comments again signify his class-consciousness and his comments may even be seen as a justification of the kind of subaltern violence that characterised the food riots in the 1960s and 70s and also the planned attacks on landlords and mahajans by starving distressed peasants, especially in the wake of the Naxalbari movement. In fact, Dutt’s entire dramatic career was based on his ideal of jointly opposing the forces of imperialism and capitalism at once. It is this twin struggle which Dutt has repeatedly celebrated through his plays and it is this two-pronged attack which distinguishes his exploration of history.

In the process, Dutt was trying to fashion a new kind of nationalist discourse which, despite stressing the importance of national liberation movements, harped on the importance of the simultaneous development of class struggle to ensure equitable distribution of national wealth, in a manner that definitely resembled Fanon’s arguments in *The Wretched of The Earth*. *The Great Rebellion* is itself a significant example of this integrated discourse as it neatly fuses the elements of class struggle with the sustained attempts to imagine a nation on the basis of a syncretic culture which also sought to combat the growing communal tensions of India owing to the steady rise of right-wing Hindutva. Initially, however, such unity remains not only absent, but rather incredible as the soldiers remain strictly separated. Not only do they drink, dine and smoke separately but even use separate vessels to keep themselves apart. Parantap bitterly reproaches Lachman for mingling with the Muslims and curses him by shouting: “A curse on him. He eats what the Muslims have touched.” (TGR 16) However, Parantap’s own reactions also exemplify the fact that Hindu society was itself also fractured along the lines of hierarchical caste-barriers which is why he shouts at Prasad: “Go to hell, you low-born untouchable” (TGR 14). Lachman’s own tirades against native religions, especially orthodox Hinduism, are partially motivated by the insults faced by weavers belonging to lower castes when they even come close to Brahmins or other upper-caste Hindus: “In the village, if our shadow falls on them they lynch us” (TGR 16).
Such differences, however, dissolve immediately after the beginning of the revolt when the sepoys together begin to shout the sky-rending battle-cries of “Deen! Deen!” followed by “Allah-ho-Akbar” and “Har Har Mahadeo” (TGR 23) which emphasise the bond created between the two communities by a sense of shared threat to their religions from the British Christians. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that the religious fervour complemented the mutual perception of Hindustan being the motherland of both Hindus and Muslims which was being plundered and contaminated by the Company Raj. This is why Heera Singh and Bakht Khan pronounce an oath of loyalty which emphasises that element of patriotism that necessarily forms the foundation of nationalism: “I pledge my life to her that gives me my bread, namely my country.” (TGR 20) Even Bahadur Shah has to repeat this oath which marks a crescendo of nationalist zeal in the play. This sense of nationality becomes most evident from the behaviour of the sepoys, who instead of bickering with each other, unitedly join the battle and eat, chat, struggle together and brave the adversities that keep plaguing them. In the process, they become embodiments of that ‘horizontal comradeship’ (Anderson 8) which Benedict Anderson deems essential for national unity and even foreground the idea of a shared syncretic culture which is generally held to be the defining feature of Indian civilisation. The role of Nawab becomes crucial in this regard. Characterised from the beginning as a soldier who has a taste for the finer things of life and can even use a full month’s pay on cherished perfume, Nawab becomes a representative of India’s syncretic culture through his appreciation of a brass statue of Dancing Shiva, stolen by him from the Ludlow Castle after a battle with the English. Placing the statue inside his tunic and near his heart he wonders how “all the rhythm of nature is caught in the arms and legs” (TGR 41) of that statue. And as he goes out for perhaps the final battle he still keeps it inside his tunic and even uses it as an example of the superiority of Indian culture from which the colonisers must learn something as they are only seemingly capable of making destructive devices like rifles and cannons as opposed to shawls, perfumes or brass sculptures. And Nawab’s actions also become instructive for a post-independence Indian audience who find in him that syncretic sensibility, essential for national unity, which has been repeatedly assaulted by the spectre of communal violence across the land. As a result the play also emerges as a typical postcolonial national allegory which reassesses the past in light of present
anxieties and tries to draw succour by focusing on those moments of unity that desperately demand revival.

It needs to be kept in mind that Dutt is not unique in attempting such a presentist use of history. A number of contemporary Hindi films, like Mangal Pandey and Lagaan also use the same strategy and Mangal Pandey is quite significant in this context as both it and The Great Rebellion deal with the same historical event, though with vastly different aims and approaches. However, unlike Mangal Pandey which projects a unified mass of people, rising together against an oppressive foreign regime, Dutt presents a more nuanced view where the horizontal comradeship achieved by the sepoys is vertically fractured by the class-interests of the nobles who are shown as being even willing to sabotage the freedom-struggle for their own gains. This is precisely what happens as Tularam and Asanullah deliberately provoke Mirza to conspire against Heera Singh by utilising his excessive pride and the omnipresent contempt for the lower classes, to which the likes of Heera Singh belong. He therefore tricks Heera Singh into writing a letter to one who had already defected to the British side and thus convicts him of being a traitor. He thus avenges his own hurt pride without considering the impact of such a conspiracy on the fate of the revolt, about the success of which he hardly seems to care. Heera Singh thus becomes a victim of aristocratic betrayal and Dutt’s plays are strewn with portrayal of such betrayed rebels who remain defiant and glorious even amidst torture and ignominy. Such betrayals are also used by Dutt to stress the limitations of various rebellions as well as to castigate the bourgeois nationalist leadership of India whom he repeatedly accused of betraying the aspirations of the people. This becomes evident from such plays as Kallol where too a proletarian rebel leader, Shardul Singh, is deceitfully imprisoned and murdered by the British in collusion with the contemporary Congress leadership, representing the Indian bourgeoisie. The betrayal and death of such subaltern rebel leaders as Heera Singh and Shardul Singh powerfully signified the dangers of allowing the native bourgeoisie to lead a national movement, which was also voiced by Frantz Fanon. And it is this consciousness which is voiced by Kasturi, Heera/Bishen Singh’s long lost wife and Lachman/Kalua’s recently found mother. Striving to earn a living by stealing valuables from dead soldiers, Kasturi appears on stage almost as a Mother Courage figure who also becomes Dutt’s spokesperson for the
inescapable urgency of a resolute class-struggle for the betterment of independent India. Therefore she castigates the sepoys after the hanging of Heera Singh for failing to discern the deceitful plot behind such a crime and states:

There are two battles raging at the same time – between us and the English and between us and the princes. If you don’t see that, you see nothing. The enemy is before you and behind you. While you fight for freedom the enemy behind stabs you in the back. (TGR 65)

Asanullah, Tularam and Mirza here exemplify the conspiracy of the ruling elite to keep the masses as subjugated as ever and this is precisely why Fanon deemed it essential to combine the movement for national liberation with one for social reconstruction. It is this awareness which also finds voice in Kasturi and Parantap’s final conversation before he goes into battle:

Kasturi: You cannot fight a battle of freedom with princes and merchants on top of your head. They don’t love the country, only money.
Parantap: You are right old mother. I think we have lost this time. But the next time we’ll wring their necks before we go to war. (TGR 66)

Dutt’s explorations of all past history thus keep reaching out to some unawakened future in order to conceive an ideal struggle which will doubtlessly triumph by successfully overcoming all the limitations of past rebellions which despite their failure continue to radiate as glowing examples of courage and resolve. It is this revolutionary nostalgia that forms the basis of Dutt’s historical plays as he relentlessly attempted to use theatre as a tool that would prepare the spiritual climate necessary for a successful revolution.

However, his hopes of such a revolution, based on class-struggle, were also combined with persistent concerns revolving around communalism, ethnic strife, gender-differences, the role of the media and even the necessity and use of violence for ensuring subaltern success. Some of these concerns are also addressed in The Great Rebellion, especially through the characters of Waziran and Lachman. The very presence of a woman in the battle field at that time is a rather unique situation and despite the reports of female involvement in 1857, especially in the form of the Rani of Jhansi, these reports were indeed rare and most representations of 1857 generally ignored the role of the women during the conflicts. The role of Waziran as a holy warrior is indeed remarkable
in this context and this fact becomes all the more fascinating if we consider her profession – that of a prostitute. In fact this is why she is initially taunted by the other sepoys who repeatedly reproach her as well as Lachhman, as it is Lachhman who is responsible for her presence among the sepoys. While Parantap rebukes him for his limitless ‘profligacy’ (*TGR* 21), Nawab calls her a ‘fallen woman’ and even goes on to add that “A woman in the middle of the battle is a load of troubles” (*TGR* 40). Such comments refer to the general moral denouncement which was meted out to courtesans and prostitutes as well as the separation of male and female domains of action which was simply another way of ensuring women’s domestication. However, throughout the entire history of India’s freedom movement a number of women have repeatedly defied the patriarchal barrier between home and the world and have gloriously participated in various struggles. Apart from such memorable figures as the Rani of Jhansi, Matangini Hajra, revolutionaries like Preetilata Waddedar, the members of INA’s Rani Laxmi Bai brigade and others there were countless ordinary women who actively joined in the struggle and made immense sacrifices. Waziran’s participation in the struggle as a holy warrior, whose role is even recognised by Commander Bakht Khan, is a testament to the heroic struggles undertaken by many such women. In fact, as historical reports suggest, the rebellion of 1857 was itself notable for such participation in various places like Jhansi, Delhi and Kanpur. This is also highlighted by Waziran herself who rebuts the other soldiers’ chauvinistic taunts by stating:

Bastard, you think this war is your personal affair? Peasants, weavers, fishermen, blacksmiths have joined this war along with their wives. When the Nawab of Malagarh came out in support of the rebellion, his begums fought alongside him. When the chief of the Gujar tribe, Shah Mull fell in battle, the Gujar housewives took the field. Housewives are fighting in the streets of Lucknow, Kanpur, Gwalior and Agra… (*TGR* 40)

However we cannot accept the term ‘women’ as a stable signifier referring to a homogeneous group. As the response of the sepoys itself shows, there is definitely a divide between housewives or women who are considered to be pious and virtuous according to patriarchal norms and those who are considered to be morally impious, whatever may have been the circumstances for their supposed ‘fall’. In fact the nationalist discourse of the twentieth century represented an ideal of womanhood which was strictly
based on traditional, patriarchal, religious norms that sought to portray the women as repositories of traditional Indian values that were preserved intact from colonial cultural contamination\textsuperscript{21}. Women like Waziran operate as the absolute ‘other’ of such an ideal of womanhood and she embodies through her presence the contribution of such ‘other’ women to the cause of Indian freedom who remain relegated to the peripheries of dominant narratives\textsuperscript{22}. Waziran, therefore, represents an attempt to visibilise such marginalised women and inculcate them in the mainstream of the narratives of India’s past and she acts as a composite figure in whom coalesces a number of historical characters and tendencies as exemplified by Azizunnisa of Kanpur (Chaudhuri 101), or the courtesans who taunted sepoys at Meerut before the beginning of the mutiny (Chaudhuri 62). The presence of such a figure also testifies to the fact that Dutt’s representation of subaltern politics on stage was also sensitive to gender-issues and that he even sought to render audible those female voices that even fell outside the ambit of middle-class feminism.

Waziran’s role in the play is further heightened by her open affair with sapper Lachman Singh, who also plays a crucial role in the play as he embodies within himself both the identity crisis that affects postcolonial societies as well as a resultant anxiety that finds relief in bloodlust, which is condemned by others. This anxiety is evident from the very beginning as Lachman confesses in his letter to his mother that his well being is ensured by the grace of his “country’s mortal enemy” (\textit{TGR} 8), General Nicholson, whom he serves, who also provides him with the kind of fatherly love that he has not received for the most part of his life. Torn between his love for his motherland as well as his reverence and love for the English general who has acted as a father-figure in his life, Lachman Singh becomes an embodiment of psychological anguish which he himself admits: “I suffer continually from mental anguish and uncertainty” (\textit{TGR} 8). This is further emphasised later when he states:

\textsuperscript{22} I am indebted to Lata Singh’s article “1857: Visibilising the ‘Other’ in History – Courtesans and Revolt” in \textit{1857: Essays from Economic and Political Weekly} (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2008) for these insights. It is important to note however that unlike the author, or Tripurari Sharma, whose play the author discusses, Dutt does not make a distinction between ‘courtesan’ and ‘prostitute’.
The man I ought to call my father is an English General. Now I am told he is the arch-enemy of my country. Isn’t it ridiculous? I’ve no right, it seems, even to a memory. (TGR 46)

His uncertainty is deepened by the English education that he seems to have received during his life under the guidance of General Nicholson which is why he savagely critiques native religions and rituals and praises in contrast the actions of people like General Nicholson who had supposedly saved a widow from being sati. Lachhman becomes another typical example of colonial alienation because of which he develops a revulsion for his native religion and religious customs, combined with a grudging admiration of the British and their supposedly profane ways. At the same time, he remains acutely aware of British oppression in India and therefore happily joins the rebels and bravely devotes himself to the struggle without any hesitation at all. This is why Parantap comments:

This renegade is a mystery to me. When you hear the things that he says you are sure he is an agent of the enemy and you want to run him through with a sabre. But in the field of battle, you see him running ahead of the whole line like a damned male version of the Queen of Jhansi. What the hell are you? What are your politics? (TGR 42)

His incomprehensibility stems from the oscillation of contrary emotions in Lachhman’s own heart. While on the one hand he is prepared to destroy the British, including the father-like General Nicholson whom he had seen burning black men, he also wants the traditional India, with its caste systems and various rotten superstitions to be destroyed. This is why his heroics against the British in the battlefield are complemented by the remark: “I shall be only too happy if the English artillery smashes the whole city of Delhi. This India needs to be destroyed.” (TGR 42) While these comments may, to an extent echo the progressive sensibilities of the author, in terms of characterisation, such remarks display that pathological fascination with external destruction with which he wants to quell the turmoil in his heart. This becomes evident from his previous confession: “Explosions – walls, bridges, bastions collapse, and my heart beats a joyful tattoo. There is nothing so joyful as destruction.” (TGR 23-24) It is this perverse sensibility that later leads him to remark: “I say our real enemy is not the English, but our own princes and moneylenders. We should turn our guns around, cut their throats and play polo with their severed heads” (TGR 46).
Such remarks echo the sadistic pronouncements of Ramananda Giri in *Sannyasir Tarabari*, where he bursts with insane laughter as he repeatedly stabs the traitor Bhabataran to death and even threatens to torture him by smearing him with honey so that he is attacked by hilly ants who would gradually devour him (UDNS: 5, 413-14). These remarks exemplify of a perverse bloodlust which is immediately castigated by Heera Singh who emphasises the constructive and creative element of the struggle which must not be relegated to indiscriminate violence for its own sake:

We kill when we have to, but do not boast of how much blood we have let... The Indian poor have not learnt to relish bloodshed. We are fighting for a dream, for an ideal and you are dragging it down to a bloodbath. You have no faith, no love for this country or for these generous people. You have no roots and therefore cannot draw sustenance from the soil. Sometimes I want to put you in chains because in the freedom struggle you see only struggle and not freedom. You are anarchy and destruction; you shouldn’t be in this army at all. (*TGR* 47)

Similar statements are also made by Kripananda in ‘Sannyasir Tarabari’ while reproaching Ramananda’s bloodlust:

Kripa: Ramananda, I have known for a long time that there exists a blaze of hatred within your soul. But I didn’t know that the fire, instead of burning the enemy, is gradually burning you... Are you beginning to enjoy the agony of a dying man?
Rama: Not a man, a traitor!
Kripa: He too is a man! A poor man! By chance or coincidence, you are a crusader while he is a traitor. The opposite could well have been the case. In the crossroads of life, you too could have taken a wrong turn owing to the agony of hunger.
Rama: But I didn’t! Hence the undying hatred between me and Bhabataran.
Kripa: Fool! We don’t hate, we love. And it is because we love that we are in such a huge war. (*Translation mine*)

Such remarks are vitally significant in today’s context as Heera’s and Kripananda’s reprimand may well be seen as a valid criticism of the kind of Maoist violence that is now ravaging various parts of India including Bengal. What these Maoists are doing in the name of an armed liberation struggle is a veritable bloodbath in which even those

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23 I use the term ‘crusader’ in the translation as Dutt himself had christened the play as ‘The Crusade’ in his translation in *Towards A Revolutionary Theatre*, 147.
poor tribals for whom they are supposedly fighting, are being killed regularly\(^{24}\). As someone who had himself been involved in Naxalite activities, which he later had termed as mistaken deviations, Dutt was well aware of the problems involved in such struggles which often relegated into mindless violence (Towards 73-89). Throughout his dramatic œuvre, he has therefore sought to criticise such violence and warn the people against the practitioners of such violence. Heera Singh and Kripananda are two of those figures through whom this caveat is sounded in these plays and the validity of such remarks is further emphasised by their contemporary relevance\(^{25}\).

The play thus brings into focus a number of issues associated with subalterneity and the politics involved in it. What makes it relevant even today is the continuation, though with differences, of the inequalities and injustices that it highlighted. Even though artisans are not getting their hands chopped, the same economic forces are now operating through the legalised channels of global economy as a result of which multinational corporations, aided by their Indian bourgeois associates are dominating the market at the expense of the indigenous artisans and producers, leading to frequent suicides by farmers and weavers alike. Despite the abolition of earlier colonial rule, neo-colonial forces are still dominating the world through international divisions of labour. The struggle against the Company in the play, in this context becomes symbolic of the struggle against global capitalism which exercises itself as much through organisations like IMF and WTO and World Bank as through major multinational corporations. At the same time the play also focuses on those facets of class-oppression which are still rampant in India and therefore the play’s call for united struggle against class-oppression is as resonant today as it was three or four decades ago when the play was first produced as Tota. And it is perhaps because of this relevance that the play was revived and produced in 2007 to commemorate the sesquicentennial of 1857, under the aegis of the Government of West Bengal, with significant public appreciation.

\(^{24}\) According to Governmental reports, between 400-500 civilians have been killed every year, from 2003-2007, by the Maoists. Furthermore, a total of 4666 persons have fallen victim to Maoist violence between 2002-2006. (Pradip Basu 373, 428)

\(^{25}\) Even in ‘Titumeer’, Titumeer himself is seen as an initially reluctant participant in a violent war and he distinguishes between his army and that of the British by stating: “We are the sons of poor peasants, we didn’t want bloodshed. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. We are not warmongers like them; we haven’t learnt to dance over corpses. That’s the pride of the poor, not their shame.” (Translation mine) Utpal Dutta Natya Samagra, vol. 6, 336.
However, such government sponsored revivals create that tension between ‘memorising’ and ‘memorialising’ which has been discussed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in connection with the governmental celebration of 1857 and how 1857 also operated as a signifier of popular insurgency of the kind that no government can tolerate (“Remembering” 45-55). Considering Utpal Dutt’s involvement in Leftist politics and his warm support to the Left Front government that came to power in 1977, it is quite natural that it would be keen to revive such a play as The Great Rebellion, especially since Dutt’s Marxist analysis of 1857 chimes well with the general Leftist celebration of 1857 as a popular uprising. The idea seemed to be that the legacy of popular uprising which had been initiated by the rebellion of 1857 was carried forward by the Leftist parties who used such mass mobilisation to democratically come to power and retain it for over three decades. Such a strategy, even while highlighting the element of popular insurgency, contains it by placing it in a past which does not need to be repeated as the existing government, unlike the earlier ones, is supposed to be an expression of popular aspirations. Such strategies conveniently forget the contradictions that fissure such claims and it is ironic that 2007 also saw protracted peasant agitation against this government in places like Singur and Nandigram in opposition to the land-acquisition drive of the government in an attempt to ensure rapid industrialisation in the state. The year also saw a series of so called “ration riots” as a result of which hungry villagers attacked corrupt ration dealers, many of whom were affiliated to the ruling party, and often assaulted them and burnt their papers in a manner that recalled outbursts of popular fury against banias and mahajans during 1857. Dipesh Chakraborty has also referred to a conference held in Delhi in March, 2007 on ‘1857 and the Legacy of Peasant Resistance’ with the subtitle ‘Tebhaga, Telengana, Naxalbari and now Singur?’ (“Remembering” 54). In the light of such developments, which indicate severe anger against the government from the peasantry, the decision to revive a play that memorises 1857 to inspire future struggle by celebrating peasants’ resistance against an oppressive regime, bafflingly becomes a suicidal attempt at self-subversion which foregrounds the fact that such events will

continue to offer incitement to popular politics by defying the various strategies of containment. Dipesh Chakrabarty therefore remarks:

My point is that for good historical reasons, insurgencies have remained a potential form of popular politics in India just as riots on the streets have been a part of French democracy since the revolution. That is why the element of incitement cannot ever be completely domesticated or extinguished by the process that makes for a stable national calendar of political anniversaries of events such as 1857. (“Remembering” 54)

One can only wonder how Dutt would have utilised this omnipresent element of incitement in the present context and the very possibility of such utilisation testifies to the lasting relevance of these plays. In the process, the play foregrounds a multifaceted paradigm of subaltern resistance that not only redefines the past but creates such intersections with the present that fuel new possibilities for the manifestations of subaltern consciousness.

**Hunting the Sun:**

…the real work of the committed writer is, as I said before, to reveal, demonstrate, demystify, and dissolve myths and fetishes in a critical acid bath.

- Jean Paul Sartre. (qtd. In Datta Gupta 189)

Set during the reign of Gupta emperor Samudragupta, *Hunting the Sun* operates as a scathing critique of the regime, in opposition to traditional historiography. In the process the play serves both as a caveat against revivalist Hindutva, fostered by a nationalist historiography in search of a Hindu ‘golden age’ as well as an exploration of subalternized Dalit voices of the past. Through such foregrounding the play not only warns us about the innate violence of Brahmanical Hinduism and the communal tensions its revival is likely to stoke but also becomes linked to contemporary Dalit movements, gaining momentum across India.

While *1857: The Great Rebellion* focuses more on issues of class and to an extent on gender, Dutt realised that his attempt to rewrite the received historical narrative would be rendered too parochial if he focuses exclusively on colonial history as many of the
problems plaguing Indian society can be traced back to pre-colonial pasts which have continued to ensure the perpetuation of the oppressive hierarchies of caste and gender. Plays like *Hunting the Sun* and *Kiratparva* are powerful examples of this realisation as these plays serve to demystify supposedly glorious epochs of Indian history and culture by examining the underlying patterns of dehumanising brutalities, concealed otherwise by a veneer of culture. This chapter would seek to analyse both the emergence of those historiographic discourses which would search for ‘golden ages’ in the past and their relation with both the colonial discourse of the past and the evolving fundamentalist politics of post-independence India, in order to locate *Hunting the Sun* within its appropriate context. The chapter would thereby evaluate how the play not only critiques the supposed cultural glory of Brahmanical, patriarchal power-structures of the Gupta age from subaltern perspectives and thereby invalidates the ideological roots of modern communalism, but also how Dutt foregrounds subalternized characters of the past to relate to their ongoing attempts at self-assertion. What makes such successful deconstruction of traditional historiography all the more interesting is Dutt’s keen Marxist insight which, however, operated then without the assistance of much historical evidence from subsequently published historical analyses.

**Colonial Discourse and Indian History**

One of the cornerstones of the colonial discourse is the conceptualisation of the colonised as an absolute ‘Other’ who is not only deprived of the civilisational illumination acquired by Europe but one who is in dire need of colonial intervention for his/her own improvement. This is precisely the idea that constitutes the basis of Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden” where the colonised are described as “sullen peoples/Half devil and half-child”, whose ‘heathen Folly’ had sent them to a “loved Egyptian night” from which the European white men are supposed to bring them gradually to ‘light’ (Kipling, stanza 1-5). What Kipling manages to achieve through such textual manoeuvrings is a blatant erasure of the pre-colonial past, which is basically a textual, rhetorical extension of the European’s own ignorance, and it is this deliberate ignorance that eventually crystallises into a historical fact, fostering the myth of the supposed civilising mission by academically and institutionally locating the pre-colonial existence
of the colonised as a derelict patch of unrelieved gloom marked by endless tales of misery, barbarity and stagnation. The dissemination of such assumptions consolidates the hegemonic authority of the colonial regime and Fanon therefore wrote:

Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (Fanon 170)

The process of decolonisation therefore entails, among other things, a rediscovery of history – history from the perspective of the formerly colonised who found that their stories had been erased from the official records which virtually reeked with the smell of the bloodshed that ensured imperial domination. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins therefore write

Aside from the basic reviewing of a fragment of history when new ‘facts’ come to light, post-colonial histories attempt to tell the other sides of a story and to accommodate not only the key events experienced by a community (or individual) but also the cultural context through which these events are interpreted and recorded. Reconstructing the past in this way usually heralds the emergence of new voices and new tools for understanding the past (Gilbert and Tompkins 107).

This reconstruction and re-comprehension involves what Fanon called a ‘passionate research’, which is motivated by “the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others (qtd. In Hall 111). Like other colonised natives, Indians too were faced with the problem of being confronted with an absent or at best a disgraceful history. The calumnies of authors like James Mill and others, based on the discourse of Orientalism, represented Indian history as a mosaic of despotic rulers, factious feuds and a state of civilisation that was almost semi-barbaric. Vincent Smith, one of the propagators of such typically colonial stereotypes, even asserted that,

…the bewildering annals of Indian petty states, when left to their own devices for several centuries, may perhaps serve to give the reader a notion of what India always has been when released from the control of a supreme authority and what she would be again, if the benevolent power that now safeguards her boundaries should be withdrawn (Smith 370-72).
Such representations not only served to justify the so-called civilising mission of the colonial enterprise but also sought to infuse in the minds of the Indians a sense of inferiority which would make them accept British rule virtually as a godsend that ought to be celebrated and not resisted. Therefore the cultural logic of nationalism invariably required the search for national pasts of which people could be proud and which would provide Indians with examples worth emulating for the purpose of national liberation. No wonder, Bamkimchandra urged his fellow Bengalis: “We have no history. We must have a history” (Chatterjee 76).

**Hindu Historiography, ‘Golden Age’ of the Guptas and Marxist Reassessments**

The question is, how was this national community of ‘we’ and ‘us’ imagined? As Partha Chatterjee illustrates with numerous examples, a number of major Bengali thinkers and authors began by imagining the nation as a primarily Hindu entity, within which however, even originally anti-Hindu and anti-Brahmin religions like Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism could be subsumed, and placed both Islam and Christianity as alien forces which could not be included within the imagined community of India. As Chatterjee explains, nineteenth century Bengali intellectuals and historians had actually assembled and accepted a narrative of Hindu misery dating back to the invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni and an attendant construction of Muslim villainy. Interestingly, such classifications directly stemmed from contemporary colonial historiography of India which was itself motivated by a vilification of Islam and especially Mohammad, determined by a Orientalist discourse that went as far back as Dante and Spenser (Said 68-70; Spenser 333). And it was their division of India into a classical Hindu ancient past, a dark Muslim Medieval age and a British induced Renaissance, which was accepted and applied by Indian historians who did not bother to interrogate the categorisations and their bases. Chatterjee therefore notes:

> For Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century, the pattern of classical glory, medieval decline, and modern Renaissance appeared as one that was not only proclaimed by modern historiography for Europe but also approved for India by at least some sections of European scholarship. What was needed was to claim the agency for completing the project of modernity. To make that claim, ancient India had to become the classical source of Indian modernity, while “the Muslim period” would become the night of medieval darkness. (Chatterjee 102)
Whether it is the novels of Bankimchandra or the plays of Jyotirindranath Thakur and others, the same paradigm continued to be replayed through various literary examples that reinforced Hindu-Muslim antagonism by positing the Muslim as the inimical, external Other. The following excerpt from *Anandamath* may be seen as being representative of such discursive virulence:

> How does the Muslims ruler protect us? We have lost our religion, our caste, our honour, and family name, and now we are about to lose our very lives...how can Hinduism survive unless we drive out these dissolute swine? (qtd. in Tanika Sarkar 180)

Unfortunately, such a conception of national community contributed to an evolving discourse which also gave birth to Veer Savarkar’s twentieth century concepts of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hindutva’ which are the basis of the attempt to make India a Hindurashtra, almost in the manner of the German Aryan state under Hitler and his Nazi party. Savarkar stated that a ‘Hindu’ means a person who regards this land of Bharat Varsha, from the Indus to the Seas, as his Fatherland, that is the cradle of his religion. Savarkar’s definition of Hindutva, through the notions of ‘Karmabhumi’ and ‘Punyabhumi’, as Peter Van Der Veer observes, “equates religious and national identity: an Indian is a Hindu – an equation that puts important Indian religious communities, such as Christians and Muslims, outside the nation” (Veer 1). These correspondences very clearly highlight how the discourse that began to emerge with nationalist historiography eventually culminated in the creation of the ideological base of Brahmanical Hindu fundamentalism which is one of the major forces of postcolonial subalternization in independent India. This becomes even more explicit when we take into consideration how Tarinicharan’s narrative of Hindu decline, following Muslim invasion would later be echoed by former RSS general secretary and chief ideologue, M.S. Golwalkar, in his “We or Our Nationhood Defined,”: “Ever since that evil day, when Moslems first landed in Hindusthan, the Hindu nation has been gallantly fighting on to shake off the despoilers.” (qtd. in Noorani 18-19)

Such statements contributed to the development of a militant revivalist Hinduism which used the trope of this struggle for national regeneration against the Muslims to
gather such massive popular support across India that the ‘Sangh Parivar’
led by Bharatiya Janata Party, its political wing, even managed to form a coalition government
at the centre, based on the aftermaths of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. This itself
represented the climactic actualisation of the trope, since the mosque was accused of
being established on the ruins of an original Hindu temple, as well as, on the specific
place where Lord Ram, was supposed to have been born. The icon of Ram became all the
more emotionally appealing to the people because his name has always been used with
the mythical concept of a ‘Ramrajya’ – a utopia that has been repeatedly flaunted to
excite the struggling masses of the land.

This utopia has been created through a vast and evergrowing body of discourse
which has largely been bolstered by a series of historical narratives focusing on specific
periods or epochs which have been set up as ideals towards which all Indians must strive.
What such grand narratives of golden ages generally ignore is the inherent limitations of
most of these ages and how they contribute to various subalternizing discourses in the
present, based on determinants like caste, gender or religion. The representation of the
Gupta age has often followed this same trajectory as evident from the texts of a number
of eminent historians like R.C. Majumdar (1946, 1954) R.S. Tripathi (1960), Radha
Kumood Mookerjee (1969), K.P. Jayaswal (1933), R.N. Dandekar (1941) and others.
R.S. Tripathi even claims:

During this epoch Brahminism gradually came into ascendancy. This was to a large extent due to
the patronage of the Gupta Kings who were staunch Brahminists with special predilections for the
worship of Vishnu. But the wonderful elasticity and assimilative power of Brahmanism were not
less important factors in its ultimate triumph. It won over the masses by giving common beliefs,
practices and aboriginal superstitions the stamp of its recognition…and above all, it cut the ground
– so to say – from beneath the feet of its great rival, Buddhism, by including the Buddha among
the ten Avatars and absorbing some of his noble teachings. Thus with all these features, the
aspect of Brahmanism changed into what is now called Hinduism. (Tripathi 268-69)

This triumphal march of Hinduism, especially at the cost of other religions
which are held to be rivals, is thus depicted as one of the factors responsible for the

27 The term is used to refer to Hindu socio-political organization like the Bharatiya Janata Party, the
Bajrang Dal or the Vishwa Hindu Parishad which work under the leadership of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak
Sangh or RSS.
supposed glory of the golden age. And the same idea is even more forcefully echoed by R.C. Majumdar in *The Classical Age* (1954), where he states:

Finally, this was the age made memorable to three million Hindus by the fact that it witnessed the evolution of that form of Brahmanical religion which they follow today. It saw the final development of two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the phenomenal growth of the two religious cults, Vaishnavim and Shaivims at the cost of heterodox religious creeds like Buddhism and Jainism. The vast Puranic literature which originated, or at least took shape during this period, completed the break form the Vedic age and set up on a solid foundation, what is now commonly known as Hinduism, the culmination of a religious movement which had behind it the rich heritage of the diverse people of India. (Majumdar xlvii)

The golden age of ‘Indian’ history thus finds its final justification in being memorable to ‘three million Hindus’ who are eventually transformed into ‘the diverse peoples of India’. Such narrative manoeuvring inevitably helped to consolidate the notion of India as a ‘Hindurashta’, of India as a land of Hindus. No wonder Romila Thapar remarked that “An examination of modern communalism shows quite clearly that it seeks intellectual justification from the historical past” (Thapar, Mukhia and Chanda 1). This is further bolstered by the persistent eulogisation of Samudragupta as a Hindu deliverer. For example, R.C. Majumdar wrote, in *A New History of The Indian People* (1946):

The emperor Samudragupta, such as we know him, even from the scanty material at our disposal, was a visible embodiment of the physical and intellectual vigour of the coming age which was largely his creation. As we study his coins we seem to visualise a king of powerful build, whose physical vigour, matched by his intellectual and cultural attainments heralded a new era in which Aryavarta regained new political consciousness and material prosperity after five centuries of political disintegration and foreign domination and reached the high water-mark of moral, intellectual, cultural and material prosperity which marked it as the Golden Age of India to which untold generations of the future were to look for guidance and inspiration. (Majumdar 158)

The implication is obvious: a post-independence India should also look for inspiration in the Gupta Age, with perhaps someone like Samudragupta at the helm. In fact, other historians like R.K. Mookerjee would actually go on to hail him as a ‘digvijayi’ and ‘dharmanvijayi’ superman (Mookerjee 39). Such statements uncannily correspond to the Nietzschean quest for a superman, culminating in the rise of the Third Reich, which was also accepted by RSS leaders like M.S. Golwalkar for his envisioned Hindu revival:
“Every time our race has been down-trodden, Beings of a super-human order, veritable divinities, have been born in our land and revitalized our Nation.” (qtd. in Graham 47)

However, Marxist reassessment, through the writings of Romila Thapar, D.N. Jha and others, have repeatedly stressed how the supposed cultural glory of the Gupta age was actually limited to a miniscule upper-caste male elite whose cultural prosperity served as a veneer to conceal the abject subjugation faced by women, members of lower castes and people outside the Brahmanical fold. D.N. Jha therefore remarks, “True, the upper classes were happy and prosperous and lived in comfort and ease, as can be judged from their art and literature, but this could hardly have been true of the lower orders” (Jha 173).

These lower orders referred to both peasants and lower castes. The peasantry suffered specifically because of the development of feudalism during the Gupta Age. Grants of land were made to both military chiefs and different types of administrators, as well as temples and priests. At times even whole villages, including peasants and artisans were handed over to others who were then empowered with administrative and judicial powers and the responsibility of collecting taxes to be paid to royal authorities. Furthermore, the landlords even had the right to allot the land to tenants on the basis of certain conditions in order to get it cultivated, which further eroded the peasants’ right to their land by transforming them into tenants-at-will. These problems were also accompanied by growing taxation and various kinds of unpaid labour which cumulatively worsened the condition of the peasants who no longer enjoyed that direct relationship with the state which they had during the Maurya regime (Jha 155-56).

Along with the feudal set-up, exploitation also persisted through the hardening of the varnasrama-dharma and the resultant caste-discriminations. The theoretical force behind the caste-distinctions obviously lay in the various smritis and dharma-shastras which laid down the rules of conduct and social organisation. The Manu-Smriti, written during this time, for example, asserted that the Shudras were born from Brahma’s feet and therefore deserved to be the lowest caste in society who could only gain salvation through service to the Brahmins. This gross Brahmanical bias also reflected itself in the constitution of the laws. Such laws argued that if a Shudra hurt or insulted a twice-born,
his tongue or the limb in question would be cut off. The lawbooks also argued that a Brahman should be tested by a balance, a Kshatriya by fire, a Vaishya by water and a Shudra by poison. Similarly the Shudra son of a man of higher caste was only supposed to get the smallest share of the ancestral property and according to Brihaspati the son of a twice-born and a Shudra woman was not entitled to get any share of that property. At the same time, as if to emphasise the hypocrisy of the social hierarchies, Patanjali mentions how the dasi (maid servant) and the Vrishali (Shudra woman) were meant for the pleasure of the upper classes. Such practices and institutions must have caused widespread discontent among the Shudras and other lower castes, which is suggested by the numerous safeguards against Shudra hostility by the lawgivers to ensure the continuation of Brahmanical patriarchal orders (Jha 161).

These caste discriminations functioned alongside an alarming degeneration in the status of women which is evident from the prevalence of ‘Sati’ during this period, pre-puberty marriages and the prohibition of women’s education which even the conservative historians document28 (Majumdar, New History 351; Mookerjee 148). At the same time there was also the prominent presence of courtesans and a rise in temple prostitution which is even attested to by Kalidasa. Such examples testify to the growing commodification of women and the texts of the dharma-shastras themselves contribute to such objectification. D.N. Jha remarks: “The social philosophy demanding increasing subjection of woman to man was a natural development in a patriarchal class-divided society based on notions of private property” (Jha 159). These women, Shudras and peasants were the silenced subalterns of a past age whose voices, in the words of Amitav Ghosh, vanished into “the crater of a volcano of silence” (Ghosh, Shadow Lines 230).

**Utpal Dutt’s Rediscovery of History**

It is this unearthing of subaltern voices from the past which enables Dutt to persistently critique regressive fundamentalist historiography in India whose dominance was designed to offer ideological justification for a re-enactment of earlier modes of

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28 Interestingly, Mookerjee’s cryptic comment “Sati was known” is included in the chapter called “Material and Moral Progress”. One wonders what sort of a progress was achieved through such rituals.
silencing and erasure. Even though Dutt had not seen the communal conflagration unleashed in the name of Rama, while composing *Hunting the Sun* (hereafter *HS*), he was already well aware of the destructive power of such forces on account of his experience of Partition and surrounding events as well as subsequent communal clashes such as those of 1964 during which, Minerva theatre hall, then run by Dutt’s Little Theatre Group, was raided by hooligans for, what Dutt calls, in the book *On Theatre*, “the crime of rescuing Muslim victims of mob violence” (81). Such violence, so far as Dutt was concerned, was another strategy employed by the ruling bourgeoisie to continue their hegemonic authority by drugging the masses with such religious postulations as would encourage them to endure their hardship without any attempt of resistance. He cites the famous line from Gita – “You have no right except to work. The fruit of it does not concern you” (*On Theatre* 41; translation Dutt’s) – as a typical example of the way in which religious texts have sought to ideologically negate the possibility of resistance. This is just one of the many examples given by Dutt of the way in which religious texts of ancient India have sought to consolidate class dominance which was also congruent with discriminations against lower castes such as the Shudras. Among all the different examples he cites, one particular stipulation which is most shocking, refers to a ritual called the Purushmedh Yagna, in which, according to *Bajasneyi Samhita*, “a chandal, an aboriginal must be sacrificed.” (*On Theatre* 41). He therefore comments:

> But if we take ancient India as an example and make even casual investigations into the much vaunted philosophy of the Hindus and the Buddhists, we cannot help but notice the conscious efforts of the ruling classes to marshal religion for their own ends. Religious beliefs are a mask for class exploitation. (*On Theatre* 40)

And he also knew that a deliberate erasure of these details actually sought to create an image of ancient India based on Hindu glory which could ideologically foster communal passions. In one of his scathingly ironic articles in *Now*, written under the pseudonym Iago, Dutt, through a conversation with Candide, supposedly during a History Congress bitterly expresses his revulsion against such fundamentalist mythmaking:

> We stumbled upon a lean, hungry sort of a professor in the next room who talked shrilly of the Qutub Minar being built by the Hindus. He annihilated the distance of time with the irrefutable...
argument that the Muslims could not have built it because they were not mentally mature enough to do so. At this the house applauded.

‗I want to pee‘, said Candide, and we left. (On Theatre 101).

Through plays like *Hunting the Sun* and *Kiratparva* he extended this “ideological struggle against ossified religious traditions of India” (On Theatre 48) by offering a radical and Marxist reading of what he perceived to be the concealed reality of one such ‘golden’ period of ancient India by foregrounding those lower-caste or Dalit characters who continue to be victimised in various ways in post-independence India by Brahmanical upper-classes which constitute a dominant section of India’s variegated ruling elite that also continues to nurture blatant hatred against the Muslims. Such critiques are necessary for an examination of subalternity because subalternity is as much based on material realities as it is on ideological dominance. It is in recognition of this truth that Gramsci said “Subaltern groups are always subject to the ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only ‘permanent’ victory breaks their subordination and that too not immediately (Gramsci, Selections 55).”

The entire oeuvre of Dutt revolves around his sustained attempt to foreground subalternized voices in order to both combat the ideology of the ruling classes as well as to trigger in the minds of his audience a revolutionary consciousness capable of piercing through the discourses that are spawned to ensure their subjugation. While Dutt did not have access to all required historical information and associated Marxist interpretations while composing the play in 1971, with habitual incisiveness he managed to offer a representation of the Gupta Age and Samudragupta which radically discarded all the mythification surrounding the age and its kings and instead foregrounded, through subalternized characters, all those processes of exploitation which prevailed during the age for the purposes of his own revolutionary theatre. In an article for the *Ospal* magazine of Cuba, Dutt wrote:

29 The comments are part of one of the number of articles written under diverse pseudonyms in the newspaper *Now*, in which the author deliberately adopts the persona of the naïve narrator in order to safely convey his satiric criticism. The same method was also used in the article “O Blood! Blood! Blood!”, 121-125.
The cultural offensive unleashed by such a ruling class must necessarily be equally rank and gross in nature. Religious obscurantism and open and shameless opposition to the sciences have been their principal platform. But since 1962 especially, this medieval necromancy has developed new features, the principal being a brazen aggressiveness towards all our neighbours and the creation of a myth that India taught the world civilisation and peace. It is a Hindu myth, sustained by almost idiotic fictions written by their hired agents who attribute all good things of the world [including the Taj Mahal] to our Hindu ancestors (Saha 122).

If history entails “an ongoing reassessment of the past that facilitates a perception of the present and the future” (Gilbert and Tompkins 106) then such evaluations become integral for our vision of a better present and future and this is precisely what Dutt sought to do through his representation of Gupta Age in Hunting the Sun. What is all the more remarkable in this context is the fact that Dutt was the first Bengali playwrights to undertake such a de-mystification of ancient history without succumbing to the trap of blind glorification or fundamentalist imaginings as nineteenth century Bengali playwrights had done (A.K. Ghosh 94-95). Even later, when we come to the twentieth century and the historical plays of Shachindranath Sengupta, Manmatha Roy or Mahendranath Gupta we see either a theatrical enactment of History as perceived from overt or covert Hindu nationalist perspective or at best the dramatic recreation of received history revolving around elite icons without their being any attempt to foreground the silenced voice of the masses. Instead, Utpal Dutt completely went against the prevalent mode of Hindu valorisation and deconstructed ancient history on the basis of his own Marxist analytical perception to unearth entrenched ruptures which need to be excavated to recover lost voices. In the process the play, through its indictment of Samudragupta’s Brahmanical tyranny becomes a powerful caveat, much like his other play Kiratparva, both against the spectre of fundamentalism that would engulf the nation in the course of the next two decades and that caste-based discrimination which has always ravaged India.

The nature of this dehumanising tyranny becomes evident from the very beginning as we witness the selling of Shudra slaves including the public stripping of Madhukarika. Despite all the rhetoric of material and moral progress and unprecedented cultural ascent during the Gupta age, orthodox authors like R.C. Majumdar and others also acknowledge the existence of slavery during the age which even sanctioned the
hereditary servitude of slaves’ progenies who invariably belonged to the Shudra castes. R.C. Majumdar actually refers to the documentation of Narada, who mentions the prevalence of fifteen different kinds of slaves and the opening sequence, referring to the selling of Madhukarika and her son Veerak, amply illustrates the kind of degradation and exploitation to which they were subjected. Suryavarma’s remark, “Slave and beast are similar animals” (HS 3) further exposes this Brahmanical caste bias working against the Shudra slaves whose dehumanisation was endorsed by contemporary shastras and scriptures which virtually refused to treat Shudras as proper human beings. In fact, contemporary literature includes several textual evidences documenting various severe punishments against Shudras as well as instances of their subjugation, such as the Eklavya episode of the Mahabharata. Such textual traces exemplify the nature of the dominant Brahmanical discourse whose pervasiveness is also exemplified by the refusal of the bullock-cart driver to kill Vasantsena, in keeping with the logic of Karma, as he does not wish to repeat those crimes of his last birth which have been responsible for misery in this life.

Ironically, however, the same scriptures which disseminate these ideas are also full of innumerable laws and regulations that are designed to ensure the maximum subjugation of the Shudras without giving them the dignity of a human being. Apart from the examples already mentioned, Dutt himself had referred to a number of other rules and regulations which expose this dehumanisation:

The Aitereya Brahman records that a Shudra may be physically beaten whenever the upper castes choose. The Shudras right to learning was taken away; a Shudras caught reciting Vedas would be promptly put to death. In the Shranta Sutra the Shudra has only the right to wash the feet of the upper caste students. (On Theatre 41)

These scriptural strictures are vividly dramatised in the play where Gohil, a Shudra slave, who was sold along with Madhukarika and Veerak and bought by Samudragupta’s general Hayagreeva, is whipped and punched without the slightest provocation. The nature of such exploitation becomes all the more evident from Gohil’s response to questions regarding his ability to judge horses: “Horses?... (Laughs) That’s a good one.
Kshatriyas ride horses, sometimes over the Shudra’s body…Can you judge horses from under it? Then I can” (HS 3).

His response again underscores the sheer brutality which Shudras had to endure which is paralleled by the way in which Punjistha is killed by Karna in Kiratparba simply because he touched Karna while praying to him to spare a crazed Shudra woman who had lost all her five sons while fighting against Arjuna as part of the Kaurava army. The nature of this brutal persecution of the Shudras is further exemplified by the way in which Hayagreeva explains why he had to kill his chariot-driver:

I had summoned a woman called Sangarika yesterday – nice looking as they go, and my slave had the gumption to look at her. I never touch a flower that has already been sniffed at. The slave might have taken her the next morning. I would not have minded at all. But in the evening, before I had even touched her! No, it was too much. (HS 2)

Hayagreeva’s blatant disregard for the minimum human rights of the slaves, such as the chariot driver, is combined here with similarly obnoxious commodification of women simply as an item of sexual gratification. Such dramatic actions illustrate why D.N. Jha argued that “Women became an item of property and came to live under perpetual tutelage of men, notwithstanding their idealisation in art and literature.” (Jha 173) This becomes all the more evident when we take into account Patanjali’s reference about how the dasi (maid servant) and the vrishali (Shudras women) were meant for the pleasure of the upper classes. This again is highlighted through the fate of Madhukarika, a Shudra woman who is sold by Suryavarma to Basubandhu. When asked about the father of his son Veerak, who is sold along with his mother, Suryavarma replies: “She cannot tell because all the males in my house have slept with her one time or another.” (HS 3) This is again followed by the public stripping of Madhukarika, ostensibly for assessing her physical condition and that too in front of her son. Such actions further emphasise the prevalent dehumanising exploitation of the Shudras and Madhukarika as a gendered subaltern, as Spivak explains, is even more deeply in the shadow (‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ 84). Unlike Draupadi, who was saved by Krishna’s intervention when Dushyasan attempted to disrobe her, Madhukarika finds no aid or assistance from anybody and can only cry, following her helpless humiliation: “You are cannibals! You
have banished dharma from the land” (HS 3). Her cry not just voices the anguish, humiliation and anger of Shudra women belonging to that particular age but it reaches down to our age as well and sounds equally resoundingly against the practitioners of caste-violence in our times where we keep on hearing reports about Dalit women being paraded naked as a result of upper-caste menace\(^{30}\). Dutt realised, like many others, that despite the changing material basis, the ideological axis, on which such violence revolved still persists and this can be traced back to the shastras and the scriptures of that ancient past which continues to be venerated by many. This is precisely why the same issue has also been explored in *Kiratparva*, where Makar, a Shudra, who claims to be the illegitimate son of a Brahmin, sarcastically remarks:

> The spirit of a Brahmin is such that a Brahmin woman can never satisfy him. These Brahmans have forcefully taken the women of all other varnas in all other ages. Hence the numerous regulations regarding the nomenclature of mixed varnas. If a Brahmin takes a Khatriya woman, the child is called Murdhavishkta, if he takes a Vaishya woman, the child is called Ambashtha; in case of a Shudra woman, the child is called Parashab. The long history of Aryavarta was thus spent in keeping track of the illegitimate children. (Dutt *Kiratparva* 4)

Despite the rise of Mayavati\(^{31}\) and electoral caste-politics, the shape of the Indian ruling class is such that it manages to include within itself a number of contradictory elements including orthodox Brahmanical leaders who unflinchingly perform such inhumanities without the least perturbation. In accordance with Dutt’s dramatic strategy of jolting people out of their alienation, the spectacle of Madhukarika’s suffering or the subversive remarks of Makar are supposed to create a consciousness that would not only alert the viewers against the continuation of such malpractices in the present but would also force them to question that ideological framework, traced back to India's ancient history, which has been responsible for forming that mentality which renders possible the execution of such atrocities.

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\(^{31}\) A Dalit leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, catering to various backward castes and communities and a former Chief Minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh.
However, Dutt was never in favour of dramatising passive victimisation as such. Considering his theatre to be a weapon to combat the idea of the ruling classes he always sought to explode their cherished myths in order to liberate the spectators’ consciousness from those notions which allow the hegemonic authority of the ruling classes to persist:

Marxism demands that we look at every phenomenon historically. Thus we need to look at the Indian workman against a long tradition of the deprivation of his rights. The religion preached for centuries makes him believe that he is born to suffer; anything else will somehow be a sin...Thus when the other theatre, the theatre of idea, tries to now speak to the Indian workmen, it faces not just an exploited class but a concept of life, it faces 3000 years of resignation and surrender. *(On Theatre 41)*

It is this concept of life which is challenged by Indrani, a Shudra woman who became a Buddhist ‘parivrajika’, and her ideological resistance against Brahmanical orthodoxy operates in the text as a supreme example of subaltern assertion against dominant orthodoxy, in the same way that the unnamed Shabari’s outbursts or the curses of the Shudra widow Baruni operate in *Kiratparva*. Her role as a Buddhist is significant as according to Romila Thapar

*The only category of women who had a large measure of freedom were those who deliberately chose to opt out of what were regarded by law-books as the ‘normal’ activities of a woman, and became either Buddhist nuns or joined the theatrical profession or became courtesans and prostitutes* (Thapar 152).

Furthermore, it may be argued that, Dutt also focuses here on the historical role of Buddhism which emerged as a critique of orthodox Brahmanical religion, especially its pervasive caste-discriminations. This particular fact was extremely important for the development of Dalit empowerment movements in India since Ambedkar, one of its chief architects had described the rise of Buddhism as the revolutionary phase of Indian history which opposed the Vedic Varna-divided society before succumbing to the “counter-revolutionary” period of Brahmanical resurgence marked by the *Manusmriti*, chiefly during the Gupta age. Ambedkar went on to assert:

*The triumphant Brahmanism began an onslaught on both the Shudras and the women in pursuit of the old idea, namely servility, and Brahmanism did succeed in making the Shudras and the women the servile classes: Shudras, the serfs to the three upper castes and the women the serfs to their*
husbands. Of the black deeds committed by Brahmanism after its triumph against Buddhism this one is the blackest. There is no parallel in history for so foul deeds of degradation committed by a class of usurpers in the name of class domination. (Omvedt 50)

It is to protest against the theological framework that sanctified such degradation that Ambedkar eventually converted to Buddhism along with thousands of followers. The concerted opposition against Brahmanical orthodoxy mounted by Indrani and Kalhan becomes significant not only in terms of historical analysis but also in terms of growing Dalit movements in Post-independence India.

This opposition initially manifests itself through Indrani’s attempt to rescue Gohil from slavery. A learned woman, Indrani, not only confounds Suryavarma by using the very shastras he swears by and also displays a rare courage by the way in which she undauntedly speaks truth to power, in defiance of Hayagreeva’s repeated threats. As a disciple of Kalhan, the Buddhist scientist, Indrani also possesses a logical and rational mind which is devoted to scientific truths and holds in contempt all those superstitions and illogicalities that are often associated with conventional, institutional religions. Dutt considered such beliefs to be a hurdle on the path of workers attaining a liberated consciousness necessary to resist oppressions and therefore made Kalhan and Indrani, much like the later pair of Rishi Pulkas and Shabari in Kiratparva, models of subaltern resistance, endowed with an emancipated consciousness, however anachronistic that may be. Indrani therefore, not only quotes from Naradsmriti to substantiate her arguments with a scriptural basis, but also rubbishes Hayagreeva’s claims about being born of a tree:

You want to turn lies into truth with your sword. Where are your senses, man? If you don’t use your perception, cognition and knowledge, how are you different from a beast? Ask your commonsense, if you have any: Can a human child be born in a tree-hole? The answer will be No. Impossible…Why either you are a foundling, or you are born in the womb of a slave or a Shudra woman and your father must have invented this tale to cover a scandal. (HS 4)

Her undaunted rationalism not only stops here but she even calls Hayagreeva a cowardly womaniser as she is never afraid to speak the truth, despite repeated threats of physical torture. Even though Hayagreeva wishes to make her his captive to fulfil his lust and looks upon her as “an exciting variation on a worn out theme” (HS 5), Indrani remains
unflinching and steadfastly proclaims the moral authority which is pitted against the brute oppressive force of the entire regime, embodied, in this context, by Hayagreeva himself.

However, Hayagreeva is only one of the many pillars of state challenged by Indrani and Kalhan’s scientific arguments and materialist philosophy. Just as scientists like Galileo and others had been persecuted by the Church for advocating scientific truths that challenged the Church’s authority, Indrani and Kalhan’s scientific pronouncements operate as a challenge to the authority of Brahmanical orthodoxy, represented by Rajguru Virupaksha who denounces Indrani for preaching that the earth is round and even orders her arrest for preaching what he calls “heretical, atheistic avidya” (HS 5). What further enrages Virupaksha is that Indrani not only is prepared to logically refute all the claims of orthodox Brahminism and is also learned enough to prove and substantiate her own remarks. But her erudition itself operates as a rebellious transgression since it goes against the Brahmanical doctrine of barring women and Shudras from learning the Vedas and the shastras. B.G. Gokhale in his discussion of the Gupta Age remarked that

There was also stratification of learning in the priestly schools where there was a tendency to brand every attempt at divergent interpretation of the sacred lore as heresy. Conformism thus became the highest virtue and freedom of thought came to be smothered by orthodoxy. The educational privileges granted to women in the Vedic times gradually disappeared and with the Vaisyas and the Shudras, they had to put up with the illiteracy imposed upon them by priestly injunctions. (Gokhale 162-63)

Dutt’s dramatisation of Virupaksha’s accusations against Indrani vividly represents this historical context in which Budhist and Jain monasteries alone offered education without caste-discriminations, as exemplified by Indrani herself. Gokhale went on to assert:

The net result was while the intellectual reached great heights the masses remained in ignorance. It was only in the Buddhist and Jain monasteries, where the rule of caste had no validity, that an individual, provided he was so inclined and had the necessary talent in him, was admitted as a member of the order, to the Budhist monastic system of education, regardless of his birth and status. (Gokhale 163)

Indrani, as a product of such a system of education could transcend the barriers imposed upon subalterns like her by Brahmanical orthodoxy and both as a woman and as a Shudra, her logical refutation of Virupaksha and others’ allegations, operates as a telling
instance of subaltern assertion that remains unaffected by constant threats of torture and imprisonment. Such threats were by no means idle, as illustrated either by Ekalavya’s amputated thumb or Shambuk’s death or the death and imprisonment of Pulkas and Shabari in Dutt’s own Kiratparva. This genealogy of violence is brought to the surface when Samudragupta himself later refers to the story of Shambuka to convince Indrani of her criminality. In the Krittibashi Ramayana, the following lines refer to the logic behind Shambuka’s eventual death at the hands of Ramachandra:

Okale onodhikare Shudra top kare
Sei rajye okale dwijer putro more
Kolikale Shudra ar potiheena naree
Toposhya korile srishti nashibare pari…
Na more tomar pape dwijer kumar
Toposhya korichhe kotha Shudra durachar (Krittibash 497-98)

[In troubled times Shudras pray and meditate despite not having the rights to do so and it is these actions that lead to death of Brahmin children in states where such actions occur. In the Kaliyug Shudras and unwed women can bring catastrophe by praying and meditating…the Brahmin child has not died because of Rama’s own sins but because somewhere in his kingdom a heinous Shudra is praying and meditating.]

Like Shambuk, Indrani too would eventually die and the initial threats operate only as a precursor of such a Brahmanical termination.

Such punitive measures which are carried out in accordance with royal edict again underline the tyrannical nature of Samudragupta’s reign which is further illustrated through the branding of Madhukarika and Veerak for being slaves of the royal household, as if they were mere cattle. These actions are repeatedly scorned and mocked by Dardura, the Shudra court jester who, much like a Shakespearean fool, shoots his arrows of wit under the garb of folly to expose to us the bitter history of exploitation and butchery which lay behind the facade of royal splendour. Pitted against the eulogies of poet-laureates and courtiers, Dardura’s soliloquies, asides and quips, which resemble the statements of Makar in Kiratparva, are part of a testimony that subversively undercuts all the praise and reverence for monarchs which mark our history books:
Samudra means the sea. I don’t think you have lived up to that name at all. Pond or cesspool would be more fitting names. Lord, here comes the Empress Urmila. One does not ordinarily come across such a shameless slut. Shamelessness is the prerogative of the rich. We slaves do not understand it…Every stone in this accursed house is plastered with sin. (HS 6)

This initial soliloquy is only the first salvo in a cannonade of subversive quibbles which singe not only the king and the queen but also others like Basubandhu and Virupaksha. Not only does he ask Virupaksha “What are you doing here with Chinese silk and gold bangles on a well-fed body? Is this your priestly vow?” (HS 8), but also mocks Basubandhu’s Machiavellian contrivances by addressing him as ‘Labyrinth’ and adding

And by the time he works his way down to the end of the syllogism. He will be ready to make a fool of god himself, not to speak of poor Hayagreeva. I shall not be surprised if then the Gupta dynasty is replaced by the Labyrinth dynasty and this man here becomes Emperor Labyrinth the First. (HS 8)

Just as Dutt himself used at times the pseudonym of Touchstone to unleash his mordant indictment of the ruling bourgeoisie, his Shakespearean fool Dardura operates in the play as an irrepressible source of carnivalesque laughter which parodies the pretensions of the ruling elite who are forced to use the whip from time to time to silence the laughter of this “bitter fool” (Shakespeare 41). And even though Dardura admits that he is so frequently flogged that his back “looks like a landscape with hills, mountains, valleys and riverbeds” (HS 6), his sarcasm never stops and like Shakespeare’s own fools, in accordance with the typical features of carnivalesque speech, Dardura too is always ready with bawdy jokes and innuendoes, as exemplified by the following remark to Virupaksha: “This dirty old man cannot get over the fact that he lost the girl. Listen Rishi, I don’t think you would have been able to cope with the girl sexually. Now you’re just being jealous. (HS 9)” Such remarks seem all the more valid owing to the growing instances of numerous fraud sadhus and saints who cater to a wealthy band of devotees, live in luxury and pomp and use their religiosity simply as a garb for personal gratification. What is important to note is these modern malpractices can be traced back to earlier ancient customs as a result of which Brahmins became huge landowners or instituted such practices as temple prostitution. Dutt’s dramaturgy, much like Walter Benjamin’s backward-looking angel of progress, employs a dual gaze that not only offers
a re-examination of the past from the subalterns’ perspective but also enables an objective assessment of the present that is able to look beneath the ideological smokescreen which thwarts the attainment of a liberated consciousness that refuses to accept exploitation as destiny.

In fact as far as Dutt was concerned all such notions of destiny, rebirth etc were mere elite concoctions which prohibited people from recognising the true nature of the production relations and then striving to change them. In *Kiratparva*, this attitude becomes explicit through the curses of an aggrieved Baruni who shouts:

You Brahmins! You have written shastras to make war religion; you are writing poems, history and puranas to beautify barbarity; all regulations are in favour of the two upper castes. Along with the Kshatriyas, you too will be destroyed…Go to hell, all of you! You will be tormented in those hells where are confined all the patricidal and matricidal persons. This is the curse of Shudra Baruni! (Dutt, *Kiratparva* 22; translation mine)

However, Dutt knew that just as the ruling classes consisted of different groups and sections with divergent attitudes, workers too are never uniform in their thoughts and ideas. Dutt wrote:

Within the working class too one can assume a multiplicity of ideas and struggles for ascendency. Among the Indian workers also a bloc will advance rapidly and another will be frightened of ghosts. The workmen in one part of the country will conquer religious dictation and in another, prostrate themselves before clay images of gods. (*On Theatre* 45)

It is this multiplicity that is represented by Dutt through various characters like Dardura, Kalhan, Indrani, Gohil and others. In fact Dardura’s subversive laughter is drastically contrasted by the solemn, rational arguments put forward by Kalhan and Indrani which challenge the basis of Brahmanical orthodoxy even more substantially. Just as Indrani had exposed the hypocrisy of the elites by repeatedly quoting the Vedas and the shastras, Kalhan too speaks with utmost erudition and without falling prey to the verbal snares of Virupaksha and Basubandhu, contradicts their claims and lists a series of proofs to substantiate his arguments regarding the earth being round, the force of gravity and the identification of cosmic entities as ‘matter’ and not gods. Though it may be argued that Kalhan, who was originally a Brahmin as well as a man of unparalleled erudition, cannot
really be a subaltern, he too finds himself in a subalternized space owing to the subversive nature of the scientific truths he preaches and the dauntlessness with which he too, like Indrani, speaks truth to power. Furthermore, he, with his ancient telescopes, much like Brecht’s Galileo, even proves his theories to Samudragupta, Virupaksha and others. Unfortunately such undeniable proofs, instead of securing Kalhan’s position, make it even more vulnerable as they invoke the wrath of the state which is always prepared to use coercion against those whose voices may corrode its hegemonic authority. And it is to sustain this hegemonic authority that Basubandhu states: “We need lies. Some lies are necessary. For the millions on whose labour the fabric of this empire has been built, we need some irrefutable and unchallengeable lies” (*HS* 10). In other words, Basubandhu declares the need for intensifying that false consciousness which prohibits one from realising the actual production relations which is necessary to reconstruct the social order. Dutt, a Marxist to the core, therefore remarked that “To fight the ideology of the ruling classes, the world’s theatre and literature must steep itself in the knowledge of exactly what makes the working man the willing tools of his exploiters” (*On Theatre* 52). Through Kalhan and Indrani’s scientific assertions that religious orthodoxy which constitutes a pillar of the ideology of the ruling classes is subverted and it is in response to such subaltern speech that Samudragupta has to admit:

_I shall know that a lean and hungry man has made a bonfire of every book we swear by. I shall know that you [Virupaksha and Basubandhu] are brazen liars, that you have peddled superstitions for thousands of years. I shall know that there is no heaven, no god, no immortal soul – neti, nihil – that we live and die in a chaos of matter. (HS 11)_

It is this realisation that makes Samusragupta all the more determined to act against both Indrani and Kalhan as he realises that if others start realising the same thing then the whole edifice of his imperial regime would be threatened by slave insurgencies as they would neither believe in his divinity nor accept submission as their duty in life. He therefore concocts a typically Machiavellian plan to eliminate both Indrani and Kalhan and much like the superstitions being peddled for thousands of years, his plan involves the use of accusations that are as false as they are degrading. This becomes evident when he orders Indrani to malign her teacher Kalhan in open trial by identifying Kalhan as “a hypocrite, charlatan and seducer” (*HS* 13) who had used Indrani to fulfil his
“shameless lust and debauchery”. Knowing fully well that Kalhan cannot be defeated in astronomical arguments which would only end up exposing the rulers’ own lies, the monarch resorts to fabricated accusations of debauchery which is rather ironic in view of the lustful promiscuity that is perpetrated by characters like Hayagreeva and Urmila. The sheer repulsiveness of such a scheme obviously becomes manifest to Indrani who not only refuses to comply with royal edict but, as always, expresses her vehement revulsion against it: “I spit on this state, its forged religion and its king” (HS 13). Such revulsion expresses Dutt’s own reactions against the ideological conspiracy that ruling classes keep hatching to either vilify the creator of emancipatory ideals or to submerge them in silence. In “Theatre and Ideology” he wrote:

But ancient Indian philosophy had its atheist side too – it denies the possibility of God and is grounded in materialism. Such was the Charvaka philosophy, the dialectics of Jaimini and Buddhist atheist thought. But Hindu religion, law, mythology and epic soon went after them with slander and abuse; in the Indian mind Charvaka transformed into a cannibal (rakshas). So effective and vast was the propaganda that the Indian villager considers himself polluted if he so much as thinks the name of Charvak. In the Mahabharata, Charvaka has been irrelevantly dragged in as a friend of wicked king Duryodhana, suggesting that all the evil schemes have been suggested by this demonic fiend. (On Theatre 44)

Kalhan’s vilification occurs according to the same strategy and Dutt’s plays have repeatedly exposed how such strategies have persisted across time and space in various different contexts. In Barricade he focussed on the way in which the Nazis persecuted the Communists after falsely accusing them of various crimes, the Nazis themselves had committed, such as setting fire to the Rheichstag and then tied it up with similar political situations in his state of West Bengal. In Ferari Fouj, it was the British who indulged in such scheming as they represented Ashok, the captured revolutionary, as a traitor in order to make him a reviled figure for the both the masses and his former comrades. Samudragupta performs a similar role and launches a dual strategy of using Indrani to malign Kalhan and then arresting him and destroying his books and inventions through Hayagreeva. These strategies and ideological masks employed by the dominant classes need to be exposed for what they are since, ‘subaltern mentality’, as Goutam Bhadra explains, is constituted by both “submissiveness and defiance” (Bhadra 63), and it is only by examining the grounds for submissiveness can one progress towards defiance.
Both these aspects of subaltern mentality are represented through Gohil’s reactions following the knowledge of Indrani’s captivity and torture, before Hayagreeva’s raid at Kalhan’s ashram. The raid itself is preceded by the attempted ridicule of Kalhan and his science by a series of burlesque performances from Dardura, Aksha, Mahasweta and others. Despite the fact that the performers themselves belong to the same subaltern classes they readily engage in such performances against somebody who is ideologically assaulting those very shackles that keep them chained, as they have no other options but to follow the royal decree. Dardura’s own involvement is indicative of this limited agency as despite all his earlier subversive remarks he must consciously serve that same order he has been railing against. The fact is that all ruling classes, even though they try to dominate by consent, are never wary of using coercion to serve their own interests. The use of such force becomes exemplified by Hayagreeva’s raid which leads to the burning of Kalhan’s treatises on science, philosophy and other branches of knowledge as well as the destruction of his invented instruments, like the telescope. The bestial barbarity of such an act becomes evident from a helpless Kalhan’s agonised plea to Hayagreeva:

> Commander, I plead with you in the name of future generations, don’t burn these books. They contain the knowledge, the discoveries, the realisations of men. Commander, don’t behave like a beast, don’t destroy the treasury of ideas accumulated through centuries, don’t cast your countrymen into darkness. (HS 16)

Of course, Hayagreeva pays no heed to these pleas and in exact imitation of the Nazis, burns and destroys all the books and instruments at will. An anguished Kalhan remarks:

> These ruins, these charred manuscripts, these splinters of glass, these are the witnesses. These witnesses of the barbarity perpetrated by a fiendishly ignorant Hindu empire will send a call into the future asking them to remove the veil of darkness and awaken an era of light and the eclipse of superstitions. It will be a world where knowledge will not feel ashamed to show its face, where truth will not be tied to a wooden wheel and tortured to death. (HS 16)

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32 It is interesting to note that during the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) regime (1999-2004), led by the BJP, subjects like astrology and vastushastra were introduced as academic disciplines and historical treatises regarding the freedom movement, written by Marxist historians were prevented from publication. The penetrating insights of Dutt thus continue to prove their relevance.
Echoing Tagore’s dream of a heaven where the mind is without fear, Kalhan reaches out to our times and warns us through his speech about the impending perils which would be unleashed if the ideologues of Hindutva and Hinduras manage to wield power and Dutt’s representation also underscores the typically fascist nature of such revivalist movements through the visualisation of the book burnings which marked one of the worst episodes of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. Dutt himself perhaps was aware of similar tragedies in his own Kolkata where following the communal clashes of 1964 a number of printing presses owned by Muslims were set ablaze, leading to the destructions of thousands of books including Gita, Mahabharat, school-books and even the books of Rabindranath Tagore. Bengali literary stalwart Narayan Gangopadhyay, in his column “Sunandor Journal”, serially published in Desh magazine from 1963 to 1970, had lamentfully registered his own response to the events through an imaginary dialogue between Sunando and his litterateur friend, in the column of 25th January 1964, in the following terms:

Those who had appeared to utilise the emotional outrage of the common people, do they really love Bengalis? Are they religious? Sunando, who are these people who had sought to instigate emotionally overwhelmed individuals to establish a reign of loot and plunder and who have again vanished into the darkness of the night for fear of curfew and military rifle? Whose interests are they serving? Whose? (Gangyopadhyay 17; translation mine)

Such incidents had perhaps made Dutt aware of the kind of savagery which may be unleashed in the future as well. Quite naturally therefore, his historicist consciousness found the link between the Nazis and their Indian counterparts and dramatised it through plays such as these.

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33 The same sensibility is also manifested in Kiratparva where Krishna offers Pulkas, during the battle of Kurukshetra, a vision of Aryan dominance by the Nazis.
34 The clashes in Kolkata erupted following days of communal violence in East Pakistan’s Khulna district where Hindu minorities were killed and wounded, their houses ransacked and burnt, supposedly in retaliation of the loss of Mu-i-Mubarak or Prophet Mohammad’s sacred hair from the Hajratbal shrine in Srinagar. As reports of that violence continued to appear in Kolkata dailies and survivors started heading to West Bengal, the situation took a turn for the worse and sparked communal clashes which even necessitated the deployment of the army and imposition of curfew in several areas. A front-page report in Ananda Bazar Patrika, on 12th Jan, 1964 states “During the afternoon the army marched frequently in several areas of central and east Kolkata, fired shots and helped to shift to safety frightened members of both communities. At the time of the writing of this report, the number of stabbed, shot or otherwise wounded individuals is at least 140. Most of them are currently hospitalised. According to official estimates, the number of casualties, due to the recent violence is around 60 and the victims belong to both communities.”
However, as all the rest of Dutt’s plays prove, he was never content with the mere representation of exploitation and oppression. Instead his plays keep counterpointing elite oppression with instances of subaltern struggle, however great the odds. And all such struggles are not just dramatised for the sake of historical accuracy but to evoke a rebellious consciousness among the oppressed of the present so that they too, like their historical predecessors in the plays, may valiantly resist elite machinations. It is important to recall in this context what Terry Eagleton wrote about the analysis of Walter Benjamin:

The significant past, Walter Benjamin remarked is that frail image which flashes up to us at a moment of extreme danger; and Benjamin’s practice of revolutionary nostalgia was to summon into the present the shades of the unjustly quelled of history so that they might lend us something of their power (“Saint Oscar” 373).

This is precisely what happens in this play as well where an outraged Kalhan instructs Gohil to prepare for a rebellion against Samudragupta’s Gupta regime: “You gain nothing by killing one Samudragupta, or his son will become emperor…in Ayodhya alone they have kept a thousand slaves. Let those slaves shatter their chains, stand up and bring down state erected on sin. This is the only way” (HS 15). His speech obviously astounds Gohil who believed the king to be god – a belief handed down through generations – and even wonders if the aggrieved Kalhan has lost his sanity: “Sanyasi, are you mad?…The king is god…That’s what I have known from my childhood days…My father told me…My grandfather had told my father…The king is god” (HS 15). Dipesh Chakrabarty too defines subalternity in terms of “the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of domination and hierarchy” (“Invitation” 376) and the dialogues between Kalhan and Gohil clearly highlight this composite culture. Therefore despite being galled by the tortures inflicted on Indrani, Gohil cannot bring himself to adopt the role of rebel against the Emperor. Kalhan is obviously rather agitated by such submissiveness and therefore tries to make Gohila ware of the concept of popular sovereignty which was mentioned not only in the Vedas but even in the Ramayana where even King Ram was made to act in accordance with popular will, for the purposes of ‘lokanirankan’ (satisfying the people). In his rage he even calls Gohil a “cowardly emasculated slave” (HS 15) owing to his hesitation to rebel. Such incitements, however, are enough for Gohil to join the revolt.
against Samudragaupta initiated by other slaves, also belonging to the lower castes. It is this rebellion that marks the climax of subaltern resistance in the play which also dramatises the urgent need for resistance against all such modes of oppression, theological or otherwise, which Dutt insisted through most of his plays.

Of course it must be admitted that history does not provide us with any record of such an uprising. In that sense the rebellion is entirely a figment of Dutt’s imagination, without any corroborating historical proof. This is again rather usual for Dutt as in many of his other plays, most notably in Kallol, he very deliberately deviated from historical truth to highlight those latent possibilities and potentialities which he felt would be able to inspire the people and lift them out of their slumber. As he mentions in the director’s report to Mahavidroha,

The temper is the most important element in a historical play- the plot is secondary. If the plot becomes too important the audience is bound to think that it is simply an interpolation as such artificiality seems impossible in history. There must definitely be a plot in historical plays, but that has to be scattered across different episodes. What would have to be emphasised is historical fact and the class-dynamics of history – historical fact and imagined history would merge. (Satya Bandyopadhyay 60; translation mine)

This is exactly what happens in case of Hunting the Sun as well. However, it must be acknowledged that there is enough available information regarding the Gupta Age which highlighted the validity of such possibilities. For example Fa-Hien, in his otherwise eulogising account mentions: “Criminals are simply fined – lightly or heavily, according to the circumstances (of each case). Even in case of repeated attempts at wicked rebellion they (i.e. those who rebel) have their right hands cut off” (Gokhale 82). The very possibility of recurrent rebellions indicates the seething tension among the people which alone could have prompted the failed rebellions. Ram Sharan Sharma, in his Shudras in Ancient India, also remarks that

The description of Kaliyuga, as available from accusations and prophecies of Brahmins must not be dismissed as mere fragments of imagination. These descriptions stress the plight of Brahmins following the activities of Greeks, Shakas and the Kushanas. It might be that the simmering discontent of the Shudras boiled into an uprising owing to these invasions. Quite naturally, they stood up against those who had subjected them to various discriminations. (Sharma 213)
Knowing that drama is as much about fact as it is about “what is possible as being probable or necessary”, (Aristotle 43) Dutt utilised this very probability to script a slave rebellion against the kingdom led by Gohil and other slaves from their centre in Sharvalika Palli. In the process the heterotopia\(^{35}\) of Ayodhya, the capital of Samudragupta and also epicentre of Hindu fundamentalism in the future, is itself represented as a site of oppression, barbarity and consequent rebellion which ends up exposing not only the ruptures in Hindu society, as they have existed for thousands of years, but also the brutalities which have been repeatedly overlooked in the attempts to imagine an ideal Hindu India.

In fact this deconstruction is carried out by Dutt through the figure of Samudragupta himself who is represented as a Machiavellian sadist who knows full well the heinous violence that is being committed and at the same time finds delight through poetry and music while planning future atrocities. Just as Hitler, moved to tears by Wagner’s music, could also unflinchingly plan the holocaust of the Jews, Samudragupta too can perversely write poetry while ordering executions and witnessing tortures. Therefore, even as he orders his general to rout the rebellion and arrest Kalhan, he can also comment:

> It’s only natural. They want freedom from oppression – and Gohil leads them towards freedom. If there had been a god anywhere in this cosmos he would have been ashamed at this humiliation of humanity…A great man like Kalhan would naturally rise against your inhuman oppression. (HS 17)

\(^{35}\) This idea of Ayodhya as a heterotopia is taken from Satish Deshpande’s “Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-century India” in Subaltern Studies XI, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (New Delhi: Permanent Black and Ravi Dayal, 2000), 167-211. According to Deshpande “heterotopias are very special kinds of places because (and here I depart from Foucault’s formulation) they mediate, in a mirror-like fashion, between utopias and ideological subjects. In other words heterotopias enable – incite, compel, invite – people to see themselves reflected in some utopia.” (171) He then goes on to assert “Hardly an unreal place, Ayodhya has nevertheless acted as a mirror opening into the imagined space – the utopia – of Ramrajya, Hindutva, Hindu pride and so on. Seen from another angle, Ayodhya (or more accurately the Ram Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid) as a heterotopian site has offered thousands of people (particularly young Hindu males from urban and semi-urban lower-middle-class backgrounds) a social identity as inhabitants of the utopia that it projects, namely the identity of the kar sevak.” My contention is that the representation of Ayodhya, though written before the actual Ram Janmabhoomi movement offers a powerful critique of this constructed heterotopia, as seen from our perspective today.
Yet, it is Samudragupta himself who sadistically enjoys the brutal persecution of Indrani which presents him with the inspiration needed for his poetry. Such a representation indeed shatters the notion of cultural glory associated with Samudragupta who was even hailed as the ‘Kabiraj’, for his supposed poetic skills. By extension, such a Foucauldian spectacle of punishment, while emphasising the sovereign sway of royal power over the subject’s own body, also manages to unearth the sordid realities of a regime, which its royally patronized cultural façade sought to conceal with a virtually blinding show of cultural glory. It is difficult to imagine a more telling illustration of Walter Benjamin’s axiom: “there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time, a document of barbarianism.” It is to emphasize this contradiction that Dardura mockingly remarks: “A great man! Therefore have him arrested. My tears flow at the misery of the slaves. Therefore have them arrested and set on a shula.” (HS 17)

This barbarianism finds its climactic representation in the final scenes of the play, culminating first in the death of Indrani and Hayagreeva and then in the literal and metaphorical silencing of Kalhan whose tongue is chopped off. This final act however is preceded by the execution of Indrani and the death of Hayagreeva who, no longer able to resist the passion of love for Indrani, voluntarily embraces death after learning from her that she too loves him, as much as he does. As a result both of them fall prey to the emperor’s mad elephant Jambuka who mangles their bodies as the emperor looks on and even prepares to compose an ode to Indrani. Indrani, however, dies as a martyr as till her death she remains resolutely devoted to her convictions and all the torture could not extract from her a single lie, even though it would have been much easier to forsake truth and spare herself the trauma. This is precisely what Galileo did in Brecht’s play. Kalhan and Indrani, however, true to Dutt’s belief in “revolutionary romanticism” remain completely undaunted and are rather represented as idealistic characters, undeterred by any moral limitations, which goes against Dutt’s own notions of characterisation. In Towards A Revolutionary Theatre he wrote:

We have watched plays by communist groups where the Communist Hero appears as a super-human Captain Marvel, without a blemish on his character, advocating war or peace according to the party-line, laughing in the face of danger and generally being as big a bore as a Guru...
when the well-meaning groups produce such absolute fictitious Good Men, they arrive at the opposite of what they intended to say (Towards 18).

Although Kalhan is not a communist and is located in the play precisely as a Guru, he too becomes one of those fictitious ‘Good Men’ Dutt generally reviled as dramatis personae. The answer perhaps lies in the use of the form. _Hunting the Sun_ was derived from the yatra-play called _Samudrashasan_. Towards the end of the 1960s and afterwards Dutt engaged intensely with Yatra as a form, in order to reach out to more and more people and was so enthralled by its powers that he went on to write “It’s distinctive feature is its mimetic element, its robust and unashamed use of every emotion, every passion, every violence to subdue the audience to its will. This is theatre as magic.” (Towards 145) He considered this form to be capable of giving rise to proletarian myths for political theatre and went on to assert:

> The stories move in convulsions of violence, deaths and murders in every act, transcending thus the pettiness of life as it is, and reaching out to a new mythology, often erratically and without perspective, but still I believe, creating the ground from which myths will eventually arise…robust, proletarian audience, dictating their shape, size and nature, truly folk elements and a folk-lore about folk-heroes, a mythical world where even Mao Tsetung must conform to the requirements of a traditional Yatra-hero. He must be the Good King who lives like an ascetic in the cave and rules justly and the evil-king Chiang- Kai-Shek must fall in violent epilepsy and rage and rant against the mountain-rat, much as Aurangzeb has traditionally ranted in the Yatra against Shivaji. (Towards 146)

Kalhan and Indrani are a part of the same pattern and therefore appear to be larger than life.

However, Dutt does not end the play with any simplistic “Good triumphs over Evil” formula. Instead, after Indrani’s death we also witness the trial of Kalhan in which a drugged Kalhan, having lost its tongue, only utters meaningless groans to Samudragupta’s questions which are then interpreted by the king who triumphantly declares to the people:

> The master Kalhan has expressed his intention of observing Retreat – Maunavrat – for twelve years to expiate his guilt. He shall not speak and I am therefore constrained to read his confession
in his presence. First of all, he says in this letter – the earth is flat, not round, the Puranas are true, Science is false...the moon is a god, the Rigveda is true, Science is false.” (HS 23)

And finally, in his last political masterstroke he even grants Kalhan his freedom and appoints him Rajkulajyotish who would live in the royal palace as the emperor’s friend and counsellor. As a helpless Kalhan struggles in vain, the Machiavellian monarch replies with calm confidence:

“Maharshi, you can’t fight me. You try to say there is no god. Very well, we shall make you a god. You gesture wildly with your arms to say man needs reason, not faith. Very well, we shall fall at your feet and worship you and make you a monument of blind faith against reason...we shall make you, the mortal enemy of religion, a temple for the propagation of religion, just as we have turned Buddha, the enemy of Vishnu, into the tenth incarnation of Vishnu. (HS 23)

What emerges in the process is an intriguing representation of the way in which the dominant discourse appropriates and silences dissent to expand its base and further consolidates its authority. However, this is not the whole story. All hegemonic discourses are invariably contested by counter-hegemonic discourses which emerge out of the tensions generated by the forces inherent in the existing hierarchies. And even though some acts of subversion may be contained, appropriated or neutralised, there remain others which keep on haunting the structures of dominant discourses. This is precisely what happens through the duo of Madhukarika and Veerak, the slaves who had appeared in the first scene of the play. Not only does Madhukarika poison Mahasweta, the courtezan who had agreed to provide false testimony against Kalhan in the trial, but she also sends her son Veerak to Indrani for him to be blessed by her. Indrani gives him her ring and instructs him to go to the Buddhist monk Devangshaghosh, take the books he gives him and then flee to Acharya Prasenjit’s school in Mathura so that Kalhan’s ideas and knowledge can live through Veerak and succeeding generations to illuminate hundreds and thousands of other oppressed, exploited individuals who may use such knowledge to crush those mental shackles that prevent any attempted reconstruction of the social order. As Indrani says, “The ideas live on, from Kalhan to Veerak. I might have known. You cannot fight ideas with a flaming torch” (HS 20). This is why Madhukarika, as he comforts Kalhan, states in her concluding speech:
Come father…No, all is not lost. Your ideas live. Do not despair, do not think them invincible. Your science lives. My son Veerak has taken Indrani’s books away…Yes. Veerak has the books. The world will know the truth, if not today, then tomorrow, a century, a millennium later. And people will know, a courageous old man once lit a lamp to dispel the darkness of the mind. They will look up at the sky and discover deathless Kalhan and Indrani in the constellations, in the unravelled mysteries of the universe. (HS 23)

Kalhan, Indrani, Madhukarika, Veerak, Dardura and such other figures have indeed lived on through Dalit anti-Brahmanical leaders like Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Birsa Munda and Veer Narayan Sing, Mahavir, Kabir, and Guru Nanak and Basavanna who have inspired countless Dalit activists fighting against various kinds of caste-discrimination and violence unleashed by that Brahmanical Hinduism which is defined by these activists as an oppressive class/caste/patriarchal force as illustrated by the play itself. What makes this critique of Brahmanical Hinduism and its cultural glorification all the more significant is that through the characters of Kalhan, Indrani and others Dutt managed to voice the major concerns of anti Brahmanical Dalit activists in both colonial and post-colonial India. For example, just as Kalhan had proved the falsity of the scriptures and the way in which they justified caste oppression, Jyotiba Phule, one of the earliest Dalit activists in India could assert:

When all the Arya-bhat Brahmans throw away their bogus scriptures and begin to behave towards all human beings in the way of Truth, then there is no doubt that all women and men will bow down reverently before the creator of all and pray for the welfare of the Aryas. (qtd. in Omvedt 22)

In fact, like Kalhan, he was very much an advocate of science, reason and education as tools of empowerment. Gail Omvedt writes:

Phule’s argument that knowledge, education and science were weapons of advance for the exploited masses was in contrast to elitist theories that sought to link western sciences and eastern morals and argue that Indian could maintain their (Brahmanical) traditions while adopting science and technology from the west for material development. For Phule, rather, vidya or knowledge was in direct contrast with the brahmanic shastra and was a weapon for equality and human freedom as well as economic advance. (23)
However, as Ambedkar later realised, no such ideal would actually be achieved without the complete abolition of caste and he advised the Indian socialists that they will be compelled to take account of caste after the revolution if (they) do not take account of it before the revolution. This is only another way of saying that turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster. (qtd. in Omvedt 51)

Kalhan and Indrani’s science, as well as Gohil’s rebellion are emblematic of this proposed annihilation of caste which had begun to gather momentum even during the last decade of the colonial rule when Ayyappan came up with the slogan “No religion, no caste and no god for mankind,” while Periyar wrote:

There is no god
There is no god
There is no god at all.
He who invented god is a fool.
He who propagates god is a scoundrel.
He who worships god is a barbarian. (qtd. in Omvedt 56)

Such assertions indicate a growing, rebellious consciousness among the Dalits against Brahmanical caste-violence which persisted and intensified in post-independence India where casteist violence continued to ravage lives. A Dalit poet would therefore write:

I stand today at the very end
of the twentieth century.
All around me is in flame…
Taking in one hand the sun, in the other the moon,
I am conscious of my resolve,
The worth of the blood of Ekalavya’s broken finger. (qtd. in Omvedt 78)

This resolve actually refers to a concerted resistance against casteist violence:

Forgive me Ekalavya, I won’t be fooled now
By their sweet words.
My thumb
Will never be broken. (qtd. in Omvedt 98-99)

It is this consciousness which led to the formation of the Dalit Panthers in 1972, just a year after the production of Hunting the Sun, who declared in their manifesto:

We do not want a little place in the Brahman alley. We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons but a system. Change of heart, liberal education etc will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution. (qtd. in Omvedt 73)

The spirit of Gohil and Veerak and others, banished from the Brahmanical records, return with a vengeance through the Dalit Panthers with the promise of another revolution. The ability of political theatre to respond to evolving political situations can hardly be more apparent. Though the subaltern characters of Dutt’s plays had failed to hunt the sun, such plays not only expose the inherent barabarity of the Brahmanical system but also offer hope for an illuminated future – a hope shared by the Dalit balladeer Waman Kardak:

Chase away the army of darkness
Search the sky, the moon, the stars
The light is in you
The light is in you
Be tomorrow’s sun. (qtd. in Omvedt 103)

Dutt wrote: “A myth is an intensified, poetic expression of a whole era and therefore true of every era. Its characters are vast summaries of a trend, tendenz, a social need” (Towards 138). Hunting the Sun, with its astute analysis and modern resonance, may well be seen, in the context of anti-Brahmanical Dalit activism, to be such a myth. At the same time, the tortured, persecuted individuals of the play, may also, by extension, represent those minority communities who are repeatedly victimised by majoritarian Hindu fundamentalism. Dutt’s historical exploration thus remains stirringly relevant in the context of India’s multi-faceted processes of postcolonial subalternization which he persistently explored, incisively interrogated and resolutely opposed.
An Afterword

The burden of critical, theoretical evaluation is that one has to temper earnest admiration with an acknowledgement of inconsistencies and silences that invariably creep in. Despite such a remarkable exposure of Brahmanical barbarity and the championing of an Ambedkarite hero, in the form of Kalhan, why did Dutt make Kalhan refer to Rama as the ideal King, following public opinion, as opposed to the tyrannical Samudragupta? Even though Rama may have a different cultural resonance in Bengal than he has elsewhere, Dalit activists could scarcely be happy with such a representation as they consistently view Rama as a Brahmanical aggressor against non-Aryans or the non-Brahmins of South India, who have been perversely represented as demons and monkeys in The Ramayana which also explains why there are a number of versions of The Ramayana available in South India where Ravana is a tragic hero. Similarly Kalhan’s attempt to curse his oppressors by holding his sacred thread again seems rather incongruous as such an action would not only be incompatible with his Buddhist beliefs but would also go against his scientific and rational temperament according to which a thread should just be a thread. Such contradictory details compel us to investigate the limits of representation and its language which threatens to undermine, at times, the structures it has so industriously created. It would be helpful, however, to keep in mind Dutt’s own statements about the contradictions in Rabindranath Tagore and how we should approach them:

…a Marxist examines Rabindranath’s contribution in terms of his age. Neither did Lenin expect anything more from Tolstoy nor did Mao from Lu-Tsun. Rabindranath’s contradictions are natural because those who reflect an entire age in their literary works end up mirroring all the available tendencies of their era. The Shakespeare who boldly preaches the emancipation of women through such powerful characters as Desdemona, Portia, Jessica and even Hermia, also shows the wife as being happy at the husband’s feet in Taming of the Shrew. The same Gorky who upholds the revolutionary workers in his novel Mother also pours his compassion to beggars, thieves and tramps, who are merely the dangerous lumpen class from the perspective of social revolution, in the play Lower Depths and in countless other short stories (Satya Bandyopadhyay 40; translation mine)
Perhaps such contradictions are apparent in the oeuvre of all prolific writers and Utpal Dutt too may have succumbed to them in *Hunting the Sun*, which however, do not alter or tamper with the holistic appeal and significance of the play. At the same time, such references also testify perhaps to his approach towards religion and the kind of popular myths and legends associated with it. In his brilliant assessment of Shakespeare’s social consciousness, Dutt repeatedly emphasises the fact that even though religion was used in the interests of the ruling classes and that the Church as an institution was a principal source of exploitation and torture in the medieval society, Christianity, and especially the figure of Christ, was also recurrently invoked by exploited masses to rise up against various atrocities in different times and spaces across Europe. While on the one hand Henry V opportunistically uses religious rhetoric to sanctify personal ambition, someone like Cordelia becomes an idealised Christ-figure who dares to confront the avaricious megalomania of her sisters – Goneril and Regan. As Dutt states,

> Recurrent direct and indirect references to Christ only prove one fact: the saga of Christ’s life must have had a deep-seated influence on Shakespearean creativity as his mind was seemingly obsessed with the significance of Christ’ life and sacrifice. And that is quite natural. The rebellious social-consciousness of sixteenth century society had to express itself through various elements drawn from the life of Christ (Dutt, *Shakespeare* 98; translation mine).

Similarly it might be argued that irrespective of Dalit resistance against the glorification of Rama, elements of his mythical rule had been assimilated in popular discourses to such an extent that he was also seen as an example of the ideal king, embodying the principles of holistic welfare. Therefore, Dutt’s Kalhan uses the mythical figure of Rama to communicate to Gohil the idea of ideal rule precisely to oppose the kind of tyranny that had been unleashed by Samudragupta without emphasising any religious implication associated with such myths. In his analysis of Shakespeare, Dutt also shows that even though the political orthodoxy would constantly try to represent Christ exclusively as a prophet of non-violence, thus protecting themselves against armed resistance, many insurrections would burst forth precisely by utilising Christ’s injunctions against oppression from the Bible. He would therefore claim “Shakespeare’s Christ was the ascetic warrior, who was the terror of Pharisees on temple-steps of Jerusalem; who would

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36 Utpal Dutt’s analysis of Ramkrishna Paramhansa in *Girish Manas* follows a similar strategy.
claim ‘I haven’t come to distribute peace but I have come with a sword’” (Shakespeare 106). Likewise, Dutt’s Rama may be seen less as the warrior-prince of Brahminical Hindu fundamentalism and more as the just ruler devoted to the cause of public welfare. Myths are, after all, what we take them to be.

However, even if one remains unconvinced by these attempts to explain the apparent contradictions in Dutt’s text, such an assessment, though it is necessary for our caution, can never detract from Dutt’s text its remarkable, critical, political commitment, resonant with penetrating insights. Italo Calvino once wrote:

> Literature is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice, when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice. When it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude…literature is like an ear that hears things beyond the colour spectrum perceived by politics (Calvino 114).

Utpal Dutt’s plays are literature of this kind which keeps on excavating lost, silenced voices to ensure a better understanding of both present and future.

**Invincible Vietnam:**

A colonized people is not alone. In spite of all that colonialism can do, its frontiers remain open to new ideas and echoes from the world outside. It discovers that violence is in the atmosphere, that it here and there breaks out, and here and there sweeps away the colonial regime – that same violence which fulfills for the native a role that is not simply informatory but also operative. The great victory of the Vietnamese people in Dien Bien Phu is no longer, strictly speaking, a Vietnamese victory. – Frantz Fanon. (Fanon 55)

Dutt’s own dramaturgy as well as contemporary political discourse had a pronounced transnational dimension which manifested itself through a number of plays based on international topics, focusing on episodes of mass struggle from world history. *Invincible Vietnam*, which locates the subaltern in international framework, not only highlights this transnational dimension but also allegorically represents, through the resistance of the Vietnamese peasants, the dynamics of contemporary agrarian struggles in Bengal. The chapter will explore both the relevance of Vietnam in contemporary political discourse and how the fusion is dramatically represented in the text where Vietnam serves both as an allegorical embodiment and an aspirational ideal.
In fact, the Vietnamese victory in 1954 as well as its subsequent successful struggle against the murderous might of the American army, not only represented a heroic anti-colonial, nationalist triumph against imperial forces but also the power of a determined and organized peasantry against forces of far greater magnitude. It is this image of the peasant armed, fighting to save his/her own land from foreign or elite aggressors and working towards an ideal represented by the slogan of “land to the tillers”, which made the Vietnamese struggle emblematic of agrarian struggles aimed at the abolition of feudal structures throughout the world, including India and West Bengal in particular. As eminent theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay remarked:

As far as Calcutta is concerned, we have had a long association with the entire Vietnam experience, and it’s not merely a matter of the present Vietnam War. In 1946 when the French were occupying Indochina, there were student demonstrations in Calcutta in support of the Vietnamese struggle for independence. And students got killed in the streets for such a seemingly remote cause. So there has been a deep emotional connection with Vietnam. Writers and playwrights felt the need to speak out. So hundreds of poems, and some plays, have been written about Vietnam. (Gunawardana 245)

Utpal Dutt’s *Invincible Vietnam* (1967) was a product of this creative ferment which Bengal’s emotional identification with Vietnam and its struggles gave rise to. The play offers a portrayal of anti-American Vietnamese struggle which becomes linked with peasant movements in Bengal against an unholy nexus of feudal oppression by landlords and administrative exploitation and indifference. This political context also includes the armed peasant rebellion emanating in North Bengal, which would come to be known as the Naxalite movement and thus locates the issue of subaltern resistance within an international framework.

**The Significance of the Vietnam Saga**

One of the reasons why the fate of Vietnam acquired such unparalleled significance in international politics, especially the post-independence politics of West Bengal is because of the fact that the success of the nationalist movements against French, Japanese or American imperial invasions was complemented by an equally successful refashioning of the crumbling, collapsing socio-political structures of Vietnam.
through intensive public participation in the evolving political process which promised people not just political freedom but a redefined political order, responsive to and inclusive of popular demands and initiatives. Unlike countries like India, where independence did not bring about any simultaneous resolution of internal modes of exploitation, based on considerations of class, caste, gender etc, the communist-led national liberation struggles in Vietnam managed to illustrate to the people, how, within the holistic control of the Indochinese Communist Party, led by Ho-Chi Minh, it was justified to hope for a postcolonial utopia which would not only liberate the country from foreign invaders, but involve the people in a collective effort to shape their own destiny through active public participation in governance and policy making, without bothering about earlier indigenous hierarchies. It is this particular element which made the Vietnam War a truly revolutionary phenomenon and held out a promise to other colonies and newly independent countries of achieving that radiant alternative which almost all nationalist movements promise and frequently fail to deliver.

In other words, following the assessments of John T. McAlister (Jr.), it may be argued, that in Vietnam the exploitation of the revolutionary potential (the seething popular discontent against French or other occupying authorities), by the revolutionaries (the elite leadership which shapes and communicates the necessity for change as well as the fashioning of new order) was only possible because of their success in creating an alternative oppositional political structure, which may be termed a revolutionary structure (McAlister 11-12). Such a revolutionary structure became essential for the development of the Vietnamese society because of the radical alteration of the pre-colonial state of affairs, based on Confucian ethics and feudal structures. Alongside the creation of a French-educated urban elite there was also the emergence of an industrial labour force and a large landless peasantry with financial debt which was pitted against a class of indigenous landed gentry, in alliance with the colonial regime. Instead of relying exclusively on an elite political leadership which would include the masses within political frameworks without ever allowing them to act on their own, the communist leadership of Vietnam managed to create a political structure which ensured mobilization of people for the national cause on the basis of an extensive network of local organisations. Such organisations allowed the hitherto neglected peasant population of
the villages not only to enter the political structure but also move up the organisational ladder on the basis of successful contributions, irrespective of status, ethnicity or origin. This is precisely why the contributions of Truong Chinh, a technical school student and Vo Nguyen Giap, a Doctor of Laws, paved the way for someone like Chu Van Tan, an uneducated mountaineer, belonging to the marginalised Tho community, to become the first Minister of Defense in Ho Chi Minh’s revolutionary government. Not only did the communists create a broad national front, the Viet Minh, in order to assimilate the various different sections of the Vietnamese society, without forcing on them the rigorous discipline required by a communist party, but also created village soviets and organisations of women, elders, youths, farmers or teachers to maximise popular involvement in the nationalist struggle. Furthermore, the Communists also insisted on the creation of self-defence units in each village and endeavoured to make the villagers as politically conscious as possible through propaganda sessions during which party-newspapers would be read aloud to people gathered at the village hall. Such a system of social mobility and extensive popular involvement was also complemented by a scrupulous attempt to distribute those fruits of modernity – education, organizational capabilities, familiarity with machines – which were earlier confined to a small urban elite. As J.T. McAlister, writing during the post-1954 phase of the Vietnam War, observed:

The Communists are not simply trying to eliminate their adversary by force. They are attempting to win the political commitment of the mass of the people (emphasis mine) in the countryside and thereby deny legitimacy to the Republic of Vietnam as a representative government of the people. To achieve this commitment the Communists are...forging them into a political community – one which commands loyalties because it rewards performance by upward mobility in a hierarchical political structure...From this mobilization of the potential power of the peasants and a sharing of authority with them, changes have been occurring in Vietnamese politics which are the very substance of revolution. (McAlister 10)

It is this revolutionary process which was further extended during the 20 years following the victory in Dien Bien Phu when the communist-led North Vietnam would be up against the might of American military, functioning in the name of the puppet government created in South Vietnam after the Geneva treaty of 1954. The Ngoh Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam, sustained by American financial and military aid and re-
christened as the Republic of Viet Nam, had managed to create a totalitarian government based on family relations which was also extremely corrupt. While this led to the emergence of a luxurious urban elite and widened the urban-rural gulf, the problem was further aggravated by the land policies of the new regime which negated peasant aspirations by reversing the gains ushered in by the Viet Minh. Not only were the local soviets abolished, but the Viet Minh reforms were turned null and void, leading to loss of land, reversal of rental and usury reforms and the fear of the restoration of the prerevolution landlord-tenant system through the imposition of a hated bureaucracy. As Gabriel Kolko remarks,

For the substantial portion of the peasantry that had benefited from the Viet Minh’s reforms, Diem’s policies represented a counterrevolution, and its fear of losing valuable gains and returning to the traditional peasant-landlord structure created a crisis in the rural areas (Kolko 193).

The problems were further intensified by the brutal repression which the regime had also unleashed as a result of which, according to conservative estimates, there were around 150000 political prisoners in jails by the end of 1961, around 12000 were killed during 1955-57 and even being a ‘communist’ or working with one was made a capital offence (Kolko 89-90). It is these circumstances which cumulatively contributed to escalating violence in the South which was basically an attempt by dispossessed and deprived peasants to rise against an oppressive government, without a public base, which was trying to thwart an irresistible revolutionary process with American financial and military aid.

It is important to consider this “spontaneous prerevolutionary environment for armed struggle” (Kolko 99) in order to understand the intensity of the conflict and why United States, despite its unquestionable military superiority, eventually lost in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the United States, despite being aware of the corruption and repression unleashed by the Diem government, continued to support it and continued to define the necessary resistance against it as what the Truman doctrine called “attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures” (D. Anderson 256). In the process it was only working against the aspirations of the majority who even burst into spontaneous violent reactions without the support of the topmost leadership of the Communist Party,
which continued to advocate peaceful political development even as its members were being jailed and killed. It was popular reaction, along with persistent brutalities by the Diem regime which forced the Party to reconsider its position, leading eventually to the resolution (January, 1959) to support armed struggle as well as the formation of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (henceforth NLF) which sought to

… unite all sections of the people, all social classes, nationalities, political parties, organizations, religious communities and patriotic personalities, without distinction of their political tendencies, in order to struggle for the overthrow of the rule of the US imperialists and their stooges- the Ngô Dinh Diem clique – and for the realization of independence, democracy and neutrality pending the peaceful reunification of the fatherland. (D. Anderson 261)

As in case of the creation of Viet Minh, the Communist Party was once again trying to achieve the broadest possible union of forces against reactionary and imperial forces and its decisions were being shaped by the aspirations and desires of Southern peasants who were suffering most under the Diem regime. In the process Vietnam was witnessing once again a wave of subaltern assertion which not only sought to confront the rulers and their aides but even forced the Party elite in Hanoi to rethink its policies.

It is this formidable popular support which was further strengthened and canalized through the NLF which sustained the Vietnamese struggle against the horrific assaults that were launched by the Americans. Not only did the United States drop more than twice as much bombing tonnage in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as part of its offensive but it also deployed almost 485,000 soldiers to combat the communist forces (D. Anderson, 92, 58, 78). such assault, which included the use of napalm and Agent Orange, wreaked utmost devastation on a poor country almost exclusively dependent on land and the infamous attrition strategy, with its insistence on body count as indicators of success, also led to the indiscriminate killing of civilians and innocents, accompanied by several instances of abominable atrocities such as the My Lai massacre on March 16, 1968 in which 504 unrresisting women, children and old men were killed (D. Anderson 98). All this data could well be reduced to a conflict in which impoverished peasants, demanding an egalitarian agrarian condition, were pitted against a miniscule reactionary elite backed by the mammoth occupying force of the largest and wealthiest capitalist country in the world which ruthlessly massacred even innocent civilians. And it is such a reduction
which made the Vietnam War such a talismanic phenomenon around the world, including India and Bengal.

Obviously, what made such a reduction all the more possible was the land policy of the communist-led NLF, which resolutely carried out redistribution of land in areas in that it was gradually beginning to dominate. The post-1954 reconstruction of North Vietnam, christened as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (henceforth DRV) also contributed to the fusion of the Vietnamese struggle with a utopian hope for the future. While on the one hand the cooperative movement managed to create unity and consensus within the formerly divided northern peasantry, on the other hand there was considerable increase in agricultural production which also ensured greater per capita food consumption and peasant income. This again was accompanied by immense developments in the area of transport, agricultural industries as well as heavy industries, through the utilization of foreign aid and assistance coming from both China and the U.S.S.R. These developments were obviously known to Southern Vietnamese population who too wanted to share the successes of their Northern compatriots. What made this promise of a postcolonial utopia all the more promising was the personal behaviour of the cadres themselves who were repeatedly urged to be exemplary characters, based on revolutionary morality. The charismatic leader Ho Chi Minh himself offered the most radiant example of simple, down-to-earth lifestyle and inspired countless others to emulate his example. Therefore, while on the one hand the Party insisted on eliminating social vices like gambling or usury, on the other hand members were urged to maintain clean living, shunning vanity or luxury. The most important aspect of this revolutionary morality was obviously the mentality to accept the Party’s instructions and travel to wherever the Party instructed, away from one’s family, and to be ready to make the ultimate sacrifice of one’s life. It is these qualities, along with undeniable tactical, military and organizational successes, which made the Vietnamese earn such a glorious victory, through unprecedented resilience and heroism and at the same time offered to people around the world a galvanizing inspiration for their own struggle. Vietnam became, in the process, both a signifier of consolidated subaltern assertion as well as decisive anti-imperialist triumph for the realization of a postcolonial utopia bereft of the processes of postcolonial subalternization.
Bengal and Vietnam

This is perhaps why post-independence India and Bengal has always been fascinated by the entire Vietnam experience and there has existed a remarkable emotional bond with this largely agrarian country and its heroic and resolute individuals – a bond that has been manifested through both political movements and cultural phenomena. Recently, in 2007, there was a publication of an anthology of poems, stories, essays and articles on Vietnam during the 1960s and 70s by Students Federation of India, entitled ‘Vietnam Tomar Jonyo’ (Vietnam, For You), at the beginning of which the editors remarked:

Vietnam is a fountain of heroic inspiration for anti-imperial struggles for independence and national liberation. It is a country whose name moves our sense and sensibilities. It animates our everyday struggles…During the period of its unforgettable struggle, which spanned almost a hundred and fifty years, the youths of Kolkata and India have always expressed their solidarity for the Vietnamese. The streets of Kolkata have time and again been smeared with blood because of such movements of solidarity. (Chhatra Sangram Editorial Board 3; translation mine)

In spite of the rhetorical exaggerations, the statements are remarkably true for the 60s and 70s when the whole of Bengal reverberated with slogans like “Tomar Nam Amar Nam, Vietnam, Vietnam” (Your name, my name Vietnam Vietnam) and people actually sacrificed their lives and incurred administrative wrath while participating in movements expressing solidarity with the Vietnamese and condemning imperial aggression.

Such movements came to the forefront from as early as 1945. Various trade unions and political parties decided to observe Indo-China Day on 25th October, 1945 in opposition to the British decision to send Indian soldiers to assist Dutch and French colonialists in the region. Ho Chi Minh himself had come and stayed in Calcutta for a couple of days during his journey to Paris and spent some time in office of the erstwhile undivided Communist Party of India and the office of the leftist newspaper ‘Swadhinota’ (Freedom) which obviously intensified popular interest in Vietnam and support for its revolutionary liberation movement. It is in the context of such evolving support for Vietnam’s liberation from colonial bondage that All India Student Federation decided to observe Vietnam Day on 21st January, 1947, in association with other students’
organizations. The decision was backed by overwhelming popular involvement by students which incurred the wrath of the colonial administration which deployed armed police forces against hundreds of student demonstrators and as the police opened fire in front of the Senate Hall of the University of Calcutta, two students – Sukhendu Bikash Nath and Dheer Ranjan Sen – were killed and several others injured. While Sukhendu Nath, a student of Scottish Church College, was killed instantly, Dheer Ranjan Sen, studying in the Calcutta Medical College, died in a hospital three days later. More than a hundred students were also injured during the course of the day and the events sparked off protests in other cities like Dhaka and Patna. In order to protest against such atrocities strikes were called even in Moymansingha, now in Bangladesh, where another student, Amalendu Ghosh had died as a result of police firing. On 5th February, there was also a trade union strike in support of these movements (Chattopadhyay 182-84).

Such struggles and sacrifices did not go unnoticed. The leaders of the Vietnam Students’ Association in France and Abroad greeted the leaders of All India Students’ Federation and even Ho Chi Minh, when he later visited Kolkata in February 1958, as part of a state visit to India, met some of those who had been wounded in 1947, including Ranamitra Sen who was then a sub-editor of Swadhinota (Chattopadhyay 185) Ho Chi Minh was also welcomed by the Calcutta Corporation and in the written felicitation gifted by the Mayor, Vivekananda Mukhopadhyay had written:

O tireless soldier of people’s liberation, the fire of your bold and courageous leadership has moulded the vital foundations of a new society – a foundation from which man will find the destination of an existence beyond exploitation and misery. We are fellow journeymen in that enterprise (Chattopadhyay 186).

It is this sense of a shared journey that made the people of Bengal and its political scene so keenly responsive to the unfolding crisis in Vietnam owing to the involvement of the American army which arrived in greater numbers to support the puppet governments in South Vietnam and wreak even greater destruction through its superior military might. Consequently, protests, especially by students, raged through the sixties throughout Bengal and attracted the attention of more and more people through ever-widening public outrage against American imperialism. For example, on 8th April, 1965, two student...
organizations, Students’ Federation and Democratic Students’ Union observed another Vietnam Day, demanding “US Imperialism Quit Vietnam”, culminating in a huge procession which went to the American Commercial Consulate to submit a memorandum. During that same year, students also observed a Vietnam Week, from 7th July to 14th July, with a students’ strike being organized on 14th July. Similar instances of students’ agitation against US imperialism also occurred in such different places as Krishnanagar, Goalto, Bardhaman and elsewhere. One of the most striking of these incidents was the massive students’ demonstration that took place on 20th November, 1968 around the then Dum Dum Airport on the occasion of Robert McNamara’s visit to Kolkata as the President of the World Bank. Notorious in Bengal as one of the architects of the brutalities in Vietnam, McNamara was identified as a heinous murderer and the resulting demonstration led to violent clashes between protesters and the police across the city. There was even a strike on 21st November to oppose police atrocities and the arrest of hundreds of students as well as various demonstrations and processions (Chhatra Sangra Editorial Board 37-40).

All of this was basically the result of an evolving political discourse in which the leftist political parties’ campaign for land-distribution and egalitarian agricultural reforms was conflated with the struggle of the Vietnamese peasants. A juxtaposition of two different reports, published in Ganashakti, the organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) may help to clarify this conjunction. The first is a report about the heroism and success of the Vietnamese peasantry, significantly titled, “Plough on the One Hand and Rifle on the Other”:

The peasants too are marching ahead in the liberated regions of South Vietnam. While on the one hand they are battling natural calamities to produce massive crops, on the other hand they are trying to protect their crops and villages with unwavering vigilance with rifles slung on their shoulder during ploughing or harvesting. (“Ak Hate Langol ar Onyo Hate Rifle”: 2; translation mine).

This glorification of the Vietnamese peasant can be juxtaposed with the rhetoric of the following report regarding a youth conference in Murshidabad:
Recently, on the last day of a fortnight of campaigning regarding scientific socialism, a huge gathering was organized in the Grant Law ground by the Murshidabad district committee of the Democratic Youth Federation of India, demanding the recognition of the revolutionary government in South Vietnam...processions of the youths and fishermen of Lalgola marched in. They came in with red festoons and posters to take a vow. The vow to gather the crops in the house of the peasants – the vow to baptize themselves in the courage of the Vietnamese youths (“Dokkhin Vietnemer Biplobi Sorkarer Swikritir Dabite Yuva Samabesh”: 1; translation mine)

Vietnam thus emerged in the political sphere of contemporary Bengal as a political ideal which could inspire the Bengali peasants’ own struggle for land reforms against the exploitation and violence of landlords, usurers and hoarders which was gaining momentum through the 1960s.

The same conflation of two different struggles also took place in the realm of literary and cultural representations which obviously emerged in the wake of the persistent political engagement with the issue. Hundreds of poems, stories and more than a couple of plays were written during the 60’s and the 70’s on Vietnam which highlight in various ways and in varying degrees the association of the two struggles. Krishna Dhar would hail Vietnam as the ‘shepherd of times’ (Dhar 10) and Ram Basu, in a similar vein, would write:

The warmth of rice  
Serenity of conscience  
Generosity of forests –  
Vietnam.  
We want your truth  
We want your sun  
We chant the incantation of purity:  
Vietnam. (R. Basu 19; translation mine)

It is in acknowledgement of this bond that Mohit Chattopadhyay would also write:

Blood from Vietnam,  
Spills onto Bengal,  
Ashes of Buddhist monks  
Float on Ganga’s tides.  
Sorrows jostle together
And cry from my heart
Hanoi! Hanoi! (Mohit Chattopadhyay 33)

It is this process of galvanizing the hearts and souls of the people with the inspirational fire of Vietnam which was continued by various leftist parties and student organizations even during the 70s as evident from the six day long sit-in demonstration in front of the American Information Centre from 22nd to 27th May, 1972 by students and youths. As I have tried to establish, such political actions themselves gave rise to a political discourse, which led to the production of various cultural representations on the subject, which in turn further consolidated the discourse and validated the continuing political actions. This entire process was necessary because the international incidents were seen as sources of inspiration for the ongoing peasant movement across Bengal against landlords which often led to violent clashes as the administration and the police would often collude with the oppressors against the peasants (Konar, 1994). Even a cursory survey of *Ganashakti* in the late 1960s, during the time of harvest, would provide a vivid picture of widespread exploitation as well as persistent organized resistance against such exploitation throughout the state, as evident from the following report:

A major unrest was created when in Bhakla, of Botun region, big landlords and their associates fired five rounds of bullets against poor peasants. Thousands of peasants surrounded the whole village. Owing to the intervention of the district leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), police arrived and arrested six landlords and confiscated two guns. Peace was restored thereafter. (“Krishokder Upor Gulichalona”: 1; translation mine)

Similarly, in the Chaitanyapur village of Burdwan, landlords fired on peasants trying to take possession of governmentally allotted land, killing two and injuring around seventy. However once the initial sock and grief was weathered, thousands of peasants gathered again to carry the struggle forward (Konar 53-54). Naturally, the leftist leaders who urged these peasants forward advocated a militant mode of resistance that could withstand the violence unleashed by the landlords. Harekrishna Konar, in one of his speeches said:

If the landlords can resort to guns why wouldn’t the peasants wield sticks?...In the villages of Bengal, lakhs of peasants have embarked on a remarkable enterprise and with them are the labourers of factories. Today we can claim, let there be storms, let there be assaults, we are prepared for all eventualities. (Konar 90)
Significantly, such organized resistance of the peasants was often inspired by the lessons of the Vietnam saga, popularized through cultural representations, as suggested by the following report:

In the Rarh area of Murshidabad the struggle to harvest paddy has begun. The gang of landlords is trying to gather everything in its own granaries. But the peasants, under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Krishak Samiti are gathering the harvest in their own granaries, foiling the conspiracy of the landlords. In such circumstances, in Khargram Cinema Hall, of Khargram thana, 252 delegates gathered for a democratic convention, called by the Krishak Samiti…In this gathering of more than three thousand people, after listening to the speeches of the leaders for two hours, the participants watched Gananatya Sangha’s play ‘Vietnam’. (“Dokkhin Vietnamer Biplobi Sorkarer Swikritir Dabite Yuva Samabesh”: 1; translation mine).

These reports thus make us aware of that strange alchemy through which the Vietnam saga could become fused with agrarian struggle in Bengal and act as a source of inspiration. It is because of such a connection that we would see the organization of exhibitions on the Vietnam War, the performance of a play on Vietnam during the Khardah-Titagarh labourers’ conference (“Khardah-Titagarh Labour Conference”: 3), felicitation of the NLF delegates by workers of Jaya factories (“Dokkhin Vietnamer Biplobi Sorkarer Sombordhona”: 1-2), and even the acceptance of a proposal to support Vietnamese struggle against U.S. imperialism at a regional conference of the All India Kisan Sabha in Habra (“Mahajoni Shoshon Protirodher Ahvan”: 1). All such examples cumulatively highlight that strange alchemy through which Vietnam had become an integral part of the contemporary political discourse and had animated almost all aspects of contemporary leftist political and cultural realms.

**Dramatising Vietnam as Allegory and Ideal**

Utpal Dutt was obviously aware of this alchemy and his own unmatched oeuvre was therefore marked by several plays on international subjects including not just those which deal with the communist movements in Russia, China, Cuba and elsewhere but also plays focusing on the French Revolution, Nazi Germany, Indonesia, Black Resistance in America, freedom struggle in Bangladesh etc. In an interview with Samik
Bandyopadhyay, Dutt stressed both the need and the validity of this transnational dimension and stated:

Communists are not sui generis. They inherit the legacy of all the revolutions and uprisings that have taken place in the past. Be it the French Revolution…the October Revolution or the Chinese Revolution – all of these form our legacy. The communist movement in India is the consequence of all this…all our attempts are designed to assimilate this legacy by citing international examples as only the communists know that even if a fighter, a freedom-fighter is killed in Nicaragua, then that too is our loss. Our duty is to bring these stories of struggle to our masses. (Samik Bandyopadhyay xii-xiii)

This is why he would later claim, in his *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*

I have also sought to bring, though my powers are woefully limited, the history of proletarian armed struggle of other countries into our theatre and Yatra, such as “Lessons of Liberty” (about the Paris Commune), “Invincible Vietnam”, two plays on Lenin, “Mao Tsetung”, “Stalin 1934”, Barricade (on the rise of Hitler) and a few others. The object has been precisely to show that the proletariat of all countries is fighting the same battle and that the communist, for that reason is the motive-force of world-revolution. He inherits a world-tradition and is, therefore, even when persecuted and imprisoned in my own country, infinitely stronger than the fear –crazed Indian ruling class. (*Towards 63*)

*Invincible Vietnam* (henceforth *IV*) was obviously a part of this larger enterprise and Dutt’s fusion of two different struggles becomes evident when we learn that the American soldiers are taking the help of a woman belonging to an elite landowning family to hunt down Vietcong soldiers, many of whom worked as farm hands in their estate. Just as there would be innumerable cases of collusion between landlords and policemen in rural Bengal against poor peasants, similarly Vietcong soldiers would be seen as being involved in a class war where the American military operates in favour of the indigenous reactionary forces which is obviously in keeping with the historical reality of contemporary Vietnam. It is because of this perceived parallelism that the American Lt. Gen Fitz-Coulton introduces his officers – Wheeler, Knight and Finney – to Madame Tran Thi Lan Huu, who “happens to be the only child of the richest man in South Vietnam…She’s the daughter of Neng, the dispossessed master of all the territory between Ben Suc and Ben Quat” (*IV* 6). It is this class identity that ensures her collaboration with the Americans as her father was dispossessed by the communists, who,
as has been previously mentioned, strengthened their rural base through the capturing and redistribution of huge portions of land that previously belonged to a miniscule elite. As has already been mentioned, the same strategy was also employed by the communists in Bengal where they gained more and more popularity in the rural areas precisely because of their persistent campaigning about redistribution of land by taking away excess land from the landlords. And in such campaigns not only did the communists use the administration when they gained power but also advocated vigilant actions by the peasantry on their own to protect their rights. A play like *Invincible Vietnam* not only offers an artistic representation of these political policies but also contributes to them by emphasizing that element of class-antagonism which was pivotal in ensuring united peasants’ action against landlords, usurers or colluding policemen and earning urban citizens’ support for their struggles.

This class-dynamics becomes evident from the following dialogues of the opening sequence:

General: Captain Kauffman, back in 1954, the reds killed Madame’s father right before her eyes on a charge of collaboration with the French. They used bayonets and tore little strips of…

Huu: (rising suddenly) I did not come here to talk about – to be reminded – will you please remember that I am not your servant? My service is entirely voluntary. I know the Ho Bo jungle well because I spent my childhood playing in it. It…it belonged to us.

Finney: Do you think we shall find the Castro battalion?

Huu: Yes.

Wheeler: Do you know Trac?

Huu: (after a pause) Yes, I do.

Wheeler: Who is he? What is he?

Huu: Trac was one of my father’s land-labourers. Believe I have a blood-debt to pay off, gentlemen, because Trac and Duyet killed my father. (*IV 6*)

Although Rustam Bharucha finds in such dialogues “a touch of melodrama” as Madam Huu “murmurs rather like one of those victimized patrician figures in a novel by Pearl Buck” (Bharucha 74), he completely misses the political relevance of such dramatic strategies by allowing his personal impressions to cloud his awareness of political circumstances. My argument is that it is this paradigm of an army of peasants and
landless agrarian labourers, up against the savage and atrocious force of the landlords, local elites and the foreign army that backs them, which made *Invincible Vietnam* and such other plays so popular among the people, both in cities and villages, as the spectators could identify with the Vietnamese and relate their crisis to the unfolding political scenario in Bengal. All those black or brown bodied actors, who essayed the role of the Vietnamese peasants, with only the typically Vietnamese triangular hat on their heads, must have invariably reminded the spectators of peasants in Bengal and it is this allegorical dimension which made these plays so vastly popular. The text here seems to move towards what Sirkku Aaltonen, in *Time-sharing on Stage: Drama Translation in Theatre and Society*, identifies as “transcultural theatre” which proposes “to go beyond particular cultures on behalf of a universality of human condition” (qtd.in Gupta 68). In this case it is precisely Dutt’s anti-imperialist, humanist concern for the subaltern that creates this politicized transcultural space. Thus, although Utpal Dutt had agreed with Samik Bandyopadhyay’s classification of the play as Documentary Theatre, and referred to the influence of Piscator, the play may be considered to be more than that in the sense, that following the logic of Fanon’s celebration of the victory of Dien Bien Phu and Bengal’s own emotional identification with the Vietnamese struggle, as already substantiated, a play on Vietnam could never be seen as just a theatrical documentation of facts regarding Vietnam alone. Just as the people in Bengal were prompt in realizing that the death of Joseph Tsauritz in “Barricade” was only an allegorical representation of the murder of Hemanta Basu37 and such other political assassinations (Saha 49-50), similarly, it is my contention that Vietnamese peasants in *Invincible Vietnam* and elsewhere were also embodiments of peasant concerns and struggles in Bengal. Such plays and performances were able to illustrate how “Solidarities built on a common history of suffering or battles against oppression, and fought at various levels and in multiple locations constitute a postcolonial hybridized and transnational ethic” (Nayar 210). The international subaltern, without losing his/her own specificity, also becomes the representation, of other national subalterns and presents to them both a reflection of their struggles and the ideals towards which they must strive.

37 An eminent contemporary political leader of Bengal.
The twin dimensions of such representations become evident from the discussion of the villagers and the way in which they both govern themselves and prepare for future battles against the US army and its monstrous might. Just as contemporary leftist newspapers and political proclamations would urge the peasantry to be ever-vigilant and embolden themselves for long and protracted struggles against the landlords, hoarders and other such “class-enemies”, the villagers of Vietnam, despite all their injury and loss and perennial danger repeatedly talk of duties and responsibilities in their collective struggle for both survival and self-assertion. It is a remarkable world where false sentiments and ordinary emotional concerns hardly have any room owing to the overwhelming national catastrophe in which the whole nation is plunged because of persistent American bombing with Napalm and Gas which leads to the destruction of schools, fields and millions of individuals. And the personal experiences of each of the peasants become a saga of sacrifice and loss along with virtually incredible resilience and fortitude. Therefore while someone like Tam, despite being unrecognizably charred by Napalm, refuses to waste any time in his personal medical treatment, so that he can rush to his post and contribute to the national resistance against American invasion by gunning down the bombers, his own wife, despite being seven months pregnant dutifully mans her post “at the observation post on Road 7” (IV 8) even though her husband lies in the hospital. Such examples offer powerful lessons of fortitude in crisis which is essential for any kind of successful subaltern assertion as such assertions always have to encounter the forceful wrath of the elite who are able to utilize the maximum might of state machinery for their purposes. And it is because such show of strength often manages to demoralize the resisting subalterns that it frequently operates as an effective strategy of containing dissidence. The peasants who would watch these plays were supposed to draw inspiration from these examples for success in their struggles through a kind of globalization of resistance from below.

All such discussion of struggle however, cannot efface the undeniable loss that was suffered either by the Vietnamese or their downtrodden Indian counterparts whose processions in demand for food or land, were only met with police reprisals or unchecked brutalities by landlords themselves. Instances of peasants being beaten or murdered by landlords was common enough in contemporary Bengal (Konar 17-61) and it is these
facts that fostered the growing resentment of the rural peasantry which was effectively utilized by the Bengali leftists for their political ascent. It is this combination of loss and related anger which crystallizes in the experience of the character Thuan and our response to him:

Thuan: Doctor, will you take a look at this child please? It’s behaving so... so funny –
Vinh: (with one look at the child) Nurse, Le Chi, operation table, quick!...
Thuan: Won’t he... won’t he live?
Vinh: I am sure you don’t need false hopes to cling to.
Thaun: (after a pause) No.
Vinh: He won’t live.
(The doctor goes in. Thuan slumps in a corner. Bui comes over and touches him.)
Thaun: His mother went before him, in the December bombardment. (IV 9)

Even though a critic like Rustam Bharucha finds in this play various examples of melodrama, sentimentalism and what Barthes terms “the Communist mode of writing” which makes “multiple use of the grossest signs of Literature” (Bharucha 78), such descriptions offer factual representations of the plight of many Vietnamese men and in the process Dutt succeeds in awakening in us a valid hatred of not just the Americans but their allies and indigenous counterparts as well. What such critics also overlook is that a Joycean sophistication, however theoretically fascinating it may be for critics, is unlikely to capture the imagination of Dutt’s illiterate or semi-literate subaltern spectators. Dutt justifies his deliberate rhetorical strategy by alluding to Marx’s analysis of the cretinism to which the worker is reduced and states:

The revolutionary theatre addresses these working masses and must adjust its pitch, tone and volume accordingly and to hell with so-called critics who find our plays naïve, melodramatic and loud. Try playing Tagore’s infinitely subtle verse–plays to workers reduced to cretinism and you will realize the truth of Marx’s analysis. (Towards 70)

Dutt writes not just about subalterns, but for them as well. Neither Mr. Bharucha nor Roland Barthes were paying attention to subaltern spectators during their theorizing and it is because Dutt refrained from such blunders that his plays received such widespread popularity and successfully communicated the suffering of the Vietnamese peasants to
their Indian counterparts by fusing the two experiences. Anal Gupta, Utpal Dutt’s friend, contemporary and fellow playwright, significantly observed:

*Krushobiddha Cuba* (Crucified Cuba), *Ajeya Vietnam* (Invincible Vietnam), *Jalianwalabagh* or *Leniner Daak* (The Call of Lenin) are not just documentary plays. They offer materialist explanations of the central conflict of an age. Conveying it in a comprehensible manner to the common people is an arduous enterprise…Utpal Dutt had mastered it. Otherwise there would not have been surges of boundless spectators across rural Bengal…. (UDNS: 3, 4; translation mine)

This fusion is also evident from the experience of Aunt Kim who has not only lost her son and daughter-in-law but is also on the brink of losing her granddaughter, who has been severely wounded by American bombing. She is a significant character within the scheme of things as she highlights that aspect of collective action which managed to transcend binaries of either gender or generation. Unlike many other authors whose attempts to imagine the nation have often been circumscribed by patriarchal barriers, Dutt has always insisted on imagining an inclusive nation which treats women as equal. That is why all of his plays repeatedly highlight the role of the gendered subaltern in resistance movements. This was also true for contemporary leftist politics in India, especially in the villages. In the rural areas division between home and the world had always been less stringent, mostly because of women’s involvement in harvesting and such other rural activities. Not only is she the voice of reason within the play, as Bharucha points out, but she is also an active revolutionary who successfully shoots down an American plane:

Duyet: Listen, Comrades, two enemy planes have been shot down…one by – (Kim desperately waves at him not to name her) by this seventy-five-year-old grandmother of Vietnam (He embraces her and lifts her off her feet. Another burst of cheering)...She was cycling home. She sights the plane low over the fields, gets off the cycle, shoots it down, back on the cycle, and off home. What do you think of that! (*IV* 12-13)

Duyet’s passionate embrace symbolically represents the inclusion of women within the imagined community through an acknowledgement of their revolutionary agency which is further emphasized later when Duyet represents Aunt Kim as an example to all of Vietnam’s revolutionaries for her dedication and discipline:

This lady touched a rifle for the first time in her life when she was seventy. Then she would go out into the fields at night, set up a little envelop with a burning candle behind it, and move back six
hundred paces. What do you think the target looks like from that distance – a wee speck of light on a vast black canvas. And so she practiced shooting. (IV 13)

Thus Aunt Kim, along with nurse Mao and teacher Bui and others represent to us the image of a struggling peasant community, beyond usual gendered hierarchies, and gives us an image of powerful self-assertion by the gendered subalterns who refuse to linger in the shadows and literally come out, all guns blazing, as suggested by the final image of Trac, disguised as Madame Lan Huu, arriving to surprisingly raid the Americans with a tommy gun slung across her chest. While Wheeler’s incredulity represents the usual chauvinistic inability to comprehend such remarkable female self-assertion, such incidents were not at all uncommon in Vietnam and represents how, unlike Spivak’s Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, many female subalterns are often able to make a room for themselves within national communities, during the course of their ascent to a non-subaltern space, even if such language flows from the barrel of a gun. What is important to note is exactly this merging of the individual and the collective, without jeopardizing the individual voice in any way. Rather all such voices voluntarily locate themselves within the peasant community which is indisputably a peasant community. And this peasant community is seen to be the ideal which other oppressed peasant communities are supposed to replicate. Therefore while Aunt Kim states “The people understand that Vietnam is fighting all of Asia’s war of freedom…They will also realize that Vietnam’s way is Asia’s way…And the day will come when all oppressed people will have to take up arms and fight a people’s war as we are doing now” (IV 36), Duyet will also clarify that “Comrades, guerillas are conceived in the womb of the peasantry like a stream from the mountains” (IV 17). In the process, the almost ideal peasant community of Vietnam’s HoBo village is sublimated into a romantic ideal which would inspire the Bengali peasantry who too would give birth to guerillas willing to wage a people’s war. It is not coincidental that within a year of Invincible Vietnam’s first production, the armed peasant insurrection in Naxalbari would begin and be hailed by Radio Peking as “Spring Thunder over India” (P. Basu 80). I obviously do not mean that such plays provoked the peasants into revolt, but it is undeniable that such plays contributed to the production of that revolutionary discourse which would shape such actions as the Naxalbari insurrection, which would again be dramatized by Dutt as Teer.
The intensity of the insurrection required the employment of military and paramilitary forces to capture or kill the armed rebels, many of whom were local peasants who had taken up the mode of guerilla warfare as part of an attempt to initiate a national peasant rebellion. Such force is always employed by the state to crush instances of subaltern resistance and Vietnam of course witnessed the fiercest employment of force the world has ever seen. This is not only exemplified by all the deaths that are reported in the course of the play, including the eventual death of Pupu, Aunt Kim’s granddaughter, but also through the beating up of dumb Le Chi or the torturing of Dr. Vinh with barbed wire and especially the use of flame throwers which blinds his eyes. However, all such atrocities pale into insignificance in comparison with the rape and murder of Nurse Mao, shown on stage, and the forcible stripping of other Vietnamese women in the name of searching. Not only are such incidents characteristic of that masculine chauvinism which is integrally associated with colonial conquest, but also the precarious position of the gendered subaltern, who, along with other institutional modes of oppression and exploitation is also subjected to the bestial consequences of male lust and the attendant use of murderous force.

As Rustam Bharucha points out, this particular motif has been repeatedly employed in Bengali theatre since the days of Neel- Darpan where Rogue Sahib rapes Kshetromoni and this particular incident operates as the apex of colonial violence. As Bharucha remarks, “In many ways, a rape is a necessary element in the structure of any proletarian play in Bengal. The violation of a woman is symptomatic of the violation of a country or an ideal or brotherhood” (Bharucha 18) He corroborates his assertion by quoting the remarks of peasants’ leaders like Harekrishna Konar who re-employ such rhetoric while discussing peasant-exploitation by landlords. While the successful redistribution of land under the aegis of the United Front Government would be seen as “the reestablishment of the natural relationship between mother and her children”, on other occasions he would state,

Under united front rule, the landless peasant and the agricultural worker have begun to get land of their own...Land is the mother. The peasant is her first child. At Chaitanyapur and other villages, the jotedars (landlords) reddened the mother’s bosom with her children’s blood. And so the green
Therefore the violation of a woman on stage seems to operate as a violation of fundamental processes of life itself. At the same time, such representations have a truth-value that is not entirely reducible to symbolic significance. Rather, such representations highlight that mode of patriarchal violence which has been a perennial mode of exploitation for prevailing hierarchies to thwart any threat to their perpetuation. Dutt himself was aware of this reality as evident from his assessment of audience response to a farce by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, produced in 1954. According to Dutt, he played the role of “a filthy old rustic lord, whose indiscriminate womanizing leads him finally to an ambush by angry masked peasants” (Towards 14). Unlike Dutt’s urban spectators, who “roared with laughter…enjoying the antics of a monster they have never seen”, the peasants in the villages greeted Dutt with what he calls “a miasma of hostility”. As Dutt explains, the reasons behind such a drastically altered response lay in the lived experiences of the peasants – “These peasants were seeing something which is their daily life, being evicted for non-payment of rent, being whipped, their women seduced by pimps of the lord.” It is because of these experiences that the play, far from being a farce, emerges as “a frightening chronicle” (Towards 15).

It is this factual reality which is again highlighted by Dutt through the torture and rape of Nurse Mao which not only looks back to the rape of Khetromoni but also looks forward to the rape of Dopdi Mejhen in Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’ as well as Dutt’s own Teer which revolved around a violent occurrence in the village of Prasadujot where ten women were killed by the police. While Teer focuses more on the merciless murder of unarmed women, Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi also highlights the specific plight of the female subaltern as Dopdi Mejhen is systematically gang raped after her arrest:

At 8.57 Senanayak’s dinner hour had approached, and saying, ‘Make her. Do the needful’, he disappeared…

Trying to move, she [Draupadi] feels her arms and legs are still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed…she senses her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?...
Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven – then Draupadi had passed out. (Devi 34-35)

The lurid details are starkly similar to those that are indicated by Dutt, who uses such details to intensify public hatred against the identified enemies as such hatred was considered necessary for the consolidation of class-struggle. As Dutt himself says, “It's not enough to have a rifle in one's hand – one must know how to fire it and must hate the enemy enough to fire it” (Gunawardana and Dutt 227). Dutt’s depiction of rape on stage, along with the off-stage reporting of Aunt Kim and Bui's forcible stripping for the entertainment of American marines, were instrumental for the awakening of such intense antagonism which was supposed to inspire the peasants of Bengal who too had directly or indirectly experienced such atrocities and were likely to do so in the future as well. In the jatra-play Rifle too Dutt reports the rape of Bengali women at the hands of the colonial authorities whose Indian collaborators are later seen as the power-wielders of a supposedly independent India and the underlying implication seems to be that the dignity of both women and the nation would continue to be violated under such circumstances.38

However, the protagonists of Devi’s own narratives are often defiant enough to spiritedly resist the patriarchal, state-sponsored injustices which are inflicted upon them. Dopdi herself, perhaps, offers the most stark illustration of such resistance as she, after being gang-raped by soldiers, tears her own clothes and nakedly struts to the Sennanayak, and confronts him with “an indomitable laughter, that Senanayak simply cannot understand” (Devi 36), combined with questions that deflate that air of authority which brutal force was supposed to secure:

38 Dutt himself, however, seems to have been caught in a contradiction between theory and practice. While there are numerous references to rape as an exploitative weapon of the elite and occasional representations of it on stage, in Towards A Revolutionary Theatre (26) he critiqued this entire practice and the tradition behind it, “beginning superbly from The Indigo Mirror” in severe terms: “Our modern playwrights who shy away from Love, have pounced on Rape, not so much, one feels, to rouse hatred, but to express their own anxieties, and they seem to believe that the primary form of exploitation in the modern society is the molestation of the peasant’s wife. This not only falsifies the production-relations now prevalent but confuses the very issues over which class-struggle rages. Above all, this exposes the petty-bourgeois writer’s male chauvinist views, the crude threat that he holds out to women if they venture out of home.” While such criticism may seem rather odd from someone who uses such strategies in his play, to be fair to Dutt, a rape, as shown in Invincible Vietnam is specifically enacted to arouse hatred and it is juxtaposed with the scrupulous account of other modes of exploitation as well.
She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me – come on, kounter me – ?

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Devi 36-37)

Unlike the Mahabharata, there is no divine intervention here and it is Draupadi’s insistence on her remaining naked which transforms her action into a potent gesture of resistance on the symbolic plane. As Spivak explains, through her final act, she elevates herself into “a terrifying superbobject” (Spivak, Other Worlds 252) who fractures the locus of that patriarchal authority which enjoys a foundational role in the functioning of the nation.

However, Mahasweta Devi’s achievement is not unique. Although Spivak’s analysis of Devi’s narrative often remains blissfully unaware of the literary context within which she functions, we cannot indulge in such selective amnesia. Devi is surely right in asserting through Dopdi, that mournful withdrawal is surely not an option as it would only herald the triumphant march of the invincible power of patriarchal violence. Nevertheless, the same idea had already been voiced by others, including Dutt, as evident from the consolatory remarks of Aunt Kim, in the play:

There’s no shame, no shame at all. Do you hear, my daughter Mao? There can be no shame in this. When they beat up our men and smash their ribs, is it a shame or their glory? Glory, the greatest glory…When they tortured Van Troe in the prison, did it shame Van Troe or his executioners? Well then, there is a special torture that they employ on women, and it is called rape. There is nothing more to it in Vietnam today. When will you fight dear daughters if you brood on shame and things? Maidenly honour and dignity of women shall return after we have won the war. (IV 28)

Such statements not only link female dignity to the notion of a postcolonial utopia but also insist on the urgent need to further resistance without being cowed down by the brute force of male oppressors. At the same time, as Rustam Bharucha has pointed out, Dutt does seem to be exaggerating, as he virtually represents the fact of being raped as a proof of one’s patriotism and honour: “I say, therefore, that the true, faithful and chaste woman is she who has laid down her honour for the sake of her country (IV 28).” Such statements
probably reveal the locational limitations of Dutt who is unable, in this context, to adequately account for the trauma and indignity that victims of rape may face. He is however, right in asserting that such atrocious strategies of domination, which continue till date, must be resolutely challenged as any withdrawal from resistance because of such risks will only ensure the triumph of such bestiality. Hence the significance of Trac’s eventual arrival with a tommygun and the consequent capture and destruction of American soldiers. Trac’s successful leadership and cunning dissembling represent an ideal vision of revolutionary self-assertion, transcending gender-hierarchies, which seems all the more potent in the context of Mao’s rape and murder. The juxtaposition of the two diametrically opposed images of Mao and Trac thus again highlights the role of the Vietnam War as both a representation of indigenous agrarian concerns as well as an aspirational ideal which Bengali peasants would need to emulate. The actual presence of female guerrillas like Devi’s Dopdi only indicate how well the lessons were learnt and why a special correspondent of *Economic and Political Weekly*, in 1971 would talk about the “Vietnamisation of the Ganga Delta” and declare: “The soft clay of the Ganga-Padma-Meghna-Sunderbans delta is going to be burnt into the same hard metal of which have been made the soldiers of Algeria and Vietnam” (*EPW* 906).

Not only does such an analysis take us back to Fanon, with whom the section began, but also to the entire question of race and the African-American population of the U.S.A which was also involved in the Vietnam War, as signified in the play by the presence of “The Negro” among the American soldiers, who seems to foreshadow Dutt’s own involvement with and exploration of this issue in *The Rights of Man*. This issue of racial exploitation is an important element of those processes of postcolonial subalternization which are of course examined at length by Dutt. The fact is, that despite the fact that Blacks in the U.S.A were neither enslaved nor colonized, in the traditional senses of the term, they also suffered from, what Du Bois termed a process of semi-colonialism, because of the pervasive institutionalised discrimination that they faced.

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39 It is also relevant to recall here the example of Phoolan Devi who surrendered herself after the massacre of 20 *thakurs* (landlords) to avenge a gang-rape that had been perpetrated on her, among many other abuses, by them. After spending several years in jail she also joined politics, became an MP and worked for the downtrodden. She represents a fusion of the figures of Mao and Trac and has been hailed by Robert J.C. Young as “a dramatic and highly visible symbol of the political assertion of subaltern women” in *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2005) 117.
Therefore they possessed what he called, a double consciousness – “a twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois xiii). Their endeavour, according to Du Bois, is to be both “Negro and... American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Bois 9). It is precisely this Janus-faced identity of the Negro that comes through in Dutt’s play as well. While on the one hand, he is obviously a part of the American military establishment, he also remains aloof from the bestial tortures that the White officers unleash on the Vietnamese as he doggedly devotes himself to the functioning of the wireless transmitter. As Dutt states in his stage directions:

As the light goes out Mao screams and fights frantically as Wheeler and Knight beat her down. The revolving searchlight reveals to us snatches of the outrage as she is finally overpowered and dragged behind a barricade of sandbags. The Negro operator in the meantime, his face lit by a little red light lamp on his wireless, keeps doing his work with complete detachment. (IV 26)

It would be both idealistic and historically inaccurate to assert that the African-American soldiers were not involved in any of the atrocities that were perpetrated by the American army on the Vietnamese. Although such an impression might be created by Dutt’s representation it would perhaps be more fruitful to look at his representation in terms of his attempt to forge a kind of postcolonial solidarity of the oppressed which may be collectively pitted against the concerted might of imperial forces across the world. Aime Cesaire, perhaps hoping for such solidarity, would cry – “There is room for us all at the rendezvous of conquest” (Cesaire 127) and explain:

As there are hyena-men and panther-men, I shall be a Jew-man
a kaffir man
a Hindu-from-Calcutta-man
a man from-Harlem-who-does-not-vote (Cesaire 85)

It is in accordance with this ethics of tricontinental solidarity, that someone like Che Guevara, an Argentinean, would lead a successful revolution in Cuba, followed by similar attempts in Congo and Bolivia and in his message to the Tricontinental Conference held in Havana in 1966, he would claim:
The contribution that falls to us, the exploited and backward of the world, is to eliminate the foundations sustaining imperialism: our oppressed nations from which capital, raw materials and cheap labour (both workers and technicians) are extracted and to which new capital (tools of domination), arms and all kind of goods are exported, sinking us into absolute dependence. The fundamental element of that strategic objective, then, will be the real liberation of the peoples…(Young 18)

Such attempts and declarations are examples of what Robert J.C. Young would call

…insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and seek to change the terms and values under which we all live. You can learn it anywhere if you want to. The only qualification you need to start is to make sure you are looking at the world not from above, but from below. (Young 20)

It is as part of this solidarity from below, what Ranajit Guha identifies as “horizontal alliances” (“Aspects”, 5) among subalterns, that the Negro soldier40, after the successful counter-attack by the Vietnamese, exits the stage by saying: “[Softly to Trac] I believe in you. Vietnam is invincible. For the people of America, you must win” (IV 40). Dutt’s implication would be that Vietnam must win, even for the struggling peasants of India so that they too may strive towards the utopia of their imagination, braving all odds.

The notion of a postcolonial utopia, not just involves the drastic alteration of socio-economic circumstances but also radical developments in the cultural sphere. Such cultural activities are as much a part of any investigation into subalterneity as are other material circumstances. Ranajit Guha, spelling out the objective and approach of the Subaltern Studies Collective remarked:

As such there is nothing in the material and spiritual aspects of that [subaltern] condition which does not interest us…There will be much in these pages which should relate to the history, politics, economics and sociology of subalterneity as well as to the attitudes, ideologies and belief systems – in short, the culture informing that condition. (“Aspects”, 5)

As has already been mentioned, in the introductory discussion on Dutt, he had astutely anticipated many of the developments that Subaltern Studies would later usher in. As

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40 In accordance with the situational fluidity of subalterneity, we see how the Negro, who would operate as a subaltern in racist American societies, becomes the dominant in Vietnam, by being part of the American military establishment. With the reversal of fortunes, however, the situation changes again and makes possible that brief space of subaltern solidarity.
someone who once described himself as a worker of the cultural front, it is quite natural
that Dutt would not only be interested in the political self-assertions of the subalterns but
also in their cultural self-expressions. Not only has he written copiously about these
issues in his books and essays but even his plays are remarkable for their appropriation of
various modes of cultural self-expression used by different groups of subaltern
populations across the country. Not only did he tape and note the various songs and lyrics
of the tribals in the Naxalbari area for his play *Teer*, but he also rigorously went through
African-American cultural artefacts for the representation of Black subalterns in U.S.A in
the *Manusher Adhikarey* (The Rights of Man). In none of these representations, however,
was Dutt looking for some pure and pristine form of indigenous culture, unaffected by
any trace of other cultures. Such atavistic quest for origins obviously went against the
grain of Dutt’s Marxist thinking and its dialectical foundation. And it is this synthetic
attitude to culture that always enabled him to resist both nationalist origin-mongering as
well as the artificial production of some proletarian culture which may supposedly be
cleansed from all traces of an earlier bourgeois past. And this is precisely why, Dutt’s
exploration of the concept of revolutionary theatre is punctuated by recurrent references
to not only Marx, Lenin or Mao, but also to playwrights as different as Shakespeare,
Brecht, Piscator, Goethe and so on. Such polyglot allusiveness, though accused of
arrogance and elitism, was born out of Dutt’s immersion in Marxist aesthetics, as
indicated by the following lines of Marx and Engels, in the *Manifesto of the Communist
Party*:

> The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness
and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and
local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Marx and Engels 47)

Similarly, Dutt too represents through *Invincible Vietnam* the vision of a world
culture as we see how Radio Peking’s Lao-tien Ma plays Chaupin’s Etude
Revolutaionaire and Dr. Vinh is presented as an avid connoisseur of Bach, Beethoven,
Brahms and even Paul Robeson. This represents, what Wheeler sarcastically calls, the
“commendable effort at proletarian assimilation of foreign classics”. However, as far as
Dutt was concerned, there was nothing sarcastic or frivolous in such an attempt. He
clearly stated:
A communist, I had always imagined, would be a more total man. If he does not understand Beethoven, I thought he would be at least deeply interested in him, that he would be full of awe-struck questions about the colossal structures of his music, about this fulfillment of a great people’s urge to create. (Towards 3)

It is not as if Dutt celebrates such an ideal only for well-educated middle-class individuals like himself or such erudite comrades, as Samir Majumdar and Satya Bandyopadhyay. But he sees such a desire to infuse within oneself a sense of world-culture to be a valid aspiration of those dispossessed multitudes who have been deprived from cultural privileges. Therefore, Dutt’s fictional persona, Jopen da, enlightens his typically naïve and befuddled interlocutor when he states:

Stalin says that man’s great creations, which become timeless by reflecting their ages, transcend production relations. Therefore a change in the base does not lead to the discarding of Homer, Goethe or Shakespeare. Rather they become all the more true since, instead of being confined to a paltry three or four percent people, they come within the reach of ninety nine percent. All that is beautiful in the world was once consumed by only the exploiters...They [the working classes] say – I am Bishwakarma, I am producing assets, I am creating a new society – no class understands the value of creation the way I do. It is my birthright therefore to enjoy all creations. Through exploitation, you have closeted, literature, music, philosophy. I will break those closets and distribute it all to the people because, Shakespeare is mine, Goethe is mine, mine is Beethoven. And so is Rabindranath. (Jopen da 34-35)

While it is undeniably true that such verbal bravura is underpinned by a remarkable sense of arrogance, it is also buttressed by Dutt’s own experience of translating several Shakespeare plays in Bengali and producing them in front of villagers and workers in far-flung villages with wide acclaim. This is precisely why he could so confidently assert the supposed cultural ambitions of the working classes when they eventually transform their subalternity into hegemony. And it is as part of Dutt’s imagining of such a future that the guerillas of Vietnam seem to embody the best in world culture, represented not just by the musical composition referred before but also such texts as The Bible, Tolstoy’s

41 Noted actor and director, Samir Majumdr has been associated with Bengali theatre since 1962, joined PLT in 1969 and was the leading actor in many of PLT’s production during the next two decades and also directed several PLT productions after Utpal Dutt’s death.

42 A remarkable actor of both theatre and films, he was associated with Utpal Dutt since 1952 and acted in almost all the major productions of PLT. He also acted in several films with famous directors like Satyajit Roy and won several awards for his lifelong contributions.
War and Peace or Whitman’s poetry or even Shakespeare’s Hamlet\textsuperscript{43}, which however, are burned by the Americans, almost in imitation of the Nazis. However, Dr. Vinh remains undaunted in his approach and despite all the ruthless torture that he endures, or that which he sees enacted in front of him, he can still defiantly shout Whitman’s ‘A Broadway Pageant’ or ‘To America’:

Young Libertad!
With the venerable Asia, the all-mother,
Be considerate with her and now and ever, over-hot Libertad – for you are all
Comrade Americans
Bend your proud neck to the long-off mother, now sending messages
Over the archipelagoes to you
Bend your proud neck low for once, young Libertad. (IV 30)\textsuperscript{44}

One could perhaps be forgiven for resenting the kind of Dramatic exaggeration that Dutt offers here, but there is also an element of historical truth, in the sense that Ho Chi Minh’s declaration of independence had indeed quoted words from the American Declaration of Independence. Even during the Vietnam War, as Dr. Vinh himself reminds us, the Vietnamese poet Tu Huu wrote a poem commemorating the self-immolation of Norman Morrison who sacrificed himself to oppose American massacre in Vietnam. It is because of such cross-cultural bonds, and the kind of solidarity with the Vietnamese which was evolving both in America and the rest of the world, that Dutt perhaps felt justified in fashioning such dramatic scenes which so blatantly foreground both the cultural wealth of America and its destructive military enterprises. At the same time, we may also see in such scenes a profound criticism of the kind of irrationality which would

\textsuperscript{43} Dutt’s own evaluation of Hamlet was striking. Jopen da remarks “Lenin says that the protest of humanity, ravaged by merging capitalism, first manifests itself through hatred of wealth and in the reveries of some lost golden age. Hamlet therefore keeps thinking of his father. He clutches the past because the present has become intolerable…Claudius, Polonius on one side, and one the other Hamlet, the overwhelmed representative of a silent society. A merciless hateful conflict of the two. Just like the corpse of that young boy – sacrificed on the great altar of social revolution – there is also Ophelia in Hamlet. Between the ‘bloody thoughts’ of both sides, lies the submerged corpse of Ophelia.” (Jopen da12, translation mine). One can certainly disagree with Dutt’s view. But the socio-economic focus of his analysis is incontrovertible.

\textsuperscript{44} In the actual text we find the phrase “Comrade Americanos”, but in an earlier line. One wonders whether it was Dutt’s slip, typographical error, or if the words are merely addressed by Dr. Vinh to his American torturers, in the middle of his poetic recitation.
later erupt in Bengal’s revolutionary politics where icons like Tagore, Vidyasagar and Subhash Chandra Bose would become targets of shrill criticism on account of their ‘bourgeois’ origins and the entire education system would be disrupted. Dutt recalls:

They began attributing to Mao a sentence that led to shameful attacks on schools and colleges: “in this society the more you read, the more ignorant you become”, which was welcome news to all drop-outs and truants. Actually Mao said something quite different to students of Pei-ta, Peking University, before they left to work in the countryside. Mao said, “When you meet the peasants, do not flash your books and do not flout your bookish knowledge, because then peasants will not open their mouth. On the contrary if you wish to learn from them, you must tell them: we know nothing, because the more you read the more ignorant you become; you know life; teach us. This will reassure them”. (See “Mao Tsetung Unrehearsed”, edited by Stuart Schramm). (Towards 85)

It is precisely because of his own erudition that he was able to rise above contemporary pettiness and envision a future characterised by both cultural and political rejuvenation. More importantly, such representations once again emphasise that vision of multidimensional plenitude which Vietnam, as a socialist ideal was supposed to offer. This was not just a dream of radical socio-economic upliftment, but a corresponding cultural revolution as well. It is in hope of this holistic ideal that Aunt Kim states:

This nightmare will pass, little one, for the bandits’ days are almost over throughout the world. The rice-fields shall be full again, the mother’s womb will be heavy with child, and Ho Chi Minh’s face, angry now, will once more be lit up with a smile. (IV 19)

Once again, what is important to note is that apart from the reference to Ho Chi Minh, all the other cultural markers are as much applicable to Vietnam, as they are to India, and specifically Bengal. In the process, the play heralds, not only a postcolonial utopia for Vietnam, but a similar ideal for Bengal as well, provided, of course, that people are able to endure as much torture and adversity as the Vietnamese. This project was further extended and developed by him through the subsequent production of Teer, regarding the Naxalbari movement, and there is no doubt about the fact that such plays, contributed to the contemporary discourse regarding revolutionary politics, obviously born out of entrenched resentment regarding existing political situations and sustained victimization by them. At the same time we also need to be aware of the fact that Dutt himself was deeply involved in such political turbulence at the time, which however, he
later repudiated as the “narodnik politics of assassination and terror”, born out of “petty bourgeois outrage” (Towards 84). Such assessments are all the more relevant now in this time of Maoist insurgency against the Indian state in various parts of India, including parts of Bengal. Despite the fact that such armed movements managed to find a toe-hold in these areas because of pervasive under-development, sustained exploitation and systematic asphyxiation of non-violent modes of resistance, the fact is that what is continuing now, in the name of Maoist insurgency is leading to indiscriminate bloodshed in which even poor tribals, who refuse to side with the Maoists, are also losing their lives. At the same time, it is important to note, that despite his own re-evaluations, Dutt never failed to appreciate those elements of subaltern self-assertion which formed the bedrock, even if initially and temporarily, of these movements and justified the choice of such episodes for plays simply to celebrate the courage and heroism of the masses:

Involvement can lead to gross exaggeration, but the kernel of truth remains. No matter, how wrong, ill-timed, and adventurist the leadership, the courage of the masses will always remain important source-material for the revolutionary theatre, which does not analyse political line, but creates sagas of mass struggle. (Towards 77)

This is also important for our assessment of the relevance of Invincible Vietnam now. Irrespective of Vietnam’s own transformation and its current friendly association with the U.S.A as well as the perpetration of mindless violence, masquerading as people’s war in India, Invincible Vietnam remains an important example of revolutionary theatre in terms of its glorification of subaltern self-assertion, especially the way in which Dutt highlighted the role of the gendered subaltern, at a precise point in history, when such struggles indeed seemed to many to be a pioneering example of the kind of endeavours required to ensure a better world. And it is perhaps in acknowledgement of the international significance of this event that Invincible Vietnam was also staged in the erstwhile German Democratic Republic on 7th March, 1967 on the World Theatre Day in Volkstheater as Unbesiegbares Vietnam. Berlin critic, H. Gebhardt, in his review of the performance, wrote:

45 It is important to note, however, that despite a certain similarity in professed ideological programme there are several differences between the Naxalite movement of the 1970’s and the current Maoist insurgency and the latter should not be seen as a continuation of the former.
Small wonder that the flame of solidarity with the heroic people of Vietnam, sparked off on the stage, spread to the whole of the audience...The dramatic means of the theatre are employed here to stir people’s feelings and to prevent them from passively accepting things; the spectator is made to face a decision which he cannot escape...The production provokes hatred and a feeling of sympathy. It leaves the spectator with the conviction: Vietnam concerns us all (Chakraborty 436).

The success of Utpal Dutt lies in his ability to intensify both our feeling of sympathy for the subaltern, whether in Vietnam, or Bengal or Germany, as well as a hatred against those who dominate and oppress the subaltern, in order to ensure our active involvement in the political process to both learn from the subalterns and contribute to their struggle. Despite his own topicality, his dramaturgy represents that transnational dimension which enables him to explore subalterneity in an international framework and create precisely those subaltern solidarities that alone can confront the globally institutionalized menace of empire. For a man of his international erudition and cultural preference, nothing less would have been acceptable.

Works Cited


