When the Agit Prop Street Players changed their name to Red Ladder Theatre Company, it was a tacit acknowledgement of the shift from an overt declaration of the nature of the Company to a more symbolic one. The politics of the Company, its ideology and methodology as an Agit Prop Theatre Company, underwent little change. It continued to function as a Collective for a long time; to address issues, that were of interest to the labour class or look at neglected subjects like gender, in other words, to promote the more peripheral voices of society. However, events detailed in these Chapters proved that if Red Ladder had to continue, it would have to reform in many ways. 1985 was perhaps the most important year in ushering these changes.

With the appointment of an Artistic Director, the very structure of Red Ladder changed from a Collective to a Hierarchy. This led to more efficient management and planning of the Company's schedule of events. The mode of scripting too altered as the Collective scripting of plays gave way to the commissioning of playwrights to write on a particular topic. From catering to the needs of the labour class and propagating measures to lessen their angst, the Company gradually converted to one that saw tremendous potential in the youth of the country. So, it took on youth oriented productions: plays that engaged with problems of the youth be it race or sex or gender or the domestic versus the public, tradition versus modernity, employment or career and so on. Its effectiveness in handling such issues is marked by the fact that today Red Ladder is perceived as one of the foremost youth and community development theatre companies of the country.

Success allowed Red Ladder to take risks with form so that artistic experimentation sneaked into the plays and spilled over to the resource kits, i.e. the fanzines and magazines. Keeping in mind the consumerist culture of the twentieth century which the target audience, i.e. the youth, was a party to, the language of the plays as well as the resource kits underwent a change with an increase in the personal and social register as against the political. Not just language, the tone of the plays too reflected lesser emphasis on anger at a situation and more stress on furnishing constructive solutions. The 'protest' element seemed to have given way to the idea of 'Help/Care Lines', the message being that self help was possibly a speedier way out of a crisis than governmental laws.
Red Ladder's heightened artistic endeavours saw training programmes for Directors; Theatre Workshops; Theatre Schools for Asians (a summer training programme); and more interaction with theatre companies from outside Britain such as Theatre Direct, Canada (and during their visit to India in 1998 with Theatre Companies in Delhi). In other words, the shift from the aggression underlying 'Agit Prop' to the artistry behind 'Theatre' was now complete.

Or was it?

Red Ladder has not changed its name today when, in historical terms, the downfall of the communist ideal has been clearly heralded by the collapse of the Soviet Union and so a symbol such as 'Red Ladder' (red, the communist colour and ladder, the much loved prop of the labour force) has come to stand on dubious ground. The Company obviously apprehends the need to keep alive this symbol as an ideal and as a signifier of all those communities that have remained on the fringes and must be brought to the centre. To reiterate a point made earlier, the plays continue to voice the anxieties of marginalised/oppressed groups. Mainstream, urban theatre; plays meant for sheer entertainment; typically proscenium arch theatre, are still out of bounds for Red Ladder.

Name aside, in aim too the Company may have a façade of a hierarchical structure, but its spirit is still that of a Collective. All decisions are taken collectively; plays written by commissioned playwrights are preceded by intensive sessions with members and actors of Red Ladder thrashing out the selected theme. It still aims to take theatre closer to non-theatre venues and make it accessible to those who otherwise don’t get to watch any theatre—thus it persists in using venues such as community centers, the streets and even, as one has seen, a bus. It also continues to use minimalist props, costumes, scenery, etc so that it remains a more affordable alternative to expensive commercial theatre without of course compromising on the artistic merit of the plays or of the performances. Red Ladder’s reaching out to Theatre Companies of the same ilk outside Britain reveals an effort to make the foundations for such theatre firmer by giving it a global standing—to build a platform or forum the world over for propagating a certain kind of theatre.

Not all theatre companies last. And especially not all agit prop theatre companies—agit prop theatre being meted the kind of treatment that one typically
associates with a foster or illegitimate child. Ultimately the difference really is between those theatre companies that produce good plays and those that produce bad ones. This is true of agit prop plays as well. What is required is more transparency and accessibility on the part of theatre companies that are agit prop whether completely or partially in their ideology and methodology.

Only such openness can assert that the essence of agit prop theatre, in however modified a form since its inception, remains even today. The pejorative labels attached to such theatre, the stereotyping and the prejudices that this theatre encounters can be banished only when more and more theatre companies declare their agit prop leanings and make accessible their plays, unabashedly. In an age which believes in cost effectiveness and in value for money, good agit prop theatre can expect (and does receive) a warm welcome. So what will lend strength to this thesis would be more such critical appraisals of agit prop plays so that the range of form and content and of dramaturgy of the theatre companies or activists or playwrights, practicing or writing such plays, becomes manifest.

The thesis began on the premise that agit prop theatre is here to stay. It ends with the same positive conclusion; the rider being that its ideological preoccupations and modes of operation shift from an extremist position to a more tempered one. That historical conjunctions in the future may rechange the nature of agit prop theatre and make it yet again a forceful cultural mode of protest is a possibility that cannot be ruled out. Its ability to condition psychology is after all intact even today as can be seen in the successful way that Red Ladder uses it to negotiate with the challenges faced by youth in Britain. Thus to announce or assume the death of agit prop theatres’ will not only be premature or shortsighted but indeed, a grave blunder.