INTRODUCTION
Studying an area as vast as agit prop theatre is a marathon task and one that raises many questions from the viability of the research project to its focus and its conclusions. One of the first questions that such a research project is bound to encounter is: “Why BRITISH and then, why British AGIT PROP theatre?” Especially since one is residing in a country where agit prop theatre abounds. The answer is not insignificant.

In the first place, though rich in agit prop drama, one rarely comes across plays of this genre in the English language in India. For the purpose of this study then, it would involve a translation of the plays into English; and translation is inevitably problematic creating its own web of socio-historio-culturo signifiers. But of larger consequence is ones own location as a post-colonial subject in choosing not just British but agit prop theatre over and above other theatres in Britain. Subjected as one had been to an English Literature curriculum where the study of the (now much intellectually bashed) English canon was sacrosanct, where Shakespeare was iconicised to the extent that his plays were seen as cutting across historical space and time, one failed to realise that this was misleading. One had unwittingly become an accomplice in abetting the vision of a sanitised British culture, an ordered entity. One failed to observe the agenda behind the English Literature curriculum imposed in schools and colleges which was to suppress peripheral voices including what this thesis focuses on, that of the alternative theatre groups/movements in Britain which dared to challenge the Establishment and to prove by their very existence that they were a viable option against the mainstream.1 Such groups though dealing with a space/system quite different from those in our country had politically subversive aims that were similar to theatre groups of the same ilk here (and in fact elsewhere in the world).

It was only with the burgeoning of post modern and post colonial studies in the late 1980s and 90s and with such landmarks as The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post Colonial Literature (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (followed in 1995 by their Post Colonial Studies Reader): Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory (1993) ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman; and Nation
and Narration (1990) ed. by Homi Bhabha – that English Literature students of my generation in India gradually awakened to challenge and negotiate with the literary manipulation that they had been subjected to.

Apart from the valorisation of Shakespeare one discovered that most English Literature curriculums for undergraduates within the country concluded with either TS Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral or at the most John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger as part of the drama course. Such a rounding off inevitably led the unsuspecting graduate, especially one not inclined towards further studies, to believe that post John Osborne (and by extension, post the well-made play) theatrical activity in Britain became sterile. It is true to some extent of course that there was a relatively dull theatrical period in Britain in the 50s. But it is also true that this inertia was broken in the 60s by such a spate of theatrical performances/movements that critics are still trying to categorise them into such types as “expressive realism”, “utopian realism”, “socialist realism”, “drama of conversion”, “agit prop” and so on. Such attempts at categorisation only serve to highlight the vastness, heterogeneity and alterity of Post World War II British theatre. It also serves to point out that the objective of a lot of theatrical activity in the late sixties was non-commercial and therefore distinguishable from West End Theatre or the circus and music hall which aimed at financial gain (Davies, 1987, Preface). Thus for me, the process of selecting ‘an’ area for study was steered in the direction of that theatre which has been effective in more ways than one and which has changed the whole nature of the theatrical enterprise. Such a theatre is the agit prop.

While it is true that agit prop theatre has not accompanied or generated major revolutions in Britain as it has done in other countries, it has stood in the vanguard of political and social change and has justifiably been the model of alternate theatre used by the WTM (Workers Theatre Movement). Perhaps the most interesting facet of the British agit prop theatre movement is that it has a diverse nature even if different agit prop groups seem to share some common elements. Christopher Innes puts it clearly when he says that many stylistic features were shared by various groups since a Marxist
ideological line had come to be identified with the agit prop. Aims however ranged from conveying information for example on the social and economic implications of new laws to shaping political consciousness (by promoting support for industrial action or exposing Establishment corruption) to aggressive protest (through the use of violent images to bring home the corrupting effects of pornography or to assert the public complicity in the bloodshed of Northern Ireland) (Innes, 1992).

Or again, to quote John McGrath who identifies three main areas of activity. Loosely speaking, they are:

- first, the struggle within the institutions of theatre against the hegemony of the ‘bourgeois’ ideology within those institutions;
- secondly, the making of a theatre which is interventionist on a political level, usually outside those institutions; and
- thirdly and most importantly, the creation of a counter-culture based on the working class, which will grow in richness and confidence until it eventually displaces the dominant bourgeois culture of late capitalism. (Bigsby, 1981: 33)

This thesis recognises that contrary to popular, uninformed belief that post the Fall of the Soviet Bloc and subsequent events, agit prop theatre too declined, in actuality such theatre continues to thrive whether practiced wholly or partially, by Theatre Companies interested in investigating political/social/cultural concerns. The thesis also perceives that there is no single formula responsible for the survival of such theatre, indeed of ‘any’ theatre—mortality rates of theatre being as high as they are.

If agit prop theatre, in whatever form, has succeeded in surviving, it is significant to analyse the reasons for its survival. The most obvious reason of course is the nature of such theatre i.e. its immediate emotional appeal during a historically charged situation and time. But the question is, how is this emotional response elicited? If Performance Studies can be seen (and it has been, primarily by cultural anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner) as synchronous with Ritual Studies, the answer to the question becomes more manifest. Even when only reading the text of agit prop plays,
one discerns certain patterns emerging in various aspects of the plays—be it the language, the form or the themes. It is these elastic patterns that this thesis will address as 'Rituals'.

Because Ritual Studies are a focus of study in disciplines as diverse as Religion, Sociology and Cultural Anthropology, it is necessary to chart out the parameters within which this thesis intends to use the term Ritual as will be observed from Chapter Three onwards. Even though the range of critical approaches to Ritual Studies is wide, there are certain points of convergence. To begin with, Ritual is considered as a symbolic action which, while on the one hand is temporarily discontinuous with routine activities by enforcing itself spontaneously on the other hand, reveals a tremendous capacity for routinisation. At once the connection between this definition of Ritual and Theatre becomes clear. As Eugenio Barba says:

It is the performance not the theatre which lasts only a short time. The theatre is made up of traditions, of conventions, of institutions, of habits which endure throughout time. The weight of this endurance is so heavy that it often prevents life from emerging and replaces it with routine. Routine is another of theatre's natural boundaries. (Barba, 1990: 96)

Hence 'drama' or a 'play' which is defined as a mode of fiction represented on stage and constructed according to certain dramatic conventions may be replaced by another. But 'theatre' which is a complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction, i.e. with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it, endures conceptually. (Kier Elam, 1980: 2)

Such a definition of Ritual ushers in notions of the 'sacred' and the 'profane': while 'profane' embraces the routine aspect of a man’s activities, the 'sacred' is that aspect of a community's beliefs, myths and material objects that is set apart and sacrosanct. The function of ritual in the community is that of providing the proper rules for action in the realm of the sacred as well as of supplying a bridge for passing on into the realm of the profane. It would be useful at this juncture to refer to Van Gennep who
in his *Les Rites de Passage* speaks of the ‘pivoting of the sacred’, i.e., he says that nothing is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories but rather, situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is in itself sacred, only things sacred in relation to. It is perhaps easy to recognize this feature of Ritual as an intrinsic characteristic of all Theatre but especially of agit prop theatre.

Ritual can also be studied as non-verbal communication disclosing its own structure and semantics. The space, spatial orientation and location of the ritual setting are essential features of the semantics of ritual action. Examples of ritual time and ritual space orientation can be found in the rituals for building the sacrifice in Brahmanic Indian ritual texts; for the building of a Hindu temple or a Christian Cathedral; and for consecrating those structures that symbolise a definite space-time orientation in which rituals are enacted. Man’s use of space in his architectural, domestic, urban, workplace and aesthetic activities is neither casual nor merely functional but represents a semiotically loaded choice, subject to powerful rules which generate a range of connotative cultural units. The three principal ‘syntactic’ systems distinguished by the American anthropologist Edward T Hall, and which are an important basis for the study of drama and theatre, are the ‘fixed feature’, the ‘semi fixed feature’ and the ‘informal’. (Kier Elam, 1980: 62-63). In Hall’s own terms the fixed feature space involves ‘static architectural configurations’ which relate to the playhouse itself, be it the opera house, the proscenium-arch theatre, the open square or the street—the shapes and dimensions of stage and auditorium. The semi fixed feature space involves such movable but rather static subjects such as furniture or the set and other auxiliary factors like the lighting. And the informal space is concerned with the ever shifting relations of proximity and distance between individuals in the theatre viz. actor-actor, actor-spectator, and spectator-spectator. Such proxemic analysis can reveal how drama and in this case, agit prop affects and transforms dramaturgic space.
While there are many conflicting views about whether ritual is prior to explanatory belief, a view propagated primarily by Robertson Smith, or whether there is a priority of belief over ritual as Taylor believed; there can be no doubt that ritual can be seen as an expression of the urge for integration with the whole that transcends it and transfigures it. This ‘integration’ (read variously as allegiance/binding/affiliation and affinity) however, seeks not just to reinforce notions of the collectivity but also serves to impart a sense of belief in individual identity to all the members within the collectivity because within it, the members have their own status and role. Ritual is thus oriented to the need dispositions of a collectivity and requires the participation of a community. Bearing this aspect of Ritual in mind, the nature of agit prop theatre will be detailed in subsequent chapters; the parallels between the two become only too visible, for after all, the aim of agit prop theatre is to integrate a community by propagating a certain ideology. As Kertzer says:

Ritual is a means by which we express our social dependence; what is important in ritual is our common participation and emotional involvement, not the specific rationalization by which we account for the rites. (Kertzer, 1988: 67)

It follows then that Ritual has both a hierarchical as well as an egalitarian structure. It is hierarchical when the sacred is outside the person of the communicants who reach out to it as individuals approaching factual objects. And it is egalitarian when the sacred is inside the person of the individual communicants who listen within and join together in a group. Theatre may wield its power over spectators; agit prop theatre attempts to literally hand over power to the spectators.

Ritual has a many layered or tiered structure, each level having many sectors so that it becomes an instrument for carrying out and communicating many messages at once, even of subverting at one level what it appears to be saying in another. The full meaning of the ritual emerges from the union of the text of the ritual with the performers at a given moment in a group’s ongoing social process. The performative genre does not
merely 'reflect' or express the social system or the cultural configurations or their key relationships but has a reciprocal relationship i.e., it is either a critique (direct or veiled) of the social life that it grows out of or an evaluation of the way society handles history. This critiquing and evaluating has been and is a need disposition of most collectivities. Agit prop theatre carries this a bit further and uses the register of active protest in its performative process. This protest occurs in two broad formations: one in which the propagandists speak for the ruling opinion (or dominant power structure of the times) and treats the audience as a passive existent; the other speaks against the ruling opinion, for the people as individuals or grouped into associations and in which the audience is (apparently) regarded as a subject or co-creator. In the former, the propagandist seeks to exhort or correct the listeners so that they move perfectly according to the ruling opinion. In the latter, the propagandist seeks to realise in the listener, a consciousness, latent until then, of necessary change which is done by exciting the imagination of the listeners to conceive of difference; once difference (disharmony, division) is recognised and the idea of belonging to two ‘opposite’ factions becomes clear, a successful reducing of accord between the listener and the ruling party will have been achieved.⁶

Repetition, emotionality, drama and symbolism are the other principle features that most rituals share; along with is the whole process of order-disorder-reorder which is embedded within rituals.

While it is relatively simple to deduce the connections between Ritual and agit prop theatre as described in this section, it is certainly not conclusive enough. Any research on drama invariably involves confronting the whole issue of 'performance', i.e. questions about the validity of conclusions in the light of not having watched the actual performance of the plays. Undeniably, as all theatre researchers will agree, there are disadvantages in being thus situated. With agit prop theatre, this difficulty is compounded by such problems as an unavailability of scripts (few have been published; many have fluid texts with missing sections/pages). Besides, the kind of historicity which this thesis intends to explore cannot be located only within the scripts of agit prop theatre.
companies—other factors such as the policies of the theatre companies, finance, the government, etc—cannot be ruled out. However, in spite of such problems it is possible to discover the protests, the ritualistic features of the protest and an evolution of the rituals of protests over a period of time through a semiotic study of the texts that the thesis will use as case studies. Proxemics one has already mentioned earlier on. A few more primary aspects of the kind of semiotic study that will be involved need to be mentioned here.

The two most important aspects are in Roman Ingarden’s terms, the ‘Haupttext’ (main text) which comprises of the words spoken on stage by the actors and the ‘Nebentext’ (subsidiary text) consisting of stage directions, etc. (Esslin, 1987: 80). That the Haupttext is crucial is obvious but the significance of the Nebentext can hardly be overstated for it decides the infrastructure of spaces which ‘determines the patterns of the actors’ movement’ and ‘express a multitude of moods and meanings.’

The language of both, the Haupttext and the Nebentext will be studied according to what, semiotically speaking, can be called the ‘denotation-connotation dialect’. The mechanism of connotation in language and other sign systems has been much discussed, but the most satisfactory formulation remains that provided by the Danish linguist Hjelmslev, who defines a ‘connotative semiotic’ as one ‘whose expression plane is a semiotic. Connotation is a parasitic semantic function, therefore, whereby the sign vehicle for one sign-relationship provides the basis for a second-order sign relationship (the sign vehicle of the stage sign ‘crown’ acquires the secondary meanings ‘majority’, ‘usurpation’, etc.).’ (Kier Elam, 1980: 10-11)

Apart from analysing changing ritual patterns within the scripts, it is imperative to study the developments in the Artistic Policies of the Theatre Company under consideration. The Theatre Company that this thesis will be studying is one that has withstood the test of time and financial tide, i.e., the Red Ladder Theatre Company. This theatre company emerged in 1968 (originally called Agit Prop Street Players) sharing theatrical space in Britain with equally effective agit prop theatre companies like Cartoon
As time went by, however, Red Ladder persisted in its efforts and is a major fringe company in Britain even today.

Obviously no theatre form is conceived overnight. It evolves out of past and existing trends and is influenced by theatre theorists, philosophers and practitioners. Agit prop theatre too has grown in scope and reach as it has proved itself a viable theatre form. Chapter One of this thesis is divided into two sections. The first section would trace the history of agit prop theatre till the immediate post-World War II period. This would necessarily involve a study of those historical movements or unique situations especially the Russian Revolution that have facilitated the progressive growth of agit prop theatre. Such a background would serve to provide the parameters for defining the way that agit prop theatre will be perceived in this study.

The second section of this chapter will seek to elucidate the ideas of those who have most influenced agit prop theatre practitioners. While it is true that many philosophies have helped agit prop theatre proponents, it would be more meaningful to study in particular those to whom agit prop theatre activists have themselves acknowledged a debt. So, while not neglecting the work of such cultural anthropologists as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner who are vital to this study in terms of examining the roots of theatre in the ‘lived experience’ and as part of a ‘ritualised lifestyle’ of many cultures (therefore not only an isolated art form); or in the theories of Jerry Grotowski and Augusto Boal with their Poor Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal would be especially interesting in his projecting the spectator as spect-actor and in his propagation of Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre and Forum Theatre with special attention to the last); the chapter will also concentrate on Romain Rolland (1866-1944), Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1890), Erwin Piscator (1893-1966), Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Finally, the growth of such theatrical movements as Dadaism and Futurism and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty shall also be dwelt upon.
Proceeding from the view established in Chapter One that agitprop theatre originates from unique moments in history; Chapter Two will then trace the birth, progression and decline/success of agit prop theatre/s in Britain from 1968 onwards. This chapter will make a close and detailed study of historical developments in post-World War II Britain and how these in turn affected political theatre, in particular the agit prop theatre enterprise. That different Companies employed different technical methods for a consummation of their ideological aims and different tactical measures for their survival, will be central to the analysis of these Companies in this chapter. Apart from outlining the career graph of different agit prop theatre companies (including the one that this thesis takes up as a case study: Red Ladder), the chapter will also briefly look at individual playwrights who have written meaningful agit prop plays or plays that have been used effectively by agit prop theatre companies.

Chapters Three and Four will then examine the first two decades of Red Ladders existence. In order to formulate a certain system to analyse the plays in the face of a complete lack of criticism on them, both chapters will use such bases as historical realism/parallelism; Schechner’s theories of performance; the politics of discourse and Feminist theories to delve into the plays at length and will also carefully follow the changing dimensions of the Company under different circumstances over the years. Factors such as the differing attitudes of changing governments towards Theatre (and therefore a poverty of insecurity about funds); failed productions; administrative bungling etc that led not just to an improvement in both, form and content of the plays so that they became artistically more complex and fulfilling, but also resulted in the conversion of Red Ladder from a collective to a hierarchy; from an aggressively political Theatre Company to one concerned primarily with community development and social welfare, will all be chalked out in these two chapters. That in the final analysis, youth in the multicultural situation of Britain with its problems of race, class, sex, gender, tradition, modernity, etc has become the main area of concern which Red Ladder consistently addresses, will be firmly established as well.
Chapter Five will continue to engage with the same aspects as the preceding two chapters but with a shift in emphasis from the plays proper to the other pre and post production devices deployed by Red Ladder, i.e., such stratagems as leaflets, fanzines (magazines for fans), ragazines (literally ‘rags’ or scraps of information relating to the theme/s and the actors of a production, interestingly collaged in magazine form), interactive sessions with members of the target audience/organisers or hosts of a particular production, both before and after the performance. The chapter will highlight the increasing professionalism of all these measures complemented by the growing complexity/artistry of the scripts, especially in terms of language.

In the conclusion, there will be a quick recapitulation of the changing trends and emergent patterns in the functioning of Red Ladder and an evaluation of how far it has succeeded in sustaining itself as an agit prop theatre company. Through such a reassessment, the altered parameters of the agit prop in theatre will be redefined.

The value of this Thesis lies in the difference between the method by which the subject, i.e., agit prop theatre has been approached here as compared to the other (scarce) critical appraisals on the same subject. Most critics devote only a few sections upon agit prop theatre in their books on political/social theatre such as for example the collection of essays edited by Sandy Craig, *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Craig, 1980). Even more thorough works as Catherine Itzin’s *Stages in the Revolution Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (Itzin, 1980) or Andrew Davies’ *Other Theatres The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (Davies, 1987), provide only a comprehensive historical mapping. They do not unravel the inner complexities within such theatre; the battles for survival waged by such theatre companies and certainly there is no single analysis of the plays performed, available. Consequently, the sheer immensity of the work done by such theatre companies is barely perceptible and is perhaps the most significant reason for the flawed understanding the layman has of agit prop theatre as one that arises out of historical contingencies, and dies once these are resolved. When combined with other factors such as the unavailability of...
scripts (un/published) and the incomplete information that theatre companies are furnished with, the former due to financial constraints and the latter possibly due to a negligence in handling archival records, it is small wonder that in epistemological terms, there are so many misconceptions about agit prop theatre.

In the face of such lacunae then, this thesis aims primarily at initiating a critical tradition regarding agit prop theatre and acknowledges that there is a definite need for contesting views about how the plays performed by agit prop theatre companies are perceived. It is also not insignificant that with Red Ladder, the case study of this thesis, having recently destroyed a large number of their primary resource materials and early archival records; this analysis is perhaps the only repository of information about a long standing company like Red Ladder, supplemented by copies of their original documents. If made accessible to a wider readership, the authenticity and the depth of the information disseminated through the thesis may arouse more interest and actually lead to further dialogue on this subject.
Notes and References

1 The introductory pages of Post Colonial Drama theory, practice, politics by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, Routledge, London and New York, 1996 were helpful in formulating my position.

2 Victor Turner’s methodology has been followed closely in Chapter Three. He is best known for formulating such concepts as ‘liminality’ in his book The Anthropology of Performance PAJ Publications, New York, 1986, while Richard Schechner’s Environmental Theatre is briefly outlined in Chapter One. Eli Rozik’s The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and other Theories of origin University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, USA, 2002 is a useful book to refer to if one wants to study those who believe the exact reverse.

3 Among the cultural anthropologists Victor Turner and Richard Schechner are important while Durkheim, Radcliffe Browne and Malinowski are significant sociological thinkers on the subject of ritual.


5 The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropedia, Vol 15, p 866


8 These misconceptions have been outlined in Chapter One.