Agitprop Theatre: A Survey

CHAPTER I

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By common consensus, the academic history of modern drama begins with the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen’s 1877 naturalistic drama, The Pillars of Society. The term “naturalistic” was rather a stylistic labeling. It referred to the depiction of believable people living credible lives in familiar surroundings and speaking standard language (Pickering 4). Eschewing the concepts of philosophical indoctrinations through theatre performances, most of the earlier modern plays deal with the predicament of human beings caught up in a conflicting world of engulfing industrialization and institutionalized religions.

Drawing themes from contemporary lives, strictly speaking, modern playwrights discarded the obsessions with the concepts of transcendental significance as well as timeless appreciation of dramatic art, which were considered to be the essential parameters of “standard art”. Along with the significant change in thematic concerns, this era also witnessed the emergence of a new profession that of a director whose job is to impose mainly artistic conception to the issues depicted by the playwright. The increasing prominence enjoyed by the director simultaneously foregrounded the importance of performance, pushing behind the importance of “text.”

Technically too, modern drama introduced many novel practices. In the medieval period, the bare stage signified nowhere-so-
everywhere. With the induction of illustrated back-wall curtain in the modern period, the stations of dramatic occurrences were specified. Earlier dramatic performances were held in broad daylight, but with the induction of new electric stage-lights, the theatre people were encouraged to perform at night too. This had far reaching consequences as far as the audience was concerned. These changes altered the positioning, conditioning and attitude of the audience forever. During ancient Greek theatre and even in Elizabethan drama there used to be a stage the front part of which was projected up to the middle of the them, enabling the audience to watch the performance closely standing/sitting on all three sides.

By the time modern play had evolved, the audience was swept to one side, to the front of the Proscenium Arch. The mouth of proscenium signified transparent fourth wall of a room, through which audience could peep into. The once visible, noisy, grumbling, commenting, chaotic crowd was tamed and transformed into a silent, invisible and ordered audience by modern theatre. Even their right to enter and to go out the performance area at their own will was restricted. Thus the once intervening, feel-free spectators were transformed into a group of curious peeping Toms.

There were some positive transformations also. Intellectually, the theatre public, (consisting the playwright, producer, performer, spectators etc.) started to think about the aim of their whole exercise. They started discussing issues such as: What is the theatre for? Whom was it intended for? What should it deal with?, etc.
Theoretically speaking, it was these interrogations that brought out many of the revolutionary changes in the theatrical scenario. Later on, these three fundamental issues provided the basics of agitprop theatre.

Agitprop theatre is one of the most successful forms of applied theatre. Etymologically as well as genealogically agitprop theatre cannot get rid of its inherent political nature. Agitprop theatres are firstly and finally political theatres. They are not only simply political, but also extremely political. On the origin of this portmanteau term "agitprop", Encyclopedia Britannica records:

Agitprop: abbreviated from Russian agitatsiya propaganda (agitation propaganda). This was a political strategy, in which the techniques of agitation and propaganda are used to influence and mobilize public opinion. Although the strategy is common, both the label and the obsession with it were specific to the Marxism practiced by communists in the Soviet Union. The term agit-prop originated as a shortened form of Agitation and Propaganda Section of the Central Committee Secretariat of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. (149)

This department of the Central Committee of the Communist party was established in the early 1920s and was responsible for determining the content of all official information, overseeing political education in schools, watching overall forms of mass communication, and mobilizing public support for party
programmes. The word ‘agitprop’ is used in English to describe such departments and, by extension, any work especially in the theatre that aims to educate and indoctrinate the public.

Words like agitate, propaganda, indoctrinate, politicize, mobilize, educate, strategy etc, which are always inseparably identified with this term, openly declares its politics. To be more precise, agitprop theatre is a Left theatre, right from its inception. Not surprisingly, the theoretical premiers of this genre were Marxists. On this Marxian affiliation of agitprop theatre and on the two constituent words of the term “agitprop”, Encyclopedia Britannica further explains that, the twin strategies of agitation and propaganda were originally elaborated by the Marxist theorist Gregory Plekhanov, who defined propaganda as the promulgation of a number of ideas to an individual or small group and agitation as the promulgation of a single idea to a large mass of people. Expanding on this notion in his pamphlet “What is to be Done?” (1902), Vladimir Lenin stated that the propagandist, whose primary medium is print, explains the causes of social inequities such as unemployment of hunger, while the agitator, whose primary medium is speech, seizes on the emotional aspect of these issues to arouse his audience to indignation of action (149).

The deliberate adaptation of this Marxist propaganda theory to theatrical performance gave birth to a new theatre genre _ agitprop theatre. This adaptation itself was an artistic revolution, which rewrote the history of performing arts to a great extant. With
this artistic revolution, authors were replaced by collective authorship; boxlike proscenium stage with a transparent wall on one side was replaced by a circle in a city/village square or an open stage; darkened auditoria gave in to broad daylight; passive, curious, peeping Tom audience got transformed into a participating, intervening, interrogating crowd.

With this paradigm shift in theatre, the once state patronized or bourgeois artistic performance became a participatory mass culture. Economically too, low cost productions of agitprop theatrical performances facilitated in multiplying the quantity of performance thereby taking the art to a larger public. In brief, an overall simplification of theatrical performances was achieved with stunning effect. Supporters of elitist art are still contemptuous of agitprop theatres’ simplicity. These critiques equate simplicity with absence of aesthetics.

In bourgeois proscenium theatre, the performance area, i.e. the stage was a sanctum sanctorum where it was sacrilegious for an audience to step in. The iconoclastic nature of agitprop theatre demolished the sacrosanctity of the acting area by giving the audience access to it freely. Dramatic structure too underwent modification in agitprop theatre. Though Modern theatre was avant-garde in theme, structurally it remained traditional especially in dividing the action into scenes and acts. But in agitprop theatre this compartmentalization of dramatic action and the audience disappeared. A shortened, holistic approach was accepted, where
the beginning is not far too different from the end. Most often, the absence of a logical culmination or denouement is the norm in agitprop theatre. The piece given by an agitprop theatre is an event, a chunk of ordinary day-to-day life.

Agitprop theatrical performance discards elaborate use of props, make ups, sophisticated sound and light effects which mark the performance of contemporary proscenium theatre. Agitpropists believe that the use of supplementary theatrical devises turn theatre into a mere spectacle, which in turn provides only entertainment. The conscious rejection of these supplementary devises and props makes agitprop theatrical performances more focused and goal oriented. Traditional proscenium theatre, largely, prioritized achieving aesthetic and artistic goals whereas agitprop theatre overtly prioritizes the achievement of definite political goals. Theatrical performances of aesthetic of artistic excellence can go for a high degree of sophistication and abstraction. For them the more sophisticated and abstract the performance, the more artistic or aesthetically appealing it is! Disclaiming these false notions of theatre, agitprop theatre simplifies the content and put more focus on the message. Unlike the mainstream theatre, it is not a theatre by an enlightened creator of an enlightened well-heeled audience. Its aim is to enlighten both the performer and the audience collectively. At the conclusion of agitprop-performance the isolated identities of the performer and the performed get integrates into a single unit call activists. Actors in agitprop theatre are more activists than artists.
A probe into the origin of agitprop theatre as a particular genre would take us far behind the post-revolutionary Russia. It was in post-
Das Capital Germany where overtly propagandistic plays emerged. According to Carol Poor, with the publication of Das Capital in 1867, several educative clubs for workers were started up for acquisition and increase of intellectual capital. The motto of those clubs was that once the workers educated themselves, the capitalists could no longer dare to offer them such exploitative wages. Poore traces the origin of agitprop performances;

But it all started quite simply. When the first volume of Karl Marx's Das Capital was published in 1867, Mr. J.B.V. Schweitzer studied it thoroughly and published the results in the newspaper Social Demokrat. In order to make the text's more difficult thoughts comprehensible to the newspaper readers, he used the form of a dialogue, or a disputation between tow characters. This written debate, called "Schlingel", was not originally intended for the stage for live performance. Nevertheless, it began to be performed here and there as a piece in German workers clubs. Because some of the text was too lengthy or theoretical, Schweitzer published a version adapted for the stage. The piece nonetheless remained more a "Lesedrama" or proclamations, and was intended to be read rather than to be acted on stage.
With this kind of an unintentional intervention into the theatrical performance, the questions like, what is a play for? Who was it for? What should be its content started reverberating all over. Though we cannot strictly describe these late 19th century German productions based on *Das Capital* as agitprop theatre in the contemporary sense, they definitely showed one strong element in the agitprop devise, i.e. the propaganda part of it. The upstage delivery of Marx's ideological teachings was intended to propagate this theory and to indoctrinate the working class with the fact that the cause of their impoverishment did not lie within the working class itself, but within the exploitative capitalistic mode of production and distribution. This attempt to confront the workers with the relevancy of Marx's economic theory unknowingly sowed the seed for a latter theatrical revolution that would emerge by the 1920s.

Formally, the workers theatre was never novel. They adapted the prevailing theatrical forms with all its peculiarities. Nevertheless, thematically it was a tremendous shift from the status quo. This introduced an instructional theatre that was for the proletariat spectators. The producers of this propagandist pieces were also different form the norm. They were not dramatists by profession. Instead, they were trade union leaders. The performers too were not professional artists but trade union activists. Audience too was not drawn from the social elite, but from the working class.

Therefore, right form the initiation of this kind of stage demonstrations, the interests behind the production, articulation and
appreciation were a non-bourgeois social group, whose aim was clearly political. The long and argumentative debates were clearly not particularly entertaining. They were straightforward readings, lightly disguised with theatrical means. Their rhetoric and didactic literature were useful for purposes of agitation, but they included no action that could guarantee an entertaining play.

Between 1880 and 1900, theatre by workers for workers was popular with the workers themselves as an important tool for self-education. Nevertheless, the communist parties considered the various plays and recitals a waste of time, whilst the state authorities regarded them as highly dangerous agitation and therefore censored and banned the performances (Poore). The secret behind the popularity of with workers self-made theatre was nothing but the workers own realization that a theatre with bourgeois sentiment would only entertain, but would not enlighten. J.B.V. Schweitzer, Otto Walsler, Boreslav Strzelewicz were the arch figures of the workers theatre in the nineteenth century Germany.

It was in the post-revolutionary Russia only full-fledged agitprop theatre troupes were established. Ironically in its earlier stages in Russia, agitprop performances were promoted only to propagate the programmes and political ideology of the newly constituted proletarian government. Confrontation and clashes with the establishment was not even dreamed of the infancy of the agitprop theatre in Russia. Of its twin functions, it focused only on propaganda. Not surprisingly, most of the agitprop troupes were thoroughly professional, funded,
and patronized by the Soviet Communist Party. While the German workers theatre of the 1860s adopted the Proscenium stage for presentation, the Russian agitprop theatre practitioners invented a new form for their purpose. This new invention was street theatre. Though theatrical performances were there in the past also, it was in Russia only it took a new political dimension. It was here the flexible modes and methods of political street theatre were codified. Regarding the origin of agitprop street theatre, Safdar Hashmi says:

Street Theatre, as it is known today, can trace it direct lineage no further than the years immediately after the Russian Revolution in 1917. On the first anniversary of the October Revolution, Vsevolod Meyerhold produced poet Vladimir Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe* in which he combined the elements of circus clownery with revolutionary poetry and put it up in the city square for an audience of several thousands. Similar theatrical performance remained popular in various part of the new worker’s state for several years. This was the beginning of a new kind of agit-prop theatre, performed on the streets, at factory gates, markets, dockyards, playgrounds, barnyards and so on. Avowedly political in nature, this theatre sought it audience at their places of work or stay rather than attempting to bring them to the theatre hall.

(Right 6)
With this, another important phase in the evolution of agitprop theatre has completed: thematic, "productional" and receptive evolutions were taken place in the German Workers Theatre. Through the seizure of performance area from the omnipotent proscenium arch to the bare street, there comes an evolution of theatrical milieu. The content compelled to change the form, not vise versa.

It would amount to tautology if we speak about "political agitprop" theatre because "politics" is inseparably and inherently embedded in the term "agitprop". Devoid of the political dimension agitprop theatre is impossible or incomplete. In a conventional sense a theatre is regarded as political in nature, when it consciously takes sides in political activities, for a particular political party of ideology, or for or against a particular government or a prominent political institution. "In a more modern sense a theatre may be regarded as political when it attempts to raise the political consciousness of the people and tries to change the beliefs and opinions of the audience by raising political questions or problems" (Mukhopadhyay xiii). In this sense even if a play does not support a particular political party or propagate a particular ideology, but still raises political issues by exploring certain social problems, it can be regarded as political.

Any political theatre that is intellectually dynamic, intentionally engaged, explicitly partisan, experimentally innovative, collectively conceived, emotionally sensitive, purportedly and positively agitative, ideologically oriented and revolutionary in aim can be defined as agitprop theatre. Intellectuality, intentionality, partisanship,
innovation, collectivity, sensitivity, agitative, ideological, and revolutionary are the general adjectives used to describe a typical agitprop drama.

After studying the political theatres of India since independence, Mukhopadhyay, an eminent critique of political theatre in India distinguishes between agitprop plays and propaganda plays:

Agit-prop theatre dramatizes contemporary issues to politicize their audience. Agitprop theatre is a synthesis of two types of plays. One is agitational plays, which concentrates on an immediate live issue, and the other is propaganda plays, which handle larger issues involving the whole of society, or a period of history or the sufferings of an entire class. Agit-prop preaches revolution and wants to overthrow the political power of the oppressors. (17)

People's theatre activists like Lou Furman agrees to the categorization of modern plays into "social drama" and "agitprop drama". According to him social action theatre or "social drama" is evolutionary in its approach to bringing changes in the society, whereas agitprop theatre is the only form that will make revolutionary change in the society (59). However there are purists like Arthur Miller who outrightly disagrees to this kind of classification. He accuses the left-wing playwrights for such an unnatural classification. He says that, "If one can look at the idea of 'social drama' from the Greek point for one moment, it will be clear that there can be only either a
genuinely social drama or, if it abdicates altogether, its true opposite, the antisocial and ultimately anti-dramatic drama" (672). This opinion seems to be rather conservative because agitprop theatre is a peculiar theatre form that is thoroughly militant and provocatively irritant. Even if social issues are addressed in conventional social play, its aim is not to bring a quick radical social change. To the maximum social plays can be said to be progressive and purposeful. They try to interpret the social issues but not to overthrow the social setup that is responsible for the particular social issue.

Studying the radical dramas of James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins, in Racial Consciousness in Black American Drama, Dasan commented that:

All writers express their vision of the world. But the oppressor and the oppressed, the White and the Black could not have the same vision of the world, for the experience of human beings also contributes in forming one’s vision of the world. Even the question of what is truth is answered not alike by the two races because their interests, beliefs, and cultures are not only different, but are often conflicting and opposing. (127)

This opinion as such can be adopted in agitprop theatre also, by a simple replacement of White/Black with Capitalists/Proletarian. Agitprop dramatists look at the world from the viewpoint of the oppressed and exploited working class. Hence their vision of the contemporary world inescapably varies from that of the mainstream
bourgeoisie dramatists. As a result the dramatists on the side of the 
exploited proletariat presents a world of conflicts which necessitates 
class struggle to ensure socio-political justice.

The task of agitprop theatre is to stimulate immediate action so 
as to bring a radical change in the political situation. With its 
techniques of focused sketch like situations, revolutionary songs and 
instigating choruses directed at the audience and with short loosely 
linking scenes in the dramaturgy, agitprop drama is a rehearsal for 
the non-stoppable revolution.

Instead of clinging to the proscenium arch and auditoria that 
inescapably brings in a barrier between the audience and the actors, 
most of the agitprop drama prefers the arena type performance space. 
This performance area ensures a comfortable feeling of intimacy, a 
sense of space, and a hospitable atmosphere to the performers as well 
as to the spectators. For agitpropists a drama can be performed at any 
time and at any place. This spatial liberation made arena theatres 
popular immediately in the years following the second World War 
(Gassner, Producing 542). But this freedom of the space as well as the 
engagement with the common people could slip into the production of 
thematically shallow and aesthetically inferior performance from the 
part of the inexperienced agitprop dramatists. According to Bertolt 
Brecht, the simplicity and commonality of the audience should not be 
misinterpreted, by the dramatists, as the audience's absence of 
aesthetic taste or their inability for proper comprehension. He advises 
the people's theatre practitioners in this connection:
I speak from experience when I say that one must never be frightened of putting bold and unaccustomed things before the proletariat, so long as they have to do with reality. There will always be educated persons, connoisseurs of the art, who will step in with a 'the people won't understand that'. But the people impatiently show them aside and come to terms directly with the artist. (On Theatre 111)

Rejecting romantic monumentalism, spiritual dilemma, psychological eccentricities and existential obsessions of mainstream playwrights, agitpropists try to build up the Prolitcult (Proletarian Culture). They attempt at “public celebrations of the working class struggles, in which the boundary between labour and festival, between life and art, between spectator and art would be dissolved” (Brown John, Oxford Illustrated 385). Noel Greig, an actor-cum-activist of the British Red Ladder Theatre Company, speaks about this essential integrity and inseparability between the performers and spectators in agitprop theatre: “I don’t want to get holy about this when I say, the actor is the communicator and the person in the audience is the communicant: there is an umbilical chord between two.” (19)

Vladimir Meyerhold’s Mystery Buffe (1918) is proclaimed to be the first soviet/proletarian play in the history of agitprop play. This turned out to be the trendsetter in the years to come. Proclaiming that the style of the actors as well as that of the author and producer should be complete and concrete in nature, Ervin Picastor was the
first to enter the political theatre in Germany, opening the *proletarisches theatre* (proletarian theatre) in a working class district of Berlin (Lumley 93). In the 1920s this new mode of theatre was adopted by Ervin Picastor and Bertolt Brecht in Germany, and by Joan Littlewood through his Theatre of Action in England during the 1930s. In America Clifford Odets’ vignette of working class exploitation *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), became a lasting agitprop classic. These classic productions with their minimal staging, crude caricature, sequence of short scenes, and topical immediacy made theatre a primary vehicle for left-wing performance (Brown John, *Oxford Illustrated* 395).

Rejecting the liberal humanist idea of “pure art” agitprop theatre turns dramatic performance into “a political pressure” (Kirby 132) because it believes that the idea of “pure art” as a compatible ideological legacy of the parasitic ruling class. This particular vision on the designated space of art in society is definitely inherited form the renowned Marxist thinkers like George Lucacs and Bertolt Brecht who believed that art and literature should show the people the reality of the contemporary society in all its contradictions (Ramanujam 128). Realism in all theatrical enterprises as well as concern for the exploited were the common concern for the agitpropists all over the world. In this sense, Carnicke says, in propagating people’s theatre Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, who were the archetypal premiers of agitprop theatre, “seems to define antithetical poles of twentieth century attitude towards theatre: theatricalism and psychological realism.” (366)
A glance at contemporary agitprop theatre shows its exciting variety in forms and themes. Therefore, it is illogical to talk of a single form of agitprop theatre. It is plural in form as well as in treatment. So the phrase ‘agitprop theatres’ seems to be more logical. The website Tonisant lists more than 30 theatrical forms and companies in America alone under the heading “Agitprop Theatre”. This pretty long list includes: Resist Inc. of Boston; Salaam Theatre of South Asian League of artists in America; Theatre Against War (THAW), an international network of theatre activists against the American aggressive and imperial foreign policies; The Diggers based in San Francisco; The Living Theatre by Judith Malina and Julian Beck; Workers Theatre of New York, which is dedicated to play on the issues the working class confronts; Guerilla Girls; and so on.

Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil, Grotovksy’s Poor Theatre, Dario Fo and Franca Rame’s La Commne in Italy, the British based Theatre Workshop by Joan Littlewood, the Action Theatre, and the Red Ladder by Noel Greig, the Indian street theatre groups like Jana Natya Manch (Janam) New Delhi, Prasanna’s Smudaya in Karnataka, Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), Progamana Kala Sahitya Samgam (PUKASA) and Janayana, Thendikkoothu by Ramachandaran Mokeri, Drop Calicut, Manjumalaimakkal by K.J.Baby in Kerala, Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in Kolkatta, Praja Natya Manjali in Andra Pradesh, Kuttak based Sahas, Kalai Kuzu in Chennai, Mukhouta Kalamanch in Guna-Madhya Pradesh, Nishanth in Gujarath, Disha and Jagar in
Mumbai etc. can be grouped together under the umbrella term agitprop theatres.

Agitprop theatre is an openly revolutionary and agitational form of theatre that is concerned with the day-to-day issues of the class struggle. There is always an interplay between the political ideas and artistic expression and a crusader’s zeal in theatrical action in all forms of agitprop theatres. These performances have always showed an anarchic spirit in dealing with all the de-politicization of social life for the benefits of the elite and influential strata of the society. Agitpropists echo Ervin Picasto’s words, “The important thing is always the aim: the best performance is the most effective propaganda (168). Transformation of dramatic performances into weapons of class struggle is the first and last motto of agitprop theatres. Sometimes these performances are described as “pamphlet theatre”, or “docudrama” or “theatrical newsletters”, or “propaganda plays”, “guerilla theatre”, “ambush theatre”, “poster plays”, “property-less theatre” etc.

The highly politicized and explicitly partisan propagandist theatre make the civil society realize their prime responsibilities in ensuring the fundamental rights of the deprived sections of the society. As a general norm agitprop theatre make a political point to stimulate debate or protest simultaneously encouraging the public expression of dissenting voices in the society. Even though the different agitprop performances use different techniques and modalities in giving voice to the suppressed, the following distinctively
common features could be noted in an agitprop theatrical performance:

- Most often the performances take place outdoors rather than in traditional specially built auditoria. It goes directly to the people.
- The troupes tour across cities, villages, countries rather than restricting the performance to a particular station.
- Elaborate theatrical props like distinct costumes to differentiate characters, sophisticated electronic accessories, detailed scenic sets, etc. are avoided.
- It is mainly physical theatre, where the actors have to make maximum use of the physical capability to convey the exact meaning to the audience.
- The play is collectively devised by the troupe itself.
- Consists of dramatization of reported events. The content is derived form non-dramatic sources.
- Seek to persuade the audience to adapt a particular attitude or stand to the represented events.
- Satirical caricaturing of politically incorrect figures and attitudes.
- Performances are shown free of cost, but often used to collect donations after the performance.
- Interactive in nature. Encourages open participation of the audience also. Spectators are encouraged to become ‘spect-actors’.
• Performance is taken not as an end but a beginning of political action from the people.

• Spontaneous creation of the dramatic plot.

• Issues of topical interests are often dramatized.

• Comprehensive improvisation during the performance. Local issues, names of local people, places, etc. are easily incorporated.

• Acting is not differentiated from political action. Actors are termed as activists.

• The theatre group goes into communities where possible problems exist. They investigate problems that the community wants to solve. They create story based on the problems.

• They engage the audience and act out the solutions.

Agitprop plays often stir controversies in the political spectrum because they challenge the quiescent assumptions and cherished ideologies. Theatre semiotics like Keir Elam considered theatre as "complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transactions that is with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the system underlying it" (02). In its attack against the corrupt elements in the society the agitpropists have no time to dally with this kind of mere erudite conceptions of drama. With their revolutionary art and passionate performances, they smash the barriers between art and politics. They leave an inedible mark on the form of theatre itself,
pushing off its comfortable naturalistic pedestal into an experimental realm of radical confrontation, mixing ritual and spectacle. Most of the Indian agitprop performances, resisting the temptation to "hack back to traditions and the ethnic" (Deshapande G.P, *Modern Indian* xiv), question the authority of illegitimate political power anywhere and everywhere with stamina and commitment because they believe that:

In an impoverished state, where millions of people are denied the basic necessities of life -- food, water, electricity, accommodation, sanitation, fuel, the theatre cannot afford to be mere entertainment. The poverty and destitution of the masses demand a stringently political theatre -- a theatre that confronts the basic problems of the people and exposes the socio-economic injustices that are responsible for this problem.

(Barucha xii)

Agitpropists believe that dramatic performances should not be mere rituals. Frequent use of spectacles, sensationalization and sentimentalization in traditional theatre has resulted in loosing its sharpness as a political weapon. Any ritualization, whether deliberate of natural, sucks away the politics behind these actions. Therefore many practitioners of people's theatre felt the need for shifting the terrain of struggle to public demonstration, street fighting, street playing, in which the performers are always cast in the role of victims and the authority/police as visible subjugators.
In agitprop theatre although the script is collectively written and the actors are activist-amateurs, the relationship between performer and audience undergoes a radical change. The performances become an integral component of the direct action, by breaking the barrier between the performer and the performed. Even though there is no pretension of substitution direct action with theatrical action, the practitioners of agitprop theatre try their best at integrating protest and performance.

Agitprop is a kind of action theatre, which is more sharp and provocative than any other theatrical performances. It infiltrates in the premises of those who it opposes and performs right in front of them. This direct method has tremendous ramifications. It will be difficult to separate the performance and the protest. Street theatre took theatre to the places where people worked or stayed. Often, in this kind of theatre the platform of protest is right in the face of injustice or corruption, for example, at a factory gate where workers are fired at the will of the owner.

The un-pre-informed crowd, who can be a group of striking workers, at the place of performance, takes things for granted till the end of the performance, only to understand later on that they were participating in a dramatized protest. This unknowing participation of audience make them act out their given part in their natural temper. By questioning the authority, inspired by the “theatre agitators”, audience becomes agitators. This type of direct live theatrical intervention bags in enough concrete achievements. Firstly, people’s
sentiment on a particular issue is spontaneously elicited during the performance. The introvert audience is transformed into an extravert performer. The boundary line between the audience and the performer is absolutely erased.

The performance area is neither a stage nor a city circle, but sometimes, it is the whole premises. Through this novel method people can be alerted of the wide spread common issues like official corruption, unemployment, nepotism in the establishment etc. Agitprop theatre is a hijacking theatre. It hijacks the theatre to institutional premises, and hijacks audience and the representatives of the establishment to play a game of police-thief-play. The interceptive nature of action theatre invites provocations form the establishment that could be channelized for the reprisal of the grievances of the mass.

Another significant deviation is related to the concept of theatrical “texts” of “scripts”. Traditional proscenium performances impeccably followed the written texts. Whereas for agitprop theatre, the ‘scripts’ were comparatively flexible that could be altered to suit to the locality or time. Many times, theatre scripts are nonexistent. Only a broad understanding between the performers is there regarding the theme of their theatrical action. Just a few guidelines exist. No written scripts at all most often. This enables the performers greater adaptations of momentary interruptions by the spectators. This flexibility in the performance text gives a lot of scope for the performers to improvise during the performance.
Many theorists of agitprop theatre hold the view that spontaneous improvisation is the soul of agitational theatre. On improvisation in drama Hodgson explains:

Improvisation trains people to think. It aims at the inculcation of clear mental habits and the training of the expression of these thoughts in a concise and orderly way. Because it places people in a human situation involving the other people, it calls for fairly quick thinking and at times for different levels of thought at one and the same time. Decisions have to be made by the individual in the situation, but because it in an experimental situation, he can learn by his errors or adjust to the utilization of his mistakes. (22-23)

Instantaneous adaptation of local feelings on a particular issue, quick and on the spot gesture or verbal response to audience-response to a particular piece of dramatic dialogue, apt voice modulation in moments of commotion among the audience, accurate repartee to an unexpected comment or action by a fellow performer, spontaneous adjustment to some unexpected occurrence during the performance etc. are the different dimensions of theatrical improvisation. These types of theatrical maneuverings are common features in agitprop drama.

In this theatre, it is only at the end of the performance spectators come to know that they are simultaneously watching and acting a play. By that time they might have contributed their ‘acting’
share to the performance. Their embarrassment at the realization of the whole scenario leads the audience to achieve satisfaction for taking part in a social cause.

Agitprop theatre should be understood as a springboard to a wider critique of capitalism, consumerism or any other forms of suppression and exploitation. The unbridled march of marketism and the consequent mechanization of human psyche and activity has created deep psychological as well as sociological chasm which makes it greatly difficult even to provoke. To engage people actively in the process of resistance against global exploitation and suppression is the aim and politics of political action theatres. Their strategy includes critically looking at the past and present manifestation of covert capital and totalitarian interests that deliberately make human being only a responsible consumer devoid of critical thinking.

This short survey of agitprop theatrical forms reveals its alarming variety across the world. Social issues specific to the localities gave rise to different modes of protests, through theatrical performances. The plurality as well as the distinctive features of agitprop theatre cannot be understood merely as dispersed protests, but as an opening of multi-dimensional attack against corrupt authorities and unjust social setup.

Firstly agitprop theatrical forms declare that it is not for the economically elite class, but for the working class. These populous performances never take worried about popularity through the bourgeois media. However, after the initial negligence media ultimately
started giving appropriate exposure to the agitprop theatre.

Revolutionizing the actor-spectator relationship is a major programme of all agitprop theatre. Being activists, agitprop dramatists and performers cannot confine themselves to the specific frames of the “theatre world”. They activate the audience; and encourage contributory interventions amidst the dramatic performances. Ultimately in agitprop theatre the dramatic monologue is rehabilitated in to a more productive dialogue between the audience and the performers. Agitprop theatre, though didactic in a sense, never imposes upon the spectator, but they learn together by acting together.

Agitprop theatre is never without any criticisms. They are said to be incapable of penetrating into the deeper problems of individual dilemmas, especially psychological tribulations. This incapability makes their performance shallow, according to conventional academic arguments. But agitprop theorists like Boal has shown the world, through his *Rainbow of Desires*, that even psychological issues can also well be shown through agitprop mode, but only form a sociological perspective.

In another level, agitprop performances are said to be of mere topical importance pushing it into total oblivion very soon after some time. This lack of timelessness and universality is defended by its relentless commitment for social cause. It was this concern for the deprived section of the society and exposure of ruthless exploitation by the powerful makes the presence of agitprop theatre meaningful
amidst all denials by the apostles of aesthetic art. This commitment to the society brought Safdar Hashmi and Dario Fo together.

Though continentally apart, Fo’s and Safdar’s imaginative engagements and individual concerns show striking similarity in their crusade for the poor and against the oppressive establishments. Theatrically speaking, both adopted dissimilar methods of projecting similar issues. Safdar registered his protests by dissociating himself from the traditional theatrical forms. Meanwhile Dario For resisted not surrendering traditional proscenium performances to and for the elite only. Planting his foot firmly on the stage, he dragged it to the workers presence.

Fo’s tireless efforts showed the world that agitpropism could be achieved in conventional stage too. Being an avant-garde artist he obliterated the reservations attached to traditional theatre. All his efforts were to erase the invisible line drawn between life and art. He was of the view that life cannot be detached from art and vice versa too. The development of modern political theatre shows a progression towards the aim of filling up dividing trenches between people and theatre. On the development of modern agitprop theatre the anonymous author, in Do or Die comments:

Avant-garde artists dreams of demolishing the barrier between life and art, and have indicated that this dream is a part of the revolutionary project. In one respect, the trajectory of political theatre in the twentieth century shows a progression towards precisely that aim. Agitprop
theatre began the process by reclaiming and redefining the theatrical. Agitprop took drama out of the private space of the theatre into more public space; way from the professional writers and actors toward amateurs and activists; away from a middle class audience to a more popular audience; away form depoliticized representations of bourgeois life and manners toward explicitly politicized representations of resistance; and away from a spectacularized, commodified form of theatre toward more every day, face-to-face interactive type of theatre.