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Performing for Social Justice: Efficacy of Political Theatre in Nepal and the Philippines

Jiva Nath Lamsal

Central Department of English

Tribhuvan University

Abstract

Theatre plays a vital role in the struggle for democracy, functioning as an alternative medium for presenting social problems “of and to” the people and proving its efficacy as a powerful creative force in unravelling the hidden truths of repressive regimes. This article examines and compares the role of theatre in a Nepali and Filipino context, in particular its deployment in response to repressive regimes, and argues that theatre is both adaptable and efficacious as a tool for social and political justice. Although never colonised, Nepal was under the control of the Rana Oligarchy for over one hundred years (1846-1951). This period of oligarchical rule was followed by three decades of totalitarianism under King Mahendra’s party-less Panchayat system (1960-1990). Despite and because of this climate of political brutality and oppression, theatre and performance traditions endured. These traditions made “the invisible visible,” serving to awaken the population to their democratic rights. In the Philippines, theatre and performance traditions have been used to push back against centuries of foreign influence. More recently, these traditions have been deployed in response to the authoritarian rule of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, in particular his aggressive war on drugs. As this study shows, theatre has been a powerful means to fight against autocratic polity and restoration of democracy in Nepal and colonial forces as well as dictatorship in the Philippines.

Keywords: Nepali theatre, social change, call for democracy, Philippino theatre

Politics in Theatre

When, in different geo-cultural settings, regimes turn repressive and social discrimination in different forms and manifestations- gender, sexuality, race, class, colour, caste, region, religion, nationality etc. - becomes rampant, artists have used the

creative power of theatre and performance in their fight against discriminatory social structure. Theatre workers have contributed to creating a just society. Theatre has helped the artists reveal injustices in the society by dramatizing rulers' cruelty and people's trauma, trials, and tribulations. From the plays of Oedipus, Aeschylus, and Euripides to contemporary playwrighting when, as Richard Schechner says, "broad spectrum approach" of performance is necessary to understand contemporary society, theatre has played a vital role in interrogating unjust political system and revealing regimes' excesses to the public. Theatre has been applied to effect change in the society. It has helped make people aware about their rights and instilled a revolutionary spirit in them. From the "Hit and Run" theatre of Zimbabwe to "political theatre" of South-East Asia, from Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" to Bertolt Brecht's "Epic Theatre", and Nepal's "Street theatre/*Kachahari Natak*", theatre has proved its efficacy as a powerful creative device to resist injustice and effect change.

Bertolt Brecht, a Marxist German playwright, producer, and theoretician and Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre practitioner, drama theorist and political activist, foregrounded the power of theatre. Unlike Aristotelian concept of theatre as mentioned in his *Poetics* (c. 330 BCE) that focused on entertainment as primary purpose of theatre, Brecht took theatre as a weapon for social change. "Theatre for Brecht is not a clinic to cleanse one's soul", Hecht writes, "but it is a powerful vehicle for change in the society" (43).

Similarly, Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" encouraged the formation of theatre companies to expose the brutality of regimes and fight for people's rights with consciousness-raising agenda of "its grassroots 'cultural action' projects during the 1980" (Dwyer, 14). Boal writes, "Theatre of the Oppressed gives us the right to speak our minds, and, using the power of Art, to invent solutions to our problems. Through theatre we discover that we are more capable than we thought, able to free ourselves from our oppressions" (Sanjoy Ganguly, xiii). It was repurposed in different countries such as *Kachahari* theatre in Nepal and "emancipated theatre" of the Philippines. Aarohan/Gurukul theatre, Sarwanam Theatre of Nepal, and Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) can be cited as examples of theatre companies which have championed "applied theatre", i.e., the use of theatre as a "delivery mechanism". Theatre, hence, has been a powerful means to fight against autocratic polity and restoration of democracy in Nepal and colonial forces as well as dictatorship in the Philippines.

Regimes try to use cultural productions like theatre to perpetuate its ideology. But theatre artists mobilise the power of theatre arts to reveal "hidden agenda" of the regimes. "Theatre and performance", Marcus Cheng Chye Tan and Charlene Rajendran write, "can be considered 'events' that challenge or disrupt the political status quo and its distribution of the sensible or are works that have become events because they were, inevitably, subjected to prevailing socio-political climates that deemed them controversial, contentious or threatening to the established order" (3). As events, they are, as Jacques Derrida describes, 'ruptures' - moments that decentre or recentre a structure through disruption- or interventions, ontological disturbances which, as Alain Badiou further explains, change the rules of the situation in order to allow that particular event to be (3).

In India too, “anti-colonial-themed theatre developed” to resist British rule. AshisSengupta writes that “Theatre played a vital role immediately post-1947 in the formation of a postcolonial national consciousness through the creation of theatre associations, government-owned institutions and their patronage of the ‘theatre of roots’”. Theatre continues to have a significant place in contemporary Indian society and politics through its more recent forms, subgenres, and locations that indicate a welcome plurality and inclusivity in the conception of ‘nation’ and ‘national’ theatre and culture” (18).

Investigating the relationship between grief and democracy dramatized in the South Korean Theatre Company ToBakYi’s 1988 production of *Kumhi’s May*, Hayana Kim argues that “in displaying these uncounted deaths to the audience, ToBakYi issued a powerful rejoinder against the state’s prescribed limit of those whose lives are deserving of grieving” (542). *Kumhi’s May* was a way to channel his grief into actions that are “productive for history and for politics” by mobilizing theatre to make memories that might otherwise be lost and disavowed, acknowledged and kept alive in the cultural repository that is theatre (Eng and Kazanjian 5). For him, theatre was not just an artistic practice, but it was also an epistemic endeavour to counter the state’s obliteration of records of the mass murder during the uprising. *Kumhi’s May* stands as an example of the “democratic role of theatre: it disrupts the state’s stipulation of whose lives matter and expands the boundary of whose deaths are worthy of public recognition” (548). In the following sections, this article briefly deals with the role of theatre in fighting against tyrannical regimes in Nepal and the Philippines.

Theatre for Democracy in Nepal

The emergence of a non-royal strongman, Jang Bahadur Rana led to the establishment of oligarchic rule in Nepal following a massacre in Kathmandu in 1846. Janga Bahadur wiped out almost all the leading political personalities of the day by reducing the kings to ineffectual figureheads. They continued ruling as hereditary and dictatorial Prime Ministers for over a century taking absolute control of the administration. Encouraged by the nationalist fervour and independence movement against British Empire in India, King Tribhuvan and Nepali people both home and abroad waged a campaign to dismantle Rana Oligarchy. Ultimately, Rana rule came to an end in 1950 after 104 years of tyrannical rule and democracy was introduced in Nepal. After the death of King Tribhuvan in 1955, his eldest son MahendraBir Bikram Shah Dev (r. 1955-1972) ascended the throne. King Mahendra started autocratic party less political system shattering people’s dream for better life and freedom. He staged a royal coup; unfortunately, nipped the democracy in the bud; “declared all parties illegal, closed down the parliament, arrested and imprisoned all cabinet members then in Kathmandu [including Prime Minister], and took the government into his own hands” (Bista qtd in Davis, 50). The party-less Panchayat system that continued for 30 years till people’s movement of 1990 which, also known as Janaandolan I, toppled autocratic party less political systemandeventually, Nepal’s democracy was restored.

Nepali theatre workers, at the leadership of Ashesh Malla, mobilized street theatre to fight against autocratic political system. In Nepali people’s struggle for democracy, street theatre became a trusted partner, a powerful ally in the struggle for

democracy. *Sadaknatak* (street theatre) in the late 1970s, led by Ashesh Malla and his theatre group Sarwanam, Carol C. Davis writes, “became an effective tool of the pro-democracy movement and through its organizers gathered, educated, inspired, and mobilized masses of people to consider and take action towards achieving their rights” (50). Malla’s plays *Murdabadma Utheka Haathharu* (Hands Raised in Protest, 1977), *Sadak Dekhin Sadaksamma* (From Road to Road, 1979), *Hami Basanta Khojirahechhau* (We Are Searching for the Spring, 1982) deal with contemporary politics of Nepal. Using spring as a metaphor for democracy, Malla articulates resentment, anger against Mahendra’s panchayat system in *Hami Basanta Khojirahechhau*. Malla staged this play on the sports field of Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur and later in different campuses around Kathmandu. Because of the censorship by repressive regimes, Malla uses literary metaphors in the play. Janaandolan of 1990 (Political Movement of 1990), ultimately restored democracy in Nepal and street theatre played crucial role in making people aware about the contemporary tyrannical political situation of the country and instilling a revolutionary spirit in them.

What Carol C. Davis says is still relevant today as well. Davis writes,

The upheaval of old ways brings disturbances that often delay progress towards self-sufficiency and competition on the world stage. But Nepalis do not back down in the face of adversity—they do not give up; they continue to work for better government and better lives. The theatre makers of Nepal are at the forefront of change. They employ their vivid imaginations when they write, direct, act, and make theatre out of their problems, their achievements, their fears, and their hopes for a better society. (xxi)

Nepali rulers have not been able to deliver their promises made to Nepali people. Nonetheless, Nepalis are at the forefront when it comes to safeguarding their democracy.

Political parties could not deliver the promises and fulfil people’s expectations following 1990’s restoration of democracy. “The first decade”, Carol C. Davis writes, “after the democratization of Nepal saw little progress in these areas, however, which in turn helped foster dissent in the ensuing years and helped nurture the feelings of despair” (65). In 1996, Maoist began their guerrilla warfare against the state. Nepal fell in the vicious circle of conflict and violence. Maoist guerrillas harassed, robbed, mutilated, and eventually ambushed and murdered those who disagreed with their aims and those who tried to stop them, especially in rural areas. On the other hand, state security forces punished those who were forced to support Maoists. Nepali people were the victims of animosity and hostility between Maoist fighters and state security forces. On the evening of Friday 1 June 2001 (19 Jestha 2058 B.S.), King Birendra and the whole of his immediate family were murdered by gunfire while they were attending their customary monthly dinner gathering at the Narayanhiti palace in Kathmandu. It further pushed the country into chaos. Birendra’s middle brother Gynendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev (r. 2001-2008) ascended the throne. Citing democratically elected government led by Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepali Congress incompetent, he took the state control in his hands and formed a council of minister in his chairmanship in 2005. Political pundits say this is the darkest day in Nepal’s struggle for democracy. He showed utter antipathy to democracy and opposed the concessions made by his brother King Birendra

to the democracy movement of 1990. Gyanendra's reversion to the path of his father King Mahendra's tyrannical system irked political parties compelling them to make the Comprehensive Peace Accord with the Maoist in 2006. Maoist came 'overground' and allied with other political parties in the fight against Gyanendra's coup d'état. Ultimately, Gyanendra failed in his resistance against people's fight for democracy and the parliament was restored. The first meeting of the restored parliament declared the end of 240 years old Monarchy in Nepal in 2008.

Nepali people's dream of political stability, economic development, socio-cultural reformation, and qualitative life has not materialised yet even after change in political system and governments. Nepali people continued fighting. The role of theatre became even more crucial. At this time, Aarohan/Gurukul School of Theatre had already come into existence as a powerful cultural institution in the initiative and leadership of Sunil Pokharel. Gurukul also became a centre not only for disseminating cultural heritage of Nepal through performances of plays but also a meeting point for artists, literary writers to fight for democracy, freedom, and human rights. What Castrillo says in the context of the Philippines is relevant in Nepal as well, "To this day, theatre continues to function as a tool and rehearsal for revolution for the oppressed as they learn to perform their stories themselves to gear up for the struggle for liberation" (538).

Theatre for Freedom in the Philippines

Theatre of the Philippines is as diverse as its geography and climate. In "The History of the Philippines", Kathleen Nadeau writes,

The present-day Philippines is an archipelago nation of more than 7, 100 islands with a total coastline that stretches 10, 850 miles, which is twice the length of the coastline of California. The archipelago lies off the southeast coast of the Asian mainland, between Borneo and Taiwan. The islands are surrounded in the west by the South China Sea, in the east by the Pacific Ocean, in the south by the Sulu and Celebes Seas, and in the north by the Bashi Channel. These tropical and mountainous islands have a land area of 115, 831 square miles. The country is composed of three major regions: Luzon, also the name of the largest island in the north; the Visayas, an island group in the centre; and Mindanao, also the name of the largest island in the south. These regions have distinct political, social, and cultural differences. The nation's capital is Manila, in Luzon. Other important cities are Cebu, in the Visayas; Davao, Cotabato, and Zamboanga, in Mindanao; and Jolo, in the Sulu archipelago of Mindanao. (1)

Narrating the experiences of working with members of the Mindanao Community Theatre Network (MCTN) in the Philippines, Julie Holledge, actor, director, playwright, and emeritus professor at Flinders University, Australia, mentions one of their favourite expressions, "*Magkoryotayo kung paanomagakyo*", meaning "Let's use plays, songs and dances the way we use acupuncture: to heal our social ills" (11). In the Philippines, people experienced not only brutalities of dictatorship but also the suppression of Spanish and the U. S. colonialism. Theatre has played a significant role in fighting against foreign imperial powers and dictatorships at home.

Referring to oppressive past in the Philippines, Tiatco and Viray, in "Theatre and

Martial Law” write that “On 21 September 1972, then President Ferdinand E. Marcos declared Martial Law via Presidential Proclamation Number 1081 to suppress the rise of communism. Since its declaration, 70,000 individuals were imprisoned, 34,000 tortured and 3,240 killed”. Besides, quoting Fernandez, they further write that the theatre became ‘a voice speaking with urgency’ because the nation struggled against dictatorship (90-91). At a time when people were scared to speak a word against Marcos’s dictatorship, the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) used the theatre to “expose the human rights violations experienced by many Filipinos during Marcos’s corrupt administration”. Like the roles played by Sarwanam and Aarohan/Gurukul theatre in Nepal, PETA in the Philippines played an instrumental role to “denounce the society’s precarious state and have aligned in a quest for a national democratic cultural revolution”. Tiatco and Vary write:

PETA reinforced the theatre as an alternative and subtle venue of protestations by presenting social injustices and on its stage. For instance, PETA staged Isagani Cruz’s *Halimaw*...which was a direct analogy to the dictator even if his name was not mentioned; every time performers spoke of the Halimaw, audience members knew very well it was in reference to Marcos, and to his wife Imelda as the monster’s wife who loves shoes. (91)

Performances took place in different venues such as streets, plazas, churchyards, and even in factories- “often through guerrilla tactics, informing the general-public- turned-spectators about the governance of Marcos”. Eventually, Marcos was overthrown via a “peaceful revolution called People Power” on 25 February 1986. PETA performed *Panatasa Kalayaan* (Oath to Freedom) to celebrate the “victorious recalcitrance of the People Power Revolution” (91).

Pamela del Rosario Castrillo divides Filipina theatre into four categories: (1) The Bourgeois Theatre in English, 1946-1964; (2) Theatre of Social Concern, 1965-1968; (3) Revolutionary Theatre, 1969-72; (4) An Emancipated Theatre in an Era of Authoritarianism, 1973-85 and emphasizes the fact that “theatre became an ideological tool in the service of the national liberation struggle” (534).

Filipino playwrights, directors and actors used theatre arts for “conscientization-education, enlightenment and action”,

The multidimensional language of theatre is used to improvise oppressive situations they find themselves in and search for alternatives. This way, they become aware of the manifestations of an unjust social order and are able to articulate a longing for justice and faith in change. Theatre then serves as a creative platform of social issues and a harbinger of hope. (Labad qtd. in Castrillo, 532)

Castrillo highlights the role of theatre in the Philippines as seen in the above statement that it was committed to informing people “of their rights, of the exploitation perpetrated against them of all the isms ranged against them (imperialism, capitalism, feudalism, fascism, bureaucrat capitalism), of their own ignorance of the graft and corruption in the government. It was theatre meant not only to entertain and inform but also to persuade and activate” (Fernandez 415 qtd. in Castrillo). Theatre became an instrument for the liberation of most Filipinos. It bridged the gap between and among theatre performers

and mass audiences (255). Theatre became an ideological tool in the service of the national liberation struggle” (Patajo-Legastoqtd. in Castrillo 534).

Filipino theatre historian Amelia Lapena-Bonifacio noted that “theatre became a living newspaper because the people of the revolution strategically utilised the stage to mobilize public opinion about the enemy and to provide information about the ongoing revolution (41). On many occasions, these artists-turned-revolutionaries exposed horrors of colonisation especially in the traditional form *sarsuwela*, ironically introduced by the Spaniards in 1878 (Tiatco and Viray 89).

In musical play, *Nukleyar* written and directed by PETA’s (Philippine Educational Theatre Association) Al Santos, “powerful images point to the senselessness of the nuclear arms race, and more importantly, reveal and condemn the ill-advised construction of a nuclear power plant in Morong, Bataan that stem from the collusion of transnational capitalist forces. The play became the best medium for spreading alternative points of view” (Van Erven, 58)

Brecht’s epic theater also provided valuable inputs to the theatre of this period. The distance creating devices which have been integrated into Philippine political theater are: (1) the *dula-tula*; (2) the use of folk materials; (3) multi- media devices; (4) partial or full choruses; (5) the maximization of gestures, e. g. , mime show; (6) skits of little narratives and songs; (7) stylized movements and scenic designs; and (8) the suggestive use of space (Torres qtd. in Castrillo 535).

Abadesco decries increased militarization against their ranks but like Gramsci before him, maintains that “the answer is the development of strategies and tactics for forming and forging solidarity among alliances, not only among city-based theatre groups but also among those in towns, regions, and the nation as a whole” (Van Erven, 62). In Davao, Karl Gaspar produced plays that tackle justice and peace issues with the help of fiery Old Testament texts. Likewise, Rodulfo Galenzoga, armed as he was with “a sense of mission, the Bible and his art,” presented plays telling of local socio-political conditions” (Temple 10-11). At the same time, cultural groups of this period, secular and otherwise, engaged in the “decentralization” of theatre: cultural workers in theatre brought their practice to the dominated masses throughout the archipelago where they initiated more “imaginative means of raising people’s consciousness and provided support in organizing efforts” (Castrillo, 536).

Conclusion

In the Philippines, as Tan and Rajendran argue, where the days of martial law may seem distant, the importance of remembering this repressive political chapter is underscored in a 2017 PETA production, *A Game of Trolls: A Martial Law Musical for Millennials*. People ended Marcos’ dictatorship but again Duetetre’s brutalities, extrajudicial killings, is going on in the Philippines in the name of ‘war against drugs. Similarly, Nepali people fought against 104 years old Rana oligarchy and tyranny, party-less panchayat system of King Mahendra through King Gyanendra’s coup d’état in 2005. But socio-economic and politico-cultural transformation as envisioned in different movements in different points in time remain a distant dream. People continue to suffer, be it from repressive regimes or lack thereof. Regimes have changed but people’s life

standards have not. Political leaders who purported to raise people's life standards are engrossed in corruption. So, the role of theatre to draw the attention of the rulers and to aware the people have been so crucial today. Ashesh Malla through Sarwanam theatre mobilized street theatre in Nepal to fight against tyranny of party-less Panchayat system. Theatre and performance, then, confronted the politics of its day but also "antagonised and dislocated audiences from their settled modes of representational reality and rupture the appearance of normality and engender a space for social and political alternatives, a mode of political agency, because such a space can offer opportunities for difference" (26). What Tiatco and Viray say in the context of the Philippines, "as long as there are abusive regimes, the theatre will always focus on providing a space to negotiate truths and to initiate assembly" (91) is also applicable in the context of Nepal.

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