

History and Politics in Parthasarathy's Play Aurangzeb

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Shubh Brat Sarkar,
"History and Politics in Parthasarathy's Play *Aurangzeb*"
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Abstract: In his article "History and Politics in Parthasarathy's Play *Aurangzeb*" Shubh Brat Sarkar analyzes the use of history in a dramatic text, the underlying politics and ideology of a literary product, and the modes by which the materials are shaped through dramaturgy. The name *Aurangzeb*, the title of the play, has a strong presence in history textbooks and has perhaps become an integral part of a grand historical, "Indian" nationalist discourse. In the play multiple contradictions co-exist and find new projections in translations and theater adaptations in different historical contexts. Indira Parthasarathy's 1974 play is based on events leading to the War of Succession among the heirs of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and it offers a critique of the one-nation, one-language, one-religion theory. Sarkar's analysis explores how the theme remained relevant in Parthasarathy's play.

Shubh BRAT SARKAR

History and Politics in Parthasarathy's Play *Aurangzeb*

Taking into account the impact of modernism(s) on Indian literatures and the historiography of Indian language literatures, I propose to link the regional, national, and global sites for an analysis of a dramatic/cultural text. I interrelate the use of history in a dramatic text, the underlying politics and ideology of a literary product, and the modes by which the materials are shaped in a drama through dramaturgy. In order to do so, I analyze Renganathan Parthasarathy's (aka Indira Parthasarathy) 1974 play *Aurangzeb*. The play was written in one of the recognized Indian languages, Tamil, and was awarded three of the most prestigious literary awards along with almost all the major regional literary awards. Parthasarathy was born in 1930 in Chennai, to a traditional Iyengar family. He has published about thirty-five novels, plays, and collections of short stories and essays and he awarded prizes including the Sahitya Akademi prize for *Kurudhippunal* (Blood Stream, 1977), the Saraswati Sammam Prize (1999), and the Sangeeth Natak Academy Award (2004) for his play *Ramanujar* (*Ramanujar: The Life and Times of Ramanujan*). Parthasarathy is one of the most eminent and critically acclaimed playwrights in Tamil and his work resonates with contemporary world trends: he has infused modern Tamil drama with vitality and sensibility drawn from both the Native and outside sources. In *Nandan Kathai* (The Story of Nandan) Parthasarathy depicts the stigmatized world of the Scheduled Caste Dalit communities and it not only challenges existing forms of Tamil theater, but also questions the socio-political situation in Tamil Nadu. For example, in *Kongai Thee* (Kongai Fire) he portrays two female protagonists of the Tamil epic, Kannagai and Madhavi, and attempts a psychological study of characters. *Eruthi Attam* (The Last Dance), on the other hand, is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the fashion of Beckett's *Endgame* as done by Peter Brooks in the London RSC production, based on Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty.

Taking into account unresolved problems of the 1970s, Parthasarathy's historical parable juxtaposes Aurangzeb's dream of Hindustan as a homogeneous demographic space and entity with other dreams such as Shah Jahan's dream of building a black marble Mahal on the other side of the river Yamuna facing Mumtaz's Taj Mahal and Dara Shikoh's dream of a secular nation based on ideals of truth and spirituality, a vision shaped on emperor Akbar's political legacy of intra-religious friendship and mutual respect. In his analysis expressed in his play, the conflicts that haunt an astute politician like Aurangzeb amidst a crumbling empire, Parthasarathy weaves his narrative from the intricate interplay of historical forces and suggests how events lead to the war of succession and how ideologies and delusions make or mar the protagonists. In a decadent, bourgeois society, the opportunistic upper and military classes make the most of the situation in seeking, retaining, and augmenting their own powers (on this, see, e.g., Patil). G.P. Deshpande in the "Introduction" to *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (2000) places Parthasarathy's *Aurangzeb* among "texts which are the best examples of Post-Tendulkar modernity" (xviii). Deshpande argues that the play's negotiation with modernity takes a different form while "taking a look at the principle concerns of contemporary Indian society" (xviii). However, I do not find any mention of the play in A.N. Perumal's book *Tamil Drama: Origin and Development* (1981). Nevertheless, in the section devoted to "kinds of drama" in Tamil, Perumal mentions "Historical Plays" and even quotes "time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future" (189) handing down, like Eliot, an important tool for analysis.

The play was regularly performed between 1975 and 1989 and I have come across a few contemporary productions in different Indian languages. Natwa — a Delhi theater company which made a mark on the Delhi theater scene in 2005 through its innovative production of *Othello* presented a unique contemporary interpretation of the historical Aurangzeb. Parthasarathy's *Aurangzeb*, translated into English by T. Sriraman and to Hindi/Urdu by Shahid Anwar, was used for this performance. K.S. Rajendran, whose first language is Tamil, performed the play in Hindustani as he wanted the characters to come alive and create the period in the language of the Mughals. K.V. Ramanathan's English translation was published, for example, in *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (2000). Bangla playwright Mohit Chattopadhyay's 2008 play *Aurangzeb*, produced by the Kolkata theater group Rangapat, has also been inspired by the translated version of Parthasarathy's play. Subroto Ghosh, while reviewing the play for the journal *Desh* in 2008 refers to Khirodprosad

Vidyabinod's play *Alamgir* (1921) written for the Cornwallis Theatre and draws a similarity between these two plays in the portrayal of Aurangzeb as a "tragic hero of the Mughal Empire" (75).

Through the above mentioned representations of a dramatic text one can trace a process of impact and negotiation which involves, among others, the treatment of history and politics and the use of dramaturgy. Parthasarathy draws from the rich tradition of plays based on history as was popularized by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights like Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Webster or by the plays based on history enacted on the Indian stage by Dwijendra Lal Ray, Utpal Dutta, Girish Kannad, and others. Parthasarathy follows Chekhov's indirect action plays and Brecht's epic and dialectical theater, especially Brecht's use of "historicization" (see, e.g., Kleber and Visser; Willet). In the context of theater and performance the playwrights have been seen accepting new theatrical modes rather than writing against the grain or working under any anxiety of being influenced by previous works in the similar field. Indian playwrights and directors have acknowledged their indebtedness to European influence and some even claim almost an equal and reciprocal relationship. Some directors, like Badal Sircar, have worked as collaborators with European innovators of theater and some playwrights have adapted European plays and theoretical frameworks while others translated theories to their own languages. European influence on Indian theater reveals admiration, dependence, and acceptance rather than an "anxiety" of being influenced by an earlier work or being burdened with a past tradition. Newness in Indian theater is not a product of any "wrestling" with European innovators; rather, it results from a wider interplay of dramatic theories and new techniques of playwriting, staging, and performance. The appropriation of European themes, languages, and ideas to the Indian context often manifests a complex situation worth studying.

Written in at a time when political opponents in Tamil Nadu were engaged in a struggle for succession, *Aurangzeb* offers a critique of the "one country, one language, and one religion" theory. Debate over identity politics in Tamil Nadu dates back to the emergence of Dravidian linguistic identity in the 1920s under the leadership of E.V. Ramaswamy (1879-1973) who "began to organize constant campaigns against the imposition of Hindi, stressing the theme of Dravidian/Tamil nationality ... and in 1939 the Dravida Nadu Conference for the Advocacy of a Separate and Independent Dravidistan, demanded a separate country along the lines of Pakistan" (Omveldt 59). In 1944 Ramaswamy formed Dravida Kazhagam and declared its goal to be a "sovereign, independent Dravidian Republic" (Omveldt 59) and influenced post-independence identity politics. Annadurai's controversial secessionist speeches in parliament in which he advocated the secession of the four South Indian states including Madras brought him into prominence. He opposed prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's concept of a unified India and exposed the discrimination against the southern states and revolted against the imposition of the Hindi language. The 1970s in Indian history was an era of turbulence and Tamil drama became intertwined with crisis and unresolved questions. This enabled theater's greater involvement in society and in a politicized society like Chennai — constituting a large Tamil-speaking population developing in the hands actors/directors/playwrights who are closely involved in politics — is another field of interest.

C.N. Annadurai, a central figure in the state's political history, was a political communicator par excellence. He and his lieutenant M. Karunanidhi used theater and film to propagate their ideas, questioning the validity of religious traditions, and resuscitated the glories of the Sangam Age. Maruthoor Gopal Ramachandran (aka MGR) then emerged as an icon and Karunanidhi took over the leadership of the party. Using the popular support he enjoyed, MGR broke away in 1972 to form the party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) to form the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) — which later became AIADMK (All-India ADMK) to avoid any hint of separatism — and became minister in 1977. The leadership of the Dravidian movement had capable authors and literati in Annadurai and Karunanidhi, who utilized popular media of stage plays and movies to spread its political message and soon Tamil drama/film served the propagandist project of the ruling party. MGR who later became minister of Tamil Nadu, was one such stage and movie actor. In the political arena he also decided to oppose the "expansion of the Hindi culture" in Tamil Nadu and started the demand for a separate homeland for the Dravidians in the south. The demand was for an independent state called *Dravida Nadu* (Country of Dravidians) comprising Tamil Nadu and parts of Andhra, Karnataka, and Kerala. In 1965 and 1968, DMK led widespread anti-Hindi agitations against the plans of the Union Government to introduce Hindi in state schools. There were several such protests around Tamil Nadu and many

people went to jail. Several people were injured when police used force to disburse the protesters. Matters came to a boil in January-February 1965 and the events showed the pent-up frustration and anger of the Tamil public in general against the imposition of Hindi. Unlike most of the previous demonstrations, these were organized by Tamil Nadu students of the Anti-Hindi Agitation Council on 25-26 January 1965. The public at large rose up against Hindi imposition across party lines, caste differences, religious divides, and economic-social strata. The central government sent security forces to Tamil Nadu to crush the unarmed agitation. The action was so brutal that even the United Nations took note of the situation and discussed it. It is in this context that *Aurangzeb* can be said to be a play written for the times.

Aurangzeb begins with a conversation between two of Aurangzeb's spies in Fort Agra who tell of others spying on them thus indicating Aurangzeb's suspicious nature, as well as his attempt to be in control. The play telescopes, selects, and fuses events to capture the fissures, as well as the peaks of a period of history. In the war of succession to the throne the major protagonists represent issues and ideologies: Shah Jahan symbolizes decadent, self-indulgent, romantic aestheticism; Aurangzeb articulates and fights to establish an Islamic fundamentalist state; and Dara projects himself as a philosopher-statesman striving to preserve a pluralist society and nation. Shah Jahan dreams about a black marble Mahal for himself, Aurangzeb dreams of "one nation, one language, one religion," while Dara fears that Aurangzeb will destroy the precious heritage of Akbar. The play commences with a crisis: two soldiers discuss the future of Hindustan and the confusion over Dara's brand of religious pacifism they think might lead to the disintegration of the Mughal empire. Shah Jahan has fallen ill and a war of succession has become imminent among Shah Jahan's four sons, Dara Shikoh, Shuja, Aurangzeb, and Murad. The father lost authority, anarchy and power struggle has taken into its fold the issue of identity politics. The prologue gives premonitions of a disastrous and chaotic future where a Macbeth-like universe is created amid fog and mist of confusion over fair and foul, breaking into parodistic snigger: "Soldier 1. Yes, yes. When it is a question of self-interest, there is no such thing as a Hindu or a Muslim. / Soldier 2. A Shia or a Sunni. / Soldier 1. After all, they are all our countrymen. / Soldier 2. Hindustan hamara! / They laugh. Silence for some time" (430; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). This silence is broken by another sinister revelation: at a time of crisis suspicion is in the air as the first soldier says, "One man to spy on another — a third to spy on the second — and so on!" (430). Shrouded in this sense of skepticism the dynasty war is unfolded in full view of the audience. Amid such topsy-turvy political order we hear the lyrical outburst of a dreamer who escapes into the romantic vision of the "Taj Mahal bathed in the rays of the setting sun." (432), clinging to the remnants of a decadent past.

Although the empire is gradually destabilizing, the aging emperor is reluctant to shed his old clothes. Abdication of power and authority becomes imminent, yet the transfer of power is preconditioned by an obstinate romantic dream which has lost its relevance and utility like Madame Ranevskaya's "orchard" in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Shah Jahan wants an assurance from his sons that his dream plan of building a black marble palace (Mahal) on the other side of river Yamuna facing Mumtaz's Tajmahal would be fulfilled. The artifice stands between the transfer of power and authority and the main contenders to the throne, Dara and Aurangzeb, differ on this issue while Shah Jahan's two daughters Jahanara and Roshanara, support Dara and Aurangzeb. The emperor himself weighs his feeble support on his eldest son Dara, who, alone of the four brothers, is present at Agra and sympathetic to Shah Jahan's dream. Jahanara and Roshanara are more vividly portrayed than the male characters: they are stronger, vocal, and more faithful to their political aspirations. Roshanara appears in the opening scene as an antithesis to Jahanara and Shah Jahan's dream while exerting her force behind Aurangzeb without fear of earning her father's wrath. Shah Jahan's preference for Jahanara evokes in her a sense of sibling rivalry which becomes visible in Aurangzeb's love/hate relationship with Shah Jahan. Shah Jahan lives in the past, Dara in the future, and Aurangzeb in the present. The historical milieu of the play provides the basis for an exploration of the mind of the protagonists where hidden uncertainties and fears come to the fore and as the situation becomes more grim. With the help of historicization the familiar and predictable historical events are shown afresh to produce a startling effect, jolt the spectators with surprise and illuminate the new significance. In *Aurangzeb* history becomes a subject of central concern with protagonists drawn from history speculating on the course and outcome of history itself. This can be seen as a postmodern

theatricality that allows a conscious self-reflexivity to the act of making history and show how the dominant discourses are produced. Thus the play is also about how history is consciously written by those in power to eternalize their wistful and often whimsical thoughts at the cost of others' suffering.

In the first scene Jahanara tries to dissuade her father from pursuing such an expensive dream: "I agree that it is human nature to cling to life desperately. But is it proper, Your Majesty, to sacrifice the well being of your subjects in order to satisfy your desire that history should not forget you – in fact, in order to satisfy your self esteem?" (433). But Shah Jahan is more bothered about the eternity of his name enshrined in the minds of the people as the composer of "two elegies in stone" (433). Jahanara justifies her support for Dara by citing the claims of legitimacy for succession — "What is wrong in the eldest son becoming king, Roshanara?" (439) — but her logic is countered by Roshanara's reminder that Shah Jahan "cannot have forgotten history. Ask him if he was his father's first son" (439). The burden of taxes is levied on the common people for fulfilling "the dreams of foolish kings" so that they can go down in history. In Scene 2, the protagonists debate the historical consequence of cherishing such dreams at a time demanding more positive social action: "Roshanara: ... why should hunger and starvation be rife everywhere in Hindustan except for a few cities? Is it good government when kings do not bother about the people but are worried only about their private, personal dreams? Jahanara: What else is Aurangzeb's ideal but a dream? Roshanara: It is not a private, personal dream. It is a political dream — related to the people. Jahanara: History has shown that the people pay even more for the political dreams of their rulers than for their private, personal dreams. Don't you know that?" Roshanara: The people must be prepared to pay any price for the fulfillment of a noble ideal. Jahanara: Is this your reply to the question whether ideals are for the people or the people for the ideals?" (445). And in the climactic moment in Scene 4, the trial of Dara, Aurangzeb becomes furious when Dara says that a "time will come when Aurangzeb will rue every thing that he is doing now" (470). Antithetical ideas are therefore set as political debates that are relevant even today.

Although Aurangzeb cannot accept that his present action will someday turn into a historical blunder or that he will be finally defeated by the course of history, Dara reminds his brother of this eventuality by saying, "I have read history" (470). This knowledge of history makes Dara a noble character. His downfall is caused, ironically, by his profound anticipation of the future. His faith in this, however, dislocates him from the exigencies of the present political crisis. Dara's concept of a unified India rests on his faith in the unification of all religions on the philosophical plain. As Jahanara observes, it is Dara's "misfortune" that he is "trying to be an Akbar even before becoming king" (432). Dara's power of "sympathetic logic" is inappropriate to the volatile political situation. He is wise enough to accept that "power can lend weight to any doctrine." Like his ineffectual father, he too is trapped in the past while philosophizing the future and ignoring the present and Dara's faith in the voice of the people is almost a fanciful thought in this tumultuous time. Shah Jahan is trapped in the memories of the past and lives in an equally fanciful world of dreams. Roshanara rightly points out that Shah Jahan's real enemy is "His own dream" (442). His *hamartia* like that of Ozymandias or Kubla Khan lies in his belief that he can eternalize his existence through an artifice. With his succession secured, Aurangzeb keeps Shah Jahan under house arrest at the fort: there are numerous legends concerning this imprisonment, for the fort is ironically close to Shah Jahan's great architectural masterpiece, the Taj Mahal.

Dara's premonition comes true at the end of the play when Aurangzeb encounters the Feminine Voice that accuses him of causing the country's misfortunes: "When the rulers who create a myth based on religion or ideology for the people to cling to start believing the myth themselves, it is then that a country's misfortunes begin" (474). A lonely man devoid of music, love, poetry, or even a sense of beauty is unguarded for the first time in the finale of the play. Aurangzeb appears as a soliloquizing tragic hero half certain about the acts committed in the past. His sons are conspiring against him, and his dream of a unified Hindustan has collapsed. Aurangzeb stands on the threshold of a new history preparing to accept defeat and challenges the preconceived notions of the spectators regarding history, mimesis, and performance. He does not tempt the audience to fling itself into the story and with empathy in order to identify with the character. Instead, he stands in juxtaposition to the spectator's assumptions and judgment. This conscious theatricality can allow the actor playing the role of Aurangzeb to remind the audience about the continuity of history, myth, and literary discourse. The last words spoken by Aurangzeb alludes to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "I go carrying a heavy burden of

sin. All the waters of Jamuna will not be enough to cleanse my hands of its bloodstains ... What was it that induced me to kill so many people? (Silence.) It is not my responsibility to reason why. Only history can answer. The events of my life flash before my eyes. I am old, old, on the verge of extinction. I have myself become a part of history" (476). Thus Macbeth and Aurangzeb speak scripting their own histories from a personal perspective reminding the audience of the rise and fall of a great but ephemeral life. In the director's note, Rajendran comments that in "this masterly analysis of the conflicts that haunt an astute politician amidst a crumbling empire, the playwright (Parthasarathy) weaves his narrative from the intricate interplay of historical forces leading to the war of succession, and the ideologies and delusions that either make or mar the historical characters" (1). Through historicization an effective parable for the contemporary social history is shaped. Aurangzeb's imposition of the "one language" theory to rule the "flock of sheep" under a reign of terror remind the audience of the anti-Hindi protests which gripped Madras amid the speculation that the central government would replace English with Hindi as the official language. In the political actions of Aurangzeb one finds traces of Gandhi: Ramachandra Guha refers to Indira Gandhi as "truly the monarch of all she surveyed" (84) in the early 1970s when Parthasarathy was collecting materials for his play. When Roshanara in the play says "Only the Aurangzebs can save Hindustan," she reminds the audience about the "ascendency of populist politics" and "dynastic principle" (467). It is also a reminder of the political battles taking place on the streets everywhere in the southern states in the early 1970s when identity politics assumed political shapes taking into account the linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities in the post-independence period.

In Parthasarathy's play history is re-enacted in front of an audience removed from the particular historical space and time and history is translated into theatrical action contextualized against contemporary social milieu. Thus, historicization helps the audience to see the content of things and "episodic collage" is not necessarily a chronicle. A major point of Parthasarathy's presentation of history is that he shows the past as past and then goes on to show the crisis of history as contemporary. True to the spirit of the Brechtian epic theater which attempted to alienate the spectator by maintaining a psychic distance, the spectators here are engaged to participate in the debate and to seek a solution to the crisis outside the theater. At the end of the play, Aurangzeb presents himself as "a part of history" left awaiting the judgment of history. The spectators are divided into opposing forces, the problem is left unresolved, and the spectators seek to solve problems outside the theatre. Instead of proposing a solution to a problem, the actor, after raising a problem, seeks "solution(s)" from the audience. The contradiction finally invites the audience to think about "solution(s)" to the problems raised and infer "synthesis" once the performance is over. Through historicization the "detachment of the spectator" is invited so that the spectators can understand the dialectical structure of the play and deduce their own synthesis. In *Aurangzeb* Parthasarathy offers insights into the material conditions of real life by making theater a laboratory with visible apparatus to scrutinize history: "Who is responsible for this? Am I a religious fanatic? Or an orphan who yearned for love? I do not know ... I have myself become a part of history" (476).

In conclusion, Parthasarathy's *Aurangzeb* is dialectical, open-ended, and objective. The play offers materials drawn from history which emerge more important than critical inferences or value-based judgments. Relevant information drawn from history allows the playwright to explore the archaeology of knowledge rather than a judgment-based hierarchy of knowledge. The play uses a parable drawn from history in order to safeguard a literary text from succumbing to the pressures of ideology and power politics that history in general is subjected to. Parthasarathy gives due importance to the process of documentation of historical facts, source materials, cultural texts, artefacts, and other information. As the dramaturgy implied in the text avoids explicit references to any overt theatrical form, the play evolves gradually like a parable play for the complex seeing of a critical spectator. The playwright endeavours the challenge historical metanarrative and liberate the historical "truth" from the confines of dominant ideological state apparatus that tend to control the cultural product like drama. In *Aurangzeb* the historical "text" is liberated from the practice in political and some scholarly views which preserve historical accounts to validate the politics of domination and control along religious, casteist, linguistic, or racial lines. History is replanted within the context of contemporary political contingencies and allows to foreground important issues on the public forum for discussion. Such an attempt at linking politics and historicization adds social relevance to any literary work by

offering neutrality, dynamism, and contradictions and follows the course of an ever-changing history of cultural artefacts.

Note: The above article is a revised version of M. Sarkar and Shubh Brat Sarkar, "Treatment of History and Politics in Indira Parthasarathy's *Aurangzeb*." *Indo-Anglian Literature: Past to Present*. Ed. Ketaki Dutta. Kolkata: Books Way, 2008. 314-29. Copyright release to the author.

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