

**Periodizing the Residuality of a Composite Protest Art Form: The Case of Telangana *Dhoom Dham***

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**Vamshi Vemireddy and Sasi Kiran R. Mallam,**  
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**Abstract:** The article will document the emergence of the composite art form of "*Dhoom Dham*" in the state of Telangana, a southern state from India. A mixture of folk song-and-dance routines interspersed with political speeches, *Dhoom Dham* emerged as a potent form of political protest during the Telangana statehood movement and dominated the cultural imaginary of the movement. It has the characteristics of a residual cultural form as conceptualized by Raymond Williams. *Dhoom Dham* masterfully combined the elements of folk and repurposed the left protest music traditions to help the cause of the formation of separate state of Telangana. The article will theorize and document a history of the art form starting from its roots in the traditions of left-wing protest music to its contemporary predicament. *Dhoom Dham's* site of struggle is the state of Telangana and its villages. *Dhoom Dham* artists during the movement toured every village of Telangana and spread word about the struggles of the people and articulated the nature of their oppression. The first section will outline the socio-economic and historical context of the Telangana movement. The second section will trace the residuality of *Dhoom Dham* through a history of protest music in the region. The third section will theorize the art form using Walter Benjamin's idea of politics of aestheticization and engage with the critical and subversive potential of the art form.

**Vamshi Vemireddy and Sasi Kiran R. Mallam**

## **Periodizing the Residuality of a Composite Protest Art Form: The Case of Telangana *Dhoom Dham***

### **Introduction**

The southern Indian state of Telangana is the youngest state of India, and was created in 2014 from ten districts of the state of Andhra Pradesh after a long struggle in the form of the Telangana Movement. The movement has a long and complex history rooted in the social, economic, and cultural oppression of the Telangana people. Before Independence, Telangana was a part of the princely state of Hyderabad ruled by the Nizam.<sup>1</sup> Hyderabad state was annexed post-Independence by the Indian government and was eventually merged with the state of Andhra Pradesh. However, there were wide cultural, economic, and resource disparities between the Andhra and Telangana regions, and, as early as 1957, organizations like *Telangana Mahasabha* opposed this move.

The said disparities worsened as the agricultural surplus generated by the green revolution in coastal Andhra Pradesh led to Andhra capitalists dominating production in the Telangana region (Haragopal 53). After the "Gentleman's Agreement,"<sup>2</sup> it was decided that *mulki*<sup>3</sup> were eligible for government employment. This was followed by amendments to these *mulki* rules and in January 1969, the Andhra Pradesh high court ruled that *mulki* rules did not apply to jobs in the state electricity board. Similar rules meant that the Telangana people found themselves in a subordinate position to the Andhra migrants in all areas including employment in the public sector. This led to widespread unrest and agitations in 1969; this was the first phase of the Telangana movement, which died down in the next couple of years due to political maneuvers by the ruling congress party.

In the following years, the processes of globalization and the imposition onto India of a neoliberal economic agenda, with active financial support from organizations like the World Bank, resulted in a lopsided development model that ensured the suppression of marginalized people (Haragopal 56; Thirumali 103). This led to resistance from left groups, which in turn sowed the seeds of discontent in the peripheral districts of Telangana, as the center (the city of Hyderabad) received all the economic and infrastructural benefits. This, Haragopal believes, is one of the key reasons for the rejuvenation of the Telangana Movement in the early 2000s (56). Another reason for the renewed demand for statehood was the mobilization of marginalized castes in Telangana since the mid-1990s (Inukonda 17).<sup>4</sup>

Three new states —Chhattisgarh (bordering Telangana), Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand—were created in the 1990s, which also renewed interest in Telangana, and in 2001 a new political party, *Telangana Rashtra Samiti* (TRS), was formed, whose main objective was to fight for the formation of a separate Telangana State.<sup>5</sup> The fourteen years from 2000 to 2014, which is considered to be the second phase of the Telangana Movement, saw participation from a wider range of the population including students, people from diverse caste backgrounds, and those from professional backgrounds. The Telangana Movement is therefore a case of sub-nationalism in the age of globalization (Inukonda 14), and this article situates the Telangana Movement in a post-colonial nation dominated by elites and subject to subsequent internal colonization by dominant caste migrants from the Andhra region.

### **Origins of *Dhoom Dham***

The second phase of the Telangana Movement also witnessed a parallel cultural formation, which was successful in mobilizing people at a grassroots level, and served as the conscience of the movement. Having identified a political opportunity were a new state to be formed, the existing political parties

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<sup>1</sup> The Nizam of Hyderabad was the ruling monarch of the Hyderabad State and belonged to the Asaf Jahi Dynasty that ruled parts of the Deccan region of India.

<sup>2</sup> Before the formation of the Andhra Pradesh state, the Gentleman's Agreement was signed between Andhra and Telangana leaders in 1956 to allay the fears of the people of Telangana and to provide safeguards against the discrimination of Telangana people. The agreement dealt with opportunities for employment in public services, and spending on the development of Telangana, establishing a regional council to ensure development.

<sup>3</sup> A term used to refer to people who are native to Telangana or who have resided in the region for at least fifteen years.

<sup>4</sup> The marginalized castes include Dalits and OBCs (Other Backward Castes) who are collectively referred to as *Sabbanda Varnalu*.

<sup>5</sup> The party founded by K. Chandrasekhar Rao is the present ruling party of the State of Telangana.

were indulging in their own power maneuvers. The other two major political parties in the state the Congress and Telugu Desam Party were equivocating without taking a stance on the Telangana State formation, eventually leading to the cementing of the TRS party which had a single mandate of state formation. The *Dhoom Dham* cultural movement then became the creative site where the intentions of these parties were questioned. While there was an existing left cultural front in the early 2000s in the form of several troupes who performed across the state, a separate cultural formation with the name *Dhoom Dham* was created by Rasamayi Balakishan and Antudupula Nagaraju, along with a host of other cultural groups, with the specific objective of fighting for the cause of a separate state for Telangana. One of the earliest performances dates back to 2003 (Srinivas 191).

S.V. Srinivas observes that the musical heritage that was showcased in *Dhoom Dham* was created by the Naxalite movement, and drew from the folk idiom of the region, which itself had a long history starting in the 1940s with the folk troupe *Praja Natya Mandali*. This then slowly grew into a distinct genre of political-cultural performance that spread across the Telangana region and even to the Telangana diaspora who conducted their own *Dhoom Dham* events (Srinivas 191). A typical *Dhoom Dham* event presents several folk-art forms all native to the Telangana region, including *oggu katha*, *golla suddulu*<sup>6</sup>, and protest songs. These are interspersed with speeches, sometimes by the artists and sometimes by the politicians who are present at the event. The revolutionary potential of *Dhoom Dham* can be understood through the tenets of Brechtian Epic Theater.

This article therefore explores the residual and emergent cultural formations that led to the emergence of a composite art form like *Dhoom Dham*. It asks how one might situate *Dhoom Dham* in the history of left protest music in India and the world. It examines the relationship between the aesthetics and politics of *Dhoom Dham*.

The first section outlines a brief socio-economic and historical overview of the Telangana movement. The second section periodizes the residuality of *Dhoom Dham* through a history of protest music in the region. This section engages with the work of Gaddar, and traces the journey of a protest song as it is used in different contexts of the movement. The third section engages with the critical and subversive potential of the art form and its similarities with Brechtian epic theater. This section also explores the views of Walter Benjamin on art, politics, and Brechtian Theater. The article as a whole also employs as objects of analysis popular songs from the movement, recorded *Dhoom Dham* performances, and speeches by prominent artists who participated in the movement. The article's focus is on tracing the residues of left cultural movements in *Dhoom Dham*. Nevertheless, the article acknowledges the myriad local contexts that shaped the Telangana Movement.

### **Periodizing *Dhoom Dham***

Analyzing *Dhoom Dham* only based on the Telangana political Movement would lead us to insights that would not be fully historically and materially informed. A *longue-durée* approach will result in a more nuanced analysis and will situate *Dhoom Dham* in the larger history of left protest traditions. Though one cannot use the term *longue durée* in the grand Braudelian sense for the history of protest music in Telangana, the term does capture the transhistorical nature of it. One can draw connections between the people's songster movement in the United States (Lieberman 87), Brechtian interventions in theater, and the anti-fascist, anti-feudal nature of the Telangana IPTA-inspired cultural protest music, traces of which can be identified within the *Dhoom Dham* performances during the Telangana Movement. The common thread is the Marxist aesthetic influence on these protest traditions. Dwelling on the temporality of the Telangana Movement takes us to several historical moments—the anti-fascist grassroots movement in India, the anti-feudal peasant uprisings, the anti-colonial freedom struggle, the struggle for resources following the linguistic reorganization of states, the Naxalite movement, the formation of new states, globalization, sub-nationalism: all these events happened over more than half a century—from the 1940s to 2014—until the Telangana State was formed. This article focuses on the potential *longue-durée* possibilities of the continuation of the left protest tradition in the form of artists and songs. Telangana has a long history of left cultural presence. In this section we focus on the cultural movement of the left, outlining a brief history of this movement starting from the socialist realist aesthetic in the region, to the present state of the art form *Dhoom Dham*.

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<sup>6</sup> *Oggu Katha* is a folk performance where the artists narrate the stories of deities Mallanna, Beerappa, and Yellappa. *Golla Suddalu* is a folk form patronized and adapted by the *Jana Natya Mandali* (JNM) in the Telangana region, in which artists dress up like shepherds and narrate folk tales.

### **IPTA—The Anti-Fascist and Anti-Colonial Movements**

The edifice on which *Dhoom Dham* stands today was not built overnight, it rests on the foundations that were laid over the decades by several left cultural organizations and pre-colonial peasant rebellions. As early as the nineteenth century, folk songs were used to describe the conditions of the peasants (Thirumali 72). In the 1940s, the communist party of India led the peasant rebellion in the Telangana region by organizing the landless agricultural peasantry against their feudal landlords (Haragopal 54). To this end, they also mounted a cultural movement. The mid-1930s and the 1940s were the years when the question of realist art was discussed seriously among Marxist circles in India, and this came to be a dominant aesthetic that shaped organizations like the *Progressive Writers Association* (PWA). Both the Marxist-influenced and anti-fascist sentiments of World War Two led to the rise of progressive movements in Indian cultural circles. The *Indian People's Theater Association* (IPTA) was founded in 1943 as the theater component of the PWA (Sundar 130). The need for a vehicle to promote a culture of protest owing to the emerging anti-colonial, anti-fascist and anti-feudal sentiments of the 1940s opened up the performative space of IPTA. The IPTA brought about radical changes in both the content and the structure of theater in India through an ingenious combination of vernacular folk performative traditions and left politics. The communist party started its anti-fascist cultural movement in the Andhra/ Telangana region using the folk-art form of *Burra Katha*. Richmond observes that the IPTA was very successful in taking the left movement to the people and away from the bourgeoisie, and in places like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, they employed local folk-art forms like *Burra Katha* to great effect (Richmond 324).

Writing on the history of left cultural movements in the Andhra region, Ramakrishna observes that the Bolshevik Revolution's influence was felt in the emergence of popular-cultural forms in the 1930s inspired by folk traditions, when theater was transformed to suit the practical needs of performing in village squares (Ramakrishna 22). This left cultural surge was happening in America as well, and the communist-led movement of the 1930s and 40s developed the most elaborate and extensive cultural infrastructure compared with any other movement in American history, pushing folk music into the collective conscious by making it a genre of popular music (Roy 86).

In the same decade and during the Telangana armed struggle, the folk troupe *Praja Natya Mandali* (PNM)<sup>7</sup> became very popular with the stage play *Maa Bhumi*, written by Sunkara and Vasireddy, which was also later made into a feature film. PNM's artists included people from all walks of life—middle, lower-middle and poor peasantry, though the main organizers belonged to an urban educated class. The activities of PNM came to a halt in 1948 when they were banned.

Kurra Jitendra Babu charts a brief history of the *Praja Natya Mandali* in the 1940s and one of the themes that these agit-prop folk performances explored was the anti-fascist struggle during the Second World War, with plays such as *Hitler Bhagavatham*,<sup>8</sup> and *Cripps Rayabaram*<sup>9</sup> (12). *Hitler Bhagavatham* was performed in the folk genre of *Veedhi Bhagavatham*, which can be loosely translated as "street theater". The subject matter and the form of these plays indicate the transnational nature of the social causes that these cultural forms were fighting for.

### **Jana Natya Mandali (JNM)**

As mentioned above, in 1969, the first phase of the Telangana Movement began with an agitation started by students, who were later joined by government employees. This was also the time when the Naxalite movement took shape, responding to the unresolved question of land reforms, while calling for radical agrarian changes (Haragopal 54). To support the left movement, *Jana Natya Mandali* (JNM) was formed with a group of twenty members in 1972. It was closely associated with the then Communist Party of India. JNM took the message of the movement to every village in Telangana through their song-and-dance performances, which were adapted from local folk forms like *Oggukatha* and *Golla Suddulu*.

Organizations like JNM went to the people, learnt their art forms, and then made them amenable to the cause of revolution. In doing so, they also became a living, breathing archive of people's art forms, which otherwise would have been lost to the dominant media. Venugopal observes that this

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<sup>7</sup> While this paper highlights only a few organizations, there are other groups associated with left politics that also performed. For instance, *Arunodaya Troupe*, led by folk artist Vimalakka, remains the voice of protest even until this date.

<sup>8</sup> A street play against the fascist rule of Hitler.

<sup>9</sup> A street play based on the Cripps Mission of 1942 led by senior minister Sir Stafford Cripps to secure Indian support to Britain's World War II efforts.

also meant that members of JNM had to unlearn their petite-bourgeoise perspectives and learn the idiom of the people (Venugopal 150).

### ***Dhoom Dham***

Eyerman and Jamison observe that social movements can open up spaces for the emergence of novel artistic expressions, and tend to draw from preexisting forms of culture, social solidarity, and communication (7). They observe that social movements are potential sites of emergent cultural formations, through which aspects of residual subcultures could be transformed into forces for transformation (164). *Dhoom Dham* can be classified as an emergent cultural formation, which provides an alternative vision to the dominant cultural apparatus during the second phase of the Telangana Movement. It also rejuvenated and repurposed the residual formation of left protest movements, which in itself was an emergent cultural formation at a different period in the history of the region's left protest culture. In the early years of the second phase of the Telangana Movement, *Dhoom Dham* countered the dominant media of the time, which was predominantly owned by Andhra Capitalists, whose interests were antithetical to the very existence of the movement (Inukonda 18). By creating an alternative space, *Dhoom Dham* enabled the creation of a revolutionary counterculture.

Raymond Williams observes that residual cultural forms are still active in present cultural processes. These processes are elaborated through the presence of artists like Gaddar and songs like "Bandenaka," discussed in this section of the paper. Another observation that is relevant to *Dhoom Dham* is that the idea of a rural community is predominantly residual and is oppositional to urban industrial capitalism (Williams). *Dhoom Dham* has a very distinctive rural residual affect, and runs counter to the dominant cultural aesthetic of the time. The folk aesthetic brings it closer to the audience. The success of *Dhoom Dham* was in its grassroots approach of going to villages and performing. This can be read as the residual idea of *Gramalaku Taralandi* (Go to the Villages), or the program of JNM to go to villages and take the revolutionary message there (Prakash 248). As the example of *Dhoom Dham* illustrates, the cultural aspects of a movement often outlive the movement itself and are inherited by subsequent social movements (Lieberman 14).

*Dhoom Dham* performances invariably included an elaborate performance describing rural life and culture. Later, during the second phase of Telangana Movement, *Dhoom Dham* used a very distinctive left protest music idiom. During several points in the history of Telangana, the aims of the protest music shifted based on the contextual factors of the time. First, it was against feudal landlords, then the Indian state, then against the Andhra Capitalists.

The affect produced by *Dhoom Dham* has a rich prehistory, given that *Dhoom Dham* has always been about the emotion it evokes. This is invoked by narration of the troubled history of the region, remembering the martyrs of the first phase of the movement both in the form of speeches and songs. For instance, the song "*palle kanneeru peduthundho*" ("The Village is in Tears") discusses the oppression faced by the villagers of Telangana. The history of the left cultural movements is written into *Dhoom Dham*, both in its form and content. There is practically no *Dhoom Dham* event that does not evoke this prehistory. For instance, every *Dhoom Dham* event starts with a eulogy to the martyrs, referring to all the people who died for the cause of Telangana (Balakishan). The invocation of "*Lal Salaam*"<sup>10</sup> in these eulogies means they are also drawing from the Naxalite movement, which is an integral part of the Telangana movement.

*Dhoom Dham* is therefore a palimpsest, both ideologically and culturally, with a range of influences that make it a difficult object of analysis. The residual nature of the left cultural movements remains in *Dhoom Dham* through different means. The costume used by the lead singers – *Gochi, Gongali, Gajje* (loin cloth, blanket, and anklet) remains the same and contains a residue of both the left cultural movement and folk traditions. This was JNM's adopted costume for all its performances originating from the folk form of *golla suddulu*, which continued with *Dhoom Dham*, irrespective of the content of the performance. When they are performing in a *Dhoom Dham*, the members of the left cultural troupes use a red cloth as a part of their performance. Apart from the costume, there are individuals who have continued from the past movements into the Telangana Movement, and there are songs that have moved from one movement to another. Balladeers and revolutionaries like Gaddar were the portals for these songs, allowing them to move from one movement to the next.

<sup>10</sup> *Lal Salaam* (Red Salute) is the greeting used by the communist-party members in the Indian subcontinent.

### **Gaddar : A Transhistorical Figure**

Gaddar is a prominent poet-balladeer and revolutionary from the Telangana region who continues to play an active role in the cultural politics of the region. Gaddar is the popular stage name of Gummadi Vittal Rao, who is also one of the founding members of the Jana Natya Mandali (JNM) (Kumar 61). Gaddar and JNM were able to reach out to sections of society whose concerns were not addressed by earlier movements. They offered an alternative modelling of cultural labor (Prakash 276). Gaddar was active in Telangana left protest cultures since the 1970s. He personifies the Benjaminian idea of art and its political import. His presence in *Dhoom Dham* exemplifies its revolutionary streak, and brings the radical political nature of the left protest tradition into the Telangana Movement. Through JNM, he was responsible for the politicization of folk forms and created a whole new revolutionary idiom. He is prescient, and his observations are never limited to the immediate conditions in which his cultural politics took shape. Gaddar is also a transhistorical icon whose presence gives a structure to the movement and situates it in the *longue durée*. He was a part of numerous movements in the history of Telangana and carries forward the baton. In his speeches, using a dialectical approach, he lays bare the larger factors that led to structural oppression of the Telangana movement and points to the continuities in oppression that he has witnessed given the knowledge and lived experience he has accrued over the years.

Gaddar evokes the crucial moments of the history of Telangana in his *Dhoom Dham* performances. He performs in his signature style, interspersing songs with sharp political speeches. His contributions give a historical depth to the movement and make it much more affective. Such historical invocation means that the song (and therefore the movement) is not shallow. A *Dhoom Dham* performance captures the *longue durée* of the history of left protest music in the Telangana region, with a focus on the social and individual aspects of historical time. In his speeches, he always discusses the importance of understanding the effects of capitalism and globalization, and their connection to the oppression of the Telangana people. In a 2012 speech (Gaddar), he highlighted the role of capitalism, foreign direct investment, and the tactics of the state to suppress dissenting voices, and the important role of direct political action: "*Telangana anetidi, nuvvu international situation lo petti chusthene ardhama avuthadi*" ("One can understand the Telangana movement only if it is placed in an international context," Gaddar).

Gaddar observes that formation of a separate state is linked with the global politics of capitalism, imperialism, national and regional politics. He keenly observes that the mode of production has changed from feudalism to capitalism. He also notes that political debates should have a continuity and cannot end. He observes that wherever there are resources, there will be powerful settlers (from the Andhra region) who own the means of production and resources; whenever there are powerful settlers there is the possibility of oppression. He notes that this is a structural violence that is taking place on the people of Telangana.

### **A Transhistorical Revolutionary Song**

There are a few songs in the long history of left protest tradition in Telangana that struck a chord with the people and became popular, and were used with minor changes at different crucial historical junctures over the years. These songs exemplify the *longue-durée* possibilities of left cultural protest traditions. This section will trace the journey of one such song.

The following song was penned during the Telangana armed struggle of the 1940s, led by peasants and organized by the communist party. It is one of the most popular songs to come out of the movement (Shaw 154).

*Bandenaka Bandi Katti*  
*Padaharu Bandlu Katti*  
*Eebandlo vasthav koduko*  
*Naizamu Sarkaroda*  
*Nazilanu minchinavuro*  
*Naizamu sarkaroda..*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> This part of the song translates as "Cart after cart, you have a convoy of sixteen carts, in which cart are you going to come son, the one from the Nizam government, you have surpassed Nazis in your oppression."

The song was penned by Bandi Yadagiri, who was a member of the communist party. The third line of the song translates as "the atrocities of Nizam have exceeded that of the Nazis." This line from the song indicates the anti-fascist consciousness that was a result of the Communist Party of India's cultural movement in the Andhra and Telangana areas of the Madras Presidency. This song has, over the years, been repurposed by changing the name of the oppressor in several different versions. It was originally written by Yadagiri keeping in mind the Nizam, and (according to other accounts) the tyrannical landlord of the Visunuru village. The same song was also sung against other feudal landlords. During the second phase of the Telangana Movement, this song was also used to expose the hypocrisy of elected representatives using the word MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly).

Each time the song is reimagined, the referent keeps changing—from the Nizam to the landlord to MLA. The historical context of the song can be determined via the reference to the oppressor. Each adaptation set the "cognitive praxis" (Eyerman and Jamison 23) to frame the movement. This term is used by Eyerman and Jamison to capture the ways in which artists and songs can take the form of Kuhnian (paradigm constituting) entities that realign the consciousness of a social movement. Gaddar and the *Bandenaka* song can be described as such entities. These minor changes in the lyrics of the songs periodize the turbulent past of the region, the collective consciousness of the people, and the movements that were born out of these conditions. The song also keeps track of the change in the oppressor over the years, and provides a transhistorical view of the struggles of the people of the region. It is pertinent that the comparison to the Nazis is etched in stone for all future movements as well.

### **The Politics and Aesthetics of *Dhoom Dham*—A Benjaminian-Brechtian Approach**

"This is the situation of politics which fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art." Walter Benjamin.

In the previous section, we analyzed the residual and emergent cultural formations in *Dhoom Dham* in the context of the Telangana Movement. This section will delve deeper into the transnational character of the inspiration for these residual forms that were identified in the form of left cultural influences, particularly that of Bertolt Brecht. We will also draw similarities between the epic-theater form of Brecht and *Dhoom Dham* to get a better sense of the politics and aesthetics of *Dhoom Dham*. To this end, a Benjaminian approach to Brecht will be adopted, based on Benjamin's essay "What is Epic Theatre?" Stanley Mitchell, in his introduction to Benjamin's writings on Brecht, observes that the collaboration between Brecht and Benjamin could be considered one of the classic partnerships of the revolutionary socialist movement. The spread of street theater and agitprop across the world likewise vindicate Benjamin's and Brecht's views of such theater (Mitchell).

The establishment of the PWA and IPTA were a result of the Paris International Symposium of Writers for the Defense of Culture against Fascism held in 1935 which was attended by Brecht, Maxim Gorky, E.M. Forster, and others. One of the founders of the PWA, Mulk Raj Anand, also attended the symposium and in 1936, back in Lucknow, India they inaugurated their All India Writer's Association, which then was renamed PWA. Their manifesto stated:

We believe that the new literature must deal with the basic problems of our existence today—the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and unreason, we reject as reactionary—all that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs, in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive. (Allana 122)

The IPTA represented the shift away from an entertainment model to a form of political theater and "this new theatre, with all its political energy, created the ideal cradle for Brecht" (Prateek 36). Brechtian theater<sup>12</sup> in India was repurposed to suit the needs of a post-colonial state. In later years, cultural formations like *Jana Natya Manch*<sup>13</sup> performed Brechtian plays in spaces like working-class neighborhoods, university campuses, factories, and during electoral campaigns (Da Costa 123).

While discussing the role of art and politics in Brechtian theater, Mitchell observes that to adopt a proletarian character, art should not be a mystery and that the stage should appear with all of its

<sup>12</sup> Much has been written about the influence of Brecht on Indian theater traditions (Banerjee, Dalmia, Prateek).

<sup>13</sup> *Jana Natya Manch* is the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India and has been the pioneering force in the street-theater movement in India.

machinery exposed (xvi). Benjamin in his essay "Author as Producer" similarly observes that a progressive kind of writer works in the interest of the proletariat (86). In that sense, the original intent of *Dhoom Dham* is progressive; its art is very approachable and its sympathies are always with the oppressed.

### **Brechtian Aesthetics and *Dhoom Dham***

Benjamin in his essay "What is Epic Theater" observes that Brechtian epic theater wanted to bring about fundamental changes to the functional relationships between text and performance, producer and actor, stage and public, producers and actors. The stage according to Benjamin becomes a convenient public exhibition area where the audience is not a hypnotized test subject but an "assembly of interested persons" whose demands it must satisfy: "Epic theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather, it discloses, it uncovers them" (100). One can draw parallels between Brecht's epic theatre and *Dhoom Dham* in terms of what they set out to achieve and also their form. They are didactic instruments which aim at political action by invoking the critical faculties of the audience.

In a *Dhoom Dham* performance, the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* is sometimes achieved through the lead performer interrupting a performance and asking a few critical political questions.<sup>14</sup> One common performance piece in most *Dhoom Dham* is a folk song depicting village life. At the end of the performance, the lead performer interrupts it, while the performance on stage is transformed into a tableau. Now the performer makes a few comments: "Who made our villages cry? Until we separate from the people who made our villages cry there is no respite" (Balakishan). The interruption serves two purposes – it encourages the audience to think about the issue being discussed. It also makes the performance more powerful as it now crosses the realm of aesthetics and moves towards politics.

The folk forms from which the idiom of *Dhoom Dham* evolved ensure that the artists on stage are not acting a role but trying to propose what Benjamin would call "theses for comment" (2). Every single issue is laid bare and discussed in the crudest possible terms, without mincing any words: erasures of history are recounted, the oppressors and turncoats called out, future courses of action are proposed. Given the long struggle, speeches and songs are modified to present the latest happenings pertinent to the movement.

The performances of *Dhoom Dham* also elicit a revolutionary energy in the space of the performance and in the mind-space of the audience, and this is done not merely through the performance, but also by providing very rational arguments, and breaking down complex structural oppressional elements into simple evocative phrases that are masterfully embedded in song. While a Brechtian theatrical ideal would recommend only thought and not affect, because the latter might overpower the former, *Dhoom Dham* achieves both because a soulful performance of a song is followed by a stirring speech, and in some instances the speech and the song flow into each other. In one *Dhoom Dham* performance (Gaddar), Gaddar and Rasamayi discuss and critique the present state of the movement, and break into a song-and-dance routine. Benjamin observes that 'functional transformation' – the transformation of concert music into a political meeting requires help from the word (96). This help in the case of *Dhoom Dham* comes from the speeches and the lyrics of the songs.

Benjamin goes on to note that the habitue of Brechtian epic theater is not the bourgeoisie, but the proletariat (6). The habitue of *Dhoom Dham* is also the people of Telangana, those marginalized by caste, class, and regional differences. The artists in *Dhoom Dham* are also from the marginalized castes (*Sabbanda Varnalu*).<sup>15</sup> *Dhoom Dham* is an articulation and an appeal for social justice for the marginalized castes, Adivasis, and religious minorities that constitute 90% of the Telangana population (Inukonda 40).

In his study on Brechtian aesthetics in India, Prateek observes that Indian folk traditions also contributed to the evolution of Brechtian aesthetics (8). The left cultural organizations, as discussed in this article, also employ folk-art forms and politicize them, and what transpires is a composite radical art form that stands for social change, with the Brechtian aesthetic creating new sites of resistance and a transcultural dialogue. Thus, Benjamin's reflections on Brechtian theater provide a valuable framework to understand and explore progressive cultural formations like *Dhoom Dham* both in terms of form and content.

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<sup>14</sup> One of the central tenets of Brechtian theater loosely translated as "Alienation Effect."

<sup>15</sup> *Sabbanda Varnalu* refers to the marginalized castes and is a commonly used word in Telangana by the government in its official communication, and artists in their songs and speeches.

## Conclusion

Omvedt, in her analysis of social movements in India, observes that the movements that arose in the late 1980s and early 1990s originated as single-issue movements, but have been increasingly expanding, overlapping, and engaging in mutual dialogue, to encompass many different ideologies and campaigns (36).<sup>16</sup> This perspective helps us to understand the dialogue between the different stages in the Telangana movement and the changes in song lyrics that exemplify this. The Telangana movement is a combination of a communist movement for land rights, a movement against settler-colonialism, neo-liberalism, and capitalism, a movement against feudal caste oppression, and a movement for solidarity across marginalized sections, all in one. *Dhoom Dham's* political communication gets its affective edge from all these movements, and it brings together artists who are from different life worlds with varying ideologies.

Similarly, the left protest movements, starting from IPTA, Praja Natya Mandali, Jana Natya Mandali, and the efforts of many artists like Gaddar from the left cultural movement, laid the cultural infrastructure, created an idiom, an audience, and a form which later movements like the Telangana *Dhoom Dham* capitalized on. *Dhoom Dham's* success and popularity was in part due to the decades of work put in by left cultural organizations in Telangana, which already created a grassroots audience for this genre of performance. This also explains why many folk artists, despite not belonging to left cultural organizations directly, still adopted the costume and idiom of the latter even when their goal was the separate state of Telangana, and when they were not necessarily aligned to any left political ideology. Ultimately, *Dhoom Dham* can be read as a reactivated and repurposed composite cultural form which was successful and achieved its goal. In an event celebrating *Dhoom Dham's* ten-year anniversary, a prominent young poet, Mittapalli Surrender, observes that without the existence and success of this art form and its political message, the Telangana Movement would not exist (Mittapalli).

This paper argues that the cultural form of *Dhoom Dham* can be understood as a progressive protest art form which can be situated within global Marxist protest-music traditions that have drawn heavily from local folk cultures, as they have evolved into newer and more affective forms. The arguments made in the paper do not claim that *Dhoom Dham* is solely based on left protest music traditions; the idea is to also acknowledge the dialogue that the left protest music traditions had with local movements that had different goals, as demonstrated in our analysis of the song *Bandenaka* and the section on Gaddar, whose towering presence in *Dhoom Dham* married his experiences with the Naxalite movement.

After the formation of the Telangana State, some of the artists who participated in the movement were employed by the government under their cultural apparatus. In addition, a split occurred among the artists on party lines, with some artists performing for the ruling party and other artists performing on behalf of opposition parties. Some artists, like Vimalakka who belong to left cultural organizations, continue their revolutionary streak. *Dhoom Dham* performances are still organized across the state of Telangana to oppose the exploitative practices of the current establishment.

*Dhoom Dham* is also unique in its solidarity with marginalized castes, and it brought to the forefront the caste question, which is at the center of the region's oppression, while the earlier left movements did not confront caste directly as their focus was on class relations.<sup>17</sup> Immediately after the formation of the Telangana State in 2014, in a function that celebrated the formation of Telangana and the role of *Dhoom Dham*, Rasamayi, the founder of *Dhoom Dham*, reiterated the caste solidarity and the relevance of *Sabbanda Varnas* to the movement even after the formation of Telangana. He raises the question: "Why can't we be politicians? What is wrong if artists have political ambitions" (Balakishan). These words were facilitated by the success of *Dhoom Dham* and the movement after the formation of the separate state of Telangana.

Coming to the situation in contemporary Telangana, allegations that were made regarding Andhra settlers during the Telangana Movement are now being made against the dominant ruling party members, both in terms of issues of land use and the undemocratic means of control. Things have come full circle in terms of the owners of the means of production—from feudal landlords, to Andhra settler colonialists, to the reign of *Dora*.<sup>18</sup> Whether it is Brecht's epic theater or the long cultural

<sup>16</sup> Omvedt refers to the Dalit and anti-caste movement, the women's movement, environmental movements, and the peasant's movements on market-production issues, all of which happened during the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>17</sup> Individuals like Gaddar addressed the question in their individual capacity.

<sup>18</sup> The present Chief Minister is referred to as *Dora* (signifier used for feudal landlords) by the opposing parties and leaders of the marginalized caste groups.

movement for a separate Telangana State in the form of *Dhoom Dham*, folk performers continue to articulate and oppose the oppression that originates from different versions of capitalism, feudalism, and fascism today.

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