

Evolution of Street Theatre as a tool of Political Communication

Sangita De

&

Priyam Basu Thakur

Abstract

In the post Russian Revolution age a distinct form of theatrical performance emerged as a Street Theatre. Street theatre with its political sharpness left a crucial effect among the working class people in many corner of the world with the different political circumstances. In India a paradigm shift from proscenium theatre to the theatre of the streets was initiated by the anti-fascist movement of communist party of India under the canopy of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). In North India Street theatre was flourished by Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) with the leadership of Safdar Hashmi. This paper will explore the background of street theatre in India and its role in political communication with special reference to historical and analytical study of the role of IPTA, JANAM etc.

Keywords: Street Theatre, Brecht, Theatre of the Oppressed, Communist Party of India (CPI), IPTA, JANAM, Safdar Hashmi, Utpal Dutta.

Introduction

Scholars divided the history of theatre forms into the pre-Christian era and Christian era. *Aristotle's* view about the structure of theatre was based on Greek tragedy. According to the scholar Alice Lovelace "*He conceived of a theatre to carry the world view and moral values of those in power, investing their language and symbols with authority and acceptance. Leaving the masses (parties to the conflict) to take on the passive role of audience.....The people watch and through the emotions of pity & grief, suffer with him.*" Bertolt Brecht expressed strong disagreement with the Aristotelian concept of catharsis. He raised the question about the relationship of stage and audience. He opined that audience should react

with their intellect not with emotion. African-American writer & actor *John O'Neal* was highly influenced by the thinking of Brecht. In the year of 1963 O'Neal, *Tom Dent and Gilbert Moss* established *Free Southern Theatre* in New Orleans which was an inspiration for those who supported Civil Rights Movement. From the post WWII era the conception of Theatre for Development (TFD) emerged. In 1970 Brazilian educator and philosopher *Paulo Freire* published his notable book *Pedagogy of Oppressed*. Brazilian theatre artist and political activist *Augusto Boal* was highly motivated by the critical pedagogy of his country mate Paulo Freire and obviously by the the philosophy of Brecht. He outlined the remarkable theory the "*Theater of the Oppressed*" in 1979. Today's street theatre is intensely influenced by the conception of Theatre of Oppressed proposed by Paulo Freire.

Genesis of street theatre as a distinct theatrical form

History was witnessed street theatre as a major component of urban life in London approximately from the period of 1500-1642. According to the theatre historians street theatre was exist during the French Revolution (1789-1799) in France. Historians also mention about the Walnut Street Theatre of Philadelphia in USA near about 18th century. But Russian Revolution left a powerful impact on modern street theatre. The eminent personality of street theatre in India Safdar Hashmi wrote in an article *The First Ten Years of Street Theatre: October 1978- October 1988* –

"Street theatre as it is known today can trace its direct lineage no further than the years immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917.....This was a beginning of a new type of agitprop theatre performed on the streets, at factory gates, markets, dockyards, playgrounds, barnyards and so on."

He gave the example of China where Communist Party used street theatre to mobilize the workers and peasants. Like its birthplace in Russia, this was later spread in the USA, Cuba, Sweden, Spain, and Africa and all over the Latin America. Hashmi also commented that within a few years along with the Soviet, street theatre expanded its foot-hold in all over the world.

Historical perspective of theatre in political communication: Indian experience

In the year 1859 Dinabandhu Mitra wrote *Nil Darpan* (The Mirror of Indigo Planters). India's first significant political drama perfectly portrayed the actual situation and exploitation of

poor indigo planters. Nil Darpan was first staged in Dacca in 1861. It was the first anti-British production and purely political in nature which created public opinion against the British rulers. After the acceptance of Nil Darpan by different levels of society a specific trend was formed. Some prominent drama of that period was *Zamindar Darpan* by Mir Massarraf Hosan, Tea Planter's Mirror and Jel Darpan by Dakshinaranjan Chattopadhaya. At the same time a considerable number of nationalistic theatres performed in North India, Maharashtra, Assam, Mysore, Andhra Pradesh etc. All this theatrical representation was helped in creating an anti-british standpoint. As a result British Govt. imposed The Dramatic performance Act 1876 to suppress the freedom of Indian theatrical sphere. Theatre also left a major impression during the anti-partition movement in Bengal (1905-1911). Another important example of theatre in political communication was an IPTA production of 1944 - Nabanna (Harvest) written by Bijan Bhattacharya. Based on severity of Bengal famine (1943) it became a landmark in Bengali theatrical space. Many thespians divided the timeline of Bengali theatre in two categories – pre-nabanna and post-nabanna theatre

Street theatre in political communication: Indian experience

Street theatre adopted its political nature from its inception stage. The root of street theatre in India was strongly related with the anti-fascist political ideology of the leftists and the progressive political theatre in the '40's in Kolkata'. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed as the cultural front of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1942. The street theatre movement in India began with IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). Subir Ghosh in his book *Mass Communication: an Indian Perspective* stated that -

“The structure of street theatre in India has been greatly influenced by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) 'Epic Theatre, British producer Peter Brook's (1925-) 'Rough Theatre' and Badal Sircar's (1925-) 'Third Theatre'.”

Jana Natya Manch of Safdar Hashmi played a very significant role in promoting street theatre in India. He utilized street theatre as a weapon for political responsiveness of poor mass.

Veteran theatre activist Utpal Dutta successfully applied street theatre and he also took street theatre for political campaign during the general elections of 1950's and 1960's. *Samajtantrik chal, din bodoler pala, kalo hat, Chargesheet* etc. were his remarkable works in the context of street theatre.

Student Federation also employed street theatre for election campaign. *Japan k rukhte hobe* (1938) was a very popular street theatre led by Student Federation.

Praja Natya Mandali established in 1942 and it was the cultural squad of IPTA which operated in Andhra Pradesh. It applied the theme of Burrakatha, folk form of that region with street theatre. They raised voice against the atrocities on working class and highlighted peasant struggle of Telangana by their performances. Their innovative excellence owned immense popularity.

During the 21 month span of internal emergency (25th June, 1975-21st March, 1977) Indian citizen experienced the darkest chapter of democracy. All fundamental civil rights were suspended. Many street Theatre activists in different parts of the country were attacked, imprisoned, and even killed by police and political hooligans.

Indian theatre and various forms and genres generates all kinds of cultural varieties identifies the plurality and diversity of the country. But it always presents some kind of interconnectedness, commonality across the regional, linguistic, and cultural boundaries in its orientation- specifically contemporary social-cultural and political significance. Street theatre is one of such art forms.

Political ideologies in various art forms and emergence of IPTA:

The use political propaganda through cultural performances of theatre became very popular and used both by nationalist and social reformers for communicating messages to large audiences like Guntur *Sarasa Vinodini Sangam's* a political social drama on life of Tilak and Gandhi. In Madras city, S. Satyamurthy, supporter of the performing art, creatively used this art for national purpose to voice for the freedom in a way of popular art form. The popular theatre introduced political comments and symbols of nationalism which was taken to the interior corners of the country and these trends intensified vastly by the execution of Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries. National also appreciated the work of the theater in the Nation's cause.

Those theatre groups which earlier from 1930s staged religious, mythological plays started performing plays on the theme of self rule through the symbols like *Charka, Khaddar*. To suit the local contexts and circumstances the innovations and varied forms as folk music,

ballads, *Harikatha*, street plays, with social political themes were performed to reach wider audience.

Another theatrical form Pin Pattu was used as a backbone of stage performances for political propaganda. This form was used during picketing activities.

During 1920s, the left came in the political scenario of India as a dominant socio - political group. With its Marxist socialist ideology, it emphasized on the mobilization various sectors of society especially workers and peasants. Their emergence changed the thinking of all the sections of society beyond imagination through their anti- colonialism radical ideologies. The political - economic circumstances of the time also had intense influence on the aesthetic and artistic perception.

The Cultural Movement linked with these circumstances, developed not only in urban areas of Eastern India but also in the distant corner of Bengal, Assam, Manipur. The localized spontaneous activities led to the formation of a central organization - Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

An Anti - Fascist people's war line (to support British war efforts) was adopted after much debate by the CPI after Germany's attack on Russia in 1941. The imperialist war transformed into people's war for Communist Party of India (CPI). They were disseminating pro war propaganda and anti fascist resistance. Though intellectuals and educated sections can realize their ideologies, it was incomprehensible to the mass. And for gaining support for their war thesis they formed various cultural organizations with the active participation of well known intellectuals, writers, artists, etc. to disseminate message to the mass.

In these years Marxism gained a significant influence over the cultural life of the middle class of Kolkata. With the intensification of Japanese aggression in east Bengal the cultural squads were set up by the party to mobilize the masses to anti-Fascist-Nationalist. Anti Japanese people's play, anti-Fascist songs (in the form of Kabigan by Nibaran Pandit), and plays were organized by Anti Fascist Writers and Artist Association in the remote areas of Bengal. These localized cultural effort used for political mobilization gained momentum and appealed immensely the politically oriented audience.

Culture squads and touring squads by a Student squad from Calcutta visited inner most districts of Bengal in 1942 and in Assam and produced cultural performance for propagation of messages for generating awareness among less conscious people.

Local cultural units were also formed from among the urban workers and they used folk forms of *Jarigan*, *palakirtan* to disseminate the political messages.

Plays with anti-Fascist Nationalist theme by Anil D' Silva in Bengal and Bombay women's squad performances on Bhagat Singh's Martyrdom showed similar effort from outside Bengal. These local performances communicated political messages very effectively to the various sections of people.

Famine of Bengal in 1942 inspired many progressive writers and artists Bengal cultural squad organized by Binoy Roy performed on the impact of famine on the people and for relief work to collect money for the victims. This squad travelled throughout the country and presented performance „*Bhookha Hai Bengal*'. Usha Dutta was part of the squad. The Central squad visited Punjab in Nov. 1943 and an another squad which visited Bombay Gujarat Maharashtra in April 1944 raised considerable amount of fund for relief work. *Bhookha Hoon*”, a play by Binoy Roy and Usha Dutta's *Hunger dance generate sympathy for Bengal in those areas.*

Other cultural groups were also formed. The efforts of the youth cultural institute of Calcutta in 1940-42, was setting up of people's theatre at Bangalore by Anil' Silva in 1941, who also assisted in formation of people's theatre in Bombay in 1942. These various progressive cultural groups and theater groups functioned successfully in disseminating messages and to organize these cultural activities at National level. P.C. Joshi, the then secretary of the CPI, played an important role and Sajjad Zahir also contributed in the formation of Indian people's theatre Association in 1943.

From 1942-46, the influence of communist grew in the certain areas of national struggle and for theatre movement (IPTA) it was also the period of growth. As a cultural wing of the CPI, IPTA succeeded in the promoting of radical nationalist consciousness. Folk forms were widely used for promoting consciousness. Various innovative forms and subjects were used by the organization to reach out to the people.

IPTA vastly used traditional folk forms like “Burakatha”, “Veethi Natakam”, “Harikatha”, “Yakshagana” in Andhra Pradesh, Tamasha(Aklechi Goshte-A Tale of Wisdom in 1944 by Annabhav Sathe) in Maharashtra, etc.(Richmond, 1973: 325)

Jyotirmoi Moitras’ *Navjeevaner Gan* (dance drama) with traditional folk form, Dr. Andhra’s *Burrakatha*, *Harikatha*, folkdance of North India, folk songs in Marathi, Magai Ojhas’ Assamese folk instrumental music also found place in the movement. Shadow plays and extempore plays were also experimented during this period.

Street plays based on issues and stories directly concerned with the people such as hunger, famine, poetry, communal violence, feudal and colonial exploitation created impact on the society deeply divided by class, caste and religion through these common grave concerning issues.

IPTA’s central troupe produced dance drama — *Bharat Ki Atma* (Spirit of India)and *Amar Bharat* (India Immortal) . “Spirit of India”had a narrative commentary, composed by Prem Dhawan and sung by Binoy Roy. It depicted misery of the people under imperialism, feudalism and capitalism. The play ended with a note of hope of arousing unity among the people. *Immortal India*, another ballet, narrated the colonial exploitation and suggested possible ways to release from it. *Jabanbandi* — a one act play on famine and *Nabanna* (New Harvest) were the important dramas on theme of Bengal Famine produced by the central unit of IPTA. *Nabanna* is a folk cultural festival of Bengal to celebrate the harvest. This Bengali drama directed by Sombhu Mitra, portrayed the evils of the Bengal famine of 1943 and the shameful indifference of British rulers, and upper strata of the Indian society towards the plight of millions dying from the famine. Thousand of people came to see it in public theaters and also in open –air arenas.

The development of theatre movement was provided by the convening of conferences of different mass organization of the Communists. Two AFWAA conferences were held in Calcutta in 1944-45. At these conferences, Calcutta IPTA performed plays like *Jabnanbandi and Mai Bhookha Hoon*. Kishan Sabha conferences at Bihta in Bihar (1942), Bazwada in Andhra (1944), Natrakona in 1945 were the occasion for cultural performances. These were attended by varying audience.

IPTA started to set up its local branch from 1944 in Calcutta, Mumbai and Assam. Branches of Assam staged plays on Bengal Famine. In Hoogly, Dayal Kumar used *Panchali* form,

Dulal Roy adopted *Kirtan*. Bombay Squad's talented artists Annabhau Sathe and Gavankar, used *Tamasha* and *Powada* forms to disseminate messages among Bombay workers.

IPTA gave new direction to the Indian theatre and bring theatre to the people to generate awareness about social responsibility and national integration. Indian street theatre always has a political orientation and IPTA is a political wing of the communist party and it always gives political messages through its performances besides social- cultural issues. According to Som Benegal in "A Panorama of Theatre of India" that IPTA was -

"Took up issues of social abuse, religious bigotry, political oppression and economic exploitation" (Richmond, 1973:323).

Utpal Dutta is perhaps the most prominent exponent of IPTA. He wrote political plays since 1947 and in early 50s he adopted "pathanatika"(Street corner play) to give messages on communist ideologies. This form of play can be improvised and contemporary in themes. *Chargesheet* (1949) was among the earliest street plays in Calcutta produced by him. This play asked for the release of political prisoners and to support C.P.I. in the 1952 elections in Bengal (Richmond,1973:327). . *Chargesheet* was performed at Hazra Park, Kolkata to an audience of thousands of workers, and later was repeated many times across West Bengal. In terms of form, early street theatre seems to have imitated the stage, with the action often taking place in front of a wall or some other backdrop, and actors entering from and exiting into makeshift wings(). Dutt's other play are "Anger" (coal)in 1960 against unsafe coal mining and consequent labour death, "Teer" (arrow) in 1967 romanticising peasant guerrillas brutalized by the police and soldiers at "Naxalbari" ,a secluded area of Eastern India seems to be refuse for radicals. Dutt's play "Din badaler pala" (Tale of Changing Times', 1967) was a courtroom drama written around the same time against the hypocrisy of the establishment and said about how west Bengal is colonized by New Delhi acting as a foreign agent of America, Soviet Union and Great Britain.

During the 1960s realistic and naturalistic dramas emerged in the theatrical arena. It happened due to contemporary social issues like industrialization and urbanization of vast areas, and consequent changes of village and city life, unequal distribution of wealth, failure of any major economic growth from the period of 1951 to 1979, wars with China and Pakistan, and a huge insurgence of refugees from Bangladesh besides uprising of Naxalite

movement due to the exploitation of the peasants and land labours in almost all over Bengal during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

These momentous events instantly moved middle class, educated, urban intellectuals such as Badal Sircar and found representation on the stage and in the street. In terms of form, Badal Sircar's work had great influence. Abandoning mainstream drama, he went to open-air performance, which communicates directly in a face to face mode with the dissatisfaction working class in an intensely physical style. Although he does not participate in the movement, many street theatre groups benefited from the workshops he held all over the country.

IPTA regularly performed short skits and plays in working class apartment buildings where all the people assembled to watch the performance. One of the few street plays performed was *Shanti Doot Kamgar* (“Working Class: Harbinger of Peace”), inspired the Chinese Revolution and another is Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena’s *Bakri* (“Goat”), based on contemporary politics. With the Naxalbari uprising in Bengal and the Emergency declared by the central government in 1975, the growing intensity of political unrest of the turbulent 1970s was also felt in the movement of street theater. A number of such productions were performed in the streets of India, by artist-activists.

Street theatre performers were attacked by police leading to the death of at least two activists, *Ashis Chatterjee* of Theatre Unit in 1972 and *Prabir Datta* of Silhouette in 1974. Many others were arrested, beaten up, tortured. Bengal continues to have a vibrant tradition with regular shows performed by such persons as *Probir Guha*. Street theatre continued its journey of bringing social change in several other Indian states too. A number of such productions were performed in the streets of India by artist-activists.

Post-independence, with several internal conflicts within the communist movement, IPTA gradually became inactive and dysfunctional. By the late 1950s, it was formally dissolved as a national organisation, but independent states units remain exist.

Jana Natya Mancha (JANAM)

In 1973, when the Delhi branch of IPTA almost became inactive and dysfunctional, a few members came out of it and formed *Jana Natya Manch (JANAM)*. *Safdar Hasmi* was the main exponent of the Mancha. In small groups they went to factory gates and neighbourhoods around the city, collected money and distributed pamphlets and throughout they used to sing. [Hashmi 2007: 78].

Its early plays, though initially designed for the proscenium, were performed on makeshift stages and chaupals in the villages of North India and also in small and big towns. It also then started performing street skits. Its first play was *Mrityur Atit (After Death)*, a Bengali play by *Utpal Dutt*. Then it took *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata*, a satirical play in Hindi by *Ramesh Upadhyay* on the misuse of election machinery and it was shown in the many working class colonies and factory gates and also in colleges, public parks and middle class areas.

JANAM made a short skit called *Kursi Kursi Kursi ("Chair Chair Chair")* in direct response to the judgement of Allahabad High Court of the invalidity of the midterm assembly election which Indira Gandhi wins as a prime minister. The play was about never ending zeal for power at every possible way. An "*elected king who is sitting on a chair and a new king is elected. He gets up from his chair but the chair rises with him and no matter how hard they tried to separate the king from his chair, it was impossible*" [Hashmi 1989:156]. It was their first attempt at street theatre, and they performed it at the Boat Club, then the centre of oppositional activity. On 25 June 1975, Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency. This was a severe attack on civil rights and freedom of speech and expression in the country, and JANAM stopped performing and for the next few months, it remained inactive.

Due to the high cost and resources involved in these full length proscenium plays and unavailability of both necessary money and resources the need for low cost and need based topical theatre was felt. So the transition from proscenium theatre to street theatre happened. The members of JANAM took a decision of writing plays themselves. Its first post-emergency street theatre *Machine* depicts the machinations of the establishment in collusion with the police and security all within 27 minutes. They write it based upon an incident at a chemical factory on the outskirts of Delhi. Six workers were killed in the police firing to stop the agitation between the people hired by the management and on the workers' strike for their demands of a bicycle stand and a canteen. The play used the machine as a metaphor for the system, in which "*five people (three workers, the guard, and the owner) come on and start constructing a machine in motion, making all kinds of sounds,*" after which the worker comes

out of the machine and it stops working. This play is performed for the first time on October 15, 1978, at a meeting of progressive writers.

In December 1978 JANAM prepared a play called *Hatyarey* (“Killers”), which was set in Aligarh and used the metaphor of the lock to explain the interconnectedness of Hindus and Muslims after the communal riots over lock making industry at Aligarh, a town of Uttarpradesh.

On January 1, 1989, an event occurred which the foundations of JANAM and the very art form in the country. In the early winter afternoon, *Janam* was performing their play *Halla Bol* (“Raise Your Voice”) for a group of workers at Jhandapur, Sahibabad, on the outskirts of Delhi, as a part of its campaign to support the CPI (M) in the local election campaign. A candidate from the rival party backed by a gang of hundred goons armed with guns and sticks, ordered JANAM to stop the performance and in consequence Safdar Hashmi was murdered in the agitation.

JANAM continues its performances in working class areas and has developed several new plays over the years, both street and proscenium. It always maintains a close association with the trade union movement. JANAM goes back to Sahibabad, where Safdar Hashmi was murdered, and performs a play, in collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Trade Unions every year on 1st January. It has been a regular event since then and is widely attended by people from all parts of Delhi. It led the movement of Indian street theatre. Till 2002, it had notched up about 7000 performances of fifty-eight street plays, many of them later translated or adapted by groups across south Asia.

Expansion of Work:

In its work, JANAM has never moved away from topics that both reflect and define the experiences of the oppressed sections of society. So far they have produced plays on industrialization, condition of the laborers, price hike, unemployment, government policies, communism, trade union rights, education, women rights, gender issues, globalization etc. Some popular production of street theatres of recent times are - *Yeh Dil Mange More Guruji* on the rigidity of Hindutva to obliterate India’s democratic framework and secularism, *Aakhri Juloos* on the right to protest for all, against injustice, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa*

Hai on growing violence against women, *Honda ka Gunda* on the condition of workers in Gurgaon, *Naarey Nahin To Naatak Nahin* on industrial laborers, *Rehri-patri Nahin Hatenge* on the issues of concern for hawkers' union, *Kafila Ab Chal Pada Hai* on AIDWA)etc. *One Two ka Four* is a reworked version of an earlier play, *Nahi Qubool* is on the nuclear deal; *Yeh Hum Kyon Sahen* is on the conditions of workers in and around Delhi.

Political Significance and Orientation:

“By its very definition, street theater has to be ideologically deep rooted. And politically, it has to be Left wing.” (Deshpande, 2007, p. 64)

The street theatre came specifically from the political orientation of the communist party. It works as a political wing of the left party. Its first such play, *Machine* (1978) is a classic; *Aurat* ('Woman', 1979), *Hallabol* ('Raise your voice', 1988), and *Artanad* ('Scream', 1996, on sexual abuse of children) exemplify a popular political theatre that features direct confrontation and energy as well as artistry.

The prime objective of street theatre specifically JANAM is the upliftment of the working class leading them towards the sphere of mainstream democracy and shaking up establishment. Though it began its journey for presenting their political ideologies through theatrical aesthetics, it uses theatre for generating awareness over each and every social issues and gained wide acclamation of every sectors of the society. It always stand firm on its ideology. Though safdar Hasmi insisted on using both proscenium and street theatre, some of its members like *Habib Tanbir* give more emphasis on street theatre over proscenium theatre as according to him it is more powerful than proscenium theatre. It needs not only low production cost but also generate wide awareness and receives ample public goodwill. The proximity between actors and audience and direct communication is strong features besides its colloquial language structure. JANAM came into the fore with its political orientation and it never moves away from its ideologies and represent it always in their theatres whatever the themes are. JANAM promote the journey of street theatre as a tool of anti establishment and

thus empower the common people to take the centre stage in socio-political transformation through theatre which is participatory in nature and represent their voice.

Conclusion

The aim of street theatre is always for the upliftment of the working class people, the mass and to raise their voice to make them aware of their rights and to help them to take the central position in the socio-political diaspora of the democracy. And to attain this, it is necessary to amalgamate community development and proper education. To ensure participation, street theatre has to have acquired the community's cultural forms. Education can build proper mind set and generate awareness through relevant information dissemination. And the forums of street theatres continue to do it through its infotainment street theatre formats by performing in almost every nook and corner of the country, both urban and rural areas. The exponents of street theatre would have to know the particular communities, their language, their dreams, needs and desires for future, concerning issues of the community and shape the content according to communal expression in entertainment format and ensure active audience participation and invoking action in democratic system. Now-a-days the scenario of media system in India changed dramatically with the emergence of satellite television channels, 24x7 news channels, social media like facebook, twitter etc. But according to the recent statistics 179.6 million people live in below poverty line both in urban & rural areas of India. In case of problems like illiteracy and digital divide, street theatre can play a crucial role for disseminating political ideas, views, values, ideology to the poor people at grass root level. So that poor mass can actively take part in participatory democracy. It can also reduce the difference between information have and information have-nots which will enable the proletarian people to make right decision in multi-party system of our country with political consciousness.

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Sangita De is PhD Research Scholar at Department of Mass Communication and Videography, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. She may be reached at sangitadegotan1@gmail.com

Priyam Basu Thakur is PhD Research Scholar at Department of Mass Communication and Videography, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. She may be reached at priyambasuthakur@gmail.com

