

Memorialising the GDR

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The presentation tries to understand the ways and implications of memorialising the erstwhile German Democratic Republic in the public life of contemporary Berlin. It also situates this process of memorialisation in contrast to the contextualisation of the GDR in a certain socialist ethos that was relevant in Indian public sphere of the 1970s. In keeping with these two axes, the presentation is divided into two parts. The first part looks at one instance of the glorification of the GDR, marred with the cultural politics of cold war era, from the vantage point of public sphere in the Indian state of Assam. The second part shifts to the sites of two museums in Berlin – DDR Museum at Karl-Liebknecht-Strasse and the museum at Der Kulturbrauerei – with a contrasting view to that of the first part. The point is not to consider the authenticity of one vision of the GDR over the other, but to understand the implications of one vision's sway over the contemporary as the index for hegemonic hold of global capitalist order.

The first part provides a reading of Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika's impression of Berlin as the centre of socialist experiment. In 1972, Hazarika – a leftist in his political thoughts – was a participant in *Festival des politischen Liedes* in Berlin. He wrote about the event and his over-all impression of Berlin in an Assamese language literary-cultural magazine *Amar Pratinidhi*. Enamoured with the Berlin as the centre of a socialist utopia, his narration did not consider the divided state of the city. By focusing on the internationalist character of the music festival, the productivity of the factories, the attempt of the state apparatus to enlighten the workers, the circulation of newspapers and so on, Hazarika provided the readers with the impression of a true socialist Society. His impression was, of course, influenced by the Soviet bloc's propaganda of the time. The state socialism version was something that Indian state too invested on during the 1970s. However, it is in excess to the statist version of socialism and cold war rhetoric, an artist's engagement with the question of emancipatory politics comes through in Bhupen Hazarika's words. Thus, Hazarika stood with many other cultural activists and intellectuals with internationalist, communist/socialist leanings, who carried forward a utopian vision of social, economic, and political equality and freedom in the post-colonial world.

The fall of the actually existing socialism of twentieth century, with its totalitarian traits, brought to fore the failure of the utopian emancipatory vision as well. On the other hand, the discourse of 'end of history' held sway as late capitalism – aided with new technologies of information and capacity for simulation – covered up existing inequalities as well as growing war-like situation of ethnic, religious strife around the globe. The second part of the presentation claims that the GDR's memorialisation through museums emanates from such discursive location. Both the museums, related to the GDR, focus on the everyday characteristics of the totalitarian state. While the museum at Der Kulturbrauerei attempts to locate the utopian socialist vision through a collection of statues, paintings, and other artworks, their aesthetics also situates them within the Soviet model of socialist vision. The DDR museum at Karl-Liebknecht-Strasse, on the other hand, provides a narrative concentrating much on economic terms. It narrates the GDR's legacy of economic planning and its failure. Both museums bring to life the absent citizen by re-imagining his/her life in a totalitarian security state marked with fear of secret police, surveillance, restrictions of travel etc. On the other hand, the regime of economic planning only created scarcity of the consumer products, rationing of essentials, and abundance of sub-standard items. The museums emphasised such material conditions through exhibiting the GDR manufactured items of everyday use. A range of fashionable items brought by the GDR citizens from the west also showed their yearning for a life of betterment and abundance. The DDR museum, through a participatory approach, puts the visitor in the shoe of the citizen in the GDR. However, while he or she can experience the constrained life of an individual in the GDR times, the visitor can also slip into the figure of the secret police agent. Thus, the terror-stricken experience of the past are now transformed into the voyeuristic indulgence afforded by the late capitalist society's fluidity. In the make-believe world of the museum, Capital – instead of the totalitarian big brother – becomes the master figure. One can claim that the Rolls Royce car – once imported for the party elites and now exhibited in the museum – stands for this master figure of Capital. That is why, this car is kept out of the participatory experience of the visitor unlike other materials. In the absence of the totalitarian big brother, the participant can aspire for it. However, the aspirations – ever deferred – would be a manifestation of Capital's expansive capacity. It is this capacity, the museum appears to claim would hold the world together. As the visitor exits through the museum shop, she/he can buy a bottle of Vita Cola – reminiscent of the GDR times. Thus, even a product from a non-existing state is also available in this world of abundance created by Capital's expansion.

The presentation ends with the claim that the present situation of precarity, the implosion of the welfare state, and growing fascistic tendencies bring into sharp release the lack in 'end of history' hegemony. In this context, the problematic of the GDR's memorialisation has to be challenged with a narrative that can bring to the fore the vision of emancipatory politics without overlooking its indulgence with a failed statist project. The process of memorialisation must take the form of a critique of the GDR experience from the perspective of an emancipatory politics.