



'It Must Flow' A Life in Theatre Habib Tanvir

The noted director Habib Tanvir, delves into his childhood as he traces the story of his life in theatre. Interjections by Anjum Katyal and Biren Das Sharma appear in italics, within brackets.

I come from a religious family. My father was a very religious man. But my maternal uncles were fond of both music and poetry. My father hailed from Peshawar and my mother came from Raipur. We were all born there. I was born in 1923. Raipur is more or less a kind of capital of Chhattisgarh, which consists of six districts. It's a large region: Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg, Rajnandgaon, Raigarh and Bastar. So, it is ethnically compact—ethnically and linguistically. The dialect spoken by and large is Chhattisgarhi, which is a dialect of Hindi, like Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Brij and all the other dialects of Hindi prevalent in U.P. and elsewhere.

My elder brother used to take part in plays when I was a child. He used to do women's roles in amateur plays. Once a year in

Kalibari some friends would get together and they would put up a play. When I was in school, I used to go to see these plays. They were usually in Urdu. They belonged to what we call the Parsi theatre tradition, because of the professional companies run by Parsis, doing predominantly Urdu drama. There was a whole crop of playwrights that this movement had given rise to; they toured all over India. Many of them originated in Lucknow, then travelled to Calcutta, Amritsar, Lahore, Bombay, all over the country.

Mohabbat ka Phool, which my brother acted in, was just one of the plays written by one such playwright, Hafiz Abdullah, and I remember weeping, shedding tears copiously in the tragic scenes. My brother was the beloved of a man who gets injured and goes to meet him and laments. And there was a tailor in our neighbourhood, not too far from where we lived, called Nabi Darzi, and he would tease me, reminding me of how I had wept in that play. That he never ceased to do, even when I was a grown man. I'd gone to Bombay and whenever I'd come back he'd call me to his shop and order a cup of tea, talk about various things, but never forget to add—you remember that day, how you cried...

At that time many amateurs had no recourse to plays other than the Parsi theatre plays. These got printed and circulated and they used to have songs and dances and all that ... I was quite enamoured because in those days there used to be a whole band of musicians playing outside the theatre to woo the ticket buyer. So there was a lot of drama and *tamasha*, a very festive atmosphere. And of course, the same band was part of the play. They'd move in to start the play. But there was no time fixed. They'd wait for the hall to get filled. So, it might happen at 9 o'clock, it might happen at 10, sometimes at 11—as late as that, because they'd still wait for people and people would come at any old time. And then a long overture, and the curtain went up—it didn't open

sideways. It went up. I thought there was some magic in the curtain going up, rather than sideways, because that way we saw the whole cast from feet upwards. We could see the beautiful, flamboyant costumes bit by bit till the crowning piece came at the end—over-painted faces looking very beautiful because they all had lovely eyebrows, beautiful eyes with kajal, lots of jewellery. Then they'd sing the vandana—the opening song, a hymn to Saraswati or to Ganesh or something like that, just like the Sanskrit theatre tradition. This is how the play opened and I was spellbound; there would be painted scenery, there'd be a revolving stage, Kalibari had very elaborate machinery. I was then about five or six. And then there'd be a dhamaka, a big sound, as if a big gun had been fired. There used to be an iron rod and some gunpowder in a solid iron pot which was beaten hard by that rod. And when you hit it, it exploded and with that explosion the scene changed. And in a jiffy you'd be in a jungle, creating a certain depth with wings, painted trees in a row, ten, twelve, on each side and at the end a curtain, also showing painted trees. So you got the idea of a whole forest. Then there'd be several curtains coming down for the comic interlude. No Parsi theatre play would be without the comic interlude, which had little, if anything, to do with the main plot of the play. Usually it was totally unconnected with it. But it was hilarious. It used to be, sometimes, the biggest draw. Sometimes the play was weak but the comic interludes were entertaining and funny, so that people just enjoyed them. There were good actors doing them and they would run as a parallel story side by side to the main plot. There'd be many scene changes, all happening very quickly, in a very slick manner, though this was an amateur group.

My own first experience of taking part in a performance was when I was about 11 or 12. I did a piece from Shakespeare's *King John*. I played Prince Arthur and a friend of mine, who like me,

had started writing Urdu poetry at the same time as I did, if not a bit earlier—I think he was 3 or 4 years older than me, Aziz Hamid Madani; he finally moved to Pakistan and made a great name as a poet; he died recently—acted as Hubert who comes to take the prince away to put out his eyes, and the prince suddenly pleads—if you had a grain, a speck of dust in your eye, how would you feel? It was a small piece, but very moving and I enjoyed it. And I also acted in a big play written by my Persian teacher, Mohammed Isaakh, who became my brother-in-law later; he wrote a play about a young shoeshine boy who's a very bright boy. He's patronized by a rich man, given education, sent abroad etc. He comes back and has a very successful life. That was the crux of the play. And the opening line of that play was: '*Duniya, makkar-o-abla fareb, Duniyaa*'. My drill master directed the play. Being a drill master and a body-builder, he gave us movements which were very athletic and on every word, you'd have a gesture to accompany it. '*Duniyaa*'—put your fist on your forehead—'*makkar-o-abla fareb, duniyaa*'—move two steps forward. I found no fault, at that time, with that kind of direction, because I knew no better. I enjoyed it.

I got an award for acting for both the plays. It used to be called the Thakur Pyarelal Award. Thakur Pyarelal was a very important personage in Raipur. He was a national leader. The school to which I belonged used to be called Laurie Municipal High School and Thakur Pyarelal was some kind of President there. The award was in his name. He was already quite old then, he must have been in his seventies. I got many trophies for drama, elocution, debate etc. I'm talking about the 30's now.

(Now your, father, you said, wouldn't have approved of all this?—
A K)

My father wouldn't approve of it in general, but as a school activity he had no objections. However, he didn't approve of my brother's theatre activity. He used to do it on the sly, and I also went secretly to watch the play. No, my father used to be very unhappy about my elder brother, who was fond of all these things. As a child, of course, I grew up saying all my prayers and being as religious as anybody else in the house and in the school, in the madarsa—I was learning Arabic and Persian and the Koran and everything. When I gave up saying my prayers, except on Fridays and on Idd days, my father would tell me now and again that you must take to religion, shouldn't give it up, must say your prayers.

'I wanted to join the films.'

Later on when I went away to Bombay and started theatre activity. He knew that I didn't have a firm job. He was hoping I'd go into the ICS—I used to top my class, I stood first in my matriculation and I was also inclined to go into ICS at that time. This is 1940. And in 1940 my teachers gathered in my house, including my headmaster Mr Madhekar, who felt that I must go in for Science because I was a bright student and Science would secure me more marks, and had a better future. But I was more inclined towards the arts, despite having obtained a distinction in Botany. I was not bad in Persian, in which I was aiming for a distinction, though I missed it. Just in that year a college opened in Raipur called Chhattisgarh College. But I considered it beneath me because it'd just started and I thought I should go to a good institution. I went to Nagpur, to Morris college, Nagpur University. It was a very good college at that time, with a good reputation. There I took arts and my dramatic activities continued off and on

through my college days. For my post-graduate studies I went to Aligarh, to do my MA in Urdu. But I didn't go beyond the first year. I began to lose my division because I began to be less inclined to go in for ICS or for any of these bureaucratic lines—I thought I'd be a teacher. And later on even that didn't interest me. I wanted to join the films.

This is 1944. I was a great filmgoer, right from my childhood. So I saw the silent movies in Raipur—*Rin-tin-tin* and all those series, other such silent films—both in a tent and in the mobile cinema and also in Babulal Talkies which was the only cinema at that time and later on Sapre Talkies, which was the second one. Now, of course, there are many cinema houses. But Babulal was quite a character. He began his life in a mobile cinema, moving around in a tent and showing films and we used to go in without tickets. Some naughty boy would cut the tent and those openings allowed us in, or sometimes we would duck in between the ropes, from below. Just as we used to sneak into the circus, we did to the cinema as well. But then he built a building and in that auditorium he showed these silent films. Babulal had his full orchestra outside. And also there were no fixed timings. He'd sell tickets till the house was full. He'd print the tickets himself and he'd stand at the gate and sell the tickets himself, he didn't trust anyone else. He'd order the band to stop when the house was full, they'd move in and so would he. He'd get the doors all locked, sit in the corner watching the film with the audience and improvise—he was a great improviser. Firstly they'd play the music for a silent film whenever the occasion arose, for example, for the chase on horseback—they'd play la-di-da-di-da-da-da and so on and Babulal would go 'Faster, faster, c'mon you bastard, you sonofabitch, I'm getting late, c'mon now.' Then he'd say, 'C'mon kiss her, *chumma-chati ka mauka aa gaya hai. Dekh bhai chumma-chati ho rahi hai* (it's time for a bit of kissing and cud-



dling. Look, look, they're kissing now).'
And many times he'd make up any kind of story he wanted. It was so hilarious. Many people went more for the sake of Babulal than for the film. And then later on came the talkies and then we'd already started making such beautiful films, perhaps better than we do now. By and large they were wonderful. New Theatres, Bombay Talkies and Prabhat Cinetone, Saagar, even so-called stunt films—they were great fun: Nadia in *Hunterwali* and so on. But Saagar did very good socials with Motilal—Motilal was a great actor. Prabhat would do mythological, historical films produced by Shantaram, Master Fatehlal etc., with very good actors like Jagirdar,

Chandra Mohan, Shanta Apte. New Theatres had a galaxy of wonderful directors—Barua and Nitin Bose, and composers and very, very good actors, including the glorious singer K. L. Saigal and Pahari Sanyal, K. C. Dey, very good actors and wonderful films—in-depth, allegorical and beautiful: *Manzil*, *Devdas*.

I was enamoured of the cinema and in Nagpur I would also see all the foreign films. That's why I wanted to go into cinema. Anyway, in Aligarh I got myself photographed in different poses for the films and then I saw an advertisement for the navy: they required officers. There were to be several tests: the district level interview, the provincial level interview and the final one, which was in Lonavla, beyond Bombay. I was hoping that I'd get through the district and provincial levels, and that if I had to fail, it would be at the end, so I could get close to Bombay. In those days, for these interviews you were given an intermediate railway

pass for a return journey, which was valid for one month. I couldn't afford to go to Bombay on my own. At that time there used to be four classes—1st, 2nd, 3rd and in between was the intermediate class, which we used to call inter-class. The inter-class itself was luxurious, it had cushioned seats and everything and one month was adequate. I passed the Raipur and Nagpur tests and in the final I was alright in other respects—I.Q. and things—but I couldn't build a bridge for my troupe to cross the river—I was given 10 minutes and the rope and many other gadgets were placed in front of me. I could use any of them, but I kept on thinking of various ways and then time ran out.

So, having failed, I went to Bombay. I did many jobs in Bombay—but to begin with I went to see *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, in Metro cinema. I was sitting there in the restaurant and talking about the book, which I'd read, and there was a man sitting across at another table watching me intently. He got up and came up to me and said, 'Well, I've been listening to some of your conversation'. He liked my face and he felt that I'd be inclined to acting in cinema. He said 'Are you interested?' I said 'Yes, I've come to Bombay for that.' And he booked me in the lead role for the film *Aap ke Liye*. The director's name was Suryam. So I began as the leading man in this film ... it didn't have a public release at all, I think.

I was in Soho House, an institution belonging to one Mr Mohammed Tahir. He was from U.P. but he was settled in Bombay. Tahir was fond of poetry and I was writing poetry and I sang my poems—I sang quite well—and he was fond of *mushairas* (gatherings of poets), he'd organize them. So he took my help as secretary in his office, to help him organise *mushairas* and look after his correspondence. He had an ammunition factory. I'm talking of 1945. The war-effort was still continuing, though the war was about to come to an end. I was the supervisor and I'd talk to the

carpenters who'd be working. They were mainly from eastern U.P.—Benaras, Allahabad—and they'd speak their dialect and they had a great facility for turning English words into Indian words—Indianizing them: like 'the *tapiya* has been made, now I have to make the *bottomiya*—the 'top' and the 'bottom'. So my interest was also literary when I'd talk to these people.

I was drawn to dialects, because of their richness; I was amazed to find, both in Urdu and in Hindi, after independence, when it came to lexicons and dictionaries and coining words which were needed: like air-conditioned compartment, I still cannot pronounce it, in Hindi, it's a very long word, same in Urdu, but the Bombay coolie simply called it *thandi gadi* (cool coach)- '*Kahan jana hai, saab? Thandi gadi mein challenge? (Where d'you want to go, sahib? To the cool coach?)*.' And I thought for a tropical country, calling an air-conditioned coach *thandi gadi* was the most appropriate thing. Language is constantly getting coined by people who use it, who need it, who make their living off it. For words connected with horse and saddle, every part has a name, but who has given the names? Those who make those things. You go to the ironsmith, he'll give you all the names connected to the horse's hooves. Our scholars have taken recourse to books to coin words, an artificial, arduous and futile process, instead of going to the people and learning. I'm mentioning all this because it became the basis of my theatre.

So, from there I was picked up by Z. A. Bokhari for the radio. He was the Station Director, Bombay AIR, and he liked my voice; so he said you act, write features—women's programmes, children's programmes, produce them, do film reviews. I wrote many musical features. So I was doing everything, though as a casual artist. And I lived in a small room next to Bokhari's flat, on top of the AIR building on Queen's Road. Because I was interested in films, my favourite things were the film reviews—they became

quite popular. At the same time they became very unpopular amongst the producers because in my young enthusiasm, I used to dissect the films rather ruthlessly.

Baburao Patel was then the editor of *Filmindia*. It had a very large circulation, all over India. It was a reputed monthly, very prestigious. And Baburao Patel was considered quite a critic. But he had a very interesting way of writing. He had a discerning mind and was perceptive—he would appreciate minute things and he'd write absolutely frankly, without pulling any punches, totally ruthlessly and funnily. Anyhow, he was a friend of Bokhari's and in those days Bokhari threw many parties at which many people used to gather—music-lovers, rajas: especially the Nawab of Baroda, he was a great lover of the arts, poetry, music. Baburao Patel knew Mehmood Ali, who was the Ambassador of Egypt when he died about 18 years ago. He attended one of those parties and I was asked to recite a Persian poem of Hafiz—sing it—for Mehmood, who was a great Persian scholar and lover of Persian poetry. He used to drink neat brandy all night and stay sober, every night. So he'd already had almost a full bottle of brandy at about 2 or 3 o'clock at night, when I was asked to sing Hafiz. And I sang this ghazal of Hafiz and he listened, spellbound, totally silent, and shed tears; and in the end he said, 'After 18 years these words of Hafiz are coming back to me.' This was the milieu.

Baburao Patel, at one of these parties, meeting me for the first time, said, 'Oh, so you are Habib Tanvir!' My name was Habib Ahmed Khan and I was known as Baba at home. 'Tanvir' was the pseudonym I chose for my poetry and then I dropped Ahmed Khan and simply called myself Habib Tanvir.

So he said, 'Do you know that you're leading a dangerous, risky

life?'

I said, 'How come?'

He said, 'You don't know these filmwallahs. These directors and film-producers are goondas, hooligans, murderers, thieves. They can knock you off, kill you and you wouldn't even know who did it, if you go on like this with your reviews—under whose protection? Bokhari's? Bokhari can't defend you. The only man who can defend you is I, because I'm the goonda of goondas. When these people come to me, sitting in my office, I open my drawer, take out my dagger and put it on the table like this, and say, "Now talk." So they're afraid of me.'

And it was a fact. He was really quite violent and militant. What he was trying to say was, come to *Filmindia*.

So an appointment was made and I did go there and I was the first assistant editor of *Filmindia*—of which I was quite proud—and the last. I was only there for about six months. Then I was too lost in films, I was acting in many films, writing songs for films. Bedekar was a great director of the Shantaram and Prabhat days and he was directing *Lokmanya Tilak*. I played the role of the jailer who was looking after Tilak and helping him with letters in a clandestine fashion. In one scene, after he'd read a letter, the jailer takes it, tears it and burns it, to efface all evidence. I did what I was told. And when I tore the letter, and threw the pieces into the fire, Bedekar exclaimed, 'Oh Habib, for God's sake, you're taking the fire out of the shot.'

I said, 'I thought you said tear it and burn it.'

'Yeah, but not that quick. Do it very delicately, throw it in the fire very, very slowly.'

I still remember this. He was a great director, and these things came to mind when I started directing, these were the hints that helped me.

This was the late 1940s and early 1950s. I was writing scripts for

advertisement films. I was doing freelance journalism, which took me into various, fields—book-reviews for the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, whose editor was Schaun Mandy, an Irishman and a very good journalist and writer. He was a friend of mine. I was the editor—if you please—of a magazine as far removed from my subject as a textile journal. I was also slightly connected with the Burma Shell magazine. I was *also* the editor of a weekly in English called *Box Office*. This was owned by Badri Kanchwala, a Gujarati. His Gujarati film journal had a distribution of millions and he also had a Marathi version, again with a large circulation. He was quite a journalist in his own way. It was cheap journalism, sensational. He wanted to launch it in English. This was the only version which flopped totally. He ran it for more than a year and I remained on it, as an editor. I'd sleep on the table in the office sometimes. He would treat me to Scotch whisky, to dinners, never paying my salary.

He'd laugh—he was a jovial man—and say, 'What d'you need a salary for? You have a tin of cigarettes—555—great luxury, and Scotch whisky, good dinners—food—what d'you want money for?'

You never felt offended by the man. He was quite a joker. He'd laugh, enjoy himself. There was also another daily newspaper, where also I had a similar kind of life; I was proof-reading galleys and dealing with the composers and sleeping on the table, along with a friend of mine—Haji—who went to Pakistan later. Anyhow, I was doing freelance journalism, writing for newspapers.

'By now I'd also joined the IPTA'

By now I'd also joined the IPTA and the PWA (Progressive Writers' Association) — the latter first, as a poet. At that time we'd gather at the house of Sajjad Zahir, whom we called Bannebhai. He was a very great critic in Urdu: weekly meetings would take place at which writers would read new stories, poems—whatever they'd written. So it was a lively literary session every Sunday and I'd go and recite my poems, which were liked very much—my first set of ghazals (six of them)—were published together in *Naya Adab*, which was the organ of the PWA, edited by Ali Sardar Jafri. I'd travel around U.P., Ahmedabad, take part in all-India *mushairas* and because of my voice and my poetry, I was quite popular. There was, near the opera-house (which no longer is the opera-house), a beautiful theatre made in the British days in which Raj Kapoor used to perform. Across the road there was a smallish hall, where the IPTA used to function every evening, and there I was acting under the direction of Balraj Sahni and Dina Pathak. We got familiar with folk-forms like Tamasha and Lavani, Bhavai, the folk songs of Gujarat. The IPTA Konkani squad had a lovely music-squad and Konkani music was very vibrant, I liked it very much. The group was very strong. I love music and so all this was worth watching.

(Despite your interest in classical poetry, you were also interested in folk?--AK)

Yes, I was. My literary interest brought me to this and finally to the dialects because I considered that to be the source for all great literature. Tulsidas, Mirabai, Kabir—all derived such strength from the people's dialects.

So then in IPTA, first under Balraj Sahni's direction and then

under Dina's and some of the younger people like Mohan Sehgal, we collectively improvised plays. There was one Rama Rao, who was the general secretary from South India and he thought of a simple idea about a middle-class office-going man who lived in Borivilli and had to come all the way into central Bombay to his office. And this little line we gradually whipped up into a full play. Mohan Sehgal directed it. It was called *Jadu ki Kursi*. It was a hilarious comedy—a satire on social and political conditions. Balraj played the lead and never again have I seen Balraj in a comic role—at least not in any film. He had great comic talent, a deadpan face and he'd just speak and bring the house down. We were all given the liberty to improvise on our roles. I was the judge, and I decided to stammer. It was a full-fledged play, with no script yet. There was an IPTA conference in 1949 in Allahabad. We went with this play and it was a great success, like in Bombay and elsewhere. After the conference, when we left for Jabalpur, we were told that the police was trying to find us—they were trying to trace the address of IPTA saab, 'Where does IPTA saab live?'. They thought IPTA saab was one man. We found it very funny. We came to Jabalpur and performed this play and again as we left there was an enquiry because the message had come from Allahabad, 'Where is IPTA saab?' They were told IPTA saab had left for Bombay. Unfortunately, that wonderful play doesn't have a script to this day. A pity.

At the IPTA conference in Allahabad in 1948 I was also acting in a tragic one-act play written by Vishvamitter Adil, an Urdu poet and writer of stories. He had adapted it from some Chinese play. The subject was the Telengana movement in Andhra Pradesh. I was the old man whose son gets shot. And then I wail and weep in a long speech, a tirade. And for many weeks it went on. Balraj was directing it. In Allahabad again, we had a last rehearsal which went on till 2 at night. The next day it was to be performed. Balraj

wasn't satisfied, he was angry. He came up to the stage and hit me hard on the face—a big slap. All his five fingers left red lines on my cheek, and tears came to my eyes. And he screamed, 'Say the lines now.' And I wept and said the lines, then he hugged me and said, 'Now you'll never forget it. That's how it should be.' I was in my twenties, playing the role of an eighty-year-old man and then I had to cry to boot. All of which was not happening. So I did ask Balraj, 'Was it one of your methods of direction?' He said, 'Yes. It's called muscle-memory.' I remember that muscle-memory to this day.

Immediately on our return, there was to be some kind of protest and a procession in which the PWA and IPTA both had to march to all the working-class areas. We were given the mandate to continue with slogans and marching and if the police stopped or attacked us, not to fight or surrender, but to save ourselves and continue as far as possible. Everybody was arrested—Balraj, Dina, Sardar Jafri. One of the boys was killed by a bullet and somebody was injured. I was hit by a lathi on my wrist. I went and started living with Vijay Kishore Dubey who was a student at that time, in his hostel just near the YMCA at Colaba. I shared his room. There was a great search on, 'Where's Habib?' One day Surender Ahuja, who was in the IPTA and a great friend of mine, came and said, 'So here you are; but where were you?'

I said, 'Here'. 'Why?' 'I'm underground.'

'Who asked you to go underground?'

'We were asked to protect ourselves and it appeared to me only logical to save myself from the police by going underground.'

'And what's this bandage?'

'I got hit with a lathi.'

'Why not show it to a doctor?'

'For the same reason, I'll get caught.'

He said, 'What delusion. Nobody is looking for you. They had a

list of all the prominent leaders and they've caught them. IPTA is defunct, you've got to work. The Party, from inside the jail, has said to catch hold of Habib and keep the organization going.'

And that's how I then became the organizer, the secretary of IPTA, the playwright of IPTA, director-actor of IPTA, collecting boys, re-assembling them for two years—1948-50. And they spent two years in jail. All of them came out with colitis—Dina, Sardar Jafri, Balraj. Because of jail food. Anyway, that's another story. But for two years ...

(What kinds of plays did you do at that time? Social themes?-AK)

I did a street-play called *Shantidoot Kamgar*. I wrote and directed it. We did it in chawls. It wasn't a hell of a play, but it was good enough for the occasion, it propagated peace and agitated the workers to strike for better wages etc. Censorship in Bombay is done by the police, to this day. The government was anti-Leftist. And one of my plays was taken away by the police for scrutiny and they never returned it.

Direction was imposed on me—it wasn't my choice, acting was my choice. I continued to do drama for the J. J. School of Arts and other groups after the break-up of IPTA.

'For what I had to say ... the medium was the theatre'

After the break-up I left Bombay and went to Delhi with the sole intention of getting out of the way of temptation to act in films, because by then I'd come to the conclusion that in the cinema of those days there was no autonomy for the artist—you could not act the way you wanted, nor direct the way you wanted. The producer, who had no artistic sense, who was only a money-bag,

a financier, would meddle in the work of the director, actor, writer, everyone; and I thought, even as an actor, doing a role, there is a certain social comment that you can bring to bear upon that character. But that kind of autonomy wasn't given.

There used to be quite a discussion on this. A few progressive writers—Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishen Chander, Ismat Chughtai, Ali Sardar Jafri, Shailendra—were going into films as script-writers, poets—Balraj as an actor, Mohan Sehgal as a director. So the discussion in Bedi's house or in Ismat's house would revolve around this. Can we change things? I felt that we couldn't be effective. Many years later when the subject cropped up while talking to Balraj he almost admitted, yes, you're right. Because the whole industry was captured by the Gujarati industrialists who had a lot of money, and muslims. Look at Balraj's films—they're all commercial films. As an actor he could change nothing. He could hold his own as an actor, because he was such a good actor. But giving more autonomy to the writer and director and with Balraj in it, it would have made a big difference. Anyhow, right or wrong, I was convinced that I had something to say. And for what I had to say, in aesthetics, in the performing arts, as well as what I had to say socially, politically—the medium was not the cinema, it was the theatre. This was a very clear realization in the early fifties, which brought me to Delhi.

I thought, my language is Urdu. So this is what brought me to Delhi, where I rewrote *Shatranj ke Mohre* in chaste Lucknowi Urdu, and then in 1954 wrote and produced my first hit play, *Agra Bazaar*. For *Agra Bazaar*, writing about Nazir Akbarabadi, I looked up Mirza Farhatullah Beg, a writer of Delhi writing in Delhi language or Ahmed Shah Bokhari, who wrote *Dilli Ki Galiyan*—beautiful language. He also translated it into English as *Twilight in Delhi*, and he was equally proficient in English and so it was considered to be quite a masterpiece in English. But in Urdu, it's ab-

solutely peerless. And *Dilli ki awazen*, the sounds of Old Delhi, the sellers, the vendors, the *katora-bajane wala*, the *jeerapani bechne wala* (the man who plays the *katora*, the vendor of cumin-water), they all have musical calls; there's a book called *Dilli ki Awazen*, it has all these things, *kaun kaise bolta hai, kaise pukarta hai* (who speaks in what way, who calls out in what manner). And then you go to Old Delhi and hear this language. And a lot from the people's language, that I heard then, has gone into *Agra Bazaar*. Therefore it has that vigour.

(How did you find the milieu different, shifting from Bombay to Delhi?-AK)

In terms of drama, I liked it. It took me time to get used to Delhi. But I started my life at Elizabeth Gauba's school. I'd known her for a long time. She was a great lady. She was German and a great educationalist. She was a good friend of Krishna Menon's and Jawaharlal Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's and it was Krishna Menon's advice which made her evolve a new system of schooling for children. She evolved a system which was not quite Montessori but something new, combining some of the Montessori features and some of her own. It was a very good system in which to teach children, she'd get them to play a lot, to do some clay-modelling, painting, write their dreams, write about their elders—I've seen the children's paintings, clay-modellings, their dreams and stories, and they were fantastic. And out of these she'd asked me to come and work in drama, for the children. So, I was given a room, and gallons of tea, the whole day I'd drink tea without sugar and milk—she was a good cook and she'd make very good soups and feed me like a mother. Very loving woman, energetic, capable of laughing such a lot, wonderful sense of humour, but with very strong ideas about things, very perceptive, but nonetheless, very strong ideas. Anyhow, she gave me a room and I'd sit there with the children all around me, in her

drawing room, telling them folktales and the one to which they responded the most, I'd turn into a play. The outcome was a play called *Gadhey*, based upon a folk-tale which is common to Aesop, to India and Turkey. In the dialogue I incorporated ideas from their dreams and stories. For decor I took recourse to their paintings. The theme was a children's town. We did a few private shows on the lawns and Elizabeth had a way of doing things—school-teachers were involved and children were involved, there were shops selling handicrafts, sweets, tea, everything, on the lawn, on the stage when the play was done; and at the gate I suggested a sign, 'Welcome to children's town.' The theme of children's town was—we want our own government.

At that time I was thinking I'd devote myself to children's theatre. I wrote some other plays, continuing in Jamia; there I wrote *Har Mausam ka Khel*, produced it with Jamia kids. It was based upon a little essay by Mirza Farhatullah Beg; a story about seasons personified, and the various advantages of each season. Then *Doodh ka Gilas*, in which the ingredients of milk become different characters and they, dance there's a strong atmosphere of unity. Then the milk splits and it's a different kind of dance. A child who doesn't like to drink milk dreams all this. And another play called *Chandi Ka Chamcha*, about hygiene and civic sense in a highly metaphysical sense, a comedy. These were all for children. I wrote 6-7 plays for children and they were published.

Agra Bazaar

Well—this was in 1954. Athar Parvez, a writer, an old friend from my Aligarh University days, who was at that time in Jamia Millia Islamia University, approached me: Habib, can you do a feature or something to celebrate Nazir Diwas? Nazir Akbarabadi was a

very fine, a very interesting 18th Century poet. I went and lived in Jamia with Parvez and there'd be food and a hookah and gallons of tea and I writing, reading, writing; reading all of Nazir's verses, all that was written about him, very little documented as hard facts. The

one thing that did emerge was that the poetry of Nazir was spurned by the critics of the day who hardly considered him a poet, because they didn't like the people's language that he used; they thought it vulgar language because it was colloquial. It's fantastic, beautiful language; but they didn't like it. So in history books of Urdu literature he is brushed aside in two or three lines while lesser poets and writers get pages after pages.

He was a man of great humility and never bothered to get his things published or collected. He was known to respond to anyone wishing to get something written; maybe a vendor saying tarbooz pe kuchh likh dijiye (please write something in praise of the watermelon we sell). So he would, and they'd sing it and sell their fruit. And all of it is beautiful poetry. Nazir wrote about swimming and kite-flying tournaments; he wrote about all the indigenous flora and fauna of India. If you want to, you can trace them through Sanskrit literature, or through Nazir's poetry. Most Urdu



poetry repeats Irani flora and fauna, at best trees which are found in Kashmir. Nazir has *motiya*, *chameli*, *genda*, all Indian flowers; *tota*, *maina*, *baya*, *gilehri*—all these animals and birds; references to all the religions—Guru Nanak, Hazrat Mohammed, Ali, *Baldevji ka mela*, Ram—a very eclectic, open-minded man. True poet. Very sensual, very amorous poetry with some unprintable words, but beautiful, calling a spade a spade—that sort of poetry. But, never collected.

First when people read the play, they said, 'Where's the play?' It was just movement on stage—and the openness of the play, its form, the singing of the Nazir songs, came to me first as a feature. There was not enough material on Nazir to do anything more than just a feature. So I decided on collecting a few poems, the best, and making a feature of it with a thin narrative to describe Nazir; and I suddenly arrived at a dramatic form. Then I worked further on it, brought it to Delhi and it became a play. Now, that gave me great flexibility of form.

I didn't bring Nazir on stage because I felt—this became my inspiration—that there wasn't very much known about his life, except some anecdotes, but his poetry pervades the country, so let it pervade the stage. Poetry everywhere, which has his presence, but not the man. So I went about producing a bazaar in which I created two poles, the kite-seller's shop with conversation about kites in colloquial, spoken languages, and the book-seller's shop where poets and critics and historians gather and speak an ornate literary language, spurn Nazir and uphold Ghalib, Mir and others; and the vendors who sing his poetry because they obtain it from him and their wares, which were not selling, immediately get sold when they begin to sing the songs of Nazir. That is the theme of the play. It was only about 40-50 minutes long. But it was so lively.

This play was first done with students and teachers and the neighbouring Okhla villagers used to come and sit and watch re-

hearsals on the open air stage. So one day I told them that instead of watching from there, they could go on the stage and sit and watch, because *bhalu naach ho raha hai kabhi, kahhi bandar ka tamasha ho raha hai* (because at times there was a performing bear, or a monkey dance). So they did that, that's how they became part of the play. So there were more than seventy people who appeared on the Ramlila grounds with a *kumar* (potter), with a donkey—and the donkey even littered—so you had realism to the hilt, including the smells of a bazaar!

And then I wrote into the play more and more nuances—the *kotha* was introduced, a *goonda* (ruffian) was introduced, prostitutes and an inspector. At first it was a skeleton, then it developed into the full two hour version in which Nazir is talked of, he's here, there, but never comes on stage. It was taken up by some ladies of Delhi like Anis Kidwai and Qudsia Zaidi, and we took it to Ali-garh. It went on and on. I think already by 1954, in *Agra Bazaar*, I had established my signature.

(Did you always have a preference for 'comedy'? —AK)

No, no, no. As a matter of fact I was quite inclined to tragedies. And in the first production of this play the Kabuliwala was played by one Abdul Sattar Siddiqui, who stammers. A man with a great sense of humour, a very religious man, social worker, Congress worker, but a very talented actor. He acted for the first time in *Agra Bazaar* and produced the tragi-comic effect, which was amazing, because he made you laugh and towards the interval he moved you into pitying him and feeling compassion. So the play contained that element in it. *Hirma ki Amar Kahani* is a tragedy, *Bahadur Kalarin* is a stark tragedy, *Dekh Rahen Hain Nain* is a tragedy. Then I chose to do *Mrichchakatika*, which of course is a classical comedy. Of the productions I did of classics *Uttar-ramcharita* is a serious play, *Mudrarakshasa* is not quite a tragedy

but also not a comedy. No, I'm equally attracted to both comic and serious plays, but my folk actors have a predilection for comedy, though they acquit themselves well in serious plays also. But by and large, they have this natural gift for comedy. So that, of course, makes me lean more towards comedy because they take to it like ducks to water. They do it with much more aplomb, with ease, effortlessly, and they're hilarious.

(Tell us something about your idea of the comic, because most folk forms have moments or elements of the comic which break the narrative, and almost all your plays have this element. You have used the comic in a very significant way; I'd say there's a structural similarity in the way the folk tradition uses the comic element and the way you use it in your productions—BDS)

Let us look at it like this: I find that there is a sad element present in most amusing moments. Moliere's comedies have quite a few moving scenes, Tartuffe is an out and out comedy, but not without some sad elements. A clown is an instrument for making people laugh, but at the same time there's something tragic about the clown, and I don't mean just Shakespeare's clowns. Charlie Chaplin is the best example. Chekhov, I don't know whether he wrote tragedies or comedies and therefore we use the word tragicomedy for Chekhov, amusing and yet very, very sad: *Charandas Chor*, you'll say, is an out and out comedy, right from the beginning till the very end, it makes you roar with laughter on many occasions, and then there is the unexpected death. In *Kalarin*, a tragedy, we've got many moments of a comic kind.

If you look for reality in life, you will find amusing moments in the face of death, you'll find amusing traits in the most serious character. And as a director you try to give it another dimension, a fuller form, closer to life, closer to reality, richer in its texture, ap-

peal, plausibility and communicability to the audience. That is my understanding of the comic. And when I'm not dealing with an out and out, straight comedy, I'm looking for such relieving moments, if for no other reason than relief, but also because the porter in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* provides both, technically a relief, and at the same time, deepening the nuance and adding another dimension to the situation. So that's how I think you get the comic, but the presence of folk actors in my Naya Theatre helps me further, because they have an extraordinary predilection for the comic and the ironic, and they do it marvellously. They're such great improvisers and they know me by now, I know them by now, and on a mere hint they can come up and improvise in a very articulate and graphic manner.

Theatre training in Britain

In 1955 I went abroad. I got a scholarship under a scheme for further training in theatre, of about Rs 300 per month, meant for further training inside the country. And I didn't consider that there was any training inside the country which I needed. I had a long experience in theatre already by that time—at least nine years. The sole institution which had the semblance of a school was Alkazi's, in Bombay, and I didn't consider it had a lot to teach me. I felt that where Alkazi had learnt from was where I should go, to RADA. To my rescue came the British Council. The passage became a problem. Zakir Hussain was the vice-chancellor of Aligarh University. I'd known him, he knew my poetry and plays. He was a great help to young people, and I was, of course, in a way an ex-Aligarh student. So from some funds for old boys he gave me passage money. So I went to England by boat, and joined RADA. It was a two year course, minimum. I got fed up with it in one

year. I felt that it had no relevance for me. I discovered that language is connected with speech, which is connected with movement and therefore, quite simply, a change of language makes a change of movement and character and cultural ethos. We slur our words like the Spanish do and our movements, our gestures and hand movements differ from North to South.

RADA teaches that movement starts from the spine. Indian movements do not start from the spine. Ours is a more rounded culture in every sense of the word. I had to sit in some classes trying to correct my 'w'—as you know, we tend to make no difference between 'v' and 'w'. So I went to the head, a great authority on Shakespeare, a very respected old man who must be dead by now. He wouldn't hear of me leaving the school. I said I've learnt enough and gained a lot. If I learn more, stay longer and spend more time, I'll get stilted as an actor. I'll go back to pursue my activities, not in English, but in my language; and in my language all the rules and principles applied here will not work. He was not open to all this. He said, you come from across seven seas to this country, to a time-honoured institution with a long tradition and you want to break our rules? Nobody leaves in the middle. We can't give you any certificate.

The Indian Embassy, from where I used to get the scholarship, took up cudgels on behalf of the school against me, but I went on fighting. There was a woman in the British Council Drama Cell who alone understood me. I wanted to spend my second year studying production; which RADA doesn't offer, at a very reputed school, the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. She supported me. Just then the principal retired and John Fernald came in, who was a very good director of the Arts Theatre Club, who had produced the first production of *Waiting for Godot*. He saw my point at once and after the first year test, gave me a very good chit, and I went to the Old Vic Theatre School.

There I enjoyed every minute of my stay. They taught us mask making, stagecraft writing, production. Duncan Ross, who later went to America, was also a very good producer, a very articulate man and a great teacher. One day he said, succinctly, in very lucid, terse language, 'Production is telling a story.' I got the full meaning of what he was trying to say. To this day I quote it and I believe it couldn't have been put more simply but more comprehensively. Telling the story is all the game in production. If it falters, it means the production is faulty, you've failed to tell the story. If anything is coming in the way—costume, light, decor, anything—you've failed to tell the story. He would talk a great deal beyond class time to three of us; the other two were Israeli boys, older, like me—I was almost 30 by that time. These two boys from Tel Aviv were married, with children and had put in work in theatre over a number of years. The other girls and boys in this school were teenagers. Duncan Ross was a mature man in his 50s by then. So his head would pan almost always to the three of us because he got the most response from us. Most of it was going over the heads of the other children. The way he'd dissect Lorca, the way he'd talk about a play, just talking—it was wonderful. For example, he'd say, in England if you are a professional director, joining a company, you'll have to work under certain constraints like producing a tragedy, a comedy, a vaudeville Christmas thing, whether you like it or not; but if you are a producer, a director—I use the word 'producer' because the term used in England is really 'producer'—who wants to do the play he likes, then you don't want to produce what is considered by the whole world a classic, or something which has been a hit somewhere in a big way. You just want to read a play and in one reading if it gives you a certain kick, if you get something from it, then that's your play—whether well known or not, you do that play. In producing that play, if you enjoyed the first reading, that's

the kind of experience you want to transmit to your audience watching it for the first time. So you've read it, now you show it. But in this showing of it, unless you can transfer that experience, you've not managed to succeed. After many rehearsals you tend to forget the first experience. The thing to do is to hark back, go back to the first response and try to capture it in the production. That was another fine point. Thirdly he said, decor or sets or anything coming in the way of the progression of the story is out. You should see what facilitates the progress of the play. That alone is the best set and lighting and costume, nothing else.

These were remarkable things as far as I'm concerned. I was producing long before I left India. I'd read my Sanskrit classics. Brecht I came to know in England. And I wanted to do *Mrichchakatika*, I found that play very attractive. Something drew me to it irresistibly. And that was on the agenda. When I did *Agra Bazaar* and Qudsia Zaidi promoted it, I had decided to make a theatre. So I made a theatre called Okhla theatre. Suddenly the Jamia people rose in arms against it, they wouldn't hear of it. I'd first conceived of it as a part of Jamia. They wouldn't hear of drama. So Begum Zaidi said to me, 'What d'you need for professional theatre?' And I said 'First of all, some plays. We don't have enough plays to keep performing. We need at least twelve.' She said, which ones? So I said, 'Three Sanskrit classics—*Mrichchakatika*, *Mudrarakhasa* and *Uttarramacharita*. And some Brecht plays, some Ibsen, some Shaw'—I gave a list. I took some classics from abroad. And of course there was one Chinese play thrown in, a melodrama, historical. 'Alright. You will get trained in two years, in 2 years these translations will be ready. How big should a repertory be? We calculated, about 12-15. She decided how much it would need, and said, I'll collect the money, so many lakhs of rupees. She knew all the bigwigs. Colonel Bashir Husain Zaidi, Prime Minister of Rampur, was in Parliament, he had con-

nections. A great friend of Begum Bhopal. So at the end of two years—she went on writing to me, saying, I'm ready. She herself translated all the twelve plays. A woman of great dynamism. She said, we have twelve plays, 2-3 lakhs of rupees for the organization called Hindustani Theatre and you must come. Two years are over, it must start.

'I was travelling to meet Brecht.'

I was taking one more year, hitchhiking through Europe, watching theatre in many European countries. I was doing all kinds of things, grape-picking, ushering for a circus, writing for radio, singing in nightclubs and earning my way. I was travelling to meet Brecht. So I came to Paris to see Jean Vilar and Maria Cesares—Jean was a great Communist Party man and a great leftist actor and director with a company. Maria Cesares was his wife. I saw their festival and then there was a youth drama festival in Avignon. So I travelled upto Avignon—in 1956—and I didn't have enough money. I'd gone with money enough to live in youth hostels and a meagre sustenance for ten days. Paris is a great city; you can go absolutely lavish or you can live in poverty and sustain yourself easily. I enjoyed that city very much, except for their chauvinism regarding language. In Avignon I started picking grapes to make a living, to see the festival. I calculated the wages, and said well, in a week's time I should be rich, because I got paid according to the hour. And I decided that I'm free for so long, I'll pick grapes for so long—then I realized that I couldn't pick for so long, because barely half an hour and my back would begin to ache and I'd stretch myself and then I'd lose my wages. And I realized it is not a matter of strength as much as habit. But even so, the gains were enormous, because it earned me enough

money to let me go through St. Sebastian to Madrid and Barcelona, see a bit of Spain, spend a week there and come back to Nice. That was one advantage. The second was, I met so many young people from so many countries, who'd assembled there. I made friends with them and took down their addresses, which helped me in my hitchhiking.

In Nice, there was an interesting incident. I had money enough to either go back to London or take a train to Trieste. And in those days there used to be an European quota for money from England. My bank account had money in it, but I couldn't draw it. My year's quota was finished. I had no access to that money in Europe. I would have to go back to London and return to Europe. This odd rule had me in a dilemma, whether to go back to London or proceed to Trieste. I met an Australian and offered to give him a cheque for London. But being a stranger, naturally he didn't agree. So I didn't spend any more money in the youth hostel. It was summer, I went to the beach and I decided to go to Trieste. I wasn't eating very well, I'd bought some bread, some chocolates and cheese. And I was trying to compose a poem—it was very pleasant on the beach; I was assailed by streetwalkers and prostitutes. I responded by saying, 'Look I don't have the desire and even if I did, I don't have the money.' So they'd walk off. But then I met a boy, an Algerian. He sauntered up to me and said 'What're you doing?'

I said, 'Well, spending my time trying to write a poem. I don't have much money.'

He said, 'D'you have a beer?'

I said, 'I don't have money for dinner. I can't offer you any beer or coffee. I only have about £10 on me.'

'Oh, I've never seen English money. May I have a look at it? May I feel it?' He touched it. 'May I keep it as a souvenir?'

I said, 'No, no you can't. That's the only money I have between me and starvation' Took it back.

'What're you writing with? What pen is it?'

'It's a Mont Blanc.'

'May I see it? May I keep it as a souvenir?'

I said, 'The nerve. It's something I write with. Besides, it's rather expensive. I bought it because it has a thick nib, for Urdu writing.'

He was pestering me. So I said 'D'you sing?' He said 'Yes'.

I said 'Would you like to hear a song?'

'Yes'.

'D'you promise to give me an Algerian song?'

He said 'Yes'.

I said, 'Then I promise to give you an Indian song.'

He sang me an Algerian song. I liked it. I liked the lilt of it. I learnt it and then I sang to him a Chhattisgarhi folk song. He liked it. So I took some time learning his song and writing it and he took his time trying to learn my song—I don't know if he still remembers it or not—and the night passed. It was time for the train, four in the morning and I shook him by the hand and said 'Now you've got a souvenir from me and I've got one from you and we're none the poorer for it, in fact we're richer. Goodbye.'

I came to Trieste and from there began my odyssey. I went to Belgrade, Zagreb, Dubrovnik, all over Yugoslavia. I had already been writing about many subjects for the radio, newspapers, to earn money. They'd translate it and bring it out. I went to Hungary, Budapest and I contacted the friends I'd made in Avignon and there I saw lots of theatre, again repeated the same articles for the radio. But something got me stuck. There was a regulation in those days, that you could only use hard currency, that means dollars, pounds sterling, marks—western money—for anything beyond the border. Inside the border you could buy with and

spend only local money. I was earning only local money; it could not be changed into hard currency. I had no access to my bank in London. I couldn't get out of Budapest. Instead of a week, I spent three months in Budapest. There came a time when I dried up. I had nothing to write about. By now I'd come to know lots of students, theatre people, journalists and radio people. One of them was Itala Bekes. She was a very good singer, dancer, actress, and mime artiste. She came up with the idea that if we could cook up a number interesting enough to be shown in a nightclub, it might be taken up by a chain of nightclubs. Budapest was full of booze and nightclubs, with lovely wine and beautiful gypsies, music, guitar-players, very cozy places. So I said alright, let's see. So she, her brother and myself concocted an idea, a very simple idea—we go to see a western film in a cinema house, there's a queue. At the end we come to know the house is full, we can't go in. Frustrated, we begin to imagine what's going on inside. She does some mime and I sing my Indian song. So we concocted this 20-25 minute piece. And we presented it in a nightclub. It succeeded and I came in for more money than I could imagine, but my problem wasn't solved.

Then, from Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, came a puppet-theatre in a van. I'd go every day. They were wonderful puppeteers. I made friends with them. And suddenly it occurred to me that they'd be going back to Bratislava and I asked them how to do it and they told me. Before this happened, I went to Rehman, the Ambassador, in Hungary—hailing from Agra, speaking very chaste Urdu. I'd met Rehman in a theatre when Sitara Devi had come and presented Kathak; Vilayat Khan had come and presented his sitar recital at the same time, and on these occasions I'd just met him briefly. But I was a nonentity. So I went specially to meet him in his office with my problem. Hearing my problem his response was candid and official, 'Well, there's only

one way you can be helped—we can give you a passage back to India, free, we'll confiscate your passport which you may not get again. You'll have to first declare yourself a destitute. That's the only help the embassy can offer.' I said no, it was too high a price. But this van helped me.

Now I had the other problem of what to do with my money, the Hungarian money. It'd be no use in Czechoslovakia. There were no machines in 1956 that you could invest in, cameras or gadgets. It was by and large an agrarian country. Not even good enough clothes to buy. So I decided to collect all my friends—it was a large circle by then, students, journalists, actors, all—in a big hotel for a wine party. Their best wine, it was a Hungarian name which literally translated into oxblood, was also the most expensive wine. We had some wine and some dinner and all the money was gone. In acknowledgement of how much they'd done for me.

Three days after my arrival in Bratislava, there was a large exodus of people from Hungary and I came to know that the revolution had happened, the Soviet intervention had taken place. Had I stayed three days longer, I'd have got stuck for several more months!

Then I travelled to Prague and made many friends there, learnt some Czech songs from there and repeated my exercise—the same articles. Saw lots of theatre. I saw a wonderful puppet show in Prague of Tagore's Post Office. And many lovely musicals by many eminent directors. I saw Jean-Louis Barrault. A great mime, before Marcel Marceau's time, and a great actor. He's written a beautiful autobiography in which he mentions that the Egyptian Book of the Dead inspired him just as yoga did and he talks of actors conserving their energy like a cat does before pouncing on her victim. And his experience as a young man wandering onto the stage after the show and finding himself on Volpone's

bed, alone, everyone gone—and he spends the night on stage on Volpone's bed. He loved the smell of greasepaint. So, this was Barrault.

'When I arrived in Berlin, Brecht had died....'

From Prague I finally went to Berlin, I managed somehow, by train. But the thing is, when I arrived in Berlin, Brecht had died a few weeks before. That was very disappointing. But his productions were all there and I saw them all. I saw the rehearsals done by two very eminent directors who directed together, special disciples of Brecht. Ekkehard the actor, Brecht's son-in-law, a great actor, was already there. He's still the best of their actors. Ernst Busch was the cook in *Mother Courage*, a great singer and a wonderful actor. I was there for eight months in Berlin, met all the actors and actresses, sat in their canteen, discussed many things, saw *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, some Chinese one-act plays, *Mother Courage*, the whole gamut, except *The Good Woman of Schezuan*. I did not see that because it was not in the repertoire at that time.

Of course I did meet Elisabeth Hauptmann and also Helene Weigel. She was doing the role of the mother. I made lots of friends and travelled all over East Germany first; at that time there was no division, no wall, many people were working in the East and living in the West. One of them was Hanning Schroeder. He was a music composer for quite a reputed film company in the east. He had a house in Quermatinweg in West Berlin, in Krumme Lanke. I was sleeping on the pavement, sometimes in the canteen, or in some club or travelling with friends. A minor actress in the repertory in the Berliner Ensemble was Rosemary Magdefrau. She had other friends, one of them Nele, Schroeder's daughter,

who used to come and see the plays or meet her. I was writing for a theatre journal. We had great political discussions about communism and there were people belonging to the left among my circle of friends, newspaper journalists and actors etc. who were already against the regime, talking a great deal against the constraints they felt. One day Nele took me to her parents' house, and introduced me as an Indian friend. So I met Hanning, her father, and Cora, her mother, who was also working in music, but in a different capacity—notation, theory, writing. And Hanning took me to an attic, a lovely, cosy little attic. I'd get up in the morning and have breakfast with them, and then leave for the day for the East. I also saw lots of West Berlin theatres. But the best theatres, at that time were all in the East, and people from the West—from all over the world, in fact—used to go to the East to watch theatre. So, this family, Schroeder, and their attic—to which I went like the *Man who Came to Dinner*—we became very friendly and every time I've been to Berlin, that attic was always there for me, upto now. The friendship has lasted till now. Hanning died in his 90s, barely a year or two ago. Cora is 96—well and active. She used to cycle to do her shopping, but she can't do it now. Now she tries to walk to it with a stick. But still alone, fending for herself. Nele is a big person now in the Academy of Music in West Berlin. Rosy Magdefrau has also remained a great friend.

I travelled all over Germany—Nuremburg and Heidelberg and Munich and Vienna, hitchhiking right through. In the mean time Khwaja Ahmed Abbas was in Moscow and he was making a film on Afanasi Nikitin who came to India and wrote a travel-story. In Hindi it was called *Pardesi*. Strezhenov was the name of the Russian actor who acted and Nargis was the girl opposite him and Abbas was looking for me. He'd sent a telegram to the embassy in London; they'd told him that I'd left for Europe. So he

cabled all the embassies and in Berlin I got one of the telegrams, asking me to wire back. I did. He sent me a pre-paid return flight ticket for the air passage. I flew from Berlin to Moscow where I was for three months, working in Mosfilm Studio as the director of dubbing, and giving the voice to Strezhenov. I saw Moscow theatre—Malyi theatre, the Bolshoi theatre, Gorky theatre, Meyerhold's theatre—made friends, saw Moscow and came back to Berlin. I was trying to collect money for a passage back to Delhi. When I earned money in Moscow I could buy my ticket to Delhi. I was in money suddenly. I went to Warsaw, nearly every country in Europe—Belgium, Holland, Denmark.

The thing is that in all these travels I was pursuing one aim apart from looking at theatres. I was trying to produce *Mrichchakatika*, *The Little Clay Cart*, the Sanskrit classic. I'd tried to sell the idea in Belgium, in Germany, and also Poland. In Poland I went to Warsaw and from Warsaw to Krakow; in Krakow I met Kristina Skuszhanika. She was the head of a very good theatre, and she got interested and said, 'By the time you come back from Moscow, we shall have the new translation ready.' They had a Polish translation, but a rather outdated one. In Warsaw I'd met a man called Mikoleitis; he was interested in translating it and undertook to do so. By the time I returned to Warsaw, it was done. But then suddenly he said, 'I want to be a co-producer.' He had no theatre experience, none at all; he had just an ambition that he should be considered co-producer and not just the translator and he wanted the lion's share of the money, which wasn't palatable to Skuszhanika, or to me. It was downright cheating. So it never happened. But I did produce, a small scene from *The Little Clay Cart* for television in Warsaw. In Germany I went to Rostok. Hanning was born in Rostok. I went and met his people there, saw the theatre; and there a director got interested in my proposition. He said, 'Yes, why not. But why just one play? Why don't

you take up a job of a director here, and do it.'

Now I'd already finished my third year and was about to go to Delhi. So he said, 'Alright, within a year you come back and do this play.' But I was clear in my mind that culturally I belonged in India. If you're dealing with words and culture, you belong where you come from, because that's where you'll be your most creative. And also, of course, I'd met people and observed enough to know that I was about to overstay my time. I'd seen people who'd stayed away close to three years, finding it exceedingly difficult to get readjusted to India.

Coming Home

So I came back. It took me not less than a year and a half to really get reconciled. I was out of my depth with every little thing. Anyhow, Begum Zaidi was on schedule. She'd given me two years, she could wait no longer. She went around looking for a director. Habib is not coming, he's taking his time. I will get started. She located Moneeka Misra, who at that time was working under Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in Bombay Natya Sangh, teaching the students acting. She'd just come back from Colorado, having done her MA in Theatre. She jumped at the idea and came and joined at the proud salary of Rs 200 p.m. The first play Begum Zaidi wanted to produce was *Shakuntala*. She did it. This was 1957. I was still in Europe. I came in the summer of 1958. By then Moneeka had finished her second play, *Charlie's Aunt*, translated by Begum Zaidi as *Khaled ki Khala*, And when I came, Moneeka was thrown out. Thrown out is the right phrase. She went from pillar to post, weeping and crying and meeting Committee members. I'd met her briefly in Delhi at a party, just briefly. I was given my job. And I produced *Mitti ki Gadi*. Monica met me when I was

working on it—very angry. She thought I was responsible for getting her thrown out. She was full of accusations. She was railing at me and I said no, I don't think I'm responsible, but shall we talk about it over a cup of tea? She said alright, and we went to Alps on Janpath. It was a cosy restaurant and in those days you could sit over a cup of tea for several hours and it was still the same charge. So we sat for several hours drinking gallons of tea for several days, sorting this out, till we fell in love. But that is another story.

I was producing *Mitti ki Gadi* all over Europe on paper. I must've produced on paper something like twelve sets at least, drawings, and every time it obstructed the flow of the story. But my reading of the play never produced this obstruction. When you read it, you're not bothered about what the locale is. So long as the story is going on and you understand it, and the story flows. Let me explain the difficulty. There is a clash between Bharat Muni's dramaturgy which is followed by the Sanskrit playwrights, and the Poetics and Aristotle's theory of the three unities. Many Western scholars of Sanskrit—and I dare say great translators, through which medium alone I got these classics, because I do not know Sanskrit, and Hindi translations by and large were lousy till then—when they commented on those plays, praised the authors as Mahakavya writers, with great poetic imaginations, a great command of words. Only somewhere you found a subdued apology—the poor chaps did not know their dramaturgy, because they failed to see the unities. That was bad enough. It was much worse when you came across books written by Indian pundits echoing the apology because they knew no better either. For all their knowledge of Sanskrit grammar and language, they had no clue as to what was going on, because they had no contact with theatre. And what do I read? I find, in the very first act of *Mrichchakatika*, which is divided into ten acts, the stage-man-

ager, the sutradhar and nati talking, introducing Charudatta; and Charudatta comes from outside somewhere and goes into his house, some scene takes place there. The scene continues on the road. Suddenly you find Vasantasena the courtesan, with Shakara and his retinue all over the road and somehow—without break of scene—she comes to the exterior of Charudatta's house and slips into the house—things going on outside the house, also inside, in and out—that's scene one. Scene two, a gambler's being chased, and he goes out on the road, comes back and, moves into a *mandir*, becomes a *murti* on the pedestal, they chase him, fool around and he again gives them the slip and runs into Vasantasena's house, talks to her and she comes out and hears the shouting—all one scene. The locales haven't been changed.

Duncan Ross had taught me an important lesson: it must flow. So I made those scenes on paper and everything seemed to obstruct the play because how could you have a very swift set for a particular locale and move on in the kind of fluent manner in which you read the play? And I wanted the play to come across exactly as I read it, not with those obstructions. So I ended up, after removing this, that and the other, with a bare, circular platform. This gave me space enough on the stage for the exterior and enough for the interiors, which was the circular platform on stage with a diameter of about twelve feet. And the play just flowed. I didn't have to explain the scene changes. Initially I used to hang things, which would keep dropping and going up to suggest a locale. Later on I thought it was fussy, I removed it. And also I felt another thing, quite candidly. I felt that the descriptions of the Sanskrit poets who wrote these plays are so vivid and so beautiful, so graphic, that in your imagination, before your mind's eye, any kind of picture of which you are capable can be thrown up. One differing from the other, in the auditorium, in the audi-

ence. Now that liberty, that faculty, will not be given full play if you paint the scenery on the stage. I find it presumptuous to paint, to translate the words in terms of paint. Either you'll fall short of the description or you'll exceed it. In either case, art has mastered poetry. And as one says in Urdu, *'yeh zyada hai, yeh labz zyada hai* (this is redundant, extra).¹ The poem, the two couplets, must be terse—one word added for the sake of the metre is bad art. We know it from Shakespeare, from the great painters—what one line, one stroke can do, many cannot. Therefore, to have both painted and verbal descriptions is meaningless. And to have a painting as a substitute is to have a poor substitute, because it deprives the viewer of access to the work. At least I thought so.

In the play the vidushaka goes into Vasantasena's house and you see nine courtyards, one is painted with all kinds of beautiful pictures, in another *angan* there're monkeys and horses and cows and he describes them all. In the third, wonderful things are being cooked and he describes the smells. So each *angan* has a description. Suddenly he comes to the eighth or ninth *angan* and he finds a huge woman seated there, and he finds out that this is Vasantasena's mother. And he wonders how she managed to enter the house. And then he comes to the conclusion that she was already seated there and the house was built around her. Now, such beautiful descriptions, what will we do? So, going by Duncan Ross, going by the internal evidence and the reading, I arrived at the conclusion that there were neither curtains, nor machinery, nor a revolving theatre in the classical theatre days. There was utter simplicity—it was an actor's theatre. Whether the actor danced it out or acted it out. Otherwise you would not get instructions like, actor enter, seated on a throne. How will you manage that? Actor enter supine, lying on a couch. How? Only a dancer can do it. Or a kuchipudi curtain behind which the actor

moves in rhythm, on drumbeats, rhythmically, and that by itself is a visual spectacle because the curtain is beautiful and behind it they reveal the actor, which is what I did in my *Mudrarakshasa*. So my shrewd suspicion was that though it is not written anywhere in the books about Sanskrit drama, there was this curtain, enter by whisking the curtain. The curtain comes down again and again. I recall seeing a great Kathakali dancer, and I was fascinated by the fact that he came in behind the curtain as Hanuman and took so long to reveal himself—naughtily he'd just lift the curtain to show his toes; then you'd see his crown, white, then you'd see his nails, gold, fingers. Gradually he showed himself, bit by bit. To me it seemed that he took twenty minutes just to reveal himself fully—finally he threw off the curtain and you saw the whole of him. So, this curtain fascinated me, held me spellbound.

Also, when I had come back from Europe in 1958, before beginning *Mrichchakatika*, I went home to Raipur to meet my family. It was summer. I heard that there was to be a Nacha on the grounds of the high school where I was educated—Nacha is a Chhattisgarhi form of secular drama. It was to start at 9 o'clock. I saw it all night through, which is the usual duration for a Nacha. They presented three or four skits. There was Madan Lal, a great actor, Thakur Ram, another great actor, Babu Das, a very good actor too, Bulwa Ram, a glorious singer: and what comedians, these fellows, like music hall comedy. They were doing *chaprasi nakal*, *sadhu nakal* (take-offs). I was fascinated. I went up to them and said—would you like to come to Delhi and join me in a production? They were happy to do so. So I enlisted Bulwa, Babu Das, Thakur Ram, Madan Lal, and Jagmohan, who was on clarinet. Then I was to go to Rajnandgaon to speak on Indo-Soviet friendship or something. There they wanted to know about my European tour. I described my Hungarian travels and sang a Chhattisgarhi song as an illustration. At the end a dark man with



scuint eyes and a short, grisly black beard, came up to me and said, 'Come to my house.' This was Lalu Ram. He liked the folk songs. I went to his house. He offered me *ganja*, we shared *ganja*, and he heard many songs from me. He sang many, one of the best singers in Chhattisgarh, glorious voice. The session went on all night. So I enlisted Lalu Ram as the sixth member of the troupe. These six came to Delhi and participated in *Mitti ki Gadi*, with Bulwa and Lalu Ram playing *chandals* and singing at the top of their voices, Jagmohan playing the clarinet, Madan Lal

playing the gambler, Thakur Ram playing Sarvilaka.

So anyway, *Mitti ki Gadi* I simplified till the play moved without a hitch. The pundits all attacked it. The Sanskrit scholars said, this has been done in *lokdharmi* and the play belongs to *natyadharmi*—that means that I did it in folk style and it should have been done in the classical style. The same pundits, in the 1970s, when I sat with them in seminars, and I talked about the curtain, paid attention to it. Then I talked about the *rasa* theory being the only unity which governs the Sanskrit classics—they paid attention to it, they repeat it now.

Mitti ki Gadi is a *prahasan* (farce) and many critics have criticized the play for its lack of harmony and mixtures of *rasas*, saying that it doesn't work; it is not a romantic story, it is not another gam-

bler's tale, it has got the jewellery thing travelling around, and so many strands of stories and the play doesn't have that kind of unity of *rasa*. But the play works. It has a certain harmony—when I read it, I felt it was harmonious. It has a circular mood, like the nine courtyards of *Vasantasena*, nine public squares where *Charudatta* is taken, and it is repetitive—the same announcement made again and again. So I got a feeling that the treatment in music and elsewhere—let's take the example of music—is repetitive. Hardly four or five or six words in a line, sung for two hours, several hours, all night, in classical singing. Develop the *raga* and you get everything that you want, not so much through the words, although the words also help a bit, though they're just an aid. But the repetitiveness of it, cumulatively, finally, casts a spell on you—if you're so inclined. Keeps you riveted. So that repetition is important.

After *Mitti ki Gadi* I was thrown out. Begum Zaidi wanted *Mudrakshasa* next. I said to her that it is a tough play and I require another five years experience as a director to do it. I produced that play in 1964. Six years. Not that I'd calculated the time, but it happened. When I read the play, I was fascinated by it. A political play without parallel. I couldn't follow the plot in one reading. I read it again to sort out the spies, because it's very difficult to find out who spies on whom, it's so complex. This goes on through the play. It fascinates. I knew that something had to be done to make it lucid for the audience. They shouldn't have to see the play twice to understand it. So when I did produce it, I devised a scheme to explain what is going on. I chose two insignias, one for Chanakya, one for Rakshasa, and two colours, and I gave the spies robes. So they'd come with a robe of a certain colour with a certain insignia, and you saw that this was Chanakya's man. And right in front of you, he turned it, put it on with the other colour showing, and you saw that he'd changed

sides. So this was the device I evolved to make it lucid.

Trying to start a professional theatre

Anyway, after *Mitti ki Gadi* I wouldn't take up *Mudrarakshasa*, so I was thrown out. Moneeka helped me, since we were both in the same boat. By then we'd really become friends. She found a garage in Janpath and that's where we started Naya Theatre with nine members. Some of them had left Hindustani Theatre. Moneeka directed a one-act play I wrote called *Saat Paise*, which was based on a Czech story. It was a lovely story of a mother and a child: the child was the son of a railway worker and he is trying to collect 7p for a cake of soap. And the mother plays with the child very poetically and talks of the money in terms of a butterfly, which they'd catch hold of. And they looked into every nook and corner—one by one they collected paise. In the end the mother is spitting blood and she dies. A one-act play, fragile and delicate, and Master Champalal acted in it, the old Parsi theatre master who died recently, who knew all the music, the dhrupads used in the Parsi theatre days. His wife was also in the Parsi theatre, she did the mother. We did it in the YWCA, a small auditorium; and there were some barracks where Palika Bazaar now is, with offices all in a row. In one of the offices we did this play for a small audience, collecting money for our theatre, with a thali. And outside a man was standing—Prakash Nayyar—he was from Punjab, but he lived in Calcutta. Now this man was rich, he was a businessman and he had a beautiful flat in Calcutta. He was a great lover of literature, music and the arts. So he'd gather Qurutullain Haider, Sardar Jafri, 'Masoom' Raza, Habib Tanvir—all of us had been there. He would stay in Delhi at Ashoka hotel and there was Scotch whisky and sumptuous dinners—a very generous man.

He had many, many dogs and sometimes he'd travel with them. A very strange character. He himself had nothing to do with reading or writing, but he had such lovely, expensive art books, from China, from Europe, from India, a lovely library. And a cheerful man. Now he was standing outside, in a dark corner. He hadn't seen the play. He said, 'Habib, I saw you collecting the money; how much have you collected?' I said, I haven't counted it. He said, 'I need it very badly. I'll give it back to you.' This man, when we were collecting money for Naya Theatre to begin with, had very generously given us a 500 rupee cheque. And this was only about Rs 70 or something. But it was all our fortune. I couldn't say no to him. That money went, and so did Prakash. He had become bankrupt. Totally. He was not to be seen anywhere. I think he died. Somebody told me later that he died in penury.

With the same play we'd raised Rs 500 for the Kashmir Relief Fund when there were floods in Kashmir in the late 1950s. So that's how Naya Theatre was built, but we couldn't carry on. Four friends floated the Delhi Players, with me as the director on a salary. We used to rehearse on the premises of the Delhi Art Theatre in Shankar Market. One of the plays I chose was Moliere's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, in which in the Turkish scene, by the way—to complete that story—I used the Algerian song, which I'd learnt from that Algerian boy, because in any case, Moliere has written a lot of gibberish, with some Turkish words thrown in: this song sort of fitted in. After one year of tough auditioning I chose Champalal and Majid a very good, old-time Parsi theatre actor—he came for the audition and he crossed his legs and hands and became a leper and gave me a soliloquy from one of the old, Parsi theatre plays, marvellously—as the leading man. The other play was Rustom-Sohrab. He was one of the kings and I was the other king and an Italian director came and saw it, and found the voice of Majid and his stylized way of acting marvellous. And he

said, 'This man is a comedian.' I said, 'Yes, in Moliere he does just that.' He said, 'Only a comedian can produce this kind of tragic effect and timing.' I was quite startled to hear this—I realized that there's no barrier between these two.

After one year's work the company broke up without us being able to show the play. We were stuck, with our cast and everything. Moneeka had helped me a lot—initially I learnt quite a lot from her, in the matter of grouping. Another thing also, she took over occasionally—when I'd gone to the Phillipines at the time of *Mitti Ki Gadi* she directed. But in *Rustom-Sohrab* I remember, she'd put this man this way and this man that way and made very lovely plastic groups. For all this work we had no show. So we used to dress up actors and have run-throughs in the same space, and invite friends, for several evenings, some weeks. And they all enjoyed it, till Inder Lal Das of the Little Theatre Group came over and said, I'll open the plays, under the LTG banner. So we had *Rustom-Sohrab* and Moliere.

From freelance journalism to the Rajya Sabha

So we functioned again as amateurs, and for almost a year or so I was doing freelance journalism to make two ends meet. And that took a heavy toll of my time. I'd go to all the plays and youth festivals. So all my time used to go in that. Writing for Link, Statesman, Patriot, film reviews, drama reviews, everything. And about Rs 1000 at the end of it all. And we were living together, Moneeka and I—it was just a room and she improvised some trunks. Very neat looking, nice arrangement for sleeping, for working, for everything. There was a public bathroom and public tap that we used to take water from. It was clean, though—an outhouse. And then, of course, we were in a *barsaati* in Karol

Bagh. And we got married in 1960 or '61.

I got employed in the Soviet publishing department as a senior editor. I continued with amateur theatre and journalism. I produced a biographical play on Ghalib. The way we worked was to assemble likely actors with aptitude, from Jamia Millia and from the city, like Begum Bilgrami as the wife, eventually myself as Ghalib because other actors had let me down in the end, and some Jamia teachers who were good in speech, in Urdu, and also had a talent for acting. This kind of activity was continuing. In 1970 I was given the Sangeet Natak Akademi award and they asked me to revive *Agra Bazaar*. So I called all my Chhattisgarh actors (a thread I'll pick up later). They came and participated in the bazaar scene, and I got the music compounded with many strains of music including Chhattisgarhi folk tunes and it became much richer. And it got a big ovation and I came back with the award, great jubilation. The play again was so popular, that it went on and on. Twenty shows—I went on getting dates and extending it. It had a momentum. Then the Information and Broadcasting Ministry took on the play for twenty shows in Punjab/Kashmir and twenty in U. P. It was revived again and again till about two years ago. It still is very popular.

The Soviet boss who took me on was an easygoing and open-minded man, intelligent and interesting too. He didn't care that I was never on time. I could never be there at 8 o'clock in the morning. And I never left at 4. Because I was doing my drama activities, I was always late and I always stayed on till the night, quite frequently taking work home. He was satisfied because my output was more than the others who came punctually, left punctually, had their lunch punctually, sat in the canteen and talked all day, did nothing and collected their salaries. Then this man went away. I was summoned one day by his successor. He said, 'Mr. Tanvir, your services are no longer required. You're not punc-

tual, etc. etc.' He also said that my gratuity etc. came to about Rs. 18,000. I was overjoyed. So I just went to friends in the canteen, overjoyed.

I said, 'I'm relieved, I've got Rs. 18000 for gratuity.'

Went home to Moneeka and said, 'I'm fired.'

She said, 'I'm going to divorce you.' (*Laughs*) That was her response.

I said, I've got Rs. 18,000.

She said, 'You've lost the job.'

Also, we had Nageen in 1964. There were these responsibilities and she couldn't see how we'd survive without a job. Nageen had brought the job, I mean with her birth I got it. And so ... now, the climax of the story is that I was fired in 1972, in the month of March. In April I get a telephone call: a policeman came to our house saying that there's a call for me and I have to respond at a certain number. I didn't have a telephone. So I went to a restaurant, used the telephone. It turned out to be R.K. Dhawan—prime minister Indira Gandhi's PA—asking me whether I'd accept a nomination to the Rajya Sabha. I said, I'll have to think it over. He said, You don't have much time Mr. Tanvir, and he gave me twenty minutes. By 5 o'clock he had to announce it. I said, I'll give you a ring. I came home and told Moneeka, and she asked, 'What're the liabilities?' That was her first question. I said, I don't know. I rang up a friend, Mehndi, and asked him. And he said, 'Don't be a fool, just say yes, and I'm coming.' So I went back and said yes. He said 'What're you talking about like fools? What liability—you can do what you like, it's wonderful. Let's go and meet Vishwanath.' We went to *Link*. Vishwanath was the editor. He said No, your name is not there. He showed me the list, Sardar Jafri, Zaheer Abbas, Alkazi, all these names were there. Suddenly he saw my name. He closed the office. He took us home, and we drank whisky till 2 o'clock. So that's how I entered the

Rajya Sabha. Then I received a phone call from the Soviet Information Department, inviting me back to the office as a guest of honour. The same man. So that's how that story is rounded up.

I went on producing plays. I found the privileges, free medicine and free air-ticket twice during the sessions, free rail pass for you and your spouse, free house and enough money by way of allowances—very lucrative. We saved a lot during that time.

Naya Theatre turns professional

By now we were getting enough money. So we decided to pay Rs 150 to each actor every month. By 1972 we had become professionals, in a small way, with our own momentum. There was a Department of Culture subsidy for professional theatres, and in 1973 we got it. It used to be Rs 300 a month each for 10 actors. It came up to Rs 750 and for years it remained Rs 750 per head [increased to 20, because I had 30; but never less than 20,22,25]. It was possible to make two ends meet even then with Rs 750. Last year it became Rs 1500 per head for 20, which we're yet to receive.

(So you've used Chhattisgarhi actors from that production onwards?—AK)

Yes. Of course they let me down too, these actors, saying that we want to go off for a short while, and producing some false telegram or something—they never came back. I got two or three of them in 1960 for my production of Moliere's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*. But in 1970 they all came—Madan Lal, Thakur Ram, Jagmohan, Devi Lal. Brij Lal I used to know as a child, they used to sit in Lalu Ram's *pan thela* to sell *pans*. Most of them were fe-

male impersonators. Thakur Ram and Madan Lal were the only male actors. Otherwise Bulwa Ram had never acted in a male role except in my theatre, Brij Lal always in women's roles, Devi Lal, who played the harmonium, all played female roles. So it became a professional theatre by 1973 and we haven't looked back. Though the story of being let down went on making me very angry. There was a fellow from one of the local villages, who did some kind of travesty of *Charandas Chor*, and presented it as his own play and direction etc. And this used to make me very angry. And they were making a lot of money in the villages, they were showing it; so I went to Haider Ali Vakil, he was a neighbour, senior to me and my elder brother's friend. He was a social activist and writer, a leftist and a pleader with a difference. Not out to make money. So I went to him and asked him what to do. Haider bhaiyya listened to my story; he said, 'Habib, you're working with folk actors. You know them by now. You know nothing about litigation. Let me tell you that these illiterate villagers know a lot more about litigation than you do. You will never win the case. You'll be grilled, you'll waste your time and you might lose the case because they know all the tricks of the game. But in any case, winning and losing apart, *why do you want to sue them?* You are a social worker also, you care for them. Forget it. Do a panchayat—go to them, call fifty people, talk to them plainly *ki why do you cheat me? Why don't you announce it is my play? Give them the liberty to do it if they like. But ask them why they're telling lies.*' It was very good advice. So I went to Rajnandgaon and in Lalu Ram's house we did collect a lot of people, including these culprits. And I said, '*Aap logon ko kya cheez sata rahi hai, koi musibat hai? Jhooth kyon bolte ho? (What's bothering you people, what's the problem? Why do you lie?)*' *Maine kaha mujhe royalty nahin chahiye, paise nahin chahiye, kuchh bhi na kaho to bhi thik hai; par galat kyon kah rahe ho—tumhara play, tumhara*

direction? (I told them, I don't want any money or royalty, it's even okay by me if you don't credit anyone with the play, but why pass it off as your play, your direction?). They all agreed before everyone and they went back and merrily continued to this day; and not one, several groups are doing it. Now it doesn't touch me. But my understanding has changed now; these fellows let me down time and again, and I went pursuing them, again and again, and brought them back, till I came to the conclusion that it must be an open door policy, that if they wanted to go, I'd allow them. They always wanted to come back sooner or later and I always took them back, without acrimony. Only last year Bulwa and Ramcharan said, we're too old now and we've got some domestic problems and we want to go. Last summer Bulwa took his son as well. Then I called them to Raipur to meet and talk about a pension scheme which I'd discovered. So I called them, separately, and I said, 'Going like this isn't going to help. Fill up the form—it talks about how much land you have and earnings, etc. Then you have to sign it and I'll submit it. You must, because you've worked in the theatre for so long. But tell me,' I said, 'Many of my old plays are constantly in demand. I wouldn't like to close them. In new plays I'll have the new cast. But in the old plays I cannot do without you. So for the shows of old plays will you come?' They said, 'Whenever there's an old play, we'll come.' What I'm trying to say is that this has been my handling in my maturer years. And it has worked very well.

(So Naya Theatre is a professional company—they are paid actors of that company? -AK)

They're on a regular salary and it's this kind of a policy, no written agreement, nothing. And in my case it seemed to work very well. As a matter of fact when Peter Brook came, he wondered how I

have had them for so long, with no trace of staleness or being tired. He said, 'The history of theatre shows five years.' And suddenly it occurred to me, he's right. Stanislavsky—Actors Studio—five years, and roughly you'll see four to five years, *khatam*, finished. And no more innovation takes place. Peter Brook himself. Therefore there's one credit that I accept unabashedly, that I have held a group for so long. If somebody gives it, I'll lap it up, because it is a credit. I'm saying a great deal more than seems to be contained in these words. You've no idea how difficult it is to live with them and work with them. The tantrums, the scenes, the *gaalis* (abuses), I can't even go on record saying what else.

'Mother tongue and freedom of movement'

It took me time to realize two basic approaches to working with these folk actors: mother tongue and freedom of movement. Because what was happening with those six whom I'd brought in 1958 was, I'd pull my hair and fret and fume, stamp, my foot and say, Thakur Ram, what the hell, I've seen you in the village and I know your strength as an actor; what is happening? Why can't you simply follow my instructions and give me that same strength? He'd also not know. He'd shout back and say, it's not your fault, it's my fault, my fault, my fault! So these kinds of scenes would be created without any one of us knowing what the fault was, except I realizing, after many years, that I was trying to apply my English training on the village actors—move diagonally, stand, speak, take this position, take that position. I had to unlearn it all. I saw that they couldn't even tell right from left on the stage and had no line sense. And I'd go on shouting *ki tum dahina haat se kya karte ho, bayen haat se kya karte ho, itna nahin samajhte?* Don't you know the difference between the hand you

eat with and the one you wash with?

I saw the Nacha again and again, and what do I see? A big platform and they're performing; thousands of people or hundreds of people on a small platform or no platform, at the same level—still performing; and nothing was lost. Or a stage, and some who didn't get a place and considered themselves special, coming and sitting on the stage with the orchestra and the actors; and I'd get very annoyed over this, but not the actors. It didn't matter. I also stopped worrying about it. It didn't interfere with the audience. But what was happening was that the audience was sometimes on three sides, sometimes on all four sides. Entry through the crowd, in the middle somewhere a performance, actors all around, invariably three sides, and wherever the response went, like a cow going through the audience, the actors would turn to that. Or a joke improvised, connected with some incident in the village which they'd come to know of, and a spoof or a line connected with it, and a response from a section, then they'd turn to that section. So I realized that those who were for years responding to an audience like this could never try to unlearn all this and rigidly follow the rules of movement and that was one reason why Thakur Ram, a great actor, wasn't able to be natural.

Another reason was the *matrubhasha*—he wasn't speaking in his mother tongue, so it jarred on my ears, because he was speaking bad Hindi and not Chhattisgarhi, in which he was fluent, which was so sweet. This realization took me years—naive of me, but still it took me years. Once I realized it I used Chhattisgarhi and I improvised, allowed them the freedom and then came pouncing down upon them to crystallize the movement—there you stay. And they began to learn. That quite simply was the method I learnt.

Till 1973 I went on in pure Chhattisgarhi idiom. I presented their own stock comedies for three years. And also pieces from the

Mahabharata after working diligently on Pandavani, the *sampurna* or complete Mahabharata, and then, having a grasp of what they had to say and having studied

Mahabharata over again, in the short form of Rajagopalachari, I got the hang of it, and devised a production. '*Arjun ka Sarathi*' was the name of a short piece of half an hour which I rehearsed for timing, saying you must talk only of *geet updesh* and for half an hour; combining it with ritual which was not usually presented on stage in Chhattisgarh but in temples, and with the singing of fascinating songs with intricate, changing rhythms. Seven songs coming one after the other, blending into one another, a fascinating experience in the temples, during the weeklong Ramsatta festival, when these women start singing from their homes and go to the temple. Ramsatta had some lovely ritual tunes. I got all these women, eight or twelve of them. Then there is a ritual song which is on Shiva-Parvati, called *Gauri-Gaura* (Gauri is Parvati and Gaura is Shiva). Songs are sung around the idols of *Gauri* and *Gaura*. Intricate rhythms, with one song flowing into the other. It's beautiful. That was launched as '*Gauri-Gaura*' with '*Arjun ka Sarathi*' and a half hour skit, '*Chaprasji*'. This became an instant success in Pandavani, which enabled me to present Mahabharata in Pandavani in many drawing rooms, and then in Karol Bagh, in the open, the *sampurna* Mahabharata, for a number of days. Though they would sing and recite in Chhattisgarhi, yet the ordinary householder men, women and children thronged the park where we were showing it.

But when I did the Gauri-Gaura ritual, two women, in two different songs, would come into trance. When I was trying to rehearse Gauri-Gaura we were all living in the Gandhi Darshan space. There was an open air stage and accommodation. And suddenly Janaki came into trance. I was in consternation because something had to be done to get her out of it. So we ran helter skelter

to the market to get incense, we needed alcohol, candles for the soles of the feet, and the skull. We managed somehow, but we weren't equipped for it. Janaki came out of the trance. I then realized that it was the rhythm which does it. Slowly, easily the rhythm must slow down and stop. When we launched it in Delhi, there were strange reactions.

One drama critic came up and said, 'Habib, when these women get into a trance, is it acting?'

I said, 'No. It's an actual trance. One girl gets into a trance in one song and the other in another.'

'But why show it on the stage?'

I asked, 'Didn't you find it engaging, fascinating?'

He said, 'Yes'.

I said, 'You have the answer. My answer is that I find in this drama in an embryonic form and I'm presenting it to you, not in an academic way, but as good theatre which fascinates you. Its magic is felt. I visualize the beginnings of drama in India like this, a semblance of the kind of hymns chanted around the fire in Vedic times; and this is dramatic because religion is dramatic.'

A young French couple came up to tell me that Jean Vilar, no less, had a voodoo actor as a player in his company, and he conducted rituals on stage, dancing and spitting fire. So I said, if the critic had known that in an advanced cultural centre like France they were doing this, then he would accept my doing it!

This kind of exercise, this show of three things, one piece from Pandavani Mahabharata, then *Gauri-Gaura* and then a short comedy skit, was well attended, but never housefull. We were doing it from 1970-73. I continued with something or the other in Chhattisgarhi, giving them the confidence of doing something as actors in their mother tongue, and yet I couldn't draw more than 50-70 people per show, and I called that a failure. Not enough for successful theatre.

Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad

In 1973 I had a workshop in Raipur, month-long, one of the best I've had, the first and best. I got many Nacha parties to participate for as long as they wished, observe, be there, go away. There were some city boys, students, scholars, Surajit Sinha from Calcutta, Komal Kothari from Rajasthan, R. P. Nayak, an authority on Madhya Pradesh tribals, who at that time held some high post in the government of M. P. And they wrote some good papers, and there were some professors of anthropology from the university; and city actors and lots of these folk actors of Chhattisgarh. Many Nacha groups came as observers.

We had many things, make-up in the folk style—Thakur Ram used to put some white chalk on his face and look very good as an old man, and he was also very good with jewellery, and with tying his turban, quite an artist in his own right in these things. So I asked him to conduct the workshop on make-up, how to use coal, chalk, all the local, inexpensive things, and teach the city boys one indigenous way of making up. Then I would take a dalda tin and put a bulb in it, to show them the difference between a flood and a spot, and I told them, if you have nothing else, you can use this, and that by itself is a kind of spot since it controls focus, which is all a spot does, and the reflection of the white tin inside will increase the light. You can increase it more by adding reflectors, or put a lens on it. So the workshop touched many subjects including these. It was a rich workshop.

I had auditioned and selected some of the folk actors whom I'd known, who'd been part of my team earlier and became the nucleus of Naya Theatre, like Thakur Ram, Madan Lal, Bulwa, Lalu Ram, Brij Lal, Devi Lal. And Fida Bai came for the first time. She

had never acted before, though she had sung on stage and danced. The Nacha form is three or four skits, which go on all night, and in between they have dances and songs by men dressed as women. Sometimes they would have Devar girls, like Fida, singing and dancing. I saw her just before the workshop in a Nacha, in the village, singing and dancing. A boy in the audience whistled and accosted her, making a pass. And from the stage, on the microphone, she abused him and stamped her foot, saying that I'll crush you like this, and he subsided. And I decided then, that's the girl who can act. I told Lalu Ram, the veteran amongst the actors of our core nucleus group, that she should be a good actress. She had danced with him Thakur Ram on the Nacha stage. He said, no, no, she can't act, she'll be useless, Mohini can do it. She was one of the twelve women who came for Gauri-Gaura, and she was a good singer, with a sweet face, but I had noticed that she was slightly selfconscious. Still, I said, let's try it. So we did, and it didn't work. So I went back to my original request, let's go and find Fida Bai and get her. We got her. And the first day, I suggested what was to be done, and there she was, an actress. I was very pleased. I was right. And then, as anticipated, trouble started. I had been warned by the others that she was a difficult person, trouble of all kinds, her family came, her husband came, her mother-in-law came, she herself refused to participate. But what an actress!

In the workshop I had welded three stock Nacha comedies, blending them into one long play. I wrote some link scenes to connect the three apparently unconnected skits, but I made them into a story, and it had the Gauri-Gaura ritual too. I used 'Chher Chhera', the name of the first ritual: during *paus purnima* young boys go about calling out a few stylized lines, a call for donation for the *paus purnima* ritual. People give them grain, vegetables etc. They collect it and go to the riverside where the festival takes

place, and have a community picnic amongst the youth. So the stock comedy starts with two boys, then two girls who come to donate, and a flirtation takes place with jokes, remarks, song and dance, and that is the first skit. The second skit was 'Burwa Biwa'. Burwa Biwa was an old man who asks for the hand of a young girl, and the girl's father misunderstands, because they discuss dowry and other things and he makes it sound as if he's negotiating for some young boy of his household, then returns as the bridegroom himself, shocking the young girl's father, and then he says you've agreed, given your word, and he gets away with the girl. It's a satire, and hilarious and a good musical. The third skit was 'Devar Devarin'. The very name suggests the Devar tribe, a nomadic tribe, they live in tents and keep on the move, they sing and dance, traditionally, with their cocks, fowls, pigs, a dog, a dholak and a kind of sarangi, and the girls sing on doorsteps, and a man or woman plays the dholak, even in melas. This is how they earn. They also catch snakes and ask for milk and money for the snake and make a living; or they drive monkeys off fields for farmers. Occasionally they may have a performing monkey, though that's unusual. But the men, traditionally, are wonderful balladeers. They have long, beautiful stories in ballads, unrecorded and untouched to this day. I don't know if there are any left now, and with them go the stories, because the stories can't be related to any pauranic tales, the whole stock is separate. Adventure stories, love stories, in song, and they sing for long hours, like sagas. The other thing about the Devars is that they are kept as mistresses by rich people, landlords and moneylenders, anyone who can afford them. They can be gold diggers, and as tradition goes, occasionally a Devar woman has become a householder and stayed with one man, abandoning her nomadic life and even her profession of singing and dancing, but this is very rare. Traditionally, they are taken as mistresses

and either run away or are brought back home by their parents, and they go to another man. It is not prostitution. They make a profession of it, the singing and dancing, and a kind of life. Occasionally if a woman likes to live on with a man she fancies, which is not common, but does happen, then the parents are unhappy, and sometimes they go and cook up a fake fight and create such a racket that the man gets fed up, and they bring the girl back. And not just the parents, but the relatives, a whole gang, goes. If the girl refuses, there's a huge, racket and commotion, they tie up the girl like a bundle and bring her away. There's a monetary motivation, because each time the girl 'marries' there's a bride price for the family. These people are also very open about using abusive language. In anthropological books you'll find them described as a criminal tribe like the thugs, but of course that is a totally wrong description. I've seen them fighting, sometimes splitting open heads, and yet I would not say that they are criminal or crime-prone tribes. I have a different understanding of it, but they do fight in that fashion, making of anything a weapon.

I've described the three skits. In '*Chher Chhera*', one of the young boys falls in love with a girl, but her father inadvertently sells her to the old man and can't get out of the commitment, and the old



man takes her with him. The boy lover, who was trying to find money for the bride price, upon going to the bride's father, is told it's too late. The father himself suggests—we can retrieve her, they can't have reached the groom's house yet, so let's go disguised as Devars. And that's where the '*Devar Devarin*' skit comes in. There the *Gauri-Gaura* ritual is taking place, which was not part of the three skits, but which I had had experience of, and the beautiful songs are going on, and there the actress goes into a trance—dramatically, not a real trance—to fool the old man and beat him. He thinks there's a devi or goddess in her and the devi is beating him, and she beats him so hard he runs away. The priest who is looking after the ceremony is one of the disguised friends of the young lover—he had already cooked up a false fight to drive off the original priest and take over to help her elope with the hero, who is disguised as a Devar. But then the old man comes back in time. And the lover re-enters as a Devar boy, providing the excuse for the '*Devar Devarin*' comedy, which is a spoof on the tribe, but their own thing, and it's brilliant, full of humour. It is in the Devar dialect, which is different from Chhattisgarhi, and they kick up a racket, pretending to be the relatives, and finally run away with the girl, just as the Devars do. So this I introduced by linking themes and connecting the story. And in the end celebratory songs take place, the young lover gets back the young girl who was betrothed to the old man, and there's a happy ending. This was called *Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad*, the result of that one-month workshop in Raipur.

At the end of the workshop we held a weeklong festival—tribal dancers from Raigarh and Bastar, other Nacha parties and our own *Gaon ka Naam Sasural*, everything in the open, in the garden, thousands of people, a very successful festival. Of the folk actors from different groups, who had come to observe the workshop, Ramcharan belonged to another group from Baraonda and

he came only to observe for one or two days. He noticed that we were buying authentic jewellery which the Nacha players never had. *Mayapariksha* was the play he was to present at that festival. I had seen it before and I had selected it, saying you must show it because they were very good actors, Ramcharan and Ramratan, these two used to do it. It was both a comedy and a serious play. And they did it very well, including a murder scene in which suddenly a man is attacked, there's a splash and he's full of blood. I said, 'How d'you manage that?' They'd have a balloon filled and then they'd punch it and it would suddenly become flat. So he came and what do I see? More authentic than my production. He'd observed for two days, he saw the value of authenticity in terms of jewellery, real silver, real gold—everything was absolutely authentic, clothes and all. I'm just talking about the effect of things: Otherwise Nacha wouldn't care for this sort of thing, basically, they would give you any kind of costume, out of necessity, not design—any old coat, hat, jacket, sometimes not so good, sometimes fantastic, the colours combine and it looks very good. This was distinctive to Nacha. They wouldn't have Chhattisgarhi tunes either. They would mostly have film tunes and hybrid things. But in the main, the songs were in the fields, at harvesting time, in the mandir, during rituals, in childbirth, good, authentic songs, death songs, marriage songs, all these existed in society, but on the rustic stage little of it was reflected. So this was the first effect I could see of the workshop, on one party anyhow.

So *Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad* was the collage that I produced out of three different short plays, by adding link scenes and changing the story a bit. I presented it in Raipur in the open air. The very first show, a trial, was launched in a village. Hundreds of villagers had gathered and there it first passed muster except that hundreds more went away because of a mis-

understanding. I had a briefcase that looked like a doctor's bag and the moment I arrived, hundreds of people who'd gathered, looking at the station wagon, which was like a doctor's mobile van, watching me get down with that bag, decided that I must be a doctor for family planning, and that I was going to give them injections; and they went away. We had to send many more villagers and actors to tell them that there's no doctor and it's a play. Then they returned, but hundreds didn't come back. I did this play in so many parts of Chhattisgarh.

This was a turning point for me because when we brought it to Delhi and showed it for the first time it went on for at least twelve shows to packed houses, which was a big change from fifty to seventy coming for just a few nights. We had transcended the language barrier. People came again and again for the wonderful musical quality of the play and for the clarity of expression we had gained by this time, despite the fact that it is a specially difficult play in terms of dialogue, full of improvisation. In '*Devar Devarin*' they speak in words which are not easy to follow, for the Hindi belt. And yet they got a lot out of the slapstick and things became clear in a basic manner. In '*Burwa Biwa*' and '*Chher Chhera*' also, they have enigmatic and puzzling words, yet the *abhinaya* (acting) was clear, the jokes were followed in the main and the comedy came off. I realized that Delhi had accepted us.

This paved the way for *Charandas Chor* in 1974 and for all the other plays that followed. It was a turning point in my career, a breakthrough in introducing Chhattisgarhi as a language for a modern play. It gave me an all-Chhattisgarhi cast. Upto now I was combining them with urban actors. Now only folk actors.

Charandas Chor

In 1974 came a workshop lasting about a month, in which I produced a number of small plays. Various groups came (all Chhattisgarhi), and I had a workshop in Bhilai. We produced six little skits of 45 minutes to an hour. We got a very good response from the local village audiences. They were their own plays—I just did some work on them, injected some elements. Towards the end of the month's workshop, in the last four days, I began to work on a thief story, which wasn't called *Charandas Chor* at that time. I had tried it earlier at a workshop in Rajasthan, the story being from Rajasthan. I was holding a workshop with Rajasthani folk actors and I thought this was the best story to try; but the story failed. In three or four days I realized they were lacking in actors. There was only one good actor they had, a wonderful actor. Otherwise their whole strength lay in music. Wonderful singers. And their form was opera—the little scenes that they enacted had feeble acting. So I abandoned the thief-story.

Chhattisgarh is a very talented place in terms of acting, with a special predilection for comedy, as against Rajasthan, which is very rich in music. I took up *Charandas* towards the end of the workshop in Bhilai, just tried out within four days with a very good actor called Ram Lal who did the chor. This was towards the end of 1974. Then finally we had a show on the open-air stage of the maidan in Bhilai. It was a Satnami occasion. There are lakhs of Satnamis in this country and they've had quite a history from Aurangzeb's time, quite militant. Every year they gather in Guru Ghasidas's place near Raipur, thousands, a great mela. They sing and dance. Like most untouchables they are given a separate *muhalla* or area, not in the village. In that *muhalla* they're given a *chauraha* (crossroads), a *chowk*. In that *chowk* they have a white flag, the Satnami flag, which is kept on a pedestal. There is some

little ritual every day.

It was a very rough version. Suddenly, when I was showing the skits on the open stage and the Satnamis were coming up on the stage again and again, I was inspired by them. Towards six o'clock, I said we have a play which is still in the melting pot, not quite ready and I'd normally never dream of showing it, but considering that this is a Satnami occasion and there're thousands of people sitting here and the play has something to do with Truth, which is the motto of Satnamis, I would like to dare to show it, knowing that you'll accept it with all its faults. And don't mind if I come in and change their positions etc.

It ran for about forty minutes. We called it *Chor Chor*. For songs I had this Satnami book with me and I just improvised by singing and asking them to repeat. And there was a big response for this rough, *kachha* (raw) thing. Then I worked further on it, got the panthi dance party, choreographed them and was glad because 'Truth is god, god is truth' is their motto (*Satya hi ishwar hai, ishwar satya*). And this is a play about truthfulness and truth. It blended well together. So I included their flag, their dance, rearranged it, got them to write my type of songs. The folk singer or poet generally writes in a reformist vein. Of course some folk poetry is interesting, beautiful. But whenever it comes to that kind of thing, the folk poetry just doesn't have enough depth. Ganga Ram Sakhet was one poet, Swaran Kumar the other. I said, 'Look, I don't want to say that lying is bad, give it up, drinking is bad, give it up. I don't even believe that you can change a man, unless it happens that he changes himself. It doesn't help him that you're asking him to change. Habits are hard to shake off. So I'd like you to say that just as a drunkard cannot leave drinking, a liar cannot leave lying and a thief cannot leave stealing, truthful men cannot leave telling the truth. If habit is a vice and truthfulness becomes a habit, then that too is a vice. As vice sticks to

you, so does habit.' The song worked, because I was very consciously working on the subconscious. I was also working unconsciously, but not so unconsciously. I said, death is coming; let us have the rumblings of the coming of death right from this point. So let us introduce the word Yama.

I first called the play *Amardas*. Amardas happens to be one of the gurus of the Satnamis, and they all protested that it can't be named after their guru. Then I called him some other Das, that was another guru. So finally I said Charandas can't be a guru and it was not. The original story has no name, he's just chor. At that time I didn't know the story except orally. Subsequently it appeared in a collection of Vijaydan Detha's stories.

What happened was that Shyam Benegal with Girish Ghanekar assisting—now he's a director in his own right—and Govind Nihalani at the camera, pursued me all over Chhattisgarh, with *Gaon ka Naam Sasural*, covering many *mandis*—*marais*, they're called—*melas* and such fairs and marketplaces. A lot of footage was shot and *Sasural* was recorded. Copious, long interviews were taken with Bulwa, Ramcharan, me. All of it is lost. Great pity, because these were all young people at that time. They became history later. So he saw this improvisation and decided to film *Charandas* immediately, and *Charandas* the film was made for the Children's Film Society, before it was launched in Delhi. But



he wanted a foil for the chor. I was doing the screenplay. I trusted his good sense as a cinema man—which I still do, of course, quite sincerely—and when he said children wouldn't take to a tragedy, I tried it on my daughter and she didn't like the story to end in the chor's death. So I produced a scene where Chitragupta, the *munshi* (bookkeeper) of Yama, Lord of Death, comes and Charandas steals his name from the register, and when he looks for his name he says it's not there. It's gone. He makes a pair of it and puts it in his mouth. He swallows it. Then there's great consternation because his name isn't there in the logbook, and the man is dead. Then Yama comes on his buffalo and gets down to examine it and Charandas rides the buffalo and runs away, stealing the buffalo, and what you see in the horizon in the evening is Charandas running and the havaldar chasing him. That's the end of the film. So he continues to steal even up there in heaven. Now this, plus a foil needed. Madan Lal was my choice for the actor, according to me, one of the great actors of Chhattisgarh. But Shyam didn't want Madan Lal, he wanted Lalu Ram. Lalu Ram was a wonderful singer, but not an actor. Whereas Madan Lal was an experienced actor, having been on stage for a long time. Lalu Ram was always singing and dancing on stage as a woman, not acting except for some very mechanical lines spoken. But he had this squint-eyed face. So I went by Shyam's judgement because he was a cinematic man and he saw it from the camera point of view and I thought he must be right. Lalu Ram did it well of course, because film acting is different, you can make an ordinary man act the way you want him to. And Madan Lal became the foil. He was dishonest, would keep lying.

This is the screenplay I had written. There was a court case and I played the judge. All this was in my own screenplay, my play ruined but I not knowing any better, loaded with these things, a foil, a donkey—I got four people to become a donkey—a court scene,

all hilarious, enjoyed thoroughly by my wife Moneeka and some friends, and I then suddenly discovering that this is not my form. I don't need a foil, an actor can come on stage and simply declare that I'm a thief, my name is Charandas, that's good enough for the stage. So I cut the foil out. I made Madan Lal the actor; I cut out the judge scene, though I was acting in it and

it was very funny and I enjoyed it. I cut out the posthumous scene, much to the dislike of Moneeka and others who said no, no, it's nice. I said, yes, but I will stick to the story. Actually I didn't even stick to the story. Vijaydan Detha, who related the folktale, is also angry. His chor gets killed, but that's not the end. The queen takes the guru as her consort and the guru accepts, because, in the story as written by Detha, in order to save face she proposes to the guru and the guru, who is very worldly, becomes her consort. That's the way the story ends. Vijaydan's argument is valid enough, that if you're showing present-day conditions, evil continues, hypocrisy continues, the raj must continue with all its corruption, nepotism, everything; your story is romantic. He may be right there, but I wanted a cruel end. I wanted to say



something different. I had something different in my mind: on the subliminal level the effect of Yama, and I analysed it later, when it had a big effect, the word Yama coming so often in the sequence 'Give Death its Due', and then death coming really unexpectedly. People were stunned. Some didn't believe that he was dead, because I always used to get the actor to become very stiff. They thought it's a comedy and there'll be some trick and he'll come back.

I also had this other idea in my mind, that there's this man called Socrates who died for Truth, and accepted it, but wouldn't budge from his path of truth. There was Jesus Christ—same thing. There was Gandhi, who also stuck to his principles, and died. Here is a common man—and that's why he must remain a common man—an unheroic, simple man who gets caught up in his vows and though he fears death, can't help it and dies. And the establishment cannot brook this. So for me the tragedy in the classical sense was perfect because tragedy has to be inevitable. There is an inevitability to his death because he didn't go the convenient way of saying yes to the queen, which would be a way out. That way was barred, it was not an option. The queen is not simply a tyrant, but a politician. There is no way she can let him go free, because she entreats him not to tell anyone, and he says, but I must tell the truth; and as soon as she knows that the *praja* the populace, will get to know, she fears for her position. As we have seen throughout history, such people are always eliminated. So the inevitability of it was perfect. That was my argument, that this is, in the classical sense, a perfect tragedy. It makes you laugh till the last moment and suddenly you're silent. You're in the presence of death. And if you're receptive enough, there's absolute silence. Is it a tragedy? Yes. Is it a comedy? Yes. Is it a comedy? No. Is it a tragedy? No. I don't know what it is. It's difficult to put it in a category. And I think that's the secret of the success of the

play. To this day I'm convinced that the death is the secret of it's success. And the ending of the original story, which also has a valid point, I don't know if it would have managed to secure the kind of popularity Charandas has.

The very first night it was a stunning experience, in Kamani auditorium. He died. Total silence. Strange silence. People got up, thinking, when will the next line come? Disturbed. The restive, urban, Delhi audience was moved. And then, before going out, they stopped, turned and then stood for several minutes (because the anti-climax goes on for a long time, the whole ritual of the deification of the chor, the last song), watching from the door, uncomfortably. I learnt from Shakespeare to always end with an anti-climax; in any case, this catharsis, to use a classical word, must be brought down somehow and I have something more to say through that ritual. I integrated the Satnamis for that reason. Now nobody questions the end. I had something more elaborate for death which I removed after the first few shows, and this went on for several shows till there were no more dates in Kamani. So we moved to Triveni immediately, and had twelve shows there. Then we were booked for twenty shows in Haryana and after that it never stopped. From 1974 to now.

(Did the comic sequences come from actors' improvisations or from things you've seen in other skits?-AK)

No, no, most of it comes quite effortlessly to them, except that I was clear about the character of the thief. I did not want to romanticize or produce it in a heroic style, but to play him simply and produce a character who, because of his, let's say naivete, ignorance, conservative nature, old-fashioned belief in vows, is so caught up in the web of his vows (which he really took inadvertently as a jest), that he doesn't think that he's going to really



face death; and when he's threatened with it, he cowers, cringes, supplicates and shows all the fears of the commonest man. But at the same time he has a total inability to find a way out of it, because he is caught up in a vow. He happened to have taken it. Having taken it, he faces the consequences. Madan did it exactly that

way, I didn't have to hammer it in. Govind did it the same way. Deepak tended to be a bit flamboyant—but he can't help it. He wants lines, wants the gallery to respond. But in the end I said, try to show fear and agony, but just before the end, you attain peace, total peace. And then curtain. That he manages.

(And you've received awards for Charandas Chor?—AK)

Yes, in 1982 we got the Fringe First award at the International Drama Festival in Edinburgh. The Scots newspapermen asked me, how come they were using their own language which we didn't understand a single word of, and yet we liked it, quite genuinely, so much that we wanted to not only give it the first award but also announce it before time; traditionally we don't announce it in the middle, we announce it long after the festival is over. And this time we had this strong impulse to announce it immediately. How come? And the audience was mostly white—very few Indians. I said, I found the actors so full of abandon, so totally lacking in any kind of inhibition in front of a white audience, they were totally confident that they were speaking a human tongue to a

human audience who could understand it. They made no difference between this audience and the village audience back home. And there was no difference between their performance in the village where their language is spoken and the one here. And that confidence, that self-assurance and lack of self-consciousness, that enjoyment they themselves get, was almost contagious—that's what got you. I think this is one explanation; I know of no other. Probably I was right, because it does transcend the language barrier—I mean, for one thing it has a very strong visual language, and the story moves along simple lines and once you understand the vows it's quite easy to follow visually. But in the main I think it was because of the actors performing in that way. I was doing things in Chhattisgarhi during 1970-73. But I didn't have a breakthrough until this time because I suddenly got the language of the body through improvisations before *Charandas Chor* and through other means at my disposal—my vocabulary of the visual language of the Chhattisgarhi players had increased and so had my confidence in using it. It was simply that. Otherwise I could've gone on doing theatre in Chhattisgarhi and it would have remained obtuse to a lot of viewers and accessible only to a coterie of admirers. Suddenly we broke all barriers and people who'd never come to see Chhattisgarhi plays during those three years started pouring in. So *Gaon ka Naam Sasuraal* and *Charandas Chor* must have had all these factors in it. I wasn't aware or conscious of it.

'I've learnt many things from watching Nacha'

My long courtship of the Chhattisgarhi folk player from 1958, off and on, upto 1973, got a breakthrough in 1974-5. After all, what happened in all this time? Several things happened. One of them

was what I just described. But many things, improvisations, my watching Nacha and how they moved and why they couldn't be rigidly choreographed... the Nacha itself is a form with two or three players, not requiring any intricate grouping, and they were just moving any old how, anywhere, wherever they got a response from. And so it was difficult for me to get them to move with motivation on a line in a certain way, which is what I'd learnt in England. I had to unlearn all these things; I still choreographed them, but my method changed; I gave them all the freedom and then I brought all my authority to pounce down upon them and freeze it, crystallize it and that was the grouping, otherwise they'd never remember if they had to go right or left. So my methodology became perfected over these years and things became easier. I just work. And things begin to gel. But all these methods are at work even now, improvisations and many other things.

You see, I've learnt many things from watching Nacha, although, of course, from *Mitti ki Gadi* in 1958 I'd come to a very simple kind of stage set, just a round *chabootra* (platform), and learnt to have the stage set functional, very economical so that we remain mobile, for artistic as well as economical reasons. The architecture, set design, were also affected by the kind of awareness I gained in regard to the importance of the actor related to space and the relation of time to space and to actor and to action. All these things, I think, gave me very simple forms, like a rectangular platform with just one tree, to which I came after a few shows. In the beginning there was something like a curtain, with a temple or a queen's palace painted, on the platform—not the entire platform, just a little of it—and rolled up and down by an actor, visibly there. But I thought that was fussy, so I removed it during the shows and came to two bamboos and a little foliage piece, the branch of a tree connecting them, and through that people used to pass. Then I got rid of even that, keeping only one bamboo,

one branch, and it stayed at that. In other plays also, the bare minimum, absolutely simple.

Another factor is adaptability. I take plays to so many parts of Chhattisgarh and then perform in towns, proscenium, open-air, so we have to constantly adapt ourselves. Like *Hirma ki Amar Kahani* was really done in the open for the first show, in a railway stadium in Bilaspur, with the audience seated in the gallery; and we performed with a cast of seventy, several tribal parties participated, and they appeared to be enjoying dancing on the ground, on the grass the sheer earth—and the dust being raised looked authentic, their feet felt firm and good, being used to earth. The actors who were playing the policemen, chasing people, enjoyed running and I enjoyed seeing them run, just run, about seventy feet. And then we had to come to Sagar, where the stage is twelve to fourteen feet. Then suddenly we came to Sriram Centre; that itself was quite an adjustment; so after one day's rehearsal we adjusted to that. I think this is one more factor which has given us flexibility, but the approach was such, the space was uncluttered by props and things, except the bare minimum, and the utilization of space was such that we could have people on three or four sides and still perform. So I think that is the reason you feel this kind of openness of space, even in a proscenium.

'What an actress!'

Now, in the context of what I said about the Devar tribe, we had invited trouble when we asked Fida bai to join us. She came to live with us and after a day or two came her husband, Rohit, and her mother-in-law, and they brought a lot of trouble. The mother-in-law was a very energetic old woman, very quarrelsome with a big voice, noisy, making a racket all the time. So was the hus-

band, and they began to make trouble by fighting over every scene. And Fida herself objected to being betrothed to Thakuram as an actress in a scene, because of the authenticity of the ritual. That was, for her, as good as getting married to Thakuram and Thakuram himself claimed that now he was as good as married to her. She was a very attractive girl. And he found an excuse to declare that he had a right over her. I tried to explain that this is make believe, this is drama and it has nothing to do with life and reality, that they should rehearse and do the play. But the mother-in-law wouldn't have it, Fida herself wouldn't have it, and Thakuram loved it, for his own reasons! This was not the end of the trouble. After the whole thing was prepared, there was a festival in Raipur—This was a workshop idea I had launched, I was in the Rajya Sabha at the time and I floated the idea of such a workshop and suggested that I'd set an example; and this was my first launching of the workshop. P.C. Sethi was the Chief Minister. For the festival we were being financed by the Madhya Pradesh government. Arjun Singh was the Education Minister. Then the next show was organized in Bhopal. We moved to Bhopal with all the actors in the train, but Fida didn't turn up at Rajnandgaon where she was to board the train. We arrived at Bhopal. I mention ministers, because there was some minister who came to hear of my crisis, that I'd lost my heroine. He was from Rajnandgaon, and he knew all about the Devar girls. So he said, I'll get her. And he rang up the DG of Police in Rajnandgaon, and ordered him to go and get Fida. So the police went to Fida bai's house and the mother-in-law said, very innocently, they're great actresses, that they didn't know where she was. And she sent the police off on a wild goose chase with some wrong clues. They, of course, drew a blank and knowing the Devars as they did, they realized that there was some trick behind this and they went back demanding she hand over Fida. She again pretended she knew nothing, but

they said, you've locked her up, she's in the house, we can hear her weeping. And though she pleaded and protested, they barged in, and sure enough, found a little room locked from the outside. Inside a girl was weeping. They knocked and talked and found out that it was Fida. They ordered it opened. Her mamu was to accompany her. The police paid for the tickets and they took a train. I had sent a boy from Raipur, he was there too. These three travelled. But the train arrived just an hour before the show and they didn't come in time. Kaushalya, who was the other good actress, said I'll carry the role. And she carried it beautifully. So on that day Kaushalya was the heroine of *Gaon Ka Naam Sasuraal*. When we came back to the hotel where we were staying, we found this boy from Raipur standing waiting, ready for us, with a grin on his face. I said, what's happened? He said, she's here. And she was sitting in a corner, all bedraggled, very unkempt, very sad, with her mamu.

Then we had our first show at Teenmurti House in Delhi, attended by Indira Gandhi. That was the first workshop show done by a Rajya Sabha member and therefore it was a ceremony. And there Fida appeared for the first time. After the show she went back and declared that she wanted a divorce from Rohit. He's also a Devar boy—sometimes a Devar boy marries a Devar girl but it doesn't turn out successful because they hardly get on. And although they had six children and some of them were already grown up, she wanted a divorce. It's a very long-drawn-out



process in their tradition. First, of course there were protests, but she was determined, and you have no idea what I mean when I say determined; nothing can be more determined than a Devarin determined. She collected the whole village and she had to pay back the bride price or something; she arranged all that from the money-lender, and she did it. And then rejoined Naya Theatre, as a free woman. She lived on with us and there were many moments of trouble, but what an actress! She did many roles. In *Good Woman of Schezuan* she was very good, in *Bahadur Kalarin* she was inimitable. She really enjoyed it. The roles come to her so naturally—you explain just a little, and she'd do it softly, subtly, dynamically, loudly and also lyrically. In *Good Woman*, the impersonation of the man came so naturally, and so gracefully, it was amazing, and in *Kalarin* her maturity was really immaculate as an actress. I think that's the best role she's ever done in her life, a tragedy in which she plays the role from a teenager upto a mature woman, the mother of a grown boy who marries one hundred and twenty six girls. It is a Chhattisgarhi oral tale about incest between mother and son, a very powerful Oedipal story and I was amazed to discover it as an oral tale in a village.

Fida Bai is with us still, but not as an actress, because she got herself burnt in 1987. It was providential that I was travelling by train to Raipur. A man boarding the train, an old friend of mine, said, d'you know what happened? Fida Bai burnt herself, two days ago. She's in the hospital, dying. So I didn't go to Raipur, I got off at Rajnandgaon and went straight to the hospital and saw that she was hardly likely to survive because she was all bloated, and she was in the general ward under very unhygienic conditions. I thought she was unconscious but when she heard that I'd come she folded both her injured hands and tried to do a pranam to me. I shifted her to Bhilai where there was a burn unit—with great difficulty because that's only for the steel plants

and anyone coming from outside had to pay through his nose. Then I shifted my headquarters to Bhilai to look after her, she was in the hospital for one month and we did a play with the IPTA and my group there and looked after her, taking her soup and this, that and the other and then brought her to Delhi and the treatment continued; she's had no end of operations, cosmetic and other things, grafting and a hole in the throat, which was still open with a pipe and doctors still struggling. She's fit, except she speaks in a hoarse kind of voice, she can't sing and the doctor says she cannot act. But they're trying still, maybe they can repair the glands, and of course, the face and body has changed. Anyhow, that's Fida Bai, our mainstay as an actress.

(Your plays are something in between a performance and a ritual; one feels like they're doing it for themselves, they're enjoying it, you're just an observer, it's not consciously showing something to an audience. But the level of communication is probably taking place within the group itself, like enjoying a katha or oral tale, that the community shares, exchanges, develops—not performance for performance's sake. It's also a kind of celebration. -BDS)

I think you're right, the ritualistic quality, the unselfconscious and celebratory quality, it is all there. I have occasion to complain a hundred times about a hundred things, but never on stage. They're absolutely punctual, they get ready on time and long before the opening time, whatever the time of opening, they are there, absolutely professional in their attitude to the shows. Being groomed in Naya Theatre this quality got further sharpened. If 'professional' means virtuosity, an unselfconscious attitude and sheer excellence and deep involvement, they have it.

(Tell me, after your Charandas Chor as a kind of culmination of

years of searching and experimentation, has there been any other turning point or have you sort of just consolidated those basic principles or working methods? Has anything happened to make you change your way of looking at theatre?-AK)

You see, in these matters one just goes on and one has to suddenly pull one's thinking cap on and look back and analyse one's own self and how it went. All that I'm aware of is that some things started in *Agra Bazaar* way back in 1954 and the openness of the play, its form, singing of the Nazir songs, came to me first as a feature. There was not enough material on Nazir to do anything more than just a feature. So I decided on collecting a few poems, the best, and making a feature of it with a thin narrative to describe Nazir and I suddenly arrived at a dramatic form; then I worked further on it, brought it to Delhi and it became a play. Now, that gave me great flexibility of form. And then I went abroad and saw Brecht and so many other theatres and came to realize that imitation doesn't take us anywhere and what the villagers do by way of simplicity of staging, the imaginative use of space, in regard to make-believe and the manner in which they deal with time, haunted me. I saw that simplicity in Brecht also. So I came right back to Indian-ness in the sense of realizing that you cannot possibly excel in imitating western dramaturgy and western methods, you must come back to our Sanskrit tradition and folk traditions. That realization got translated into *Mitti ki Gadi* in 1958, another milestone. *Agra Bazaar* was the first milestone, *Mitti ki Gadi* was the second milestone where I did use time and space according to my new understanding of Indian-ness, blending folk with the classical, realizing that there're no barriers, which of course the original pundits would not accept. They attacked me.

But later on there was another generation of pundits, they came

closer to theatre as a practice and began to see Sanskrit theatre in its right perspective. Originally they only wrote about Sanskrit grammar and wrote some bullshit about Sanskrit theatre, not knowing enough. So they talked about machines and revolving stages and all kinds of curtains that were used in the Sanskrit days. They only read the western Sanskrit scholars, who all apologized for our lack of understanding of time, space and action. They were expecting Aristotelian unities and that was bad enough. But it was deplorable when the Indian pundits echoed them, y'know, not really finding out the real thing, that we have only one unity, the rasa. They didn't see it. And so they begin to fancy all kinds of curtains instead of going to the Kuchipudi curtain or the Yakshagana curtain, the curtain which we used. Then they imagined all kinds of machinery. 'Enter actor seated on a throne'—how the hell are you to enter? Enter supine, or in a swoon. How the hell are you going to enter? So it's the actor's art, either a dancer's art or behind that curtain, and the curtain is removed and you are revealed, seated, as you see even in Kathakali. I did it that way in *Mitti ki Gadi*, it's simple theatre, to be simply done. *Mitti ki Gadi* therefore was the second milestone. *Gaon ka Naam Sasural* was the third milestone, because then I went into dialect and used folk actors fully and totally, the whole cast was Chhattisgarhi. This paved the way for *Charandas Chor* and since then, there's no further story. My yatra is from *Agra Bazaar* to *Mitti ki Gadi* to *Gaon ka Naam Sasural*, which paved the way for *Charandas Chor*, which was such a big hit and turned into a classic, almost. And then followed many other plays, but there was no new ground broken, except, you might say, in terms of content. *Hirma ki Amar Kahani* was a story about tribals in Bastar, *Bahadur Kalarin* was a story about incest, an oral folktale, told in a different kind of a manner, but not really basically different.

Bahadur Kalarin

The story was very different, a tragedy, and I was stuck for two years on how to tell the story, how to dramatize it. You see, there is this wine-seller girl called Bahadur Kalarin and she has a son from a king who passes through and meets her, promises to marry her, takes her and doesn't return. And the son marries one hundred and twenty six girls. One hundred and twenty six is a magical figure in folklore; in Chhattisgarhi language it's called *chhe agar chhe kori*, which means six plus six times twenty, which is one hundred and twenty six. Their counting goes from twenty to twenty, not hundred, just like the French counting. This motif enters many legends and folktales—*chhe agar chhe kori*, one hundred and twenty six. So he married one hundred and twenty six girls, before he declared to his mother that there was no woman he had known as beautiful as her. And the mother was appalled, but she hid the fact that she was shocked and cooked him a very spicy meal, very greasy, so that he became thirsty. She didn't let him drink water under the excuse that there's no water today in the house, and forbade the village to provide him with water. When he came back thirsty, she asked him to go and help himself at the well and draw some water. When he went, very weak, to draw the water, she pushed him into the well and threw a rock on him, and killed him. That is the story. And there're *murtis* in that village saying that this is the Kalarin. This is what the villagers believe. In the play I made the king return after the son had grown up. I made them fight, with the boy not knowing that it is his father, and killing him.

My difficulty arose from improvisations. Whenever I told them,

become the son, show me; become the lover, the raja, and show me, I got black and white pictures—the lover was bad, he let her down, the son was a scoundrel, a womanizer and a rogue—which didn't give me the play. Even before I'd introduced the more explicit Oedipal impulse into the play, these improvisations didn't help me. I was hard pressed to find explanations to offer them and get something better. I said look, the raja didn't tell lies to the girl, he genuinely loved her, he meant to come back, he got involved administratively, he didn't tell her that he had another wife at home, so why should you be surprised at all this? This is part of your life. You have two wives quite often; you have, many of you, a wife and a mistress, living in different parts, one with me in Naya Theatre and another back at home. We all know that. I talked in that language, 'Your wife and mistress know. So it is not even a hole-and-corner affair. Only you don't put them together because it's not graceful and they'll fight. So if he didn't tell her, that's not so dastardly, at least not from your point of view, it shouldn't be. And why couldn't he have meant that he'll come back and really got involved and it so happened that for sixteen years he didn't return. And of course the edge also got a little less, the sharpness was less after he'd had the girl for some months or some weeks and went away and the urge was less and he went on saying "now I'll go, now I'll go" and it went on and time passed. So why make him into a scoundrel for that?' So then I got better results, improvisations about some genuine love and conflict. Likewise about the son I said, 'Why should you think of him as a scoundrel? Supposing he was sick, he went to bed with his first wife and in bed she failed to rouse him and he wanted to marry again. He thought the girl was to blame. And the same thing happened, again he blamed the girl because, knowing his body, he knew that he was all right as a man. But he fails with these girls. It happened one hundred and twenty six times.

But each time he looked at his mother or the mother touched him as a mother would touch a child, he was roused as a man. He felt his body rise, like a man. So he discovers his fixation with the mother. What is wrong with that? It is his discovery, it is his problem. And he simply states, "no woman like you." So I said, 'Now add to this, have you never known any incest?', thinking that they may not know of incest: Then they came up with many stories of incest, father and daughter, uncle and niece, father-in-law and daughter-in-law, murders taking place due to this in such and such a place in the year so and so, this is what happened between father and mother and the mother and son live together in such and such place now; so the people say, it may or may not be true, but they do live together and the folk story, the rumour; is that there's some sexual relationship between them. And so it's not important whether it's true or not. It's important that people think so—that means that in their minds the possibility exists. Suppose the boy, being the only son, is pampered by the mother right from childhood, the only male companion, so she sleeps with the child till age twelve, fourteen, fifteen and he sleeps in the same bed and he wets the bed and she tends to him, she gives him a bath, she puts oil in his hair, combs his hair and there's this bodily relationship upto an advanced age. This creates a fixation. Now if this is the connection and this is the sickness, then why should you blame the boy? And then Fida Bai brought such sensitivity to the oiling of the hair and to the feeding of the meal to the boy, the sensitivity of the touching, the delicate way she did it, and the reaction of the boy when she touched his hair, and his eyes full of desire, before he discovers himself. And after his discovery, when she pretends, then again she gives him the meal and does the same things so that he remains deceived and feels happy and he's happy without sex, even when she's touching and being loving to him, he is satisfied.

Then I got the wealth and the richness of the play and the texture which I wanted. The lover also came with those nuances—first Thakuram was doing it, then I took over because Thakuram died. My next problem was the one hundred and twenty six women. I solved that through a tribal dance and one song in two minutes. The dance is going on and they're sleeping one after the other, two or three girls, and then just declaring one hundred and twenty six marriages. So it got simply done because by now I'd solved the problem of time and space and action easily. *Bahadur Kalarin* took, in the thinking and the conceiving of it, not less than two years. In the actual doing of it, it took much less.

He marries one woman and they go to bed on the stage, they sleep on a *chatai* (mat) and suddenly he gets up and there's a fight. And the mother comes to find out and he says that this woman is no good, I want to marry again. The mother tries to talk in favour of the girl, but the boy is stubborn and he won't hear of anything but a second marriage. Being the mother who has always pampered him, she says, 'Alright, alright, never mind. We'll find you another bride.' And she finds another bride. That ceremony is shown. With the second girl the same thing happens, in a different form. They're inside and the mother-in-law, Kalarin, is talking to the girl's mother, each woman praising her own child. It's quite a witty scene and in the middle of the praise there are sounds of beating and screaming inside and the boy comes out beating her. They begin to blame one another, the girl's mother blaming the boy, the boy's mother defending her son. After this scene she calls a priest. I've shown that the son had already briefed the priest about the fact that he wants a third marriage, but I don't show that right away, it begins to show as the priest begins to say—*chawal isme yeh toota hua hai, do seedhe hue hain, teesri shadi to karna hai*. This means that there has to be a third marriage. The boy says, that's what I told you, and the priest

pretends, what, what did you say? The hints come again and again, but Kalarin is shown to be naive enough to believe that the priest thinks he must have a third marriage. Then I show the ritual, several marriages taking place, till the last marriage. By this time the whole village is rebelling against Kalarin and her son and they come to the house of the girl's father saying, 'We'll not let you get her married. All our girls are suffering.' In the legend all the girls were given the pestle by Kalarin. There's a song about that. She told them to husk the paddy. So one hundred and twenty six of them ... they showed me, in the village, where I heard this story, holes in the rocks, hundreds of them— 'these are the holes made by the *bahus* who were married to Kalarin's son. There are really some geological formations and they're just like the holes made by that. So, 'Our girls are suffering and we want to boycott Kalarin; it is a tyranny in the village.' The girl's father protests, saying how come you didn't stop the others, just as my daughter's fortune is blooming you want to stop me. As the scene goes on, Kalarin comes in and she was a terror in the village because she was a rich woman now—the legend goes that she was a beautiful and very popular woman and she grew rich because she sold very good wine. People from far off villages came in bullock carts—and the grooves of the bullock carts were also shown to me, grooves on the rocks and lines on the road—to drink her wine, so that when she told the villagers not to supply water to her son they obeyed her. This was the story. So she says, what can you do to me? If you don't want to marry your girls to my son, that's fine. I'm free to bring in girls from distant villages. And everybody is stupefied and stunned, they hang their heads and no one says anything. Then Kalarin glowers and thunders—Fida did it so well. And she orders Brijlal, the last *samdhi* to go ahead with the ceremony, we'll see what they can do, nobody can do anything, and the marriage takes place. That's the last, the one

hundred and twenty sixth marriage and then comes the last scene ... this time he just simply comes to his mother and sleeps by her side and she gets up and says, 'Why have you left your new bride?' 'No, I don't like her, I don't want to sleep with her.' And she again tries to sort of cajole him and says, 'No, no, go to her.' He says, 'No' like a child and in this conversation he declares, 'I've never seen a woman like you. 'What did you say?' Her eyes are shocked and he repeats, 'I've gone through so much experience, but there's no woman like you.' Then she makes a plan and the way she played it, Fida, she says that I'll cook the meal myself, with my own hands, feed you myself, just like I used to when you were a child. And I'll oil you and I'll comb your hair and everything. And he's happy. And she cooks: 'How is it?' 'Very nice. Give me one more.' She feeds him with her own hands and he eats, *til ka laddu* made in ghee and the rest of the dishes also very hot and spicy. And then he becomes thirsty and there's a song in which ritualistically I've shown the villagers condemning him, no water, not one drop to drink and he's becoming thirstier, in the middle of their circular dance and he's in agony. And then he comes, half exhausted, half dead and asks for water, and Kalarin says, I've asked all the women of the household, one hundred and twenty six of them, they didn't fill any water today; so go ahead and do it yourself, now you're a man. She's changed her attitude to him, she almost scolds him, you're a man now, not a child, go get the bucket yourself, go to the well and help yourself. He looks at her, amazed, and then somehow manages to get up the platform, up the ladder to get the bucket, they'd kept it hanging there, and almost falls down because of his weakness and somehow stumbles across to the top of the well, drops the bucket and is about to bring out the water with difficulty, he's too weak to resist and she goes quietly behind him and throws him in, and comes back miming a huge stone and throws it and

comes back again, agonized and sings the last song and whirls in a dance and at the end, on the *sama*, produces a dagger—the song is just a mother singing for the loss of her only son, only child—and she dies. The legend says that since she died, there came a plant by the side of the well, and a flower, multicoloured, which reproduced all the ornaments and colours which Kalarin was wearing when she died. So that comes in the last song and the villagers swear by it, they show me the well where she died, with a flowering tree.

(So what psychological state of mind did you have for the mother killing the child, did she kill him because he was breaking a taboo, because she was horrified, or felt there was no hope for him?—AK)

I was greatly moved by the Oedipal impulse—Oedipus had no alternative except to put out his eyes and Jocasta to kill herself. So that expiation was one classical feature of the end. Secondly, Freud helped me in understanding the fixation. So the Freudian complex was injected into the oral tale—it already existed, but I sort of uncovered it for the actors to fully understand and confront. And the villagers' opposition to Kalarin, first her love in the beginning and many wooers wooing her because she was an attractive woman and she remaining aloof and alone and not succumbing and yet running her wine—shop beautifully and playing up her attractiveness to great advantage for her business but keeping her chastity in tight control because she never wanted to have another lover after her one lover. I showed the lover's death on the stage and the *arti* taken out and as soon as the body is taken out and Kalarin follows her lover's body, her son stops her. The moment he stops her, she turns and beats him on the chest and he puts his arms around her and takes her away. This

the first time such close, bodily love is shown between them, before he realizes that he loves his mother in that way. This was followed by a very fast, vigorous tribal dance and a quick short dance and song. So it was unsentimental—just the death and a song suggesting come, have a *bidi* before you carry on with your journey, somehow, in my mind relating it to death, but obliquely, acquiring other meanings—the pity of life and death. So the treatment made it what it was.

It was very popular in Calcutta, more than in Delhi. I didn't get large crowds in Delhi for *Kalarin*. But the Calcuttans took to it. And villagers in Chhattisgarh took to it. I expected a violent reaction to the incest on stage, but they took it in pindrop silence, reverently, and were affected and moved by it, which did surprise me because I was afraid. But two MPs from Chhattisgarh objected' to the immorality of the play, as they called it.



Psychological methods

You asked me whether I used the conventional psychological methods. The point is that I use all the methods that I've learnt from them, and then what I've learnt from myself and my studies. The thing is that sometimes, like in this case, there is an aware-

ness. But I have to make them aware of their awareness. They were aware of incest, but they weren't aware of the fact that incest can be analysed and dissected, reasoned out as an ailment, as a sickness. They understood it when I explained in concrete terms how the mother must have been handling the child, right from childhood upto his teen years, which is a very crucial turning point in a man's life—just on the threshold of adulthood. So then they brought all that sensitivity, and when I gave them their own examples, they brought in the lover, in the improvisations.

But as for other psychological nuances, I'm all the time talking about it and they are capable of imbibing it. In *Good Woman of Schezuan*, I only tried out one scene as an improvisation and that was in the tobacco shop—one after the other a family of nine or perhaps eleven, including the little child and the grandfather, just comes and starts sponging off them, a cup of tea, no harm in one cup of tea, oh, one cigarette wouldn't make a difference, and helping themselves. They did it so effortlessly, so naturally—they are used to so much poverty and to sponging, they understand all about greed. The instinct to survive makes them sly and clever. They don't have to be taught how to behave like greedy people who are parasites on the family. So I said, we can do Brecht. But when I came to the aviation man, the pilot with the dream, talking about the aircraft with so much love and poetry, that they couldn't get. That was a problem. I had to tell them to forget the aeroplane, but to think of the moon, of a bird, a flower, whatever they love, in their own village, whatever pleases them, and think in terms of love for those things and just use the word 'aircraft'. And then Amarsingh, who was doing the role, brought beauty and poetry to the aircraft, by imagining all this. So I do feed them with these psychological methods.

I would, even in the normal course of things, try to get the actor to relate himself to the reality around him, to his own experience;

and knowing their experience as I do, I propel them towards that reality so that they can get the feel of what they are doing. And in this case, most of them being illiterate was quite an advantage because I talked them closer to the text and to the root of the matter. Whenever I came across any stumbling blocks such as this, I'd make it a kind of classroom in which exchange could take place. They'd narrate to me stories of incest and I'd analyse incest and tell them my way of looking at it; at least one additional way of looking at incest from a scientific point of view, a doctor's point of view, an analytical point of view, as a disease. They have the mental equipment to grasp it and to produce it in their acting. That method I have to use. In *Charandas Chor* I told them I wanted the chor to be a normal man who feared death—if I brought in heroics, it would fail.

(And when you choose a play, what are the things you keep in mind? What makes you choose a particular play and decide that you're going to do it?-AK)

The choice is made from very many angles. When I read Sanskrit drama initially, way back in the early 50s, I was very deeply impressed by at least three plays, *Mudrarakshasa*, *Mrichchakatika* and *Uttaramacharita*. I wanted to produce *Mrichchakatika* first because I got the feel of it at once. I thought of *Mudrarakshasa* second because I thought it was a political masterpiece. Though I produced it in P. Lal's English version, and not very many shows, just a few, to this day those who saw it, said the play haunts them and me too; I want to do it again because it was so simply done and very effectively, I think—a simple white surround and I could use the stage in any way I liked, and I used it in many intricate ways to show different scenes, by sheer innovative lines of entry, movements and placement of the furniture. So that was second.

Then I came to *Uttarramacharita*, as I'd promised myself; in *Mudrakshasa* I'd already used the curtain, the kuchipudi curtain. I made the spy reveal himself in all kinds of ways and make different entries. In *Uttarramacharita* my aspiration was to, if I may say it in today's India, show up the spurning of Sita for political reasons as an unkind act—knowing that she is chaste, but, because one dhobi claimed that she wasn't chaste; sending her to her death. I wanted to show that Ram was really in the situation of a statesman, in a dilemma, taking a decision for political reasons, against his own heart and will, in favour of good statesmanship. I used only one traditional song, a classical bhajan. That song was a thread running through the play. Also I had a conviction that the training of an actor needs to combine the experience of classical and contemporary plays, complementing each other. So that was why I chose these.

I did all of them with Chhattisgarhi actors; *Mitti ki Gadi* was an out and out Chhattisgarhi team. In 1958 it was a mixed cast but the revival was totally Chhattisgarhi and also in the Chhattisgarhi language, except for the songs, which I got written for Chhattisgarhi tunes, in a dialect which was not necessarily Chhattisgarhi, some totally Hindi. Time and again I've noticed that the blend is harmonious, despite what the purists might say about *shudhhata*, one goes by the inner harmony one feels, confidently. There's no such thing as *shudhhata* alone creating harmony, and blending or mixing producing disharmony. This is a fallacy. And this was corroborated by a great authority, Jyotirindra Moitra, with whom I used to have long discussions about these things and he'd agree with me that you can have harmony with a blend of this kind because our experience and our ears told us that if our ears are pleased and we trust our own aesthetics, well then fine, we can trust the *darshak* to receive it. In between comes the pundit. The *darshak* takes it, you feel happy and the pundit objects, so

who is wrong? The pundit is wrong (*laughs*).

So that was the reason I took the classics, to break the barrier between the so-called great and little tradition, because I don't see any compartments, I feel there is an interplay and a flow between the two. I feel that the first drama in embryonic form is a people's ritual, a people's creation in terms of songs, tunes, words, all created by the people in the dramatic form of the ritual. So these forms become the people's and they're beautiful and a giant comes along, an intellectual or poetic giant, who drinks in that tradition. After assimilating it, he reproduces it in a form which is not just a reflection of it, but much more, very ornate, injecting a lot of his personality and imagination into it, and that gets crystallized and that's what we understand by the classical, which influences the people in its turn and so their forms get equally affected and this process keeps going on. So you get that unity of *rasa*, both in the classical and the folk form and that's a great commonality; the wonderful, elaborate poetry of the *mahakavya*, the *mahakavis*, may not be found in the folk imagination, but if the demolition of space, time and action and the unity of *rasa*, is found in both, it's a very fundamental common ground. We can trace the influence from the Vedic times.'

So this was the big motivating factor why, coming from Chhattisgarh, I should want Chhattisgarhi actors, folk forms, and classical plays also. And other great plays because I was attracted by the theme, the form of Brecht, by Moliere's satire and comedy and my own folktales being created into plays. My selection of plays is just my liking for a play, in the last analysis.

(Has there ever been an instance when your actors have come and asked to do a particular legend or a story?—AK)

No ... that way they've been passive. They've never heard the name of Shakespeare, Moliere and all these writers, even Kalidasa. And what they do in *nacha* is from what they know of paucan tales, most of them religious. Some secular story is concocted by them on a very elementary level, the evils of drunkenness or an unfaithful wife or husband, something like that, and they do a song and dance and all those little subjects and scenes, or something reformatory, occasionally a brilliant satire like *Jamadarin*, about casteism, but not beyond that. For that they needed some catalytic approach like mine.

In the new play that I have raised out of an improvisation, *Sarak*, when they started a workshop in a village in Bilaspur, I told them to go to the next room and do some improvisation. Those were panchayat election times, I'm talking about last summer, and there's a candidate and there's a village and he addresses them, asking them to vote for him and they make their demands. They say, make a road for us, bring us water, make a school for us. He becomes a minister and then he doesn't fulfil those demands. Somehow he has a heart-attack and dies and the contractor becomes the minister. Then I said, now let's talk about it, what did you experience, what did you feel? And they said, it's rather dull. I said yes, I agree. They said, rather cliched—they used other words but they meant cliched—and I said yes. I said, why did you kill him? They said, we didn't know how to end it so we just killed him. I said, but why of a heart attack? They said, well, we didn't know how else. Then why a contractor becoming a minister? They said well, there must be a minister and we didn't know how to get a minister. So I said, begin again and this time, instead of asking the candidate to promise to make a road, ask him to break the road that you have, demolish the school, that you don't want any water, try and improvise right now. And they made their demands, promise us that you'll break the road, then we'll vote

for you etc. And everybody present began to laugh. I said it's now becoming very funny, isn't it? They said yes. I said, now put some meaning into it, because fun without meaning has no meaning and no place in drama. So they started justifying why the road should be broken and they came up with a wealth of details about why the road should be broken. Like: the weekly village market coming and disturbing our culture, foresters using the road and taking our rice or forest produce, our wealth going out because of the road, we getting exploited, deprived, our wildlife getting destroyed and killed by the road through which city tourists and foresters come and poach, and a million reasons, what happens to the animals, the birds, the wildlife, the trees and environment, to agriculture, to things of daily usage—hard liquor comes through the road, we don't want it, we brew our own wines and they're nourishing etc. etc.—therefore break the road. So it became a satire on development and I wrote the whole play; we're doing it now, successfully, and it's hilarious, right from beginning to end. First I wrote it in three scenes and thought it might be a full-length play, but it's a one-hour play.

We did several shows in different parts of India for Adult Literacy day, and there we passed muster—there was great response to the third scene alone. We showed it in many places, and it became so tight and so good that we began to wonder if the [longer version with] three scenes would have the same tension; nonetheless we rehearsed and then I again checked and asked them what they felt. They said it's working, it'll be okay. We worked further and made it as interesting as possible and we rehearsed and polished it and we launched it in Ujjain. The audience responded to the three scenes in one hour—there was only one song broken into three parts, three stanzas, and that's how we presented it. But then I came to the conclusion that it should be brought back to a shorter form, maybe just the third scene—

no explanations about the breaking of the road, only some more elements taken from the other two scenes into the third, revising it drastically, cutting it and making it very terse. So this is the conclusion ... first we had a 25 minute play, now we have a 50-55 minute play, and I think we'll finally have a 40 minute play, and be content with that.

(Do you work on invitation on plays on certain issues?-AK)

This was commissioned by the Literacy section of the Department of Culture, Government of India, supported financially and organisationally, and that's how I had the workshop; only, I didn't concern myself so much with *akshar*. This had consciousness, gnan or awareness, more than letters or *akshar*. They wanted *akshar* at the end, and so for their purpose on National Literacy Day, we had the song on literacy, which we've still got, but we're not using in the play. And we're not ending on the importance of *akshar* but where the play genuinely finishes, which is a satire on development, trying to suggest that there're many paths to development, and that for the indigenous people, the tribals and others in the country, there must be different paths; that what is mainstream development for the whole country, in a regimented fashion, leads to underdevelopment for large sections of the people. This is the theme of the play.

Once I was asked to do something on Family Planning because despite governmental effort, dull plays were coming out. A friend in the Madhya Pradesh government, Ajay Shankar, turned around and said to me that you sit there with your armchair criticism every time we get together, but what do we get? We get only second-grade writers to help us. Anyone like you only sits comfortably and criticizes; make yourselves available and we'll show you better results. He put it in such a nice manner that I accepted and

I went. I produced *Manglu Didi* a hilarious comedy about family planning.

First I met all the doctors and asked them about the problem and they said, men are the problem—women are willing but the men come in the way every time, in the villages. That was the first piece of information that was important to me, and secondly, so many village/folk parties are taken on and paid for shows, welfare programmes on family planning and things of that kind. So I gathered them. They said that they came because they knew my name, or they knew me personally. They said, we came because of you, though this is a government programme, normally we wouldn't have come. I asked why not. 'Because it's such a waste of time.' I said, but you are in the employ of the government, how can you refuse? They said, there're many loopholes, like casual leave, sick leave, medical certificate, we'd have somehow not come. They said, you see, they demand so many shows of a certain play and we get paid at the rate of per show, so much. That money we get and we fill up the list and show them that we've done it. But each time we do a government programme, there's no attendance, villagers just walk away, they don't want to see it, it's dull. They all insist on our own Nacha, so we perform a Nacha and we say we've done the programme on family planning. They frankly told me this. Then we talked about some folk stories and folk *chutkulas* and there was a story about a man and a woman talking about four or five children to feed and therefore the man and wife not being able to eat what they like. So they scheme that when they all go to sleep, let's make some *wadas* and we'll eat some and keep the rest for the children, otherwise we won't get any. This story was told to me by someone. So they make the preparations, but then where is the *sil*, the *batta* where is the oil, where are the matches? They look for these things and each is discovered underneath the pillow of a child. Somebody's

sleeping with a *sil* underneath his head, having heard about the *wadas*, and he says here is the *sil*! He's awake; and where is the *batta*? Here is the *batta*—and he's awake. And the *wadas* are made and they're all there and they fight over it and they finish it all—this is the story.

I made up a scene of the gods visiting the village, and they talk about child mortality and mosquitoes and unhygienic conditions and the laziness and sloth in the villages. So they come to examine what the hell is going on and see the bickering between a woman and a man who are fighting over poverty and food. The fight is also comical and an argument starts; with that argument, frustrated and in a rage, she blurts out that, 'if a sixth child is to come, may god will it that you have it instead of I' And sure enough, his stomach begins to get bloated and he complains of some pain. Then there's a little scene about this—'take this *churan*' or 'go to the *vaid*'. And he says 'No, no, *churan* won't help, there's something moving inside, a ball, there's some kind of life inside. She says, 'Could you be pregnant?' He says, 'I suspect I am.' 'In that case would you like to go to the doctor?' And he says, 'No, I feel rather affectionate towards it, I'm not going to get rid of it.' And then some visitors hear of it and he wants to escape them and puts on a saree to escape, but they catch hold of him and he's called Manglu didi (Manglu is a man's name), and they say you must get aborted. He refuses and a panchayat is called and the men press him to go in for abortion and he refuses and the women protest, saying that the child should be kept and there'll be no abortion. And when the men don't agree, the women strike against sex, men, relationships. So then starts another comedy—the men ask for their food or clothes, and when the village sarpanch is rebuking a man discovered to be going to meet his wife, which was forbidden, he makes excuses, and suddenly it appears that somebody has talked about the sarpanch



also trying to do the same thing and so on. Then the gods arrive there and while Manglu has gone to the doctor and we're waiting to know what is to happen, the gods decide that there should be no child before eighteen years, and spacing between two children, all the scientific things that we know. I had read a lot about that first. In between the gods hear stories of how somebody died due to too many children too soon and so on, and they explain. Meanwhile, Manglu comes with a baby in his hand, he had delivered.

There were villagers in the workshop saying this will not do, the villagers will never accept this play.

I said, why not?

'No, a man's pregnancy is unacceptable, especially when it's taken so seriously.'

Then I explained to them about change of sex being scientific, male pregnancy being scientific if you change your sex.

'Never mind, but still, this is taking it too far. He could say it was some gas all along, or some tumour, that's a better idea.'

I said, 'No, that's not taking it to its logical conclusion.'

Ajay Shankar was present and I said, let's try it out, with an audience. We tried it out. He laughed his guts out, enjoying it thoroughly.

He said, 'There's no need to discuss it with the villagers, they'll enjoy it. It will do.' They have had thirty shows of it in the Trade Fair, under the section on the Health Department. The play doesn't lay the entire blame on the villagers. I also talk about lack of transport, inaccessibility of district level units, lack of *dais* and nurses and doctors and medical care. So the blame is shared. The government didn't want to take their share of the blame.

But the play was a genuine comedy, very entertaining and hilarious and it made sense, it was talking about family planning, in the end through the mouths of the gods; also because of the sanctity attached to gods in India in the villages, they carry much weight. That is the story of *Manglu Didi*.

I wrote a play after Safdar [Hashmi's] death—again a comedy on his death. It was called *Muzrim(Mulzhim) Number Gyarah*, I think. We did it on Safdar Hashmi Day, immediately after his death; it's a little play of ten minutes. But I like it. Then there was this DDA attack on my house, a notice and some demolition threat and some violence and I protested and I wrote *Daddy ka Ghar*—DDA, so *Daddy ka Ghar(laugh)*. That's a little play of about twenty minutes or so, a comedy we performed before the Press and talked to the Press about this operation of the DDA against me. So I do those things too, together with the other things, serious plays.