

'It Must Flow' A Life in Theatre

Habib Tanvir

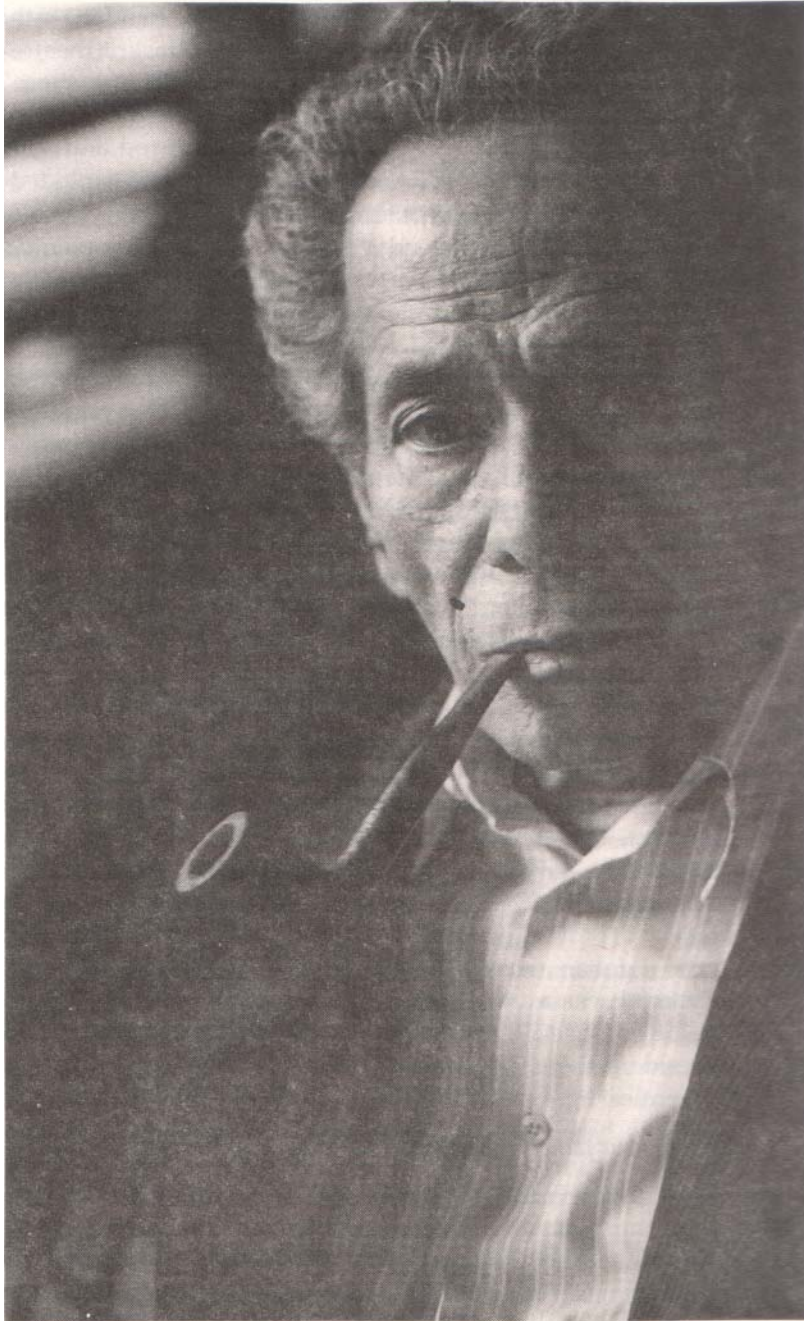
The noted director Habib Tanvir, delves into his childhood as he traces the story of his life in theatre. Interjections by ANJUM KATYAL and BIREN DAS SHARMA appear in italics, within brackets.

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, Raegarh 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 *kajnl*, 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 *dhnnrnkn*, 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. UsualV 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, nnnkknr-o-nbln *fareb* Duniyaa My drill master directed the play. Being a drill master and a bodybuilder, he gave us movements ~which were very athletic and on every word, you'd have a gesture to accompany it. '*Duniyn*'-put your fist on your forehead-'makkar-o-abla fareb duniynn'-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 30s now.

(Now your father, you said, wouldn't have approved of all *this*?-AK)

NJy 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 madarasa-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
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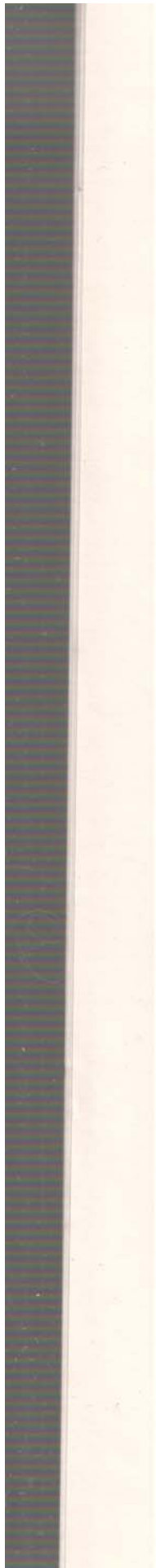
Later on when I went away to Bombay and started theatre activity. He knew that I didn't have a firm job. He was hoping I'd go into the ICS-I used to top my class, I stood first in my matriculation and I was also inclined to go into ICS at that time. This is 1940. And in 1940 my teachers gathered in my 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 chumm^a-chati ho rahi hai* (it's time for a bit of kissing and cuddling. 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*, *Devdās*.

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—LQ. and

things-but I couldn't build a bridge for my team 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 m^ushairas (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, and music. Baburao Patel knew Mehmood Ali, who was the Ambassador of Egypt when he died about eighteen 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, 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 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 Weekly of India* whose editor was Shaun 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 *muslwiras* 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 Lip 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 *Inthi 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 *Shnntidoot Knnagnr*. 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 antiLeftist. 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 Chhokrai, 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 absolutely 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 Atvazert*, 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 Mombay 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 *Gnc3hey*, 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.



Habib Tanvir in Agra Bazaar

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 rehearsals 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, kabhi 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 70 people who appeared on the Ramlila grounds with a *kurnar* (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 Qudsiya Zaidi, and we took it to Aligarh. 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 *Uttarramcharita* 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 its 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 Chitor*, 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, appeal, 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 marvelously. 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 9 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 12.' She said, which ones? So I said, 'Three Sanskrit class *ics-Mrichchakatika Mudrarakshasa* 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 connections. A great friend of Begum Bhopal. So at the end of 2 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 10 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, 'Do 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 W 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 3 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 he 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. Nelle 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-Mally 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 Skuszhanka. 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 Skuszhanka, or to me. It was downright

cheating. So it never happened. But I did produce a small scene from *The Little Clay Ca* for television in Warsaw. In Germany I went to Rostok. Harming 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 Gndi* all over Europe on paper. I must've produced on paper something like 12 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 10 acts, the stage-manager, the sutradhar and nati talking, introducing Charuc{atta; 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 12'. 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 audience. 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 lmi, yeh labz zyada hai (this is redundant, extra).' 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 squint 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 ja 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 Gndi*, 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 gambler'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 *Mudranakshasa* next. I said to her that it is a tough play and I require another 5 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 9 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 20 shows in Punjab/Kashmir and 20 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 oil

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 punctual, 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 20 mins. 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 front that production onzwards?-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 female 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 satn 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 chchiye kuchch bhi nn*

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, *khatant*, 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 nahiti samjhte?* 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 3 sides, sometimes on all 4 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, 8 or 12 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, 'Chaprasi'. 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. [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!

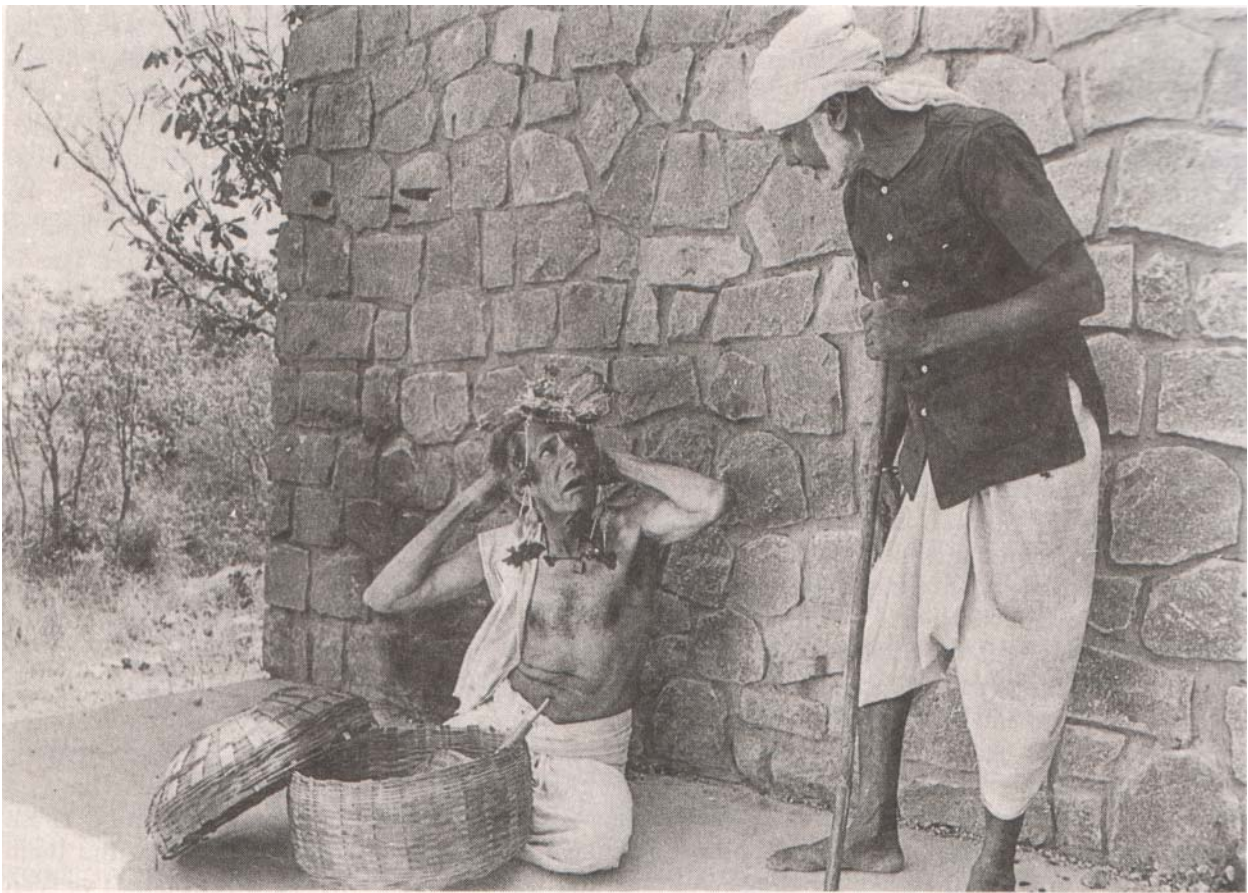
This kind of exercise, this show of three things, one piece from Pandavani Mahabharata, then Gauri-Gaura and then a short comedy skit, was well attended, but never housefull. We were doing it from 1970-73. I continued with something or the other in Chhattisgarhi, giving them the confidence of doing something 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



Habib in *Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad*

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 crimeprone 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 *Gam 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 Damad 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 misunderstanding. 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 12 shows to packed houses, which was a big change from 50-70 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 *Cltarandas* towards the end of the workhop 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 *chozyk*. In that *chowk* they



Scenes from various productions of *Chharandas Chor*

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 40 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, *kachcha* (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 or 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 *Gam ka Naam Sasural*, covering many *mandis-rnarais*, they're called-

maelns and such fairs and marketplaces. A lot of footage was shot and *Sasvral* was recorded. Copious, long interviews were taken with Bulw•a, 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 *pan* 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 mah 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 its 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 20 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 on] 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 *Gam ka Naani Sasural* and *Charanda 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 *Nlitti 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 70, 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 70 ft. And then we had to come to Sagar, where the stage is 12-14 ft. 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 3 or 4 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 husband, 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 126 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 n 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 then' 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 Breeht 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 Gndi*, 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 *Charadudas 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, *Bnhndur 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 126 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*, 126. So he married 126 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 16 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 126 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 12, 14, 15 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



Habib Tanvir and Fida Bai in Bhadr Kalarin

next problem was the 126 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 126 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 126 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 bahu 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 did surprise me because I was afraid. But two MPs from Chhattisgarh objected' to the immortality 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 awareness. 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 n particidar 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 *Uttarramacharita* 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 I. 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 *Uttaramacharita* as I'd promised myself; in *Mudrarakshasa* 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 *Uttaramacharita* 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 Gndi* 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 *sudhhata* 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 n 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 pauranic 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, *Sarnk*, 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 *nkshtar*. 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 then,. 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 Lip 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 4 or 5 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 sill 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 L' 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 18 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 30 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 *Marylu 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(laicghs)*. 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.

'Theatre Always Held a Fascination for Me'

Pradeep Muley



Pradeep Muley is a theatre designer for the Marathi stage, who has been associated with plays written by the foremost Marathi playwrights and directed by the major contemporary directors.

In this interview with SHUBHADA SHELKE he explains his design philosophy and talks of specific assignments.

SS: From a student of the J. J. School of Arts to setcostume-light designer-can you tell us something about this transition?

PM: I have a diploma in commercial art but-to tell you the truth-by the time I went into the third year, I had lost interest in it. But since I had already put in three years I thought I should put in two more and complete the course. Actually I was more interested in fine arts-I thought I could have done something in that field. A commercial artist is basically restricted by his clients, products. You can't do what you really want to do.

SS: But you went into commercial art in spite of it?

PM: Because all my friends went there. In fact, I was more interested in literature. I even thought I should join some arts college at the same time but it was impossible to do both. I even wanted to do cinematography in the Film and Television Institute of India but that required a diploma in fine arts! So I couldn't have gone there. Of course, fine arts is not too lucrative, you can't do much till you are recognized as an artist. As against that, there's a lot of work in the commercial field. And not every commercial artist is a person who draws. One can do all kinds of jobs-even design handbills! One doesn't even need to struggle much. Anyway, I wanted to study more. What I got from J. J. School of Arts is a diploma, so there's no question of post-graduation. Also no language was taught in the course at that time. So as students we had lost all contact with any kind of literature. I won a gold-medal in my final year, so I got many job offers. But I wanted to study. So I spent three years in Film City and that's where I learnt a lot. Even in J.J., I learnt a lot more in the Foundation Course than in the subsequent years.

SS: Was Film City a good place to learn?

PM: Very good. I learned a lot by just observing. Even today those things come in handy while I work-especially technical things. At that time a foreign crew had come there to work for Shaan I used to hang around them help here and there, learn the craft, technique of how things work. I've always been interested in that. But then I didn't continue there because becoming an assistant director was not my ultimate aim in life! I thought I was much better than that. Then the 'elders' in the commercial art field gave me doses of advice that I was wasting my life etc. So I went into advertising photography, did a lot of work, earned a lot of money.

SS: And yet you left it?

PM: There is a lot of money in advertising. Good money doesn't necessarily mean good work-or that anyone who makes money is a person of high calibre. There are so many good people in other : fields who are doing even better work-like, for example, a scientist or an academician-they contribute to society but don't earn that kind of money. I was making money but I wasn't happy. So I decided to earn money ten days in a month doing jobs I didn't like and spend the remaining twenty days doing what I liked. I had been doing theatre from my college days so I naturally turned to theatre. Theatre always held a fascination for me. I've seen almost all the state competition plays. While still in college, some students of j. J. School of Arts had got together to form a group called Ya Mandali Sadar Karuya-I used to do all kinds of things in the group-production, acting, backstage ... This group was formed when I was in my second year. They asked me to join because they needed actors but I wasn't interested in that ... After working with them for a few years some unrest started setting in. You see, we performed only our own plays-plays written by one of us which were tailored for our personalities, our talents. So then I felt-is this the best way to gauge our talents? But nobody was even interested in finding this out. There was an unwritten rule in the group that no outsider will be taken in and none of us will work outside the group. So there was no way to know what we were really worth.

SS: At that stage, what aspect of drama attracted you the most?

PM: Script. The kind of plays that were written during that period, starting from Vijay Tendulkar's Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe to Satish Alekar's Mahanirvan Begum BArve and G. P. Deshpande Udhvasta Dharmashala were all rich in content and created new idioms in theatre. I realized that a good script is the starting point of a good play, and yet, there were many impressive performances around me of not-so-good scripts-ours for example!! Like in Alwara Daku we had used certain rituals of the street players-for example 'spitting fire'-to suggest violence and atrocities. But we never made any attempt to find out the traditional meaning of this rite. It was used because it looked impressive. You see, the ideas were always flashy but no efforts were made to develop the thought behind them. It was like they were applying the advertising techniques of 'flashy', dazzling ideas. But they were of no use in the play. For instance, the idea of making a play on the deadly sins was very good But the kind of study required, or the depth of thought, was lacking. We had actually created quite a sensation with our

first play. We were known to be a young, dynamic, talented group who did plays 'with a difference'. Looking back, I feel we did what we liked, what we could do best-we had -no theatre background, no godfather, no patrons-all this put together made waves in Bombay and gave us an image. But we were not consciously creating a new theatre movement or anything. Today all I can say is that we were a group with good taste in theatre, art, literature etc.

SS: You have a special love for literature?

P-M: I have a lot of love for a lot of things. I like to do new things. I lose interest in a thing the moment it becomes routine, when there's nothing left to learn. Even now I change my field every three-four years. As a child I liked languages, liked to draw. My parents weren't educated but they were very keen that we get the best education.

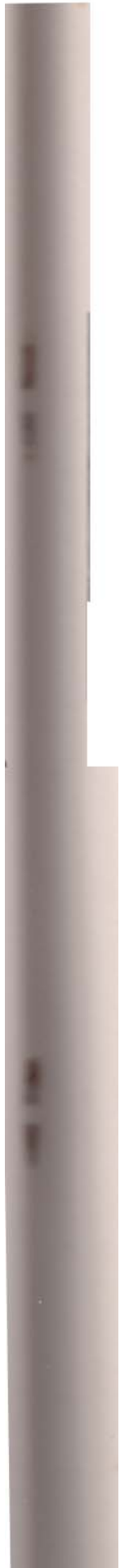
SS: Why you have opted for set designing? What was your inspiration?

PM: My ideal in set design is D. G. Godse. The kind of work he did-even on the commercial stage-is phenomenal. The thought, the study behind his designs, not necessarily a revolution, but the variation he brought into his work is something I would like to do myself. There's no one today who's as learned as him and in so many different fields-literature, art, aesthetics, Sanskrit, mathematics, even music! He used to play the pakhawaj They don't make such people any

more ...

SS: How has Godse influenced your work?

PM: I never got to work with him. He was a visiting Professor at J.J. School of Art, teaching illustration. I was good in illustration but that wasn't my subject so I wasn't allowed to attend his lectures-but I used to meet him a lot, especially in the last few years of his life. I haven't learnt from him directly but his thinking has influenced me a lot. The level at which he thinks for his design is extremely inspiring. You can be called a designer only if you put in that kind of thought. Otherwise





Durga Zali Gauri a play for children

you're just a decorator. Godse constantly revived old forms, which is very important. Your most modern concepts are going to be old tomorrow. It's necessary always to examine traditional concepts, their good points etc. Godse revived our old frescoes and paintings. People didn't know what frescoes were till it was written about. He revived the Indian tradition. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the modern or western concepts, but why not make use of our rich heritage? But nobody works at that level. Not even in scripts. We copy their cinema in our theatre not even good, just popular cinema. I don't mind doing good or -even popular plays from the west. All we do is watch some videos and turn them into plays. Neil Simon is a stray example. But we should have done Neil Simon long ago. Today he's dated. But our audience is fifty years behind the western audience. We should do what is new today. If we are catching up with them in science and technology, why should we lag behind in arts?

SS: Have you always worked in the same way?

PM: Not from the beginning. I wasn't designing lights before. But I always had a good rapport with the light designers, like for instance in *Durga Zali Gauri* I could give a few hints because of my background in photography. I even used some technically innovative ideas with a wide-angle projector-all that was on a trial-error basis. I wasn't actually involved in lighting, but when we decided not to have sets we started looking for alternatives and the idea evolved out of it. Also, because of my rapport I even suggested the colour scheme of lights taking the 'key' of costumes into consideration. So then I thought maybe I should design lights myself in future. Anyway, I had learnt the technicalities by then. Most

people assume that a designer as an artist works only on the 'art level'. But actually one has to be aware of science, maths, literature. If, as so often happens, a costume designer does not know the basic theories of light, pigment colours, his ignorance creates problems when the interplay of different colours and lights is not taken into account.

SS: How did you design a dance-drama for children like *Durga Zali Ganari*?

PM: I used to watch a lot of children's plays as a child. And I always thought that they were the kinds of plays that grown-ups thought children liked. Fantasies are not necessarily what kids want. There were hardly any plays written for children, on the level they lived and behaved. I used to say all this in my group. So when Arvind Deshpande asked Puru Berde if anyone would be interested in designing sets and costumes for *Durga*, I accepted immediately. After I read the script, at first I thought I should design the costumes differently, that the costumes for fisherfolk need not be what they actually wear but maybe should have a motif which could be associated with their profession. I had even designed the sets. But during the rehearsals I felt the set was restricting the dance movements, so I cancelled all the sets and decided to create the necessary effects on a screen in the background, using slides. So again I accentuated the colour, feel etc. By adding to the costume, using a motif for each profession like fish for the fisherfolk, pots for the milkmaids etc. Every time we had to make new costumes for *Durga* when the old ones got torn, I used to design them differently.

SS: Do you think it's necessary for the set designer to also be the costume designer?

PM: It's absolutely essential. I would even add light design to it. I didn't know much about lighting in the beginning. But during *Durga* I worked with a technician called Chandar Honavar who was trained under Mr Tapas Sen. I learnt a lot from him. I'd done photography, so I knew about the colour theory, science etc. But because I didn't have any experience I didn't know the exact

function of a spotlight etc. which I learnt in the following two years. I feel it's absolutely essential that these three aspects are combined to create the harmonious effect which is necessary in any art form. If I'm designing lights, I know the colour of the set, which colour to use for which scene. But if somebody else is doing that and he decides to use red light for a certain scene where the set happens to be green-it won't create the right effect. Lighting is designed for the entire play-not for an individual scene. So if I'm designing both, I'll keep the lighting in mind right from the outset. What sources I should use etc. Or if I need to use two

different sets, I can keep the same background, same set and create an illusion of a new set by only changing the colour of the light and some props. It can look like a totally new set by just doing that. I have done it.

In one play I used yellow light on a bluish shade to make it totally green. I'd done one more thing in that play. I'd painted a book rack, a wardrobe etc. on the inside of the horizontal levels. All I needed to do was to make them vertical to create a different locale. This made the change very quick. Almost everyone has used levels upto now. But you give little thought as to what is on its reverse side or its construction-should it be used only for standing on etc. You can also think of using the hollow side of it by just making it vertical. A very senior set-and-light designer from Pune, Raja Natu came backstage and asked me how I changed the set so quickly. So I showed him that the bed in the first set was only made vertical. This created a completely different visual. One can create a simple, easy, different and good design by giving it a little thought. And in the kind of theatres where we perform, this even becomes mandatory, because a revolving stage is a very costly affair, you need more backstage workers, much more material, and it adds to the transport cost as well as the time. In a theatre like Chhabildas where we have a stone floor, we can't even put a nail through. All those constraints give rise to new ideas. We need to really think while working within these limitations. That is what makes the work enjoyable. When you do good work under so many restrictions, it does stand out from the rest. Also, being fond of science, I keep track of the new developments and see how I can use them. I constantly mull over this and incorporate changes.

SS: Which other plays had a different design?

PM: *Ek Doha Anokhi*-directed by Neelkant Patekar. The script required nine locales! It was based on a Russian play by Alexei Arbuzov. And we were doing it in Chhabildas! So little placethese restrictions made it necessary to think on a thematic level. It was a play about a famous widowed singer and a single man of about 55 to 60 years of age. They are strangers who keep meeting on various occasions and get close and are drawn to each other. All those locales were the places when they meet. Neelkant wanted a realistic set, but there was no space to create one. I realized that the maximum action of the play was 'sitting'. She 'sits' and thinks, they 'sit' talking, she 'sits' by his hospital bed. It struck me that there are ways and ways of sitting in various places-a garden chair is different from a chair in a sea-side

cafe, from another in a Chinese restaurant. So I used chairs of various shapes and colours to suggest those locales-like crimson in the Chinese restaurant, yellow for the sea-side. The basic level on the stage was in the shape of the letter Z which made ample space to create and clearly demarcate different locales. And they were all seen simultaneously. I maintained the same colour-key in their costumes as well. If the colours used range from yellow to red the colour with a higher percentage becomes the 'key'.

SS: How do you decide the key? As per the character?

PM: Character and scene both. It's not always possible to do that. Sometimes you need to isolate a character. That you do either by using a different colour or pattern of costume. The same can apply to set design, when you want to highlight or isolate a certain area. In this way, each of these nine locales had its own key. For example, the key to the beach was yellow to show the golden sun. But these two characters wouldn't wear any bright yellow considering their age and social status, so I gave them darker shades of yellow like yellow ochre, very close to brown, that maintained the basic key at yellow.

One has to consider a lot of different things while designing costumes, apart from the colour and the character. Sometimes some actors cannot carry the costumes well, if they aren't used to wearing that style. One has to make allowances. In a historical or a period play, you have readymade ideas, certain colours are associated with certain characters. But in a social play all the colours are yours to choose from. That sometimes can become a problem! Like when you want to show a freedom fighter, you'd invariably dress him in white. At such times, rather than look at it as a restriction, you should make the best use of it aesthetically. Because however realistic your work, you are still presenting it as an art form-so you have to decide: how close to reality you should go. It's based in a certain region, at a certain time. It's not that there's no research involved in a social play. Everything has scope for research to some extent. Only in social plays you don't especially need to study you already know most of the things. Though *Wada* was a social play, it had a scope for 'design'. Most often in commercial plays you just go and select costumes from shops,, choosing the right colour and patterns to suit your concept and actors. There's not much skill involved because you don't really 'design' them. In *Wada* too, there was no need to design, but there was still the element of creating an atmosphere, a feel, a mood. Also, it's set in a slightly earlier period, in a rural town.

SS: How do you get your references?

PM: That's not too difficult, thanks to libraries. If there are no photographs documenting that period or region, you go to paintings or sculptures. For a period play, historical or mythological, you have to depend on these things. No one can really decide the authenticity of Chhatrapati Shivaji's costume!

SS: How much importance should be given to authenticity in designing?

PM: I make every effort to make it as authentic as possible.

SS: What devices do you use for that?

PM: I do a lot of detailing, not in order to create an exact replica, but to make it appear like one. It should *look* authentic more than *be* authentic. It's kind of a reverse skill. If I can use cotton and make it look like silk, I would do so. D. G. Godse did that in *Mudrarakshasa*. We do use a lot of traditional concepts, ideas which have been handed down to us over generations, but nobody goes deep into them to see how it all started, what it means nobody destroys it totally to understand its significance. . . especially people on the technical side.

SS: Is the set the key to the atmosphere of the play?

PM: Yes. The set indicates what kind of people move around there, how they behave at least it should. It's essential. When a person comes into the auditorium from his reality, he shouldn't take too long to know what's happening, to whom. If he does, I think there's something missing in that set. The set should at once convey to him the milieu and that will involve him in the play. And the set has to be a character, otherwise it stays at the level of decoration. I think in our commercial set-up, most sets are decorations, and not even up-to-date at that, because the Interior Decoration journals that they refer to are old too! They should, at the very least, attempt to get the latest ones to see what the prevalent trends are! What we call rich and lavish in theatre is often too middle-class. Maybe a staircase in the hall, either 'going up' or 'coming down'! We never study lifestyles.

Detailing plays an important role here, because social status is conveyed through minute details. The props or material normally used in our commercial theatre does not convey this. Of course, ultimately all this depends on the script. Which scene should follow which, after what interval should a character make an entry again and for how long—all this is writing craft. Playwrights should not think about theatre craft. That would restrict their writing. If a writer wants to write a scene on the beach, he should go ahead and write it. He

should not worry about how the designer and director will show it. If all the action is taking place in the drawing room, what is left for the designer to do? Or for that matter for the 'director'? But most Marathi writer, on the commercial stage do this. For example, Jaywant Dalvi wrote the play *Sparsh*. At the start of the play, he gave a two-page description. 'Just outside the house is a courtyard, in the courtyard is a tree, around it is a ledge on which there's an idol of Ganpati, that idol is broken ... beyond the fence are the tracks of the railway. You can watch the trains from here, hear the whistle. . .' This description goes on for two pages and then Dalvi sums it all up by saying-'all this is not seen!' Then why did he write it at all? It means that subconsciously he wants all these there, that's the environment of the play, only he doesn't know how to show it. So he writes the whole play in the drawing room. The tree, the courtyard, the railway-line beyond it, the whistle of the train ... I always wonder what happens to a character once he has made his exit? I told Deshpandewho was supposed to direct it then-that the whole play can be done in the courtyard. The lady, the central character is there most of the time. He agreed. I think playwrights are afraid of 'how to show' certain things. But then if everything is made so easy, what is left for the director to do? If the playwright does not shake him up, what is his contribution? Just catch hold of some actors, make them learn their lines and move them around on stage? Shouldn't he too get a chance to express himself?

SS: When a script is brought to you, how do you approach it? What is your process?

PM: When Savlya was read aloud in [Satyadev] Dubeyji's Writers' Workshop, I could visualize it even as I heard it. Chetan Datar, who wrote it, had described the house and its surrounding in almost cinematic detail. Anyway, the set starts taking shape in my mind. Then I find a way of executing that. Can it be done using existing methods, or do I have to create a new one? For example, in a play like *Sparsh* which was in a conventional mould, it was necessary to break away from the writer's visual. The first design is a very bare one. Just a broad sketch without any details, giving only the main requirement of the set, like walls etc. The next step is to make a miniature model because I need to see things in 3D. I can't get a perfect idea of the set by just the sketch.

SS: What attracts you most in a script?

PM: The possibility of doing something that's not been done so far. Very few scripts give you the scope to do that. For example, in Rajiv Naik's *Mitali Papani*, which could be roughly translated as *The Blink*, I thought I should use optical illusions on the set. That play has no story-it's just different dreams one after the other. It has no beginning or end. It can go on and on in cycles. All this could best be expressed by optical illusions like the eternal triangle, Mobius strip, etc. Once you know what you want to do, then how to do it is only a matter of rendering, grammar.

SS: So the germ of the design is found in the content?

PM: Always. And it has to be so-otherwise what is the basis of your thought behind the design? You won't even need a designer then.

SS: In that case do you think the designer should be involved right from the stage of script-reading?

PM: I would say even before that. After I've read the play I talk to the director, see what his ideas are, tell him mine and in this way, the set grows.

SS: Is our atmosphere open enough to accept the designer's interpretation?

PM: How many scripts really afford you a different 'interpretation'? I haven't done any, the kind that would be open to totally different interpretation. The basic idea stems from the content for both the director and the designer, so it's not totally apart.

PM: You mean- a design is yours only when the thought behind it is yours?

SS: Yes. Like *Savlya* is mine. I tried to make an extremely realistic set, using a lot of minute details like a broken window pane. Dubeyji thought it wasn't necessary to make it realistic to that extent. But I wonder if the impact would have been the same if the set wasn't so realistic. From what Chetan Datar wrote about that house, its atmosphere, I felt that the set is not just to be used as decor but that it's one of the characters in the play. I thought even small details were important. I wonder if the characters would behave the way they did if it weren't for that particular house. So I



Chetan Datar's Savlya

told Dubeyji that if I am to design this set, it would only be realistic. Of course, we'll take liberties by removing the walls. One has to take liberties, but everything that is to be used will have to be realistic. And I don't think Dubeyji was convinced, but he let me do it.

The scripts that are written aren't anything revolutionary either. What we recently termed 'parallel theatre' isn't very much different from our commercial theatre. Savlya could have easily been a commercial play. I have done many such plays on the amateur stage. Amateur theatre is so called only on the basis of its financial condition, facilities and the kind of audience. That's the only difference. What should we call 'amateur' theatre? That which we use as a stepping stone? Even what Dubeyji does is out of his love, passion for theatre, not in order to make money. That doesn't make it amateur. Therefore I think 'parallel' is the right word for it. Or rather, as Amol Palekar said, we don't have any professional theatre at all—only commercial and noncommercial.

SS: Do you think there are really any experiments in the 'parallel theatre?'

PM: I don't really know what one should call experimental. The so-called 'experimental' is termed as such only because it was not performed on the mainstream stage. Just being different is not experimental ... That which never existed before ... this and only this is the way I can say what I want to say ... One does not see such things happen. Experiment means to understand a concept thoroughly and then turn it around, destroy it—not just 'looking for' new ideas. But then not too many people have this awareness. For most, it's limited to doing something—anything—new. Some experiments were made on the script level. That which I want to say will need a

new idiom, new form ... but, I want to say the same old thing, only I'm saying it in a different way that is no experiment. For example, in parallel theatre a play requires a box-set but I have no money for it, so I make a suggestive set and call it experimental. This doesn't make sense. Or when you use black wings instead of walls, it's economy, not an experiment. To find a way through your problems and to arrive at a sort of set roughly resembling what you had visualized from the script, this is not being creative or experimental. And then, the stalwarts in your field should call you experimental, or the audience should. You cannot call yourself experimental because you have done something different. Of whatever quality.

SS: Is professionalism expected in parallel theatre?

PM: Yes, of course. And we do have it in the groups where I worked. Like Aavishkar, Antarnatya, Dubeyji's groups. In the commercial set-up they are very professional about business and finance but not in their approach or behaviour.

SS: How do you go about selecting a script?

PM: I don't think I really have a choice. If I were to do only those plays which I liked, I would have done hardly any so far. Maybe some, because they offered me some scope to try out new things, like the Wada Trilogy. Recently I did some commercial plays only in order to get recognition, because I know my work is good, but it doesn't have reach like the mainstream theatre does. I need to show them what I can do on their ground. I used to initially take up only one assignment at a time. You can't do justice to a production if you are handling four simultaneously. At least I cannot. But then I realized that one need not think too differently for every new play on the commercial stage because the plays are alike, and they're ever. directed pretty much the same way. One of the reasons for this sameness is the restrictive theatre space. Our plays are always performed on a 23 ft proscenium stage. Even when we have theatres like the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) where the seating space can be changed around, we treat it as a proscenium stage because we need to perform the same play in all kinds of theatres. Another reason is our schedule of theatres where we have a gap of about one hour in between two shows of two different plays, during which we need to remove one set and set up another, change the lights, etc. All this contributes to our hackneyed approach and thinking. In these circumstances I have to think of a light design using only four spotlights. Because I don't like the idea of having 12 spotlights for the first five shows and only four from the sixth one. I'd rather have only five shows then, in the same theatre. But I think I have brought 'taste'

to the commercial scene. Even while doing the interiors of a home, a bungalow or a flat, my design will never look the same and people will be able to differentiate. I have definitely achieved at least this much and been acknowledged for it.

SS: While watching somebody else's play, have you ever felt that you should have had the chance to design it?

PM: Never. But while watching some films I've felt they could be made into plays and, if they were, what kind of set and treatment they should have, etc. For example, Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. I strongly felt it should have been a play and later, when I read his autobiography, I read that it was, in fact, a one-act play. Elements of theatre were evident in that film.

SS: How much has cinema influenced your concepts of designing?

PM: To a great extent. I'm addicted to Bergman, Tarkovsky, Ray, D'sica. Tarkovsky I feel very close to. In spite of the fact that his work is not realistic like the other three and most of my work has been realistic so far. Yet, I identify with him the most. I feel his influence on my approach, my conceptualization, though my work is totally different from his.

SS: Have these filmmakers influenced your logical approach to work in theatre?

PM: Very much. It's not 'working like them' or 'doing what they did', but their approach to their work. Like in *Mahanagar* Ray constructed a set of a small room in actual size because he wanted to create the cramped feel of a small house in a metropolis. Cramped movements, cramped perspective. He could have easily constructed a big set and used only a small space but that couldn't have given us a cramped perspective. This may seem to be a small thing but it's not. These filmmakers express themselves through every element of the medium and go very deep into it. This is their influence on my thinking.

SS: Do you think that in cinema the content can be conveyed through visuals or other non-verbal elements while that does not happen in theatre that in theatre one needs the support of words?

PM: Yes, that's right. For example, there's no closeup in theatre as in cinema. The face can only be seen in the first few rows. We need words to express things. When we have words, then we can treat them in different ways visually. For example, maybe I don't need to see the character at all, just having the words would be enough! We have had 'word-oriented' plays with proper lighting, everything proper, neat and visible. Maybe now we can change it

around a bit. If we have powerful words, we can do away with the other things. For instance, I wouldn't mind if *Udhvasta Dharamshala* is only read out to me by some people sitting on stage. A play like that doesn't need anything else. Then we can go on to try out different ways of presenting the same play. Not the first time, mind you. Like when I designed *Savlya*, I insisted on a realistic set but if I have to do it a second time, I'd design something else-maybe a stylized set. What I mean is, once you have conveyed to the audience what you want to say, then say the same thing differently after that. One doesn't get a chance to do that-but I'd like to do a play in five different ways.

SS: How did you approach the *Wada* Trilogy? What was your process in terms of design?

PM: Basically I started with the duration. The trilogy itself was seven hours, excluding the intervals. Nobody had considered two hours for intervals. Nobody could have. Because they didn't know that we were going to have three different sets with different dimensions. They thought the same set will be used with some alteration-maybe some props removed in the third part. What they did not consider was that as time progresses, the look of things too changes and if the look can change, a lot of other things too can change. I think it was a subconscious thought to change the point of view, to break its visual monotony. I can't take the audience further inside with me, but I can change the angle of the set and show some other recesses of the house. I felt this very strongly at the initial stage, right after hearing the script, and it started growing after I read the script. So what started as a device to break the monotony eventually became a thematic concept.

The Master of the house in part 2 is hardly seen in part 1. He's still a young boy. And the master of part 1, is totally side-tracked in part 2, as his son takes over. I could have just shifted the son to the father's position, it was easy. But there's nothing new in that thought. So I thought that I should change the angle of the set in such a way that now the father's bedroom is not seen at all, it's shifted out of sight and a new room comes into view which had been out of sight so far. This even contributed to the play thematically. And then the idea became stronger and stronger. I was taking the audience deeper inside the house and, maybe, deeper inside the play! The main problem in this was the time taken to change the set. The producers wanted to keep the intervals between parts as short as possible. For one thing, the audience would have nothing to do for such a long time and

a long interval may have broken the link between two parts. I didn't think too much about the linking part of it. Because if an hour-long interval can wipe out the impact of a play you've just seen, what is the point of doing it in the first place? After that it became a task for me to prove to everybody around that this new thought, which is my contribution to the play, is not just a fanciful idea, but a feasible, viable one. That it can be done in our kind of theatres where we don't have any facilities, without spending too much time or money or effort, even using almost the same material. That it was possible to do away with some rooms, and add some new rooms by using just a little more material.

SS: Like?

PM: The new room which has replaced the old is made out of the same flats, the same bed with the upper portion of the four-poster bed removed, only different linen. The same table has been placed differently and a tube light has been added to the room. If you can give a totally new look with such minor changes, isn't it worth doing? The tube light was necessary in any case in order to show that they now had electricity in the house.

SS: The director accepted this?

PM: It had been discussed and accepted at the initial stage.

SS: So the main entrance which was in the centre in part 1, shifted to the extreme left in part 2.

PM: That entrance no longer held the same place of importance in the changed circumstances. The grip of convention, tradition, is slowly giving way, with the son taking over. In part 1, that grip is so firm that the master even sells a part of the house to perform the last rites of his father. In that area, the main entrance stands in all its grandeur right in the centre. Then, like the father, this structure too is sidetracked. The other parts assumed more importance, come centre-stage.

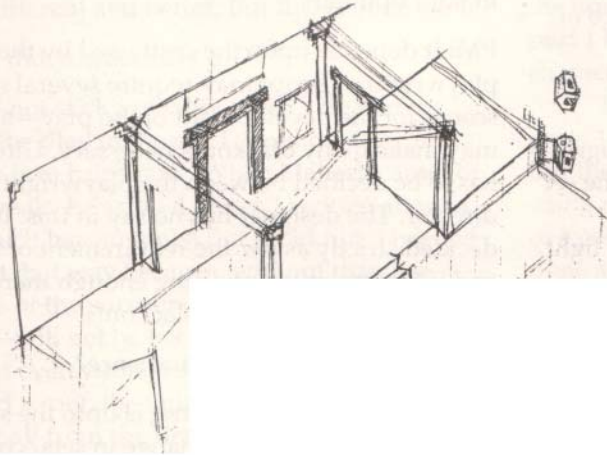
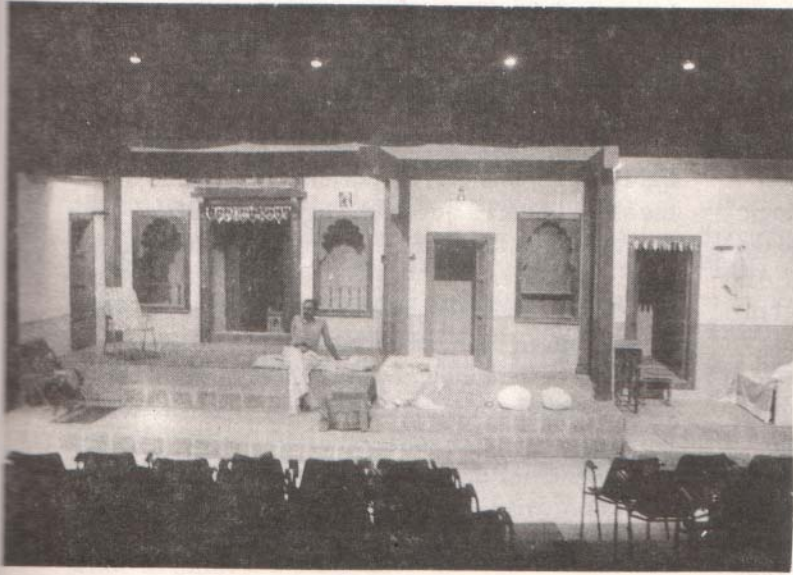
At the same time the son, who is now the master, isn't totally cut off from tradition. It still exists, somewhere in the background. That's why the entrance is not totally out of sight. This boy and his cousin both have a special love for the courtyard, so I have kept it as it is. It means that this play has three sections of the set. The interior, the exterior and what we may call the ext-exterior. It was one of my conditions before I even started to design for the play, that it will have to be done on a grand scale. I won't be able to design it to suit the normal 26 ft opening of Bombay's Shivaji Mandir. That wouldn't be fair to the play.

SS: But *Wada Chirebandi* was done in 1985 and it had opened in Shivaji Mandir!

PM: Right, that set was designed by Raghuveer Talashilkar. I, too, would have designed a 26 ft set if I was only doing part 1. What was done in 1985 was only Part 1 and not the Trilogy. But since I was

Top left: The sets for Wada part 2; *top right* and *right:* working sketches dealing with a much bigger span, a much wider canvas was needed.

SS: What is the size of your set?





just a courtyard and a verandah without any context doesn't really require study. One must go beyond it-that is what makes one play different from the other. And this also helps in the direction. The director gets many more spaces to use. Giving routine movements in a routine set is not direction. If, through my design, I can give a different logic and motivation, I should make every effort to do so. Otherwise what is the point in designing? And if I don't do it for a play like *Wada* where do I do it? One gets this kind of chance once in a while. How many times in my career have I got a chance to design freely the way I want? Or execute the design exactly as I had visualized? What is most important for me is my satisfaction. Not the money. If all one did was make one set like another I wouldn't be interested in doing it at all. That is why *Wada* is important to me. In that play I could do everything I wanted to do. If I had a bigger theatre I would have shown the change of set in action. In full view of the audience!

SS: About the lights?

PM: Once the set was designed, the light design became easy. The pattern took shape. Since the set was very realistic, I kept the light pattern as realistic as possible, using realistic sources of light. As far as lighting is concerned, each part is distinctly different from the other. In part 1 there is no electricity, in part 2 there is, and in part 3 you have the horrifying aridity, harsh sunlight. This contrast was easy to show. The texture of light can change the total atmosphere. Tungsten light, daylight and fluorescent light can change the texture of characters and even props. Tube lights gave a different look to the same people. The attitudes remained the same but relationships changed. I would have not used the tube light but for a sentence in part 2 which says 'Now we have electricity in the house.' I cannot make this obvious by using tungsten lights, I definitely need a tube light on stage to show the electricity. I tried to do away with it but no matter what devices were used, the tube light became imperative. Because the lights that I use are going to be the same. I have to change the set and the position of the lights in the given time, so that it can show a drastic change in the atmosphere in a minimum time-and I decided that a tube light which is seen in the house will do the trick. Its light will even change the texture of things. In part 1 there was a choreography of lights based on the movement of the lanterns, as characters travelled from one place to another with lanterns in hand. It may be interesting to note that two-thirds of part 1 takes place at night. Raja Nattu complimented me on the effect of the lanterns. There was a trick involved. If I had used three spotlights to light up one area, I didn't

put them on all together. First only one, then one more and one more. This increases the visibility gradually and is not noticed.

Only good operation can do justice to a good light design. It is very important. We tried to do the same in part 2 but a tube light cannot be operated on a dimmer. The choke is switched on only when a certain voltage is supplied to it. There is no gradualness. We tried to get electronic chokes for that effect, because we needed to change the intensity of the tube light like any other light on stage. If it kept burning at the same intensity when we needed to make some other area more prominent, or during fade ins and fade outs, it would only have marred the theatrical effect.

SS: How many blackouts did you have? As a light designer, how many blackouts should a play have, in your opinion?

PM: It depends upon the craft used by the playwright. A script may require several short scenes for the development of the play-and that may make many blackouts necessary. Ultimately it has to be decided between the playwright and the director. The designer has no say in this. It's decided strictly as per the requirement of the scene and if the content is gripping enough there is no need to be wary of using blackouts.

SS: Doesn't it disturb the audience?

PM: At times, yes. But then it is upto the script to handle that. For a major change in sets/costumes, the blackout becomes a long one but if it is only to suggest a change of scene or time lapse, it does not disturb. You can minimize the length of a blackout by making the change quick. That is the job of the designer. How to manipulate the costumes to make them look different. In Wada part 1, Vahini is on stage in almost every scene, so she does not change her costume at all. But because everybody else changes, it goes unnoticed. Then sometimes she covers her shoulders, sometimes she doesn't. That changes the look. It is much simpler than changing her nine yard saree, because our blackouts are pretty brief for costume change and some minor changes in props. There is no set change which would require a longish blackout.

SS: What would you say about part 3, specially?

PM: The set for part 3 is my favourite. The sets in the first two parts were easy. But in part 3 it is my expression. In the first two parts there is a lot of detailing, adherence to reality, authenticity. Apart from the change in angle, any sensible designer could have done it. Dividing the given space in different ways to create a new look is a very elementary level of designing. In any work of art one should be able to express oneself, and not many scripts allow you to do that. Even a technical person should express himself. In part 3 it is decided on the script level that the house is in ruins. I could have shown the same house in a dilapidated state. But when the script itself is so drastically different from the first two parts, why should it not be reflected in the set too? The lighting pattern in that part is different

because of its content. There is less action. People talk philosophy. There are long monologues, not much interaction. In the first two parts a lot keeps happening. And part 3 is a result of what happens in the first two parts. So even if it is the same locale, it had to look different, according to the requirement of the content. It offered me some scope to think as a designer. Nobody would design the third part the way I did. Maybe somebody will make it different and better. But this is mine alone.

SS: What did you actually do?

PM: I did not stick to reality at all. I created the mood of the play in the set. I could do it because the house is in ruins now. When Mahesh came for the rehearsals, he said-I haven't written about a house which has no roofs! But I told him I needed to show it that way because, without that, the harshness of the surroundings-especially sunlight-will not be felt inside. I had thought about that even while designing the lights. If the house had a roof, the lighting pattern wouldn't change at all from the first two parts. The same lights and same shadows would play there. For the harshness to come in, it was necessary to eliminate the roof. I would say the house isn't even there any more. We tried to create a locale without any identity, with just some stray remnants of a lost tradition, culture. So we kept the Tulsi Vrindavan, kept a broken frame neatly on the side. I tried to express through this that some things are still intact. The boy who changed to such a drastic extent in part 2, again turns to philosophy in part 3. It's possible only because of his ingrained Culture. I wanted to express that through the set too. It is in pieces, in ruins, but it is there. It's not thrown away. He feels grateful to people who did something for him when he was young, because of certain Cultural values ingrained in his subconscious; and the signs of that can be found scattered around him. He has sold everything else in the house but not the window panes and doors handed down for generations.

And the woman-his wife-who stands by him when everything else is gone. There's nothing left for her now. She has nothing to live for any more. She doesn't even talk in the play. So I used the Tulsi Vrindavan as a symbol for her. It's there in the first two parts, in the background. On a broad level you could say it is a symbol of all women. It may become a cliché, but everything depends on how it is used. Symbols which are rooted in tradition, since they cannot be changed, have to be used skillfully, without making it look like a cliché. Because nothing on earth is really new. Everything is there from the beginning of the universe, only you recreate it in different forms, just like the Tulsi Vrindavan in Wada. The difference here is that it is seen a little in part 1, then a little more in part 2 and it's right in the front in part 3. The same can be said about the woman with whom it is associated. In part 1 she's not seen. In part 2 she tries to change him and succeeds to some extent. And in part 3 the man saw she's one woman who stood by him all through. In part 3, the house has taken a 180 degree turn. The back of part 1 has now come to the forefront. The woman's character helped me to do that on a thematic level.

The light pattern in part 3 is mood-based. In parts 1 and 2 it was realistic, except occasionally. But the mood even on those occasions was created using realistic sources with maybe just an addition of a colour or so. But in part 3, reality is totally done away with. It can be justified on a realistic level by saying that the set has been turned inside out-but actually it is an expression. For one thing, there's no action-in speech or in behaviour. There are monologues which could have been patterned because there is no one subject. It keeps on changing. Parag's Cousin, Abhay, speaks in patches of past, present-his realizations-all in one soliloquy. The locales too change with those patches. I wanted to enhance those various moods with lights. If I had kept the realistic light pattern in this play of 90 minutes where characters just talk, talk and talk, not only the lighting but even the speeches would have been monotonous.

I really like part 3 a lot. Maybe because I could do a lot-I don't know. Or maybe because I identify with those people. But part 3 holds a strange fascination for me. I would even like to stage just part 3. I did enjoy working for the first two parts but I don't think I've contributed to them in any way. I've done only that which comes out of the technical experience of theatre. That doesn't mean it's mediocre but ... part 3 was different.

SS: What are the devices used in the non-realistic lighting?

PM: Designing patterns and colours. There are hardly any colours used in the first two parts. Except for jewellery scene. As against that, in part 3 even the harshness has its colours and moods. When the uncle dies, the entire sky becomes a dazzling white. I had to use three halogens for that. One or

two were not enough. The white light had to pierce the eyes of the audience, had to be painful! I needed the halogens for that intensity. When I operated the lights myself I tried to maintain the mood of each and every line. The lines in part 3 are open to interpretation. We can understand it the way we want. Only two things happen in this part. Abhay comes and Chandu dies. The rest is only talking about what has already gone before. In most plays events take place outside the set- they're only reported on the stage. In *Wada* it's not so. You can see an event take place and then see different people react differently to the same event. Both action and reaction happens in front of you. You get to know the souls of the character. All this is not there in part 3. I got to create it with my lights. In the first two parts I was only a 'filler', enhancing what was there. In the third part I could create.

SS: What material did you use to show the *wada* in a state of ruin?

couldn't have made it bigger only to accommodate more people because that's not where the menfolk usually move about. I expect the same logic to be maintained even in the movement pattern of the characters.

SS: Then do you think the designer's job overlaps with the director's to a certain extent?

PM: I don't know. I give them the inherent logic of my design. That doesn't mean there's nothing left for them to do.

SS: How long did it take to make the *Wada* set?

PM: Four months. Including the designing process. SS: How long do you normally take for other plays?

PM: Eight days for designing, because I always make a model, and about fifteen days to execute it. Just drawing is not enough for me. It's difficult to perceive all the mechanisms, problems on paper, just by doing sketches. And I don't like to repair a set once it's made, so I try to see that new instructions are flawless.

PM: I used the same levels-only covered them with tarpaulin and *durries*. The pillars were constructed in two pieces fitted onto each other and we removed the upper portions to show broken pillars. I would have liked to use levels which were not horizontally parallel to the stage. I could have done it if we were doing only part 3. But in the limited time it wasn't possible to change the levels using the same material.

SS: Your ideas are never rejected?

PM: Never. There are differences of opinion, but that's about all. There was only one play; Tagore's *Dakghar*, which was directed by Sulabha Deshpande. Her method of directing was to improvise. As a result, the set underwent a lot of changes-became totally different from its

original concept. Once a design is made and even approved by the director, it becomes very difficult to incorporate changes. I tell them my thought behind the set in the rehearsals. Nothing is done because it's just visually impressive. There's always a reason behind everything. When this logic is not maintained in the movement pattern, I don't like it. For example, there's a scene in *Wada* part 1 which takes place in the inner room of the house. It's a scene where the brother from Bombay meets his mother for the first time after the father's death. It couldn't have been anywhere else. When about seven to eight characters went into that room, it became too small and cramped. But I

SS: Who else designs both sets and lights amongst your contemporaries?

PM: Ajit Dandekar and Rajan Bhise design sets and costumes. Of the earlier generation Godse, too, designed both. Shyam Adarkar did sets and lights. He was technically perfect-maybe because he was an engineer. Of my generation I'm the only one who does sets, costumes and lights. All these designers I've named have designed at least one innovative set in their careers. Talashilkar, Sakharam Bhave, Baba Parsekar, Ram Shsituteven a non-artist like Bapu Limaye designed an outstanding set for Tendulkar's *Gidhode* (Vultures). I have no other background except the legacy of these people. I learnt from them.

When there's a lot of work, there's little satisfaction. When you start making 'made-to-order' designs it's like selling Lux and Lifebuoy. Where's the art in that? I think the time has now arrived for me to move on-to explore newer grounds.

Translated from the Marathi by Gayatri Phadke-Rao

Ibsen and the Bengali Theatre Arundhati
Banerjee



A scene from *Bidehee*, directed by Soumitra Chatterjee. Photo (c) Nemaï Ghosh

Henrik Ibsen is one of those rare playwrights whose plays have been successful in overcoming the boundaries of space and time. Not only have they been translated and produced all over the western world, they have also captured the imagination of numerous translator-adapters and producers in the east. In India, a multilingual country, his plays have been translated and adapted in more than one language and produced in several theatres all over the country. Moreover, his ideas and beliefs have had a far-reaching impact on the social attitudes and general psyche of the Indian intelligentsia.

One of the earliest mentions of Ibsen in Bengali literature is probably in a short story by Rabindranath Tagore, written in 1918. This story, *Poyla Nambar*, is a satire on the egocentrism and complacency of an Indian husband. While the husband steeped himself in European classics, amongst which are Ibsen's plays, the wife is completely neglected. Her long repressed personality expresses itself in her desertion of her husband and home, and also of her admirer, to find an identity of her own. One can immediately see the reflection of Nora in Tagore's heroine

Anila. The mention of Ibsen at the beginning of the story is not accidental at all. However, it is interesting to note that though Tagore was a master dramatist, attempting to develop his own kind of theatre, his plays do not show any influence of Ibsen. But let us move from Tagore to the scene of mainstream Bengali theatre, with which the poet had only a distant connection.

Apart from popular folk traditions, Bengali theatre had been almost non-existent during Muslim rule, due to socio-religious reasons. With the coming of the British, the situation changed. In the November of 1795, the first play in Bengali was staged under the direction of a Russian adventurer called Gerasim Lebedeff. This play was a translation of an English original, *The Disguise*, by M. Jodrell. But it was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that Bengali theatre really blossomed. Many of the plays of this period were translations or adaptations of Shakespeare, and sometimes of Moliere. What is noteworthy, however, is that the form and performance of Bengali theatre was influenced by the modes and conventions of European theatre, rather than by individual plays or playwrights. In the early phases the ideal had been Shakespearean plays. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the ideal for Bengali playwrights became the western realistic-naturalistic form of theatre. It is difficult to name one specific European playwright who sparked off the realism or naturalism on the Bengali stage. It was rather that a general convention of the western stage had influenced Bengali theatre of the time.

The first mention of Ibsen by a Bengali playwright, as his ideal of play writing, comes in 1928. Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri, a major dramatist of this era, writes in the preface to his play *Digbijoyi*- 'to make drama and its production fully adequate to the demands of the modern age I have taken up the new mode of play writing (Ibsenian technique).' It immediately strikes us that the dramatist equates modern play writing with the Ibsenian mode. It is ironic that the play to which this preface is attached is a historical drama about Nadir Shah, the ruthless plunderer from Persia who had ransacked Delhi: Although the play was not just a conventional historical play, since it tried to explore the psychology of the cruel invader, it is difficult to gauge what 'Ibsenian technique' the dramatist had in mind here. However, he wrote a few other plays, of which some are centred around middle-class characters and this milieu is depicted through detailed stage directions and lighting schemes. In these plays, the dramatist was following the Ibsenian mode, as he claimed. The dialogue is composed according to the realistic model, in colloquial prose. Some of the central female characters in plays like *Banglar Meye* or *Parinita*

remind us of Ibsen's heroines from his middle plays. Heroines of both these plays leave their homes and husbands to maintain their selfrespect. The plays, though unable to do away with asides and soliloquies, use the discursive mode and the retrospective method with which Ibsen's critics characterize his plays.² If not in Digbijoyi, then at least in his social plays Jogesh Chaudhuri was trying his best to incorporate what he believed to be the Ibsenian method of play writing.

Two other playwrights who started their career in the pre-independence era, in the 1930s to be precise, also deserve mention in connection with Ibsenian influence on Bengali theatre. Though none of them specifically mention Ibsen anywhere in their writings, their plays are reminiscent of Ibsen's plays. Sachindranath Sengupta, the older of the two, wrote quite a few pseudo-historical plays which display his patriotism in the garb of history. But it was in his social plays that he broke new ground. A renowned scholar of Bengali drama refers to him as 'the first dramatist of the new age who dealt realistically with the new problems of the changing urban Bengali society after the two World Wars and displayed a modern outlook.'³ Many of the dramatist's plays deal with characters in a middle-class milieu. The plays are usually divided into acts which comprise of more than one scene and in this the playwright has not been able to do away with older conventions. But his works seldom contain asides or soliloquies. In plays like *Raktakamal* or *Tatinir Bichar*, the retrospective method throws the shadow of the past on the present sequence of events. The dialogue is in everyday language and there are intricate stage directions specifying stage setting and lighting schemes. Most of these social plays unmask the hypocrisy of middle-class existence.

Bidhayak Bhattacharya is the other playwright whose work is worth considering in this context. He devoted himself exclusively to the writing of social plays. His plays depict the Bengali urban middle class of the thirties and forties. This was a period of transition: in post war preindependence Bengal, rapid changes were taking place in the relationship between the individual and society. In the resultant tensions which surfaced, the personality of the new Indian woman had a role to play. Many of Bidhayak Bhattacharya's heroines display a great deal of individuality, some of them going to the extent of voicing protests.⁴ While in a later play like *Kshudha* the dramatist exposes the seamier side of middleclass existence, in plays such as *Meghmukti]* or *Matir Ghar* we have complex characterizations with a great deal of

psychological insight. The factors that necessitate the discussion of these plays in connection with Ibsen are the attempts at realistic depiction of contemporary middle-class existence, emphasis on the individual against the background of a hypocritical society, extensive stage directions, the use of the retrospective method (which, to my mind, becomes necessary in any kind of intrigue play), the portrayal of the new type of Bengali woman and colloquial, prosaic, everyday dialogue. There is nothing concrete in either Sachindranath Sengupta or Bidhayak Bhattacharya's plays to relate them to Ibsen apart from these superficial characteristics. In fact, their plays, and even those of Jogesh Chaudhuri who



Another scene from *Bidehee* directed by Soumitra Chatterjee. Photo (c) Nemai Ghosh had hailed Ibsen as the master, or those of a fewn other playwrights of this pre-independence public theatre- all smack more of the romantic intrigue play a la Scribe from which Ibsen had gathered so much material and transformed- it into serious thought-provoking critical drama .

A conscious need for Ibsen and his mode of theatre took place only later, in the post-independence period, with the birth of a new avant-garde theatre which was born as an alternative to the still existent but decadent commercial theatre that had monopolized the Bengali

stage in the pre-independence era. To understand fully the radical changes that took place in Bengali theatre at this period, it is necessary to delve a little deeper into the theatre history of the time. As an extension to the growing political and social consciousness of the preindependence era and as a direct offshoot of the left-oriented anti-fascist cultural movement, an organization of committed theatre workers was born in 1943 and named the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (henceforth IPTA). This was a national organization with one of its strongest bases in Bengal. It must be mentioned at this juncture that India's freedom struggle and the associated movements in the economic and cultural fronts were mostly controlled by a dominant middle class which emerged as one of the most influential classes in post-independence Bengal. The objective of the IPTA, closely related to the Communist Party of India, was to organize a people's theatre movement which would not only reach the masses, but use popular and folk theatre material to build a theatre for the people, of the people and by the people. For various complex reasons, all of which have not been fully explored yet, the dream of the IPTA did not come true.⁶ Within a few years of its formation it dissolved into feuding factions. But the impetus and spontaneous impulse that had given birth to this association was not wasted. Out of the ruins was born a serious and committed theatre movement in the state of West Bengal within a year of the newly acquired independence. For the want of a better name, this new wave of avant-garde theatre came to be known as the Group Theatre Movement. Several theatre groups were born in rapid succession with the basic objective of producing socially and politically conscious plays. This new theatre placed much more importance on commitment to society and art than on mere entertainment and commercialization. It provided a definite alternative to the entertainment-oriented commercial theatre of the pre-independence era. It was among these nascent theatre groups that we first detect a conscious need for Ibsen and his theatre.

The first translation of an Ibsen play, namely *A Doll's House*, was produced as early as 1946.⁷ Little is known of this production except that it was produced by a theatre group named New Stage Communion on a public stage and was called *Putuler Sansar*. Whether it was a straight translation or an adaptation is not on record. A second translation of the same play was made in 1951⁸ with the specific purpose of stage production. This version was translated by Siuli Majumdar, a theatre worker. A small group of theatre enthusiasts brought the play to the stage. Interestingly, this troupe was more used to producing plays in English. Their director, Utpal Dutt, a famed theatre personality, founded the Little Theatre Group, subsequently called People's

Little Theatre, only two years later. *Putuler Sansar*, as this version was also called, was a straight translation from an English one. No attempt was made to adapt it to the Indian soil. It was performed in European costume.

1952 is a key year in the history of Ibsen productions in Bengali. This year saw the stage adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* by Bohurupee, the most prestigious and renowned of the group theatres. The adaptation, named *Dasachakra* was done by Santi Basu, a theatre enthusiast and scholar who transplanted the original Norwegian characters and milieu in the Indian soil. The play was directed by Sombhu Mitra, the acknowledged doyen of Bengali theatre. It is important to note that the play was produced twice again after intervals of ten and thirty years in 1962 and again recently in 1985. The script underwent minor changes each time, but had Sombhu Mitra as director and chief actor in the revived productions.

The most oft-produced Ibsen play in Bengali is *Ghosts*. It has been staged at least in five different versions. Of these, four were translations and one an adaptation. The first straight translation was done by Mamata Chatterjee, a reputed stage actress, back in the fifties.⁹ It was put on stage in 1958 by a theatre group called Souvanik and directed by Biresh Mukherjee, a senior member of the group. The name of the play was not translated-the stage version was called *Ghosts*. In 1960, Nandikar, now one of the foremost theatre units in Bengal, adapted *Ghosts* for the Bengali audience. This version was called *Bidehee* and the characters and milieu were very much Indian. This adaptation was done jointly by the director of the play, the late Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, and his co-worker Dipen Sengupta. The production, unfortunately, did not have a long life. A minor group called Chena Achena staged a translation of the play in 1936,¹¹ again keeping the name *Ghosts* intact.¹¹ In the early seventies another straight translation was done by Soumitra Chatterjee, a renowned stage and film actor.¹² This Bengali version was also called *Bidehee* and was directed by the translator himself. The production deserves special mention as it was the only commercial production of an Ibsen play in Bengali. It was produced by a group of professional actors and actresses, known as Abhinetri Sangha. In 1984, a translation of the play was made by a young director named Anjan Datta, whose group Open Theatre staged it. This version also had the English title *Ghosts* and was performed in European costume.

As already stated, *A Doll's House* was the first Ibsen play to be translated and produced in Bengali. Apart from *Ghosts*, this is another Ibsen play that has been consistently popular among

Bengali theatre producers, directors and adaptertranslators. The third production of *A Doll's House* was in the mid fifties by Sandhyaneed, a theatre group known for staging western plays in translation.¹³ This version was a word-for-word translation by Asoke Sen, a theatre scholar, who also directed it. The name of the English translation was retained. The most celebrated Bengali adaptation of *A Doll's House* has been *Putul Khela* adapted and directed by Sombhu Mitro. The play was first produced by his troupe Bohurupee, six years after their first production of *Dasachakra*. *Putul Kltela* was a total adaptation, so much so that the characters seemed actually to belong to the contemporary Bengali middle-class milieu. It is one of the Ibsen productions, along with *Dasachakra*, which has endeared Ibsen to the Bengali audience. Another adaptation of the same play was produced by a rather obscure theatre group called Art Theatre,ls sometime in the late fifties or the beginning of the sixties, but hardly any information is available about this production. This fourth version of *A Doll's House* was entitled *Murkti*.

By the beginning of the sixties, the Bengali avant-garde theatre had started discovering other European playwrights such as Chekov, Shaw, O' Neill, Camus, Sartre etc. With the invasion of Brecht who took over the Bengali stage in a great sweep, Ibsen receded to the background. Yet in 1969, a minor theatre group called Anwesa produced a Bengali version of *Rosmersholm* was adapted for the stage by the late Gangapada Basu, a respected theatre personality, and was directed by his son Swadesh Basu. The play was entitled *Ekti Swapner Janya*. Recently, a comparatively young theatre group called Theatron produced. another adaptation of the same play. This was called *Sada Ghoda* after Ibsen's original title *White Horses*.¹⁷ The adapter-director Salil Banerjee has transplanted the whole play to the Indian context.

What emerges from this long list of Ibsen translations/ adaptations and productions in Bengali is that most of these translations and adaptations were made for the need of the stage by theatre enthusiasts who were also producerdirectors. Another fact worth noting is that due to the almost complete inaccessibility of the Norwegian language, all translations /adaptations have been done from the English versions. There have been more translations than adaptations, if we consider the stage productions only. Yet adaptations have found higher audience acclaim than translations. What must be pointed out is that Ibsen has also been translated or adapted purely at the literary level, but these have been very few in number. For example, *Hedda Gnbler* has been adapted by a fairly important playwright, the late Ajit Gangopadhyay His

Sakuntala Ray, the name denoting the Bengali counterpart of Ibsen's heroine, is quite a good rendering of the Norwegian play. But unfortunately no theatre unit has yet attempted a production of the play. *The Wild Duck*, a play neglected till now, has been adapted by Santi Basu,¹⁹ whose adaptation of *An Enemy of the People* had made history on the Bengali stage. This adaptation has neither been printed nor produced. Quite recently, a collection of translations of fifteen Ibsen plays have come out in four volumes under the name of *Ibsen Natya Sambhar*.²⁰ Being trite, literal translations, they have not yet gained popularity among readers or directors.

This list of Ibsen productions and translations /adaptations gives us an insight into the Bengali translator/ adapters' or directors' preference for certain Ibsenian plays. None of Ibsen's early plays have been produced on the Bengali stage. There is an understandable reason for this. Plays like *Vikings of Helgeland*, *Lady Inger of Istrat* or even *Peer Gynt* are so essentially Norwegian in character and spirit that it would be difficult to make them a success on any foreign stage, let alone an Indian one. On the other hand, *Brand* or *Emperor and Galilean* are so very Christian in theme that their appeal would be lost to a predominantly non-Christian audience. Hence it is the social plays of Ibsen that have become popular among Bengali adapters and producers. The most frequently produced plays have been *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House*. Apart from *Rosmersholm* the later plays of Ibsen have not found much favour among Bengali translator/ adapters or producers. Probably the high symbolism of these plays have kept directors away. Apart from their private connotations, symbols evolve from within a culture, from a popular psyche at a particular time. As a result, it is difficult to transplant a symbol from its own soil to an alien one.

For most producer/ directors or translator/ adapters of Ibsen, the primary appeal of his plays lies in their social criticism, as some of the problems that these plays deal with still have relevance in an Indian society. Among such directors, one can name Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, the late Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Swadesh Basu and Salil Banerjee. But for other directors like Soumitra Chatterjee, Bires Mukherjee, Asoke Sen, and Anjan Datta, Ibsen's technique of building an intricate plot, his naturalistic depiction of characters and incidents, come first. This latter group has brought Ibsen to the Bengali stage for the simple reason that his plays are first and foremost good drama. Such producers have not usually taken pains to transplant Ibsen in the Bengali soil, but have remained satisfied with adequate translations.

Among those who have found Ibsen relevant to the contemporary situation and milieu, Sombhu Mitra is the most notable. In an article written on *An Enemy of the People*, he writes that the democracy practised in India is only a superficial one. As a result, the tension between the individual and society has reached such an intense state that it has become historically necessary for the individual to separate himself from the masses and seek new horizons of truth. Thus Stockmann's rebellion becomes relevant to the Indian situation and his diatribe against the populace no longer remains merely reactionary as some critics have been prone to call it. In another article written under a pseudonym and entitled *My Ibsen?*²¹ he writes that Ibsen's plays are not just social propaganda or a mass of ideas; they contain all the complexities of modern life relevant to our times. Here he also emphasizes the symbolic nature of Ibsen's plays which gives them their essential poetic quality. He has actually expressed the need to produce Ibsen, not only because he is a great figure in world theatre, but also because of the relevance of the problems he so skillfully weaves into his plots.

Some producers who have not produced Ibsen have also expressed their admiration for the discursive mode of Ibsenian theatre which has encouraged them to do 'good theatre'² Others like Jogesh Chaudhuri have been attracted by the formal aspect of Ibsenian theatre.

It would be worthwhile to analyse a few of the adaptations of Ibsen in Bengali and compare them with the originals. The changes that have been implanted will give us a glimpse into how a Bengali translator/ adapter or stage producer has treated Ibsen as a dramatist. A few production details in some cases might help us understand the problem more clearly. For this analysis, I have chosen *Dasachakra* and *Putul Khela*, as their stage versions created a stir, and also *Sada Ghoda*, a recent Ibsen adaptation performed on the Bengali stage.

Dasachakra was first staged in 1952 and, as noted earlier, revived twice in 1962 and 1985. It must be stated that there is great deal of difference between the dramatic text of Santi Basu's adaptation and the performance text. For convenience, we shall take the dramatic text first and note the major changes that have been made to reconcile it to conditions in Bengal and then take up the performance text to note further transformations.

The locale of the Norwegian play has been changed to a prospering small town in Bengal which can offer amenities like clean filtered water to its settlers. The public Baths which used to draw health seekers to the resort-cum-settlement in Ibsen's play have thus been transformed into the municipal waterworks. The living room in Dr. Stockmann's house

undergoes a parallel transformation, making it a Bengali middle-class drawing room. Captain Hovstad, a sailor in the original, is given the profession of a travelling salesman for a pharmaceutical company in the Bengali version. The town council election takes on more relevance for the Bengali reader/audience as the municipal elections. The name of the play has been taken from a Bengali proverb which says that through the conspiracy of many even a god can be made into a demon. The Bengali counterpart of Peter Stockmann, who in Ibsen's play is not only the chairman of the governors of the Baths but also the Mayor and Chief of Police, is merely the president of the municipal council-thus partially robbing the character of his overwhelming social importance and power in the original. The reference to the contents of a book that Petra refuses to translate for the *People's Herald* is slightly altered-the supernatural element in it is omitted. The adapter has skilfully shifted the burden of guilt from the majority, which would include the common masses also, to the 'genteel middle class,' thus limiting his object of criticism to a certain class of the Bengali social structure. Whenever the word 'majority' is used in Dr. Stockmann's pivotal speech in Act IV, it is qualified by the word 'genteel' or 'middle class'. The diatribe against the majority that Dr. Stockmann unleashes has been largely edited. Emphasis is laid instead on individual seekers of new truths. The sections of the speech where the doctor talks of the commonness spreading from the bottom to the topmost layer of society and where he speaks of the majority as wrongly believed to be the possessor of liberality and broadmindedness, have been omitted. At the end of the adapted version, the doctor's trust in the poorer, lower classes is emphasized to give the play a more 'progressive' bent. Another aspect rather neglected in the Bengali version is the individualistic manner in which Ibsen's characters always speak.³ The adapter also shows a certain indifference to the significance of certain key words such as 'swamp' or 'pulsating heart' in connection with the Baths in the community.

There are quite a few changes made by the director in the performance script, which I did not have an opportunity to see myself. I have depended on Swapan Majumdar's *Dasaker Byabadhane Dasachakra*.⁴ At some points Sombhu Mitra has expanded a particular speech to give it sharpness and emphasis. In the 1962 production the fourth and the fifth acts were merged into one to avoid prolonged change of settings. The whole action of the play was also intensified to a certain extent through some smart editing. The production, though naturalistic in scheme, employed a minimum of stage props. The stage decor was more suggestive than

realistic. The lighting was simple except for the public meeting scene. The stage was darkened to mark the transition from one act to another. Musical fillers were inserted during the short intervals to cover the time lag.

Bohurupee, the group which staged *Dasachakra* also produced *Putul Khela* in 1958. This time the adaptation was done by the director Sombhu Mitra himself. *Putul Khela*, which means a game with dolls, is not a literal translation of *A Doll's House*. The stage production was quite a success, and like *Dasachakra*, is considered one of the landmarks in the history of Bengali theatre. But to bring the Norwegian play to the Bengali audience, the adapter had to make some drastic changes. The Christmas festival around which the action revolves has been replaced by the Durga Puja normally held in late September-October, since that is an equivalent religious festival in Bengal. But this change has given rise to certain incongruities in the situation. For instance, it is a custom among Bengalis to present new clothes to near relatives and especially to children at puja time, and there is hardly any parent who would give the children toys as puja presents. While transforming the major event, the adapter has



left Putul Khela, and *right: Dasachakra*, directed by Sombhu Mitra. Photos (c) Nemai Ghosh with the children is expanded by attributing a few words to the children also, thereby showing a neglected these details. Ibsen's fine use of symbols has suffered to some extent in the adaptation. The stove, a significant dramatic symbol in the original, had to be omitted in the Bengali version as the inhabitants of a tropical region like Bengal have no use for a stove in their drawing room. The Christmas tree, which attains a symbolic meaning by being richly decorated in the first act and then being shorn of all adornments in the second, is for obvious reasons not present in the Bengali version. Instead, a vase of fresh flowers adorns the room in the first act and wilted

flowers take their place in the second. The central and crucial symbol of the tarantella had to be sacrificed. In its place, Bulu, Nora's counterpart, is made to recite a poem by Tagore, which itself has a certain symbolic significance as it deals with the theme of self confrontation. But here again, the situation appears a little contrived, for though social gatherings are common on the last day of the Durga Puja, prepared recitations by middle-class housewives at such meetings are rare.

Apart from these transformations of Ibsenian symbols, there have been other changes in the adaptation, most of them being necessitated by the transplantation of the play from the Norwegian milieu to the Bengali. The stockings Nora shows to Dr. Roy (the counterpart of Dr. Rank), when she flirts with him, have been replaced with a choli, which is a short blouse worn with the sari and is as intimate a piece of clothing for a Bengali woman as stockings are for the European. Bulu, the Bengali Nora, asks Dr. Roy's opinion of it, adding that her waist has grown thinner since she last wore it.

Nora's relationship with her children in the original is expressed mostly through her feelings for them, but for a Bengali woman motherhood is a sacred duty. So, in the adaptation the sequence complete relationship between the mother and the children. In the original, Ibsen had been able to show how the children were mostly playthings for Nora as she was for Torvald, by making them passive. But this effect is lost in the adaptation, where they are bestowed with active roles. At some points in the play, shifts in emphases have detracted from the meaning of the original. A perfect instance would be the relationship between Krogstad and Mrs. Linde as depicted in the original and in the adaptation. This relationship in Ibsen's play helps to highlight the one between Torvald and Nora by showing a union where the woman takes up the economic responsibility and charge of the man and his offspring. In the adaptation, the emphasis is more on Mrs. Linde's personal need to fulfil her life by caring for Krogstad and his children. That she would provide for him financially is not clearly stated. The dialogue where Torvald explains how a woman looks more graceful when she is embroidering than when she is knitting has been omitted. This, to my mind, is a crucial dialogue which goes to show Torvald's and hence male, attitude to women in general. In the night sequence in the fourth act where Torvald demands Nora's sexual submission, the emphasis on a husband's sexual right over his wife has been minimized, thus detracting from the exposure of the ugliness in a husband-wife relationship in a bourgeois society. The discussion part of the play has been compressed to some extent, probably

with the object of reducing production time. Nora's soliloquy in the act when she determines to take

A Short Note on *Neela*

Rudraprasad Sengupta

Amongst the noteworthy productions of Bengali plays based on Ibsen, Nandikar's *Neela* done in 1986, deserves mention, although the link with Ibsen in this case was rather indirect. Nandikar, a leading theatre group of Calcutta, based their production on Ingmar Bergman's *Nora*, itself an adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Rudraprasad Sengupta, the director, discusses this production with **BIREN Dns SHARMA**.

Ibsen, in the Bengali context, is generally understood, often wrongly, as an author of problem plays, as a writer with a mission, a playwright-preacher. Certainly at one level plays like *An Enemy of the People* or *A Dolls House* can be called 'problem plays.' But such an interpretation excludes the real Ibsen-Ibsen the writer of tragedies. One major drawback of Bengali theatre is that we have not done his profounder plays like *Peer Gynt* or *Brand*. We always stick to his so-called realistic plays. In the context of practising realism W theatre which by and large remains the strong point of Bengali theatre-it is easier to turn to Ibsen when he is being overtly realistic. But this over-emphasis on realism on Bengali stage has also been partly responsible for the exclusion of some very important Ibsen plays.

When Sombhu Mitra did *Putul Khela* he did not rewrite the play, he Indianized it. Yet Sombhu Mitra retained the essential Ibsen, and the profound tragic essence of the play not just the surface realism--came out very clearly. Despite the realistic trappings, the scenography of Khaled Chowdhury, the design, the acting style-everything contributed to achieving something beyond realism and it almost became a tragic, existential experience. One rarely sees an Ibsen production which puts forward such a profound understanding of Ibsen.

In the mid-eighties I stumbled upon Bergman's *Nora*. [*Nora*, an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* by the noted Swedish filmmaker and theatre director Ingmar Bergman, was part of a much talked about 'Bergman Project' which resulted in the simultaneous production of three plays, not as separate productions but as one production. The plays were Ibsen's *A*

Doll's House, Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and *Scenes From a Marriage*, adapted by Bergman from his own film of the same name.]

Bergman's adaptation was fascinating and at the same time very complex, very challenging. In the adaptation I found-and Bergman also talks about this in the preface that he had successfully got rid of a lot of realistic trappings. In an interview Bergman said, 'It's always said that Ibsen was a marvellous architect of the drama-but in *A Doll's House* he still has immense difficulties with the building, the construction of the drama. So if you make cuts, you make it easier for him, you make it easier for the actors and you make it easier for the audience to grasp what he means.' Bergman polished the text to bring out the essential tragedy and emphasize its relevance to the context of our time. To achieve this, Bergman had to ruthlessly prune, cut out, do away with, a lot. This is what made his adaptation so fascinating. His note on the production was awesome. He said that the space was a hell in which these characters were living, playing out their destiny, torturing each other; and to achieve that feeling he wanted to keep all the actors on stage all the time. There was an smaller inner stage on the larger stage. The actors would just get onto the inner stage, and perform. This was conceived because of a philosophical understanding of the play.

To get it done here, in the same style, by our theatre group, which is coached in realism, was not easy. It was a kind of catch-22 situation. The Bergman adaptation did



A scene from *Neela*, directed by Rudraprasad Sengupta

release the Ibsen play from its realistic trappings. But to approach the same adaptation here with our own strong attachment to realism was very, very difficult. You cannot really do Bergman's *Nora* in a realistic fashion. You have to approach it in a different way, with the Bergmanian cue. All this made *Nora* fascinating, challenging and baffling.

Perhaps all these things made me choose the play and try my best. The translation was done by me and it was a very authentic translation. I also followed Bergman's production note. I only changed the names and the costumes. There was a smaller stage within the bigger stage and all the actors were there all the time. So there was no entry or exit in the play, just as Bergman had conceived.

The play ran for fifty nights. The audience reaction was very interesting. They were moved, but at the same time they were very uncomfortable with the presentation. They were not really attuned to this kind of experimentation. Many years later some of the actors admitted that they did not fully comprehend the essential logic behind that presentation. They disciplined themselves to take up the challenge. But to make a production really work, one needs to understand, accept and believe in the concept fully. This, perhaps, contributed to the audience's discomfort. Also, in the mid-eighties, although I was committed to formal theatre training, I was yet to practise it. I was carrying on the tradition of the director directing the actors towards a goal. I have changed and broken away from that during the last decade. I wish this play could be done again. It is a remarkable play. If I do it now, I believe I will be able to do it more meaningfully.

her own life has been omitted. The dialogue in which Nora says that many women have sacrificed their honour for men has been edited and the one where she says that she wants to find out which is right-the world or herself-is rather inadequately rendered in the adaptation. Just as a married European woman wears a wedding ring, so does a Bengali Hindu woman wear vermilion on the parting of her hair. This latter custom has various religious connotations and it is believed that the vermilion mark ensures the well-being of the husband. In the Bengali performance, Bulu wipes off her vermilion mark at the point where Nora takes off her wedding ring. This particular action came as a tremendous shock to the audience and there was a sharp reaction to this action being shown on stage.

The production, however, was a great success. The adapter-director added a few touches to the script to highlight certain thematic aspects in the play. For instance, a mirror was added to the other stage accessories where Tapan, Torvald's counterpart, time and again delights to see his own reflection. His egoistic nature is rightly emphasized through this action. Among other decorative ornaments of the 'room' there was also a mechanical doll that went on dancing when wound up. This played a significant role as a dramatic symbol in the production. The sets were more or less realistic. An important improvement in the stage setting was the crucial position in which the letterbox was placed. The use of lights was true to Ibsen's directions. The sequence

where Bulu flirts with Dr. Roy is a good instance, as during this scene the lights grew dim and the atmosphere created encouraged Dr. Roy to express his love for Nora. The acting was true to the naturalistic tradition.

The adaptation of *Rosmersholm*, the third play under discussion, has been produced by one of Calcutta's lesser known, yet distinguished, theatre groups. The adaptation was done by the director himself after consulting several English translations. As far as adaptation goes, *Rosmersholm* is rather a difficult play, with its subtle associations of Christianity and the connotation of original sin haunting the characters, especially Rosmer. In *Sada Ghoda* the Bengali version, the mantle of Christianity is changed to one of conservative Hinduism and Rosmer transformed into the last of a wealthy and famous family of zamindars, known for their orthodox views and attitudes. Instead of defrocking himself, Niren (Rosmer) decides to break down an old family temple and use the land to build up a workshop for landless refugees who, he dreams, would thereby be able to earn their own bread. The Bengali adaptation is placed somewhere in the fifties, when India was passing through the heady, exuberant days of newly gained independence. However, this temporal aspect is not made too explicit in the play. Apart from the religious connotations, another situation that seems rather difficult to adapt is the relationship between Rosmer and Rebecca West. The concept of a housekeeper is almost alien to a Bengali household and though there are occasional cases of female relatives coming in to stay to look after the household when the mistress is indisposed, the friendship between such a woman and the master is almost unheard of. Hence, it has not been possible to show Rebecca as a social climber in the Bengali version. Some of the complexities of this remarkable character, who preceded Ibsen's still more remarkable Hedda Gabler, seem to have been marred by playing down the incestual relationship between Rebecca and her 'foster' father. But it would have been difficult for a Bengali audience, which is rather conservative about sexual relationships, to accept this. White horses-the central symbol in the play-have a special significance for the Norwegians, connected as it is with Norse folklore.⁵ In the adaptation, the symbol loses this particular connotation. The political overtones of the play have been dealt with much more easily. West Bengal, as well as India, has had a very strong conservative right and equally radical left since times dating from the days of the pre-independence freedom struggle. As a result, Ibsen's conservatives and liberals have found adequate counterparts in the political milieu. The greatest change the adapter has incorporated in this version is in the denouement. Some critics may

justifiably term it as a mutilation of *Rosmersholm*, but hardly of the Ibsenian point of view. The dual suicide at the end is only implied in the adaptation. There is no formal acceptance of Rebecca by Rosmer as his 'eternal wife' before they go out hand-in-hand to the mill race. Neither does Madame Helseth enter the empty room calling for Rebecca, nor does she witness the double suicide: through the window at the closing of the play. The object of the adapter, in so drastically changing the conclusion, may have lain in his urge to curb the romanticism and melodrama inherent in the situation. The effect of the change is a predominant sense of cynicism and pessimism which seems to imply that any honest individual's idealistic dream is bound to meet with failure in the existing social system. The redemptive aspect of death is denied to the Bengali counterparts of Rosmer and Rebecca.

The stage production enhanced this aura of gloom through its use of sets, music and light. The living room of *Rosmersholm* (Ray Villa) only apparently followed naturalistic representation. Huge dark gray flats, inclined inwards at an angle at the top, were used for walls which created a claustrophobic impression. The enormous narrow window at the centre of the sets dwarfed the characters on stage. The House of the Rosmers seemed to impose upon the freedom and individuality of the characters. The lights were effectively used to create an impression of lurking darkness in every corner. The lighting scheme did not follow any realistic pattern, in the sense that it did not necessarily grow light with the dawning of a day or dark with approaching twilight. Instead, it attempted to follow the emotional and dramatic situations. There was very little music except between the acts and that also was atmospheric. One important change from the original which detracted somewhat from the dramatic effect was the omission of Rebecca's white shawl. The shroud-like shawl that she is seen to knit from the very first act, and which becomes her bridal veil when she walks out to her death with Rosmer, is absent and this a loss as far as Ibsen's symbolism is concerned. One must admit, though, that a shroud has almost no meaning for large sections of the Bengali audience, who are mainly Hindus and cremate their dead. The acting was naturalistic in scheme, though Rosmer, Rebecca and Brendel spoke and gestured in a more refined, stylized manner than Kroll, Madame Helseth or Mortensgaard. But it must also be added that the director-adapter failed to distinguish the speech pattern or vocabulary from character to character. In the original Norwegian, Ibsen had taken care to do so.

Without the analysis of a Bengali production based on a straight translation of an Ibsen play, this discussion would remain incomplete. As we had noted earlier, *Ghosts* has been the

most frequently produced Ibsen play on the Bengali stage. What is interesting to note, however, is that each time *Ghosts* was translated, almost never adapted. One adaptation attempted by the late Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay was rather a failure and was seldom put on stage. An obvious problem in adapting *Ghosts* is the important role the character of the Pastor plays in the plot. 'it is very difficult to find an equivalent of a Christian Pastor in the framework of a Bengali middle class society. The other difficulty is to find a parallel to the background of Oswald's character. The life of complete freedom he had witnessed in Paris does not have an equivalent in the Indian milieu and for a young man belonging to a middle-class family to be sent to Paris to learn painting is rather unusual. There may be other minor problems in adapting *Ghosts* to the Bengali situation which made most producers turn to direct translation.

For our present purposes we shall take up the translation by Soumitra Chatterjee which provided the dramatic script for a more or less successful production. Though the translation was done mostly from an English translation of the play, Mr. Chatterjee claims to have consulted an expert in Norwegian to attain the nearest possible rendering.²⁶ In spite of its being a translation, *Bidehee* has had to undergo one or two changes. For example, the general setting has suffered certain alterations. The conservatory being a section of the house totally unfamiliar to Indian living, in the translation it is represented as a 'glass room'. Similarly, the fjord is alien to the topography of Bengal, so that it has been omitted from the description of the stage setting. The wet mist that can be seen outside the conservatory windows does not sound convincing in the translation, for such a natural phenomenon is rare in the Indian climate. The wash house where Regina is sent to arrange linen for the Orphanage is another stumbling block the translator has not been able to deal with adequately. Though it has been convenient to translate 'Pastor' as 'Padre', a word with which most Bengalis are familiar from their acquaintance with missionaries, 'Chamberlain' has not found a proper counterpart in translation. Quite a few expressions which sound natural in English become trite when translated literally. 'Devil's rain', which Regina uses right at the beginning of the play, sounds alien when translated directly to Bengali. The image of a 'whited sepulchre' is apt when used in English to describe the life Mrs. Alving had led. with her husband. But the translator has no other alternative but to translate it as 'a prison of hidden sorrow', for the sepulchre is an unfamiliar concept for the Bengali reader/ audience. The key symbol of the `Ghosts', when translated into Bengali, lacks the poetic depth of the original ward. In the crucial passage, the Bengali equivalents used detract from the depth and seriousness of the

central idea. As it is, 'Ghosts' is an inadequate translation of the Norwegian word 'Gengangere' which literally implies 'the dead who walk again'. One wonders if it would not have been better for the Bengali translator to find a corresponding word in his language for the original Norwegian. More examples could be listed, but it is important to note that Regina's character in the Bengali version loses its credibility because of a lack of insight on the part of the translator. French words and phrases pepper Regina's dialogue both in the English and the Norwegian, in order to throw light on Regina's ambitious nature as well as her declassed condition. These French words and phrases have been left untouched by the translator in the Bengali version, but they make little sense to the Bengali reader/ audience. Instead, if Regina had mingled English words and phrases with her Bengali to exhibit her superiority over her own class, it would have conveyed greater meaning to the audience. Regina's utterance of the common Norwegian swear words 'Fi donc' illumines her actual class origins in the Norwegian version. The translator has retained this, not knowing what to do with it. Again, it conveys no meaning to the Bengali audience and therefore defeats the purpose of its utterance. The obvious question that follows is, why did he not have it translated into Bengali by the Norwegian scholar he had consulted? Anyway, these discussions show that a literal translation is not always the best way out of the problematic of transplanting a play to a completely foreign culture.

The production based on this translation was performed in European costume and the sets also resembled the interior of a European household. The stage directions were followed as closely as possible. Lighting directions in the dramatic text were strictly adhered to, except for some atmospheric lighting effects. The acting scheme was naturalistic. In fact, the director, who played Oswald, admits to have portrayed him as a schizophrenic after having read a psychiatrist's analysis of the character.²⁷ The production ran for quite some time to crowded houses and is still remembered as a notable Ibsen production on the Bengali stage.

Let us now move to the reception of such productions among theatre critics. Susanta Basu, a scholar and critic of Bengali theatre, has iterated that an adaptation of Ibsen is ultimately more valuable than a translation.²⁸ An adaptation, according to him, reveals to us aspects of our own society, our reality, our culture, which a translation can hardly achieve. Hence an adaptation serves the social and national responsibilities of theatre better. In an article on contemporary theatre, Amalendu Chakraborty, another litterateurscholar, decries the imitation of western forms of theatre.²⁹ He maintains that this trend stems from a lack of national and historical

consciousness. Moreover, he says, in its love of emulation of western theatre, Bengali theatre tends to go back to western playwrights who are decades old. This tendency, according to him, deprives Bengali theatre of an evaluation of its own time or milieu. But he ultimately agrees that the Indianization of a foreign play may become significant provided the national psyche is taken into consideration and the adaptation is directed at assimilation rather than imitation. The same conviction is echoed by Bonophool, a renowned Bengali novelist/dramatist, in his discussion on the dearth of good plays in Bengali. *Dasachakra* one of the first adaptations of Ibsen on the Bengali stage, was hailed by drama critics as a perfect drawing room drama and was praised for the naturalness of atmosphere created through stage sets, lighting and acting.³¹ However, a particular critic raised a few questions about the adaptation, even though he praised the above points. According to him, the individuality which Ibsen glorifies in this play may have been progressive in late nineteenth century Europe, but did not have similar significance in the fifties in India. In his view, the crowd that stands against the doctor's great endeavour are not representative of the greater people and the doctor's contentment with blaming the masses for their ignorance can 'open up an opportunity to form a wrong idea about the populace of today'.³² In reviewing a subsequent production in the next decade, another critic notes, 'The torment of a conscientious man under social pressure has been expressed. The play aims at no fulfilment of a particular political objective' ³³ The 1985 production strikes a critic as 'an extended metaphor of progress, of individual realization. Dr Stockmann's minority ... is not a social class but the "intellectually superior", "the leader of, thought". . .³⁴ It is interesting to note how the critical attitudes towards the same dramatic production changed with the decades.

Putui Khela initially received a better reception from drama critics than *Dasachakra* had. The adaptation was generally praised and there was not too much objection against the transformation of Nora's tarantella to recitation or the Christmas festivities to puja celebrations. What is noteworthy is how some critics have justified the performance of this play in the twentieth century Bengali milieu. A critic writes, 'It is true that the subject of this play is woman's rebellion, but that is not the last word in it. The suffering which lies behind the individual's attainment of self respect has given this play a deeper value beyond its so-called feminism ... the question of women's position in our society has not as yet been so resolved that this play may seem stale to us from that point of view. Another drama critic writes almost in the same vein, pointing out that Sombhu Mitra's 'interpretation of Ibsen's play goes well with

conditions of India today'.⁶ Mitra had hardly attempted any new interpretation of the play, but according to this last critic, he had emphasized Torvald's lack of trust in Nora's competence as a good mother as the principal reason for her leaving the family, and thus focused on the Indian view that 'the object of wedded life is not each other's happiness but that of being instruments to shape the future through the offsprings.'⁷ This is probably one of the perfect examples of how the meaning of a play can be misread by critics. For most critics, the Indian counterpart of Nora had seemed to be more credible and convincing than Nora herself. It was really the universality of the problem of the play that endeared the production to the critics, though their interpretation of what this universality was differed. For instance, one critic emphasizes the aspect of psychological analysis, while others stress worldwide alienation and mechanization as causing the destruction of human relationships. To some, again, the play revealed the complexities of the man-woman relationship on the one hand and basic human values on the other. The critics saw in this production an attempt on the part of the pioneers of serious Bengali theatre to understand and discover the inner manifestations of reality, rather than its external ones.³⁸ A theatre enthusiast Bengali psychologist analysed *Putul Khelct* from rather an interesting view point. He interprets the word 'doll' as the idealized image which society creates for every individual, thus setting into motion a sequence of conflicts between the artificial 'doll self' and the 'true self' of the individual. According to him, Nora had succumbed to this pressure and had taken shelter in her doll-like existence. He sees Ibsen revealing how this artificial image becomes greater than the real self, whereby the 'dolls' begin to act in the roles of human beings, thus deluding their own selves and others as well.³⁹

A piece printed in the *Bohurupee* theatre journal a year after the production of *Putul Khela* should be mentioned here.⁴⁰ It is a hypothetical dialogue conceived by the author between Kalidasa's immortal heroine Sakuntala and Ibsen's heroine Nora. Sakuntala, having tired of her heavenly abode of eternal happiness with her husband and her child, has descended to earth to look for variety, and she meets Nora. They discover that they have both left their homes, but for entirely different reasons. Nora explains the futility of her past existence as a plaything in her husband's house and asks the other how she had felt when Dushyanta had rejected her in his court. Sakuntala shows ample logic for Dushyanta's behaviour, thus justifying his action, and asks Nora whether she wants to go back to her husband as Sakuntala herself had done. Nora replies in the negative, since she has not yet discovered her own

identity. It is clear from her reply that she does not belong to a single country, but to all countries *of* the world where women are still treated as dolls. In the final outcome, when Sakuntala is about to leave for her home in the heavens, she invites her new-found friend; but Nora refuses on the ground that she is more needed in Bengal. Skilfully, the author shows us that Ibsen's heroine is more relevant to our present context than KaJidasa's immortal creation.

The stage adaptation of *Rosmerlarlrn* was praised for its productional qualities but the adaptation itself was not convincing according to drama critics, chiefly because of the lack *of* credibility of the situation in which the only survivor of a Hindu zamindar family plans to break down the ancestral temple and build a shelter for refugees on that same ground.

Turning from drama critics to the scholars of theatre and drama, it may be said that generally Ibsen has had a favourable reception among theatre scholars. Yet it must be mentioned here that he has not been able to create as much controversy or impact among scholars and academics as some other western playwrights, the most notable being Berolt Brecht. Writing on Ibsen and the age of naturalism, Satya Bandyopadhyay, a Marxist actor-scholar associated for long with Utpal Dutt's People's Little Theatre, rejects the notion that Ibsen was a mere individualist or an arch idealist and sees him as possessing insight that could penetrate the mantle of capitalism and a voice that could speak in the interest of the masses.⁴² According to Bandyopadhyay, Ibsen was one of the greatest critics of the bourgeois society in his time. But he is not all praises for Ibsen. In spite of Ibsen progressive attitudes, this theatre scholar criticizes him for only raising questions and never answering them. According to him, Ibsen was concerned with social problems only to the extent that it disturbed his own individual sensibility. The dramatist had criticized capitalist society ~only on an ethical plane, but had failed to see the politico-economic dimensions of such a society.

Dhruba Gupta, another theatre scholar, writing about tragedies in our times, has regarded Ibsen as a writer of modern tragedies. Judging Ibsen's plays by classical standards, Gupta has found in the social catastrophes and the individual crises of Ibsenian plays the inevitability characteristic of Fate in Greek tragedies. He has also discerned in Ibsen the unity of plot so emphasized in Aristotle, though character is never secondary to plot in Ibsen's plays, according to him. In characters like Stockmann, Gupta has perceived the tragic greatness common in protagonists of classical plays. His article is a challenge to scholars like Steiner who have

proclaimed the death of tragedy in modern times.⁴³ In another article entitled *The Present Times and Our Theatre*, Dhruva Gupta expresses the belief that after Tagore whatever happened in Bengali theatre had Ibsen as its ideal rather than Kalidasa.⁴⁴ This, interestingly, condones the hypothetical dialogue between Sakuntala and Nora discussed earlier. In a major article on Ibsen and the Bengali theatre movement, the same theatre scholar propagates that Ibsen is essentially an individualist and his battle is against the contemporary society which tries to crush all forms of individual expression. He has cited Bentley's criticism of Ibsenian theatre to establish his opinion. Turning from content to form, Gupta sees in Ibsen's dramatic style the coalescence of realism and symbolism.

Writing about the relevance of Ibsen in the Indian context, he says that *A Doll's House* is especially significant in our milieu as there are still remnants of feudal attitudes in the relationship between men and women in contemporary society. On the other hand, a play like *An Enemy of the People* is meaningful in relation to the Indian brand of democracy which was borrowed from the west and believes in the importance of quantity over quality. Gupta thinks that the criticism that the play is reactionary since the dramatist speaks against the 'brute majority' is as worthless as that which praises him as progressive because in the conclusion he makes the doctor decide to teach street urchins. In his final analysis, he argues that it would be absurd if the Bengali reader-audience imitated western scholars in regarding Ibsen's deepset humanism and powerful idealism with contempt. On the contrary, they should learn to value the high seriousness of Ibsenian plays in these times when sincerity and good sense are considered superfluous.

Another theatre critic, Dipendu Chakraborty, feels that the Bengali drama critic has not developed any indigenous standards to judge the literary quality or the performance potential of a play and still depends on standards set by western playwrights such as Shakespeare, Ibsen or Brecht to evaluate even Bengali plays. Further, he thinks that despite quite a few Ibsen productions on the Bengali stage, original Bengali play writing has taken up the Shavian style-if any western style at all-rather than the Ibsenian.

In 1986, a scholar of literature published his voluminous doctoral thesis on Ibsen and Bengali drama,⁴⁶ where he tries to trace the Ibsenian influence on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali playwrights. Even Tagore has not been spared. But most of the elements in Bengali drama that he discusses as being caused by an Ibsenian impact could have

just as well been caused by various other reasons. He picks up a few characteristics of Ibsenian theatre such as elaborate stage directions, psychological complexities, the famous retrospective method, concern with lighting etc. and imposes them upon Bengali playwrights of the pre-independence era. In fact, he allots much more space to these playwrights than our modern dramatists who may really have been more vulnerable to the influence of Ibsen, since it was only in the end 1940s that we have concrete proof of an active consciousness of Ibsen through translations, adaptations, articles and criticisms about which this author hardly talks. Throughout the work he harps repeatedly on the so-called universality of Ibsenian theatre, emphasizing Ibsen's feminist sympathies, even though it is widely known that Ibsen himself said that he was neither essentially nor primarily involved with feminist issues when he created his powerful heroines. This book actually demonstrates the confusion which reigns in some sections of our academic world in their attitude to this particular dramatist.

As far as audience reception of a play or a playwright is concerned, it is extremely difficult to judge it since there is almost no accepted means of recording data, at least here in India. Box office sales are often misleading. Hence we are on uncertain ground here. However, for this analysis also I've taken up the same three productions, simply because of the availability of data. Since *Dasachakra* was revived twice after its first production, the producers had the opportunity of recording the difference in audience reactions. For *Putul Khela* and *Sada Ghoda* the respective theatre units were interested enough to call for audience opinions by post. As a result, there is some recorded data. One more point to clarify at the very outset is that the audience of Bengali experimental theatre comes from the urban educated middle class. The audience is not necessarily an initiated one, though it possesses a certain level of cultural interest as well as sociopolitical consciousness.

When *Dasachakra* was first produced in the fifties, the reception was rather hostile. India was then basking in the glory of newly won independence and had just proclaimed herself a democracy. A play that hailed individuality and apparently condemned the 'brute majority' was bound to be considered rather regressive. But a decade later, the novelty of democracy had worn off and its seedier aspects were apparent. That the elasticity of this political term allowed those in power to utilize it against the interests of the general public had also become evident. So this time the play received wide audience acclaim. It became immensely popular and was hailed as a classic. In the eighties, again it was received as a

classic and people queued overnight for tickets to see the production, which was a landmark in the history of Bengali theatre, and also to see Sombhu Mitra, the maestro of Bengali theatre, in the role of Dr. Stockmann.

Putul Khela became an instant success, but extracts of letters received by the theatre group from various members of the audience, though appreciative in general, show mixed reactions. For example, Annada Shankar Ray expressed objections about the adaptation, which he considered a mutilation of the original. Another viewer demands adequate editing of the script. In several letters there are shocked reactions to the end of the play where Bulu wipes off her vermilion mark. One of these even calls the play reactionary on this very account. But there is also a letter that congratulates the adapter-director for the ending of the play, which was able to create the desired impact of shock amongst the orthodox members of the Bengali middle class. However; Sachindranath Sen, who calls Bulu's last action reactionary, raises some other interesting points as well. To him, the play appeared verbose, the characters lacking in credibility. Torvald's idealism that later peters down to selfish conformity seems objectionable to Sen and Dr. Rank's disease appears to him to be totally irrelevant. He is also annoyed at not being able to classify Krogstad either as a good man or as a black villain. So his diatribe is more against the play than against the production. While one letter demands an even fuller attention to naturalistic details, another congratulates the director for the perfect blend of naturalism and symbolism in the play.

A perusal of letters received by the theatre group that produced *Sada Ghoda* show similarly erratic and contradictory responses.⁴⁸ Quite a few members of the audience express dissatisfaction with the denouement of the play. To some, it is obscure and melodramatic, to others sudden and contrived. Some letters object to the political content of the play on various grounds, including that the play seems to be speaking against leftist politics. To a few others, the analysis of political issues deviates attention from the aesthetic qualities of the play. Yet others have objection to the pessimism inherent in the play. A member of the audience writes that the failure of the play lies in its hailing the victory of people like Kroll and Mortensgaard and the play is not meant for the common audience. There is also a letter saying that a better original play could have been written on the same theme. On the other hand, there are members of the audience who hail the play for its content and congratulate the adapter-director for his courage in choosing such a play. But by far the most interesting reaction is that of a young

twenty-year-old student who writes, 'After seeing the play I have felt that I have received something new and yet also missed something. What I received was an age-old social problem and what I missed was the solution. .. Which way should we, the youth of today, adopt then? The path of success or that of ideals?'

This close look at audience reaction only reveals contradictory trends in the reception of Ibsen, which in turn emphasizes the impact Ibsen has been able to create on the general psyche of the theatre-going audience of Bengal. Whether this influence has extended to modern play writing is difficult to state. It is true, perhaps, that Bengali theatre had its first taste of naturalism through Ibsen. But other playwrights such as Chekov, Shaw or Arthur Miller followed, with their own brands of realism and naturalism. As a result, even in the realistic and naturalistic plays written by Bengali playwrights, it is difficult to discern whether the formal characteristics are essentially a result of Ibsenian influence or not, unless there is a definite proof of the author's exposure to Ibsen. Thematic influence is even more difficult to locate. What we can assert without a doubt is that Ibsen has had a considerable impact on Bengali play writing as well as on Bengali theatre production. I will end this discussion through examining a play written by Sombhu Mitra, who was certainly exposed to Ibsen, through adapting one of his plays and directing two.

The play *Ulukhagra* was produced in 1950. The title etymologically means a wild, useless plant though the idiomatic connotation is of small, insignificant people who do not matter. The play centres around a middle-class family headed by an autocratic father who is apparently an incurable idealist holding his ideals above the heads of his submissive wife, his daughter and his rebellious son. With the progress of the play, the hypocrisy of his nature is revealed as he tries to falsely implicate an admirer of his actress wife. It is also learnt that he was responsible for the illegitimate birth of their first child—the son. At the climax of the play, the son challenges the father and the mother commits suicide, unable to bear the shame. The plot is rather complicated and contrived, but the thematic and formal elements of an Ibsenian play can be easily recognized: the unmasking of the 'pillar of society', the apparent idealist, the past taking its toll on the present, the quiet lighthearted beginning, the slowly gathering storm, the three-act structure, the detailed stage directions, the naturalistic setting. There are also certain snatches of dialogue which reflect Ibsenian ideas. But in the ultimate analysis, the play lacks the compactness of an Ibsenian plot, the intricate psychological exploration, the slow, but

skilled unraveling of the plot. At most, it is a vain attempt to build a naturalistic play on Ibsenian principles. In general, attempts on the part of Bengali playwrights to write plays in the Ibsenian mode have mostly resulted in weak melodrama.

Production, performance and stagecraft have probably acquired more, by comparison. The blend of realism and symbolism in Ibsen's plays have inspired our producers and technicians. Ibsen productions on the Bengali stage have helped them to develop lighting, set designing, acting and costume to the extent where they have attained perfection in their imitation of external reality, simultaneously being able to express the inner symbolism of great drama.

In conclusion one could say that Ibsen's impact on Bengali theatre has been comparatively subtler than that of other foreign playwrights like Chekov or Brecht; the impress of his ideas on the social psyche has probably been greater. His plays, mostly those of the middle phase-the social plays as they are usually referred to-have exerted a subterranean influence on Bengali play writing and production.

Notes

All translations from Bengali citations are mine.

1. Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri, *Digbijoyi: Introduction. Jogesk Granthabali*, vol. I (Calcutta: Basumati Sahitya Mandir, 1965), p. 4.
2. Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, rpt. 1960), pp. 171-2; Edward Beyer, trans.; Marie Wells, *Ibsen: The Man and his Work* (London: Souvenir Press (E & A) Ltd., 1978), p 118; Una Ellis Fermor, *Shakespeare the Dramatist and Other Paper;* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961, rpt. 1961), pp. 140, 146-7,154; Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Tltinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1964), pp. 26-7.
3. Sushil Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres 1753 -1980* (Calcutta : K.P. Bagchi and Company, 19\$2), p. 563.
4. Examples of such protest can be found in *Meghmukti Rakter Dak or Matir Ghar*
5. Playwrights such as Manoj Basu or Manmatha Ray. Mention must be made here of Tulsi Lahiri, a dramatist of the same period, who wrote mainly for the postindependence avant-garde theatre groups. He was an avid spokesman for naturalistic plays.

6. For the disruption of IPTA's activities consult: Sudhi Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement in India : Chronicles and Documents, vols, I & II* (Calcutta : A. Mujherjee and Co. Pvt Ltd., 1979, rpt. 1985).
7. Geeta Bandyopadhyay in 'Adhunik Theatre Sankranta Kichhu Prashna', in *Bohurupee* 27, September 1967 (Special Issue), p.157.
8. This production was first mentioned to me by Dhruva Gupta and later confirmed by Utpal Dutt, who was also kind enough to furnish me with necessary information. The production is also mentioned in Biru Mukhopadhyay's article *Natya Andolan Ekti Paryalochana* included in Sunil Datta (ed.), *Nntyn Andolaner Tirish Bachhar* (Calcutta: Jatiya Sahitya Parishad, 1972, rpt. 1987), p. 215.
9. Sunil Datta, *Natta Andolaner ITirish Bachhar* , p. 100. Dr. Naresh Chandra Khan mentions in Ibsen o *Bangla Natak* (Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1986, p. 237), that Souvanik produced *Ghosts* once again in 1962, based on a straight translation by Nibedita Das.
10. Sunil Datta (ed.), *Natya Andolaner Tirish Bachhar* p.119.
11. Subir Roy Chowdhury and Swapan Majumdar (ed.), *Bilati Jatra Theke Swadeshi Theatre* (Calcutta: Dept. of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, 1971), Appendix, List 3B.
12. Information about this production was mainly supplied by the translator-director himself, whom I interviewed in August 1988. He was kind enough to let me see the manuscript of the translation. Some facts about this production are also mentioned by Dr. Naresh Chandra Khan in *Ibsen o Bangla Natak* p. 238.
13. Subir Roy Chowdhury and Swapan Majumdar (ed.) *Bilnti Jatra* Appendix, List 3B.
14. Sushil Mukherjee, *The Story of Calcutta Theatres* p. 368.
15. Subir Roy Chowdhury and Swapan Majumdar (ed.), *Bilnti Jatra* Appendix, List 3C
16. Ibid, Appendix, List 3B.
17. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Great Britain: Chatto and Windus, 1968, rpt. Penguin Books, 1976), p. 60.
18. Sushil Mukherjee, *The Story of Calcutta Theatres*
19. Mr. Santi Basu himself talked of the adaptation to me in August 1988, when the play was still in manuscript form.

20. Sunil Kumar Ghose (trans. and ed.), *Ibsen Nal un Sambhar vols. I-IV* (Calcutta: Sanyal Prakashan), 1980. The plays have been translated from William Archer's English translations and not directly from the Norwegian.

21. Satyesh Gupta, 'Ibsen Keno?' in *Bohurupee* 5, December 1957, pp. 52-9.

I have translated the title of the Bengali article in the main body of my writing for the convenience of readers. 22. Dwipen Sengupta, 'Adhunik Theatre Sankranta Kichu Prashna' in *Bohurupee* 27, September 1967 (Special Issue), p. 171.

23. Henrik Ibsen, extract from letter to Swedish actormanager August Lindberg, written on 2 August, 1883, quoted in Michael Meyer, *Ibsen on File* (London and New York: Methuen Ltd., 1985), p. 66.

24. This article is included in *Bohurupee* 38, May 1972 (Jubilee Issue), pp. 81-7.

25. Einar Haugen, *Ibsen's Drama: Author to Audience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 87. 26. Mr. Chatterjee stated this fact in the interview mentioned before.

27. Same as above. Mr. Chatterjee did not mention the particular psychiatrist whose article he consulted. 28. Susanta Basu, 'Anubad na Bhabanubad?' in *Bohurupee* 30, September 1968 (Special Issue), pp. 26-9. 29. Amalendu Chakraborty, 'Sampratit Natak: Darshaker Bhavna' in *Bohurupee*, 30, September 1968 (Special Issue), pp. 174-84.

30. Bonophool, 'Bhalo Bangla Natak Keno Nai?' in *Bohurupee*, 8, May 1959, pp. 9-12.

31. Drama Critic, 'Dasachakra Natyabhinay' in *Gartnntyn*, January 1952; Drama Critic, 'Bohurupeer Natun Natak' in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 7 December, 1952; Dileep Chowdhury, 'Samayik Sanaskriti Samalochana', 1952, p. 265. These details have been collected from Bohurupee files, so complete reference details were sometimes unavailable.

32. Dileep Chowdhury, 'Samayik Sanaskriti Samalochana', p. 265.

33. Drama Critic, 'Bohurupeer Ibsen Abhinay' in *Saptahik Bastmati*, 29 March, 1963, pp. 43-4.

34. Rita Datta, *Tlotglvts, Beliefs and Values* in a souvenir published on the occasion of the 1985 *Dnsnchnkrn* production.

35. See note 33.

36. A Staff Reporter, 'Putul Khela an improvement over Doll's House: A Superb Performance' in *Hitavndn Nngpur*, 22 February, 1964, p. 6.

37. Ibid.

38. Purnendu Sekhar Patrea, 'Putul Khela Prasange' in *Bohuru pee*, 40, April 1973 (Anniversary Issue 2), p. 51. 39. Mrinal Badua, 'Putul Khelar Sameeksha' in *Bohurupee*, 6, July 1958, pp. 22-9.

40. Sree Abhinavagupta, 'Atha Nora Sakuntala Upakhyanam' in *Bohurupce*, 8, May 1959, pp. 65-70. 41. Chittaranjan Ghose, 'Sada Ghoda: Antarik Proyojana' in *Ananda Baznr Patrika*, 12 August, 1988, p. 3.

42. Satya Bandyopadhyay, 'Henrik Ibsen o Paschimi Theatrer Ek Adhyay' in *Shnrnd Bnsudhara*, 5th year, vol. I, Issue 6, October 1961, pp. 313-20.

43. Dhruva Gupta, 'Bartaman Kale Tragedy' in *Bolturndee*, 23, September 1965 (Special Issue), pp. 120-4. 44. Dhruva Gupta, 'Ekal o Amader Natyakarma' in *Bohurupee*, 19, May 1964, p. 41. The original Bengali title has been translated by me in the main body of my article for readers' convenience.

45. Dipendu Chakraborty, 'Maulik Natak Prashna ebong Amra' in *BoIrurtcpee*, 62, September 1984, pp. 1-1h7.

46. Dr Naresh Chandra Khan, Ibsen o *Bnm;ln Nntnk*. 47. All references to audience reaction in this context' have been collected from 'Patralap' in *Bohtuntpce*, 6, Jul_v 1958, pp. 60-8.

48. These letters have not been published or printed anywhere. Mr. Salil Banerjee, the director of *Sndn Glunin*, was kind enough to let me study the contents of these letters.

Ms Banerjee is an actress, an academic and a scholar Who has been researching aspects of theatre in Bengal.

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Polls on Stage

Paramita Banerjee

It is definitely not easy to define political theatre, and the postmodernist-cum-feminist challenge against the traditional divide between the personal and the political has made the task even more difficult. Indeed, if politics be 'the actions and activities which people use to achieve power in a country, society or organization or which ensure that power be used in a particular way' (as the Collins Cobuild dictionary puts it), it is near impossible to think of any theatre that is not

political in some sense, especially if we accept the Foucauldian notion of power as something that is produced in any relationship at any point of time, and which functions through myriad open strategies. However, in common parlance political theatre is used to designate collectively plays that propagate an ideology of social change. In that sense, political theatre is also propaganda theatre, for 'propaganda is a specific form of activated ideology' (1978, Szanto, Texas and London: 6).

Anyone who has had an intimate relationship with Bengali theatre even simply as part of a serious audience for any length of time, is bound to be familiar with the close relationship that the stage here has shared with the process of daily living in the state. Whether directly-through exposing and questioning the socio-political injustices that make life difficult for the general people-or indirectly, through raising various value questions regarding the functioning of a just society in a more abstract sense, the connection between the stage and life in the streets has never been absent. It is only to be expected, then, that the state of West Bengal, at least, would come up with plays for the elections when the stage was all set for that great spectacle. However, going by the above definition of 'political', it would be interesting to note how far these election plays are political and what kind of an activated ideology they propagate.

Prabhat Kumar Goswami in his *Uttar Challisher Rajnaitik Natak* (Political Plays of the Forties and After)(1982, Calcutta) argues that Bengali political theatre in the specific sense of propaganda theatre really flourished around the nationalist issue and it crystallized through the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (henceforth IPTA) in 1943. On the Bengali stage, a new line of political plays directly confronting socio-economic injustices and seeking to define ways out of them was born with the staging of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (The Harvest Festival) in October 1944. As Malini Bhattacharya argues, '. . . its single achievement was to use the naturalism which dominated commercial theatre to a totally new purpose and ... to give dramatic form to what was emerging as a new political reality' (1995, New Delhi, Parimoo & Sharma [edt]: 250). A distinctive line of plays dedicated to the ideology of portraying the burdens thrust on the poorer and less powerful sections of society has continued on the Bengali stage ever since.

If it is difficult to define political theatre in general, it is nearly impossible to define Marxist/ communist theatre. 'If one admits that one of the functions of communists within a mass organization is to maintain vital links between the day to day interests of the masses and an

overall long term political analysis of the situation' (Ibid.: 254), then the least to expect from election plays put forward by the cultural wing of a self-declared Marxist Communist Party (whatever that means) would be that these would combine the election sentiments at the popular level with futuristic political analysis.

From the results, it is now obvious that popular election sentiments in the state of West Bengal were rather at odds in Calcutta and the districts. However, the major thrust of election propaganda for the Left Front in the state for all of the last four elections has been opposing the Congress ruled centre. Slogans of the CPI(M) over the last decade reveal quite clearly that the once oft-used 'Victory to the Popular Democratic Revolution' has long been abandoned, as has been the call for 'Integrated Land Reforms in the Interest of the Landless and Poor Peasants'. The only call to arms that this party has issued to the masses in the remembered past is *Brigade Chalo* to either listen to the misdeeds of the Congress at the centre or to celebrate poll victories. Demands raised have towed the same line insofar as they have basically been to criticize and/or question the centre's failure to fulfil its election promises and to Supply funds. True to this position of political bankruptcy (it is difficult to call this anything else!), this time the CPI(M)'s major electoral slogan circled around the hawala issue. Naturally enough, the election plays under discussion also revolve around this issue of corruption in the Congress, and sometimes the BJP.

The Special Election Issue of the Gana Natya Sangha bulletin offers eight one-act plays, only one of which addresses the problems of Hindu fundamentalist politics in any direct form, though that form does not in any way transcend that of the old riot plays. It sticks to the mode of direct portrayal of how a communal party strives to jeopardize relations between Hindu and Muslim neighbouring peasants, who are otherwise the best of friends. The entire gamut of the complexities of a long history of mutual distrust and suppressed hatred among the urban populace of the two communities in India, the inadequately dealt with refugee problems that have continued to create different shades and layers of underlying communal tensions and the culture of jingoism practised and popularized by the official exchanges of both Pakistan and India-all of which are variously used by the Hindu fundamentalists to capture popular minds-remain entirely neglected. In a region like Bengal, where the rural peasants had refused to succumb to communal disharmony even after the

worst provocation during the 1946 riots, this kind of a simplistic depiction of communal politics seems even more ridiculous! However, this particular play, entitled *Did Bandhur Galpa* (The Tale of Two Friends), written by Srikanta Bairagi, at least has one redeeming feature. It's the wives of the two feuding peasants; who are 'Red Party' loyalists, and who bring their husbands to their senses. While the political significance of such a portrayal remains unclear, it is somehow a relief to see women being painted as more sensible than men-given our general patriarchal set up and the absolute silence of these plays on women's issues. However, all that these two women can inspire their husbands to do is not to vote for communal or corrupted politicians. I find it almost impossible not to think of a play of the late sixties, *Haramer Nat Jamai* (Haran's Grand Son-in-Law) dramatized by Sisir Sen from Manik Bandyopadhyay's short story of the same name, here also the main protagonist is a woman, who comes forward to make clear that real revolutionary action is to deal with a situation through discarding traditional bias and prejudice, if that be the need of the hour for social change.

If the above play is remarkable for its protagonists being women, almost all the other plays are also of special significance as far as their protagonists are concerned. Most of these playwrights choose someone rather close to the ruler-to-be-changed as the major protagonist of that change. It is possible that the party's flirtatious relations with the Congress at the centre, despite virulent Congress opposition at the state level, has produced this kind of an ambivalent feeling among its cadres. In one play, it is a one-time important Home department bureaucrat, interned as insane for unraveling a 'plot to secretly sell to foreign agents an important discovery of the Indian defence; in another it is the king's own bodyguard; in a third it is a trader very close to the king, and so on. It is ironic indeed that the Marxist ideal of proletarian leadership now has to be vested not merely in the hands of the petty bourgeoisie, but in the hands of individuals rather close to those who are to be dethroned.

What kind of revolt can such protagonists inspire? Let's take an extract from the play called *Jhuta Moti* (The False Gem), where the ex-defence official (called 'the man' in the play) sparks off real understanding in the two militiamen who guard the prime minister's residence:

1st soldier: Are you crazy? The whole country is outraged with the prime minister. The antiparty cadres are propagating that this prime minister is worthless-he hasn't kept any one of the pledges made before the election.

The man: Why, which promise hasn't he kept?

2nd soldier: None of the essential items cost less, though the minister had said that he would reduce these prices within a hundred days ...

The man: But dear soldier, tell me, what is the most essential item? 2nd soldier: Why-rice, wheat, oil ...

The man: That's only what the opposition says. The real necessity is money. 1st soldier: You are right sir, money indeed is the most essential item!

The man: Then, doesn't the Indian rupee cost less now than it did before? It's been devalued twice in one year. The next most essential item is human life, the cost of which has reached an all time low in the last five years-nobody knows when they're going to pop off . . . ¹

So, this kind of exposure comes hand in hand with an undertone of humour, if one is still ready to laugh at such over-used puns and innuendos. However, this is not the only form of humour that these plays offer. One of them, conceived in a fairly interesting form, uses the well known Utpal Dutt style of gross humour through the use of slang words that relate to certain parts of the body or to one's toilet habits etc. The form of this play is interesting because here the ruler is portrayed as sitting on a throne, the four posts of which comprise the people of the four corners of India. The play begins with all the posts refusing to carry the weight of the ruler any more, as they find him too heavy, his most favourite and loyal southern post included. It is to be noted that the whole of the south is thus unproblematically painted as the ex-prime minister's region of support. The high point in this play is the appearance of Bharat Mata (Mother India) in response to the posts' appeal to be saved. She tells the other three to follow the eastern post's example and overthrow the ruler. Pity those who dare raise questions like whether West Bengal comprises the whole of eastern India, or whether the leadership of the entire east of India is to be followed! It is ironic, to say the least, that the need

to move away from the spectre of popular political revolt beyond poll reverses ultimately has to end up invoking the much debated and debatable image of Mother India to get across the message of overthrowing Congress rule or Narasimha rule, to be more precise, for this play does not venture into anything other than the personal corruption of the erstwhile prime minister!

The concept of the people or the masses portrayed in these plays would anger the most timid, for no one likes to think of oneself as utterly stupid and malleable. But unfortunately that is how these playwrights characterize the general electorate. For instance, the two neighbouring Hindu and Muslim peasants start to fight among themselves simply because Kachaloo (the Hindu peasant) had gone to a meeting of the 'party with the lotus leaf symbol', whose leader had kept on about the Muslims being the real enemies of the country, even though they had themselves talked about how these party cadres had problematized their lives during the last elections! The following is probably a worse example:

Gopal: . . . This grocer is just an ordinary boss. The boss of all bosses is the king of the country.

1st & 2nd Peasants: The king?

Gopal: Yes, he is the boss of all bosses ... But even that boss of all bosses has a boss-I know all about him.

2nd Peasant: A boss of the boss of all bosses? My God, it's all so confusing!

Gopal: No wonder, with such a load of bosses! ... However, that boss of the boss of all bosses is the guru ... But there is one boss who is superior to this whole load of bosses.

2nd Peasant: Who is that boss,
now? Gopal: You guys are that
boss.²

One wonders what has happened to the Marxist ideal of proletarian leadership when one confronts such a depiction of the masses. Are these simpletons who feel confused at the existence of several layers of political bosses, and who are even unable to understand their

significance as the electorate in a system of universal adult franchise, the leaders of revolution that Marx had thought of? Or is this how the CPI(M) prefers to regard the general people to justify their own complete silence about any kind of a revolution?

It is interesting to note that the eight election plays printed in this special issue of the Gana Natya Sangha bulletin mention no real names, though there are transparent distortions like calling Mamata Banerjee Kshamata (meaning 'power') Banerjee, or Subrata Mukherjee Bibrata (meaning 'awkward') Mukherjee. But half a dozen one-act plays printed in issue 3, year 18 of Group Theatre launch a similar attack against both the Congress and the BJP through naming them directly, though this direct naming in no way alters the political standard of these plays. It seems rather audacious to raise the issue of 'class politics' in the context of such plays, but it is difficult not to when one sees the complete travesty that these plays make of the Marxist notion of political parties being representatives of particular classes. A relevant extract might be helpful in clarifying my position:

Consciousness: Don't you understand what you should want? You've experienced so many elections; you know fully well whose worthlessness, corruption and treachery is responsible for your distress. What then? Your country abounds in golden crops, mines are full of resources, your countrymen have indefatigable energy. Foreigners have plundered all this wealth for two hundred years. Those who are inviting the foreigners back again should go to hell. Let those who deprive the peasants and workers go to hell. Let those who create distress only for all classes of *people go to hell*.³

Not only does this dialogue oversimplify the entire history of colonial rule and the various ententes that indigenous forces formed with the British; it also makes the ruling Congress a classless party that torments all classes. It simultaneously makes clear that the CPI(M) is by no means ready to antagonize any section of the Indian population at the moment.

The climax in all the plays is the overthrow of the existing ruler-whether he be portrayed as the prime minister or the king. However, of much significance is the fact that an alternative ruler is not necessarily identified. One wonders if the cultural wing of the CPI(M) was already preparing for the post-election alliances that might clash seriously with pre-election sidings-as is obvious from this latest drama of changing ministries.

Though the ideals of the IPTA could not be fully realized, as it dissolved all too soon into bickering cliques, at least in Bengal, where it had one of its strongest bases, it created a legacy of a continuing search for plays that are relevant to contemporary problems. As a result, just off the cuff it is possible to name many directly political plays that have by no means lost the characteristics of a good play. Manoranjan Biswas' *Sara Akash Lal* (The Entire Sky Is Red), Utpal Dutt's *Kallol* (The Waves), Amal Ray's *Lash Bipani* (The Corpse Shop) are perfect examples. The elections are a time when one would expect political issues and analyses to crystallize, especially through the propaganda of a Marxist communist party whose only interest in the elections can be if Lenin's interpretation of Marxism still be appropriate to use it as a step towards the revolution. But if the plays discussed here are any indication, instead of taking up issues, official Marxist propaganda seems to be preoccupied more with a depoliticized moral criticism of corrupt politicians. If we go by their idea of the extreme naivete that characterizes the masses, as borne out by these plays, then we should not be at all surprised.

Notes

Extracts:

1. Naresh Jana, *Jhuta Moti* (The False Gem) in *Gana Natya* Election Issue, January-February, 1996.
2. Hiren Bhattacharya, *Nater Guru* (The Master of the Ceremonies) in above.
3. Nikhil Ranjan Das, *Bhav Murti* (The Facade) in *Group Theatre*, Year 18, Issue 3, 1996. All translations and emphases are mine.

References:

1. 1995: Bhattacharya, Malini, 'The IPTA in Bengal' in Parimoo and Sharma ed. *Creative Arts in Modern India*, Books & Books, New Delhi.
2. 1982: Goswami, Prabhat Kumar, *Uttar Challisher Rajnaitik Natak* Sanaskriti Parishad, Calcutta.
3. 1978: Szanto, George H., *Theatre & Propaganda*, University of Texas Press, Texas and London.

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-----**Theatre Log**

Imaging Gita-A Polyphonic Discourse

It was a play. It was a dance. It was music. It was an amalgam, defying any clearcut categorization, marked style or known genre. Yet it was not an event.

'The time was then. It could be now,' intoned danseuse Anita Ratnam in her introduction to the performance of Gita-An Imagery an inter-cultural collaborative performance held on 6 and 7 December, 1995, and jointly presented by Arangham Trust, Koothu-p-pattarai, Brahaddhvani of Madras and Kalakshetra of Manipur with support from South Zonal Cultural Centre. They could not have done better than choosing Gita as the content of the programme. Besides imagery, Gita offers quite spontaneously all the metaphors one can look for. The

richness of Gita, among other things, is due to a philosophical interlude in a battlefield where the outcome would be a defeat either way. Director H. Kanhailal, without naming its parallels in the modern context, had worked for a tapestry of allusions. In Gita Arjuna was not one but several-a pointer to the complexity of the situation where the dividing line between the individual and the collective was a constant blur.

But this does not mean that Gita was a reworked interpretation that set out to make the viewer look at the world differently. Gita was to be seen not so much for its conceptual reorientation as for its arrangement of various elements. For, despite the piecing together of Carnatic music, Koothu-a dominant folk art of Tamil Nadu-and Manipuri theatre, at its best it was a polyphonic discourse in which different music and acting styles coexisted. Ever opposed to the idea of homogenization of cultures, Kanhailal perhaps faced the biggest test of his long career in Gita where he had to constantly satisfy the art forms of different cultures. He gave them equal time, maintained their individual pace, and allowed Tamil and Manipuri texts to flow of their own accord. In this he was assisted by the actors and musicians. But there were imbalances in the theatrical realization of such efforts. Before we begin to analyse them, we should be reminded that the performance of Gita was not due to cultural influence or cross-fertilisation of different art forms. It was a willed design, a conscious idea by a few well-meaning individuals.

A seminar held in August 1995 played a key role in shaping that will. But according to N. Muthuswamy of Koothu-p-pattarai he had been nurturing such an idea even as far back as the early 80s when Kanhailal's Pebet delighted Madras audiences in the same Museum Theatre where Gita was played. When ideas could be coupled with resources, the result was Gita One of the earlier attempts elsewhere that crosses our mind was Peter Brook's Mahabharata But Brooks fortunately limited himself to a few things. Kanhailal overtook him not on one but on several counts.

Kanhailal's theatre, like Koothu, is actor oriented. In both the actor is sovereign. If Kanhailal's theatre had developed its excellence by going to the roots of its Manipuri culture-of which martial arts was an integral part-then Koothu-p-pattarai, under the guiding spirit of N. Muthuswamy, had the rich opportunity to acquaint itself with the main currents of theatre activities elsewhere. But since Koothu was not meant to be played indoors, it suffered in comparison with Manipuri acting, which was measured, non-verbal and adapted itself easily to the proscenium-When Madhu Debbarma and Tomba froze with a stare before Viswaroopa, it

was as if witnessing another world. Sabitri, one of the best talents of Indian theatre, toned herself down to suit the different acting styles. Java Kumar and Palani wove Manipuri and Koothu music effortlessly into their respective roles. But Carnatic music, a great art by itself, had never been part of theatre experience. Dr. K. S. Subramaniam of Brahaddhvani, in an effort to make Carnatic ' music a backdrop in theatre, humbled its magnitude.

Kanhailal must have sensed that a fusion of these elements would have been disastrous and hence chose to retain them with very little intervention. It was a clever decision, but obviously it did not bear the stamp of the artist. In spite of the honest intentions of the organizers, the experiment was a bold failure-a failure without a precedent and hence to be taken note of for similar exercises in future. 'I am beginning to understand Koothu,' said Kanhailal on the last day of the performance. We are told that an exchange programme to take Koothu actors to Manipur and Kalakshetra actors to Pttrisai village to acquaint them with one another's cultures is being contemplated. Once that is achieved it may surely be the true beginning of spontaneous interaction.

Amshan Kumar

The Cultural Movement in Digambarpur



Jana Sanskriti (Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed), Digambarpur, is one of Jana Sanskriti's oldest teams. Digambarpur is situated in the deltaic region of West Bengal and the members of this team belong to landless agricultural families. But their poverty has never come in the way of their commitment to the cultural movement. As their families depend on the daily wages brought in by them, they cannot afford to devote the whole day to rehearsals and campaigns, so they work all night and all morning to make time for theatre in the evenings. One year ago this team came up with Mukta Mancha (literally, open stage), a project which seemed very ambitious at first but is slowly becoming a reality now.

The plan was as follows: the Mukta Mancha was to be situated in Digambarpur village of Pathar Pratima block, South 24 Parghanas. It was to be a hexagonal platform covering an area of about 1000 square feet, with pillars on the circumference, supporting a thatched roof. It was to have two rooms on one side. This Mukta Mancha would be the venue of a performance by local theatre teams and folk artists once a month. The rest of the time it would be used for rehearsals and workshops by jana Sanskriti, as well as other local groups. The rooms would be used as adult education centres as well as a store for props, costumes and musical instruments.

The Digambarpur boys were told that Jana Sanskriti would not be able to mobilize any funds for Mukta Mancha. Refusing to get disheartened, they have managed to raise almost half of the money needed over the last one year. They have done this by campaigning intensively in the region, putting up plays, talking to people about the necessity of a healthy cultural environment. The response has been overwhelming-those who have nothing else to give have come forward with half a kilo of paddy as their contribution. Every household in this village has donated bamboo-, and straw, small shopkeepers and businessmen have given bags of cement. One family (two members of which are very active in Jana Sanskriti) has donated some land. In addition, each member of Jana Sanskriti has contributed two days' wages every month for the last one year and will go on doing so for the next few months. The foundation for Mukta Mancha has been laid and the pillars are about six feet high now. Such a Cultural centre, built with the sweat and labour of the rural poor, will be the first of its kind in rural Bengal.

There is a definite reason why villagers have been so forthcoming with their donations. These boys had launched a very effective anti-alcohol campaign some time ago. They had put up plays in every village on this issue-as a result most of the villagers have got involved in this movement against the sale and consumption of liquor. The members of Jana Sanskriti were very

active and joined the villagers in raiding the liquor shops. It is also noteworthy that a number of these boys have married without dowry and have stopped attending marriages where dowry is given. Therefore this group of boys and girls have earned a place of respect in the eyes of the poor people in this area.

The whole Mukta Mancha effort can be seen as a concrete manifestation of the cultural movement that is taking place in Digambarpur. Another manifestation is the hugely popular Masanta Parab (literally, end-of-month festival). Started six months ago at the initiative of a group of young boys, it has already become a parab (festive occasion) looked forward to by the young and old alike. On the last Friday of every month (by the Bengali calendar), the whole village gathers in front of the school building and, on a temporary stage, a series of cultural items are held. The performers are sometimes young teenager-, who have just begun to learn music, at other times they are enthusiastic youth from a nearby village who put up a dramatized version of a well known short story. At still other times, folk artists from other districts are invited (through Jana Sanskriti) to perform. There is a conscious rejection of the current form of Jatra and Gaajan (these are rich folk forms which have been reduced to vulgar imitations of Hindi films) and the omnipresent video shows.

For the last four months the whole event has been organized by a 17 member Masanta Parab Committee. This committee comprises persons from two factions which have been at work for the last twenty-five years. Both factions have been gracious enough to acknowledge the fact that this new effort at improving society through cultural activity has really succeeded in uniting the village. The women of the village finish their work early and send their children to the venue of the *Parab* with mats to reserve places; the husbands of some of Jana Sanskriti's women members work all day to build a temporary stage for the *Parab*; Narayan Master, the old headmaster of the school, stays awake till 2 a.m. on the night of every *Parab*, helping the boys to wind up the stage, mikes and lights at the end of the show: all these are sights which remain engraved on one's mind, retaining the crying need for and success of this particular movement. At a time when religious and political fundamentalist forces are disintegrating the togetherness of the masses to serve their own interests, the success of the *Masanta Parab* highlights the heartfelt desire of the people. In this context, it may be mentioned that Jana Sanskriti has started five such centres in other districts of West Bengal.

Objectively speaking, there are perhaps two major factors responsible for this phenomenon. One is the existence of a group of committed young boys and girls who have grown up under the watchful eye of elders who have sometimes encouraged them to organize cultural events. The second is the intervention by Jana Sanskriti about seven years ago- though the youth of this village have been accustomed to some amount of voluntary activity, Jana Sanskriti's ideas and activities opened up a whole new vista to them. The opportunity to express their own problems economic as well as personal- to reach out to fellow human beings through theatre, to receive so much warmth and affection from others, have created a new dream. This spurs them forward, in spite of extreme poverty and the burden of family responsibilities, to strive to sow the seeds of a new society.

Sanjoy Ganguly

Notebook

Theatre India Limited was formed on 27 November 1995- the day on which the proscenium theatre tradition of Bengal completed its 200 years. This newly formed organization committed to furthering 'the cause of theatre, dance and music and the persons involved in these arts' has drawn up a very promising programme. The organization's forthcoming events will include a programme on children's puppet theatre, a national festival of street theatre, a festival of folk theatre and various programmes of dance and music. Recently, on 8 and 9 February, Theatre India presented a two day retrospective of plays by Badal Sircar which has drawn considerable enthusiasm from the audience. Sircar himself appeared in the first play of the retrospective *Nagirti Kanyar Kahini*. The Badal Sircar retrospective was followed by a presentation of two celebrated Bengali plays: *Madhab Malnchi Kainya*, produced by Anya Theatre and directed by Bibhas Chakraborty, and *Jngarmath*, produced by Chetana and directed by Arun Mukherjee.

Asmita of New Delhi came into existence in February 1993. With its limited resources Asmita has conducted many workshops on speech, body movements, yoga, mime and acting by inviting different experts in the field for the benefit of its members. The group is committed to taking up 'themes relevant to our social, cultural, economic and political times' and has achieved 100 shows altogether last year. Among its most successful plays are Bhishma Sahani's *Hanooslr*, Albert Camus' *CaliQula*, Girish Karnad's *Tuglrlaq* and

Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* Its most recent production is Girish Karnad's *Rakt Kalyan* translated by Ram Gopal Bajaj and directed by Arvind Gaur. Written in 1989 against the backdrop of the Mandir-Mandal conflict, the drama 'draws parallels between the socio-religious, political and economic conditions of existing times and Southern India in 12th century A. D. during the Bhakti movement.'

Groups and Organizations

After running training workshops for some years, The Artistes' Repertory Theatre-Youth was established in Bangalore in the summer of 1994. Its membership is open to youth between the ages of 13 and 22 years. The language used is English but emphasis is laid on Indian lifestyles of all kinds. Dramatic skills are taught, and although one production a year is scheduled, all activities do not necessarily culminate in a public performance. The aim is to not only teach theatre skills, but also provide an outlet for the city's youth to express

Abhinaya Theatre Research Centre has dedicated itself to working with the physically handicapped, street singers, nomadic performers and even with ex-prisoners. Abhinaya wants to do theatre with those whom the society considers social outcasts, and the group aspires to create a 'theatre of waste', as they call it. Recently Abhinaya Theatre Research Centre invited eight amateur theatre groups of Kerala to take part in a festival of 'Meaningful Theatre'. Among the plays were *Poranaadi* produced by Sopanam and written and directed by K. N. Panikkar, *Iruvattam Manavatti* produced by R. L. V. Natakavedi and directed by Ramesh Varma, Theatre Eye's *Hattamala Nattinapuram* directed by P. G. Surjith, Bhasabheri's *Karnabharam* directed by Chandrahasan, Visudha Natakasanghom's *Ttirumbi Vnnthnan Thantpi* directed by Nooranad Suku, A. S. Smaraka Kalavedi's *Kodumkattu* directed by Maya Thongberg, Centre for Performing Arts' *King Lear* directed by Joseph Antony and Rangadharmi's *Antigone* directed by S. Thampi.

Though Yavnika Theatre Group has been registered only recently it has a long history of producing plays in different parts of the country. In the last twenty-five years Yavnika has successfully staged nearly 100 shows of very eminent plays such as *Panchhi AiseAnte Haiti* by Vijay Tendulkar, *Pagla Ghora* by Badal Sircar, *Adhe Adhtrre* by Mohan Rakesh and two adaptations of Moliere plays-*Beezvion Kn Mndnrnsn* and *Kanawa Chalaa Hans Ki Cltaal*. The group's latest production is *Andhon Ka Haathi*, a political satire written by Sarad Joshi, who uses the well known parable of four blind men trying to describe an elephant to comment on the

contemporary socio-political situation. The play is directed by veteran actor/director Sewak Nayyar. Yavnika's members are mostly drawn from the defence services. Its head office is at Chandigarh, with branches in Dehradun and Jammu. Yavnika is pledged to the promotion of the cause of theatre, particularly in the north-western parts of the country.

Theatre Living Laboratory (TLL), headed by Prabir Guha, organized a week-long workshop on the Chhau dance of Purulia from May 10 to 17. Members of Alternative Living Theatre and Swapaksha Sanskriti participated in this residential training workshop held in the former's training centre, Akhra, at Madhyamgram. Guru Dhananjay Kumar, Bhutnath and Phalari Mahato were the main trainers. The participants learnt dances like *Maltishastrnmardini*, *Abhimanyu badh* etc. on the one hand and experimented with techniques to use these dance forms and martial arts in acting on the other. TLL plans to hold regular workshops on the Seraikella Chhau, Kathakali, Kalaripayyat, Tai-chi, and Thang-ta. TLL is also building up a reference library for their theatre research centre, Akhra, in Madhyamgram, for the benefit of theatre workers belonging to the group and also for trainees who come from different districts of West Bengal as well as from neighbouring states to participate in the workshops and training programmes conducted by TLL. The library already has a collection of over 500 books on theatre, sociology, anthropology and other arts. TLL appeals to the readers of STQ to donate books on theatre and allied subjects. All correspondence should be addressed to: Theatre Living Laboratory, Anandalok, Jessore Road, Madhyamgram, 24 PGS (N), West Bengal 743 275

Festivals

Samanantar of Allahabad held 'a festival of plays on human values' between 31 December and 4 January. The three plays included in the festival were Vibhanshu Vaibhav's *Manthnn*, Howard Fast's *Spartacus* and Swadesh Deepak's *Court Martial*. The plays were conceived and directed by A. R. Bhowmick.

The Eastern Theatre Festival organized by Natyabhumi-Tripura, in collaboration with All India Radio, Agartala, was held at the Rabindra Sanskriti Bhavan auditorium, Agartala, from 25 to 29 March. The festival was dedicated to the memory of Chandan Sengupta, an eminent theatre personality who died recently. The festival was inaugurated by the eminent light designer Tapas Sen. Three local groups took part in the festival: Tiwari of Agartala with their production *Khurnlmi*, based on a tribal folk tale, adapted and directed by Ruhi Debbarma, Kushilab of

Khowai with their Bengali play *Ratyqchvr* written the late Chandan Sengupta and directed by Bikram Das and Natyabhumi, the organisers, with their production *Sonar Horin*, also written by Chandan Sengupta and directed by Sanjay Kar. Other groups which came from outside were Dasharupak from Silchar, Choopkatha from Calcutta, and Natyam from Guwahati.

Dasharupak presented two plays, *Bhit* (Bengali) and *Aaijo Andhnir* (Sylheti), both written and directed by Chitra Bhanu Bhowmik. Choopkatha presented *Tnklmn Bikel* (Bengali), which was adapted from Alexi Arbuzov's *The Old World* by Mohit Mukhopadhyay and directed by Ashit Mukhopadhyay. Natyam presented two experimental plays, *Bhno* and *Snbita* (Assamese), written and directed by Niranjana Bhuyan.

Productions

Tara, a play written by Mahesh Dattani, is to be published by Ravi Dayal, New Delhi. *Tnra* has already received critical and popular acclaim in Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta through Theatre Group Bombay's production, directed by Alyque Padamsee. The release of the book coincides with a series of performances of the play produced by The Artistes' Repertory Theatre and directed by Arundhuti Raja.

Dramatics has been an integral part of the

curriculum of the Doon School, Dehra Dun, for a long time and recently the school celebrated its diamond jubilee with a production of Asghar Wajahat's play *Jis Laliore ni Vekhya* directed by Mohammed Hammad Farooqui. 'In today's grim and violent communal situation, what is needed is perhaps an objective look at the situation and happenings around us,- explains Farooqui. *Lahore* is set against the background of the Partition of India. The play was held at Sri Ram Centre, New Delhi, on 5 December, 1995. It was a charity show for the Superana Charitable Trust.

Awishkar, Bombay, in memory of Arwind Deshpande, founder-member of group, presented 'poem-plays' on the works of eminent poet Narayan Surve on 3 January at New Municipal School, Mahim. These were designed and directed by Jayadev Hattangady and produced by Arun Kakade.

Darpan of Kanpur's production *Kaat ki Gndi* is a play that deals with a rarely discussed subject-the mental agony of leprosy patients. For playwright Tripurari Sharma and director Susheela Vernekar *Kaat ki Gadi* is a significant depiction of the plight of leprosy patients in a

country like India, where victims are treated as untouchables and social outcasts. The play was presented at a festival held in Lucknow in January 1996, dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi and organized by the Department of Culture, Government of Uttar Pradesh.

Theatre and Television Associates of New Delhi presented two plays, *Judith* and *Scenes from art Execution* written by the British playwright Howard Barker and directed by Zuleikha Allana who is a graduate of Bennington College, USA. The shows were on 3, 4 and 5 February at Sriram Centre Basement Theatre. The two productions are part of a multi-cultural project and *the cast consists* of Indian and American actors playing together in the English language. 'The purpose of such an interaction is to create a contemporary theatre derived from a global environment, sharing the richness of different cultures, as part of a unified concept, without standardizing it into a faceless or a singular culture.'

Seminars and Workshops

A four day residential workshop on Street Theatre was organized between 21-24 December by Grassroot Communications, a development support media organization of Bombay. The objective of the workshop was 'to understand the cultural and political background of street theatre, its use as a form of protest and as also a highly effective communication tool for expression and awareness ... to understand the scope and possibilities of street theatre as part of an organisation's media plan and need of proper orientation and training to set-up an effective street theatre group.'

A national seminar on Theatre for Awareness was organized at Konarak by Natya Chetana of Bhubaneswar between 26-29 March. The seminar was attended by various theatre groups and some NGOs who have found theatre a useful tool, from different states of India and neighbouring countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka and Hong Kong. The seminar provided a unique opportunity to share and exchange ideas and experiences, discuss and debate on ideological issues relating to theatre practice, and explore the possibilities of forming a network. Two international networks, SATCO and IDEA, were represented by Govind Singh Rawat and Mrs Maia Van Bakelen respectively.

British Council International New Playwriting Awards 1996 The British Council's Drama and Dance Department in London is launching The British Council International New Playwriting Awards with two leading theatres specializing in new writing: the Royal Court

Theatre, London (Artistic Director, Stephen Daldry), and the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh (Artistic Director, Ian Brown). The Awards are being launched in close consultation with the BBC World Service whose successful Playwriting Competition for radio drama has inspired the British Council to launch its own project. Leading British playwright Harold Pinter has agreed to be the Patron of the Awards and will take part in a presentation ceremony in London in the Autumn of 1996.

The Awards are open to any writer who is not normally resident in the United Kingdom. Last dates for submission of scripts for the regional contest is 30th June, 1996. Shortlisted scripts will be forwarded to London in time for the final judging scheduled for 30 September 1996. All winners of the British Council International New Playwriting Awards and the Regional New Playwriting Awards will be invited on an expense-paid visit to Britain. Awards are offered for an original stage play lasting at least 75 minutes on any subject. The play should have not less than 2 characters and should be capable of being staged by not more than 10 actors. No individual may submit more than one play. Entry forms are available from any of the British Council offices in India.

Books on Theatre from Books & Books and Anamika Kala
Sangam

*Ratan Parimoo and Indramohan Sharma (ed) Creative Arts in Contemporary India
(2 volumes) Books & Books*

Based mostly on papers presented in a national seminar on Comparative Aesthetics and Criticism of the Contemporary Arts held in the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in 1991, this two volume publication seeks to 'serve as an exhaustive reference book for the new realisation regarding the modern growth of India as a nation covering in particular the area of culture.' The two volumes try to span a rather vast area that item-wise covers theatre, cinema, literature, dance, architecture, music and the visual/plastic arts, and thematically ranges from theoretical explorations into the movement from the colonial to the modern in India to evaluations of contemporary activities in the areas mentioned. Considering the multi-faceted cultural scenario in India and the number of different directions into which post-1947 endeavours in the cultural fields have moved, it is possibly understandable why the areas

covered sometimes hang loose and sometimes leave huge gaps in terms of temporality. But at the same time, it is the expanse that allows a number of brilliant articles on wide-ranging intellectual issues of contemporary cultural practices to be combined with interviews of and articles by performers themselves.

The two volumes consist of nine sections, the first of which deals with the movement-in-sociological terms-from the colonial to the modern in the cultural fields. It starts with a long discussion with film maker Shyam Benegal, held in the Center for Psychological Studies in Chicago, U.S.A, on his televising the *Discovery of India (Bharat Ek Khoj)*. Other items included here are a thoroughly discursive critique of contemporary anthropological writing by Alexander Henn, and two articles on the notion of modernity in India. One misses a few more serious explorations into the construction of the colonial/ post-colonial on the one hand and traditional/ modern on the other.

The second section concerns itself with criticality and deals with both theoretical and methodological questions in the field of the arts. There are some rather interesting articles here, though one misses pieces by actual performers and other creative artists-whose practical experience with criticality would have provided an interesting point of contrast with the academic discourses.

The third section seeks to assess literature which naturally leaves one dissatisfied with all the gaps that are bound to be there, given the rather unmanageable diversity and extent that Indian literature presents. This, however, should not be taken to be a comment on the articles that have been included.

Parts four and five deal with theatre and film respectively and again one can quite easily raise questions about why certain areas and issues have not been addressed at all. The section on dance is comparatively more exhaustive and most of the articles hang together better than in the sections so far talked about. However, apart from an article on the transformation of the *chhan* dance tradition, any reference to folk dance practices is conspicuously absent.

The seventh section on music is again rather problematic as it remains unclear from the choice of articles as to what really is in focus here. What is definitely *not* in focus are the multifarious folk musical traditions of the country and their transformations.

Part eight deals with architecture and has only two articles, one of them being a serious and interesting enquiry into the objective of architecture. What one might wonder about is, why architecture should be included at all in a book dealing with the creative arts. If it has to be, then of course it remains questionable as to why more serious investigations into the types, objectives and shifts of architecture in colonial to modern India are absent.

The last part deals with the visual/plastic arts and combines theoretical explorations into the Indian stiltipn traditions with narratives about contemporary movement-, in these fields. But then, as far as the visLial/plastic arts are concerned, there have been a wide variety of experiments and movements in different fields-if one's span is colonial India to today. It may be too much to expect that all of that could be collectively covered hi just one section of a two-volume book, but a little more comprehensiveness could possibly have been achieved with a little more serious editorial probing.

What one misses most is the almost total absence of photographs, without which quite a bit of what is being talked about is lost to the reader. However, the book provides some kind of a glossary of events dealing with the development of the creative arts in modern India and that is helpful for ready reference.

Binaal Mukherjee, Dr. Sunil Kothari, Ananda Lal & Chidananda Dasgupta (ed)

Rasa : The Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty Five Years

(2 Volumes) Anamika Kala Sangam

A similar effort, but much more limited in both area and time spanned, and better coordinated and more comprehensive as a result. Only the names of the editors for the four sections of the two volumes have been mentioned, but the set is really the joint efforts of an editorial board headed by Dr. Pabitra Sarkar. As he mentions quite rightly in his Celebrating A Period at the very outset of the book, 'I do not think such a collection, in which quite a few major performing artistes and critics of their arts look back at the last twenty years and beyond, of the performing arts scene in India, with fond as well as critical concern, needs any elaborate justification.' What does demand definite mention is that the two volumes, suffused with enough photographs to leave no room for complaint in that direction, successfully

blends serious discourses by performers and critics to present to the interested reader an extensive picture of happenings in the performing arts scene over the last few decades.

The first of the two volumes deals with music, edited by Bimal Mukherjee, and dance, with Dr. Sunil Kothari as editor. In the section on music, a wide range of articles by eminent scholars /performers look with critical concern at the Indian classical music tradition-vocal and instrumental, western classical music in India, ghazals, contemporary compositions, Tagore songs and classical music on television. Experiments with Indo-Western fusion in both classical and 'modern' compositions have also been dealt with. Of definite interest is an article by Satyajit Ray on Rabindra Sangeet. However, Indian classical music has received comparatively better coverage than contemporary efforts. The only item that one could find missing in connection with classical music is an article on accompanists of classical performers on sarengi, esraj, harmonium etc. Folk music and its transformation, if any, has unfortunately remained almost untouched. Another area conspicuous by its absence is the entire genre of what is commonly called 'mass songs', that is political songs, which have seen significant changes within the time frame covered-particularly in the wake of the Naxalite movement in the late sixties and feminist movements in more recent years. Salil Chowdhury's article focusing on compositions of the forties and the fifties leaves these songs untouched. Some coverage of film music and its transformation, which is not separately covered in the section on cinema, would also be welcome.

As the editor of the section on dance says in his comments, it is the 'voice' of the artistes themselves that makes this volume distinctive. It is definitely a treat for serious dance enthusiasts of any sort to have so many renowned performers discuss their perceptions, aims, achievements and failures in the first person. We know them as performers and it is a bonus to know their own thoughts on the medium in which they excel.

This section, again, brings together quite a wide ranging variety of articles dealing with different classical dance traditions of India, experimentations and transformations in them, and other contemporary efforts including use of Rabundranath's dance-dramas to express presentday thoughts and perspectives. Intercultural experimentations and dance in Indian cinema have also been dealt with. But in this volume also, folk dance traditions and their metamorphoses have received much less weightage and it is only two versions of chhau that

have received serious attention. It is a trifle strange that both the publications discussed here carry the same article on Purulia chhau by Prakriti Kashyap.

The second volume begins with theatre and is edited by Dr Ananda Lal. This is possibly the most exhaustive section in the set, spanning governmental policy, folk theatre and contemporary endeavours both from the performative aspect and the theoretical-methodological aspect. Theatre music, theatre training, dance in theatre, stage, sets, translation and adaptation, theatre research-almost anything one can think of with connection with theatre has been dealt with at length. Special credit is due to the effort to look at the theatre scene of different Indian states. However, one does miss a serious probe into the role and profile of women in theatre, at least one article on the IPTA and some portrayal of mime theatre.

Edited by Chidananda Dasgupta, the final section on cinema is also quite exhaustive and is also specially mentionable for its look at the films of different Indian states. While Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Marathi and Southern Indian cinema have been discussed separately, there is an interesting article entitled 'Representation of Minorities in Mainstream Hindi Cinema'. It is only Gujarati and Bhojpuri cinema that one might miss in this list. Images of women, short films, the film society movement-all of these have received due attention. Dance in Indian cinema has been covered in the dance section, but-as already mentioned-music in Indian cinema has not been presented by itself in either the music section or this one. The only thing that a serious reader might miss in this section is some coverage of the technicians who are always the workers behind the scene in films.

