

## Sculpting a Play Sudhanva Deshpande



Mala Hashmi as Dadi ( grandmother)

It happens inevitably. Whenever I mention that a play has been improvised, people tend to imagine that it is improvised *in performance* and they cannot believe that, because what they have seen seems like the performance of a fully-finished *text*. Even after I explain that 'improvisation' is only the technique one has used to evolve the play, a feeling of slight disbelief persists. It may have to do with the fact that the word 'improvisation', along with its near cousin 'impromptu', carries connotations of something unplanned, unstructured, unorganized. Improvisations are, of course, all that, also pretty often chaotic, but it is possible to use this chaos to evolve texts. Through the maze of confusion, through the pulls and pressures every actor and director exerts on nebulous, barely-visible ideas, through false starts, speed-breakers, and dead

ends, through all this it is yet possible to create texts that are complex, multi-layered, sophisticated, and dramatic. I say this on the evidence of two plays that Jana Natya Manch (Janam) evolved in 1995, *Artanaad* ('A Cry of Anguish', a play on child sexual abuse) and *Andhera Aftaab Mangega* ('Darkness Will Beget the Dawn', in rough translation; a play on the lives of the working class in Delhi).

I describe below the process we used to evolve *Andhera*. (I do realize, of course, that 'improvisation' has become something of a catchword in theatre, nearly a fashion, especially since the 1960s: everybody seems to be improvising. But that doesn't mean that the technique has lost all relevance, and in any case the uniqueness of an experience is not the only



I lit 'new' worker Shakeel as Badal

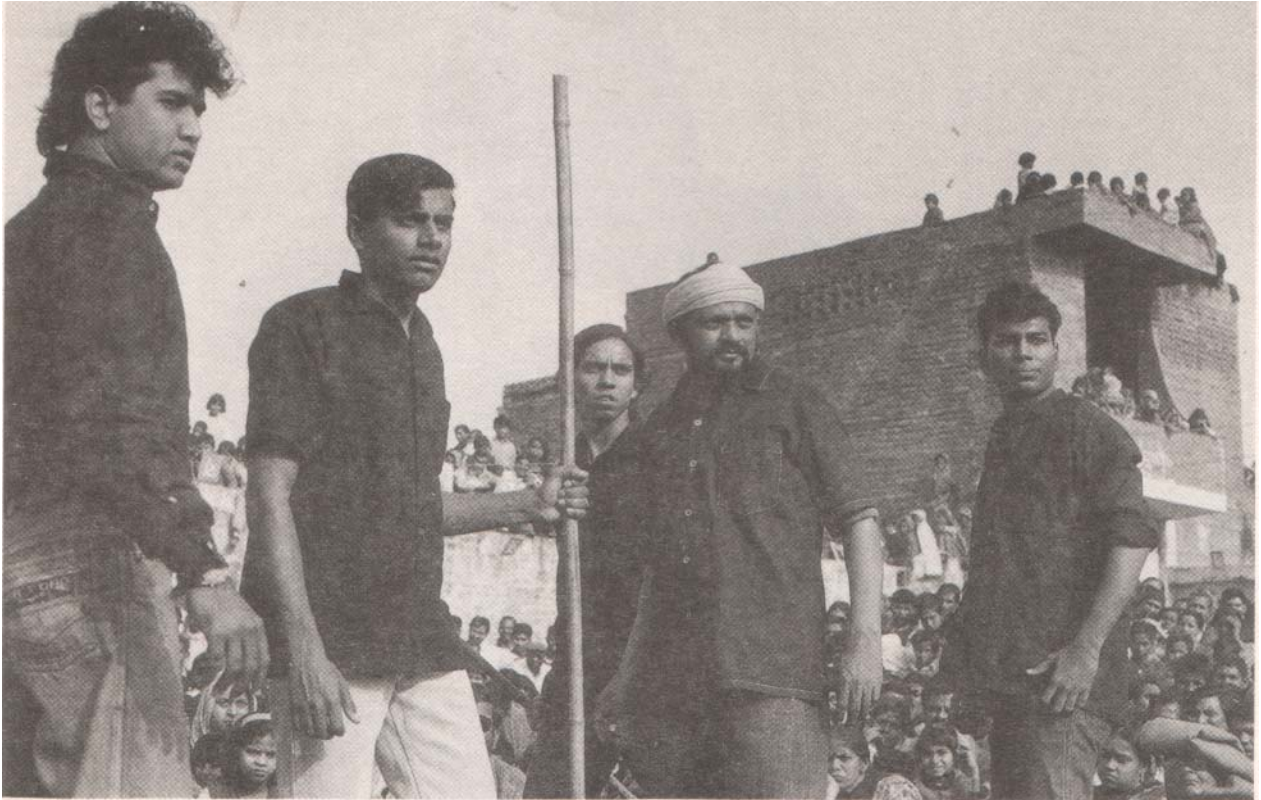
becomes a 'soft' one when dealing with capital and a 'hard' one when dealing with labour. In more human terms, this means that more and more modernization in the lives of the top ten per cent has an underside, more and more primitive methods of exploitation of the remaining ninety per cent.

This was the reality we were to somehow capture in a 30-40 minute street play which, incidentally, I was to direct.

Our Balwant improvisations had not yielded a play, but when, in the summer of 95, we decided to do a play on child sexual abuse, improvisations had produced a play. Actually, *Artannad* was not entirely evolved from improvisations. We had started out with two scripts

which were really first drafts, sort of proto-scripts, both very different in form and content. We then started improvising using one of those scripts as a take-off point to build scenes, so that the play, in the end, was very different from the original proto-scripts. Even so, in the beginning we did have a take-off point and that was important, because the actors could see the potential points of interest as well as the problem areas to be avoided or overcome. Also, working with a text meant that no matter how much you changed it during improvisations, what tended to emerge in the end, with directorial polish, also assumed the form of a finished *text*; only, the text existed in actor's memories rather than on paper. Actors adhere to this text and the only improvisations that occur are the kinds that accompany the repeated performance of any dramatic text. The *Artanaad* experience had been pretty rich and the play has done very well (for its richness of characterizations and the complexity of its arguments, it remains a personal favourite for me), so it was natural that we decided to try similar methods for *Andhera*.

Before actual rehearsals began, we invited two of our trade union comrades (from CITU), both of whom have risen from the ranks of workers to positions of leadership, to talk to us about their personal experiences. *Andhera*, we had decided, would chronicle the beginning and birth of struggle, rather than its development and culmination. This was I think a logical focus to choose after what we had seen in the zone and elsewhere that in the political, economic, and ideological realities of liberalization, it is becoming increasingly difficult to simply organize labourers in unions. There exist several constraints to the growth of a radical working-class movement, and these constraints are built into the structure of things in the zone-the business of identity cards, and so on. But what you see in the zone is only the starkest form of a much wider process in operation



*The workers decide to Make a window*

all over India. Take, for instance, the contract labour system which is widely in use in Delhi. Legally an enterprise cannot be called a factory unless it employs a certain minimum number of workers. Now, unless an enterprise is legally a 'factory', how do you agitate for the implementation of the Factory Act and labour laws? Factory owners forever want to bypass these laws, and they do this by showing less than the requisite number of workers on their rolls and employ the rest on contract. Thus, they pay much less wage to one section of the workers, those on contract, and create an artificial divide between workers, making their unionization more difficult. Many more such examples can be cited.

Our questions to our comrades fell into two broad categories. One, there were questions regarding the experience of being a worker-what it means to actually work inside a factory, how employers and supervisors behave with workers, how workers unwind after work, and so on. Two, there were questions about actual instances of struggle-how struggles begin, how unions are actually formed, the kind of role various unions play, what employers do when faced with struggle, and so on. Without these two sessions with our comrades, I can safely say, *Andhera* would not have happened. All the raw material for the play originally came from here.

Listening to anecdotes, however, is simply done; making a play, as any theatre person will vouch, is not.

First day of rehearsal: I reached rehearsal with a blank mind. I had no notion of what to do. After a short routine of warming up exercises, I gave the actors a short, quiet speech, the sum of which was: All right guys, we can do it. I don't know if they believed me, but I didn't. I was nervous, scared. The script is such a wonderful thing-it gives you something to do on the first day; if you can't think of anything else, at least you can get actors to just read it. Without it, what do you do?

As I ended my speech, there appeared, suddenly, the glimmer of first ideas. A worker had died in an accident at work. What happens in the factory? What happens in the *basti*? A young worker proposes to his sweetheart. Two workers, friends, in love with the same girl. A worker has been bashed up by the supervisor and guards. What do other workers do? The corpse of the worker who has died in an accident at work is lying on the *arthi*, about to be taken for cremation. Suddenly, someone says: *Arthi nahin uthegi* ('The corpse will not be taken away').

The improvisations at this stage were completely free, with no directorial guidance. Except that each improvisation was a short one-



*The morkers sec a fellow-worker bring beaten up*

the moment the first mistake was made (like an actor going out of character), or the improvisation became repetitive (the same thing being said or done again and again), I would stop the improvisation, and give the actors another idea to work on. After every 4 or 5 such improvisations, each lasting 2-5 minutes, we would analyse them, very briefly. This kind of work went on for 3-4 days.

It had been different during *Artanaad*. Then, there was no fixed deadline for the play, and we would improvise for as long as 40 minutes at a stretch, ignoring a lot of mistakes that are an inevitable part of improvisations. Here, there was no such luxury. I had given myself six days to have at least one, preferably the first, scene ready. The actors had to be on battle alert all the time.

Within the first couple of days or so, a number of things were becoming clear, though at that stage I probably could not have articulated them very coherently. One, the play could not be located in the zone—a tiny percentage of Delhi workers even know about the zone. Too much time would be wasted just introducing the concept. Two, the protagonists of the play would be

essentially young workers. Three, taking off from there, the play had to be a love story. (Traditionally, most street plays haven't been based on 'plots'; most often, they are a collage of scenes. Even when there are plots, they are taken forward by a sutradhar-like figure or figures. An entirely 'realistic' story, realistically told, is rare.) The love story would also be a private, if somewhat oblique, tribute to Safdar, who began *Halla Bol* with a love story. Four, a death had to be a central happening in the play. I'm not sure why this was so. Probably because most of the death-related improvisations had worked. Also because death can be the most extreme form of exploitation. And last, each scene had to be a short one. That's the only way you can tell any kind of story in 35 minutes.

More ideas. The workers break for tea, except one, who accuses the others of shirking work. One worker, who has reached the limit of endurance, kills the factory owner. A worker is bashed up by other workers. A worker is about to be dismissed by his brash, young employer when the older employer (the younger fellow's parent) steps in, prevents the dismissal, and gives a short lesson on How to Run a Factory.

The juices are now flowing, everybody is getting ideas (only some of which I've sketched here), there's a kind of frenzied air in rehearsals. Characters are emerging. Rough, in bold strokes, but alive. The actors are chewing at them and it



shows in each new improvisation. On day 6 (or thereabout) an actor reads out the first scene of the play that he's written. Three friends, workers, in their late teens or early twenties, are playing something. The girl one of them is in love with is introduced later in the scene. I don't quite remember what happened next. Anyway, we hear this scene and get down to improvising using this as a take-off point. A nice little scene emerges. Badal, Ajju (Ajay) and Vicky (Vikram) are three friends, playing *gulli-danda*, recreating their childhood days. We learn that Vicky, oldest of the three, is employed; Ajju works as and when he can find work; Badal studies, hopes to get a good job and rise up the social ladder. Shalu, daughter of an alcoholic worker, the girl Badal is in love with, appears towards the end of the scene. Just as Badal is about to declare his love for Shalu, he gets news that his father, a worker, has died in an accident in the factory. The scene opens on a note of high energy, has bits of humour, and ends in tragedy. Just the kind of stuff I wanted the play to open with. Exhilaration, wide grins.

The improvisation through which this scene is worked out is different from the earlier ones. This is a *guided* improvisation, in which I intervene all the time. Earlier, I would be outside the acting area, observing. Now, I am inside, guiding. The basic contours of the scene



are in my head, I know the two or three major points of tension I want to create. I am also putting together elements that emerged in various improvisations earlier.

I think the director's role is pretty crucial. In free improvisations, he has to first give (or get others to give) interesting situations to actors for exploration-open-ended situations, but with at least one point of dramatic tension. Usually, I have found situations beginning with this point of tension, or culminating in it. The director has to see which ideas are workable. This can be difficult, though sometimes it is not, and all the director has is his instinct, honed over years of practice. This undeniable quality called instinct is pretty crucial: it's the director's only guard against the deadliest of deadly things in theatre, boredom. In these free improvisations actors create characters; and the director has to weed out the false characters and, often, pick out elements from various characters that can be combined in one. Sometimes, the director has to be firm and assertive as when an actor is determined to take a scene. Along his/her path, not allowing others to contribute, but mostly, his job is that of silent observer and quiet critic. But all the time, he has to ensure that the actors are on their feet, active. He has to constantly throw a hell of a lot of energy at the actors. (SomEver seen Habib Tanvir rehearse?) Above all, the director has to be alert, *very* alert, and pick up even a *hint* of a good idea in improvisation; something that actually happens quite often, and often without the actors even knowing that they have thrown up a good idea. Here the director is much like a photographer on a shoot, snapping up every little bit of interesting thing he sees.

All the stuff thrown up during improvisations forms the raw material from which the final scene is to be constructed. Now, the director has to quickly change gears, working much like a sculptor. Imagine all the ideas, characters, situations, emotions thrown up during various free improvisations as a solid block of stone. The director now has to chip away all that is superfluous, and *shape* the remaining into a coherent whole, into a workable scene. Once the rough scene is ready, the whole group will offer comments and suggestions which again have to be *synthesized* and incorporated into a scene by the director.

Rich, exciting stuff. Seems like a miracle when the first scene finally emerges, like dough turning to bread in an oven. Actually, it's just plain hard work. Lots of it.

Around this time, I had a chat with my brother-in-law, a full-time trade union activist. I told him the basic elements of the play: a love story that looks at both the increasing level of exploitation

that characterize 'liberalization' in the third world, and the cultural effects of liberalization on the working class—the relentless propagation of the myth that you can improve your lot on the basis of individual initiative alone. A play that underlines the humiliation that lies at the root of the living experience of a worker, and also emphasizes that unless workers unite to tackle common problems, their individual lot will never improve. For an hour, we talked about the play, the ideas we were working on, and so on. I had been toying especially with the idea of a scene on the so-called 'performance-linked-wage' scheme, being adopted increasingly in Delhi. This is another effort to increase exploitation, whereby the capitalist sets phenomenally high levels of output as the *minimum* expected from each worker, irrespective of age and normal output both of man and machine. Workers are told that anyone producing over and above his 'optimum' will get 'incentives', helping again to divide workers.

He listened patiently. Then he said, 'Look, the scheme is an effort to *increase* the production and expropriation of surplus value. At the But at the *theoretical* level, they first have to understand what surplus value *itself is*. I think the play will need to be both universal, about capitalism in general, and specific, about Delhi, liberalization, and the 1990s.'

I mulled over this. And things began to fall into place. The characters in the play had to be of the 1990s, yet the play should not be bogged down by taking up specific issues of today (the pension scheme, minimum wage, and so on). It should talk about the experience of being a worker. Above all, it had to have a scene on surplus value. The temptation to re-read Brecht's famous scene where Pavel and his friends explain the concept of surplus value to Plagea Vlassova in *Mother* was great. But I decided not to. The scene had to be our scene, done our way.

The next day, I began rehearsal with a short lecture to the cast on surplus value. It was important that each member of the cast understood the concept. Then improvisations began. We kept at it for about a week (besides also doing other scenes, of course). This was perhaps the most frustrating period of rehearsal. No matter what we did, the scene just wouldn't work. It was far too verbose, preachy. Plain boring. No drama. I had run out of ideas. So had the others. I could feel spirits sagging. This was affecting work on other scenes. In desperation, I wanted to drop this whole damn scene altogether. But by now, not only had we worked on subsequent things assuming that this scene would work, but dropping this scene would also have been a

morale-shatterer. On the other hand, I wondered, is this scene really so crucial, or am I simply being stubborn and mulish, a bit like the captain giving himself one more over and losing the match. I was in a fix, drained of ideas, hating the very thought of rehearsal.

The inevitable happened. We were about to give the scene one more go, and an actor said 'It's no use'. He wasn't talking about only this scene, -but the whole play. Nothing was making sense, the play had no drama, it wasn't even saying anything. I confess I agreed with him.

But I couldn't have said that. Instead, I looked each actor in the eye. It happens, I said. Sometimes, things don't work. That doesn't mean we panic. I am keen to have this scene because it would add to the play. (Truth.) But if it doesn't work, I have 2 or 3 alternatives. (Lie.) Let's try again.

Then Mala (Hashmi) suggested that we actually make something right here, in front of the audience, and get to the surplus value that thing contains. Mala has this ability of thinking simply.

The problem and produces a solution so simple, you wonder why you didn't think of it before. Suddenly the scene was transformed. Theatre itself has this quality of the marvellous, the fantastic, about it, but nothing rivals the marvel of *creating* something, conjuring something, right in full view of the audience. So we decided to make a window in this scene, the same window through which workers see a fellow-worker being beaten up by the supervisor and the guards in the next scene. The window was created using two sticks and cloth bands, it doesn't look like a real window, but this never matters. The act of creation is, by itself, sheer magic.

Simultaneous to the work of individual scenes, ideas about the overall structure of the play were also becoming clear. Let me briefly talk about the songs, their music, characterization, casting and design.

The songs were written on demand. As the story became clearer, points where songs were needed more or less suggested themselves. My overall brief to the songwriters (I am forbidden from naming one of them because, mysteriously, he doesn't want to acknowledge authorship of his three beautiful songs; the other two songs are by Gauhar Raza, Janam member and a fine poet) was to write songs emerging from the situations in the play, but to imagine they were not being sung by the characters, but by us, the actors. The songs should be comments on the action, in a sense outside the play, and should operate at a higher level of

consciousness than that of the characters. Somewhat like Brecht's songs. I had specially *Mother* in mind. For each song, the songwriters asked me for the basic idea, which I gave, usually in one sentence, or sometimes even shorter: 'labour creates value'. I had been re-reading poets like Faiz, Nagarjun, Sarveshwar, Sandburg, and Mayakovsky. But when inspiration came from poetry; it came from poets I had not read recently. For the song from which the title of our play is taken, I remembered Sahir: *zulm bas zulm hai, bndta hai to mit jntn hai.* Or later, Neruda: 'Come and see the blood in the streets.' These songs never appear in the *Andhern* songs, but form the take-off points for them.

These songs were set to tune by Kajal Ghosh (leader of the singing choir, Parcham, Janam member, and professional composer). My brief to Kajal was fairly simply put: fast paced, modern music. Militant and angry. *Nothing* from folk music. Kajal's music for *Andhera* is quite remarkable: it is all of what I asked for, *and* not of whom are not even passable singers, simplicity of compositions is not simply a virtue, it is a necessity.

The characters in *Atulhem* are realistic, and they are played as such. But these characters are essentially social, rather than *psychological* characters. A little bit of psychological make-up is of course essential to bring out the individuality of each character. Yet, this psychological make-up is never allowed to *dominate* the character, for the effort is to place this individuality in a *social* setting. The actions of each character are uniquely his/her, but these actions are played out within an overall framework set by the social location of the character.

Take the superb, finely-etched portrait of the older employer created by Brijesh (Sharma). All I told Brijesh was not to do a stereotype, all-evil kind of job. Brijesh created a man in his early sixties, a capitalist of the older generation who had risen through hard work, but who is also hardnosed enough to use unfair means when required. His use of Punjabi phrases does not caricaturize; rather, it brings to mind memories of the Partition. He is a man who values human relationship, especially with his workers, so long as profits flow uninterrupted. Brijesh is a fine writer (author of our proscenium adaptation of Nagarjun's *Vinur ke Bete*) and he has given himself some marvellous lines. Possibly best of all is this: throughout *Andhera* the older employer addresses his son as '*kutte dn puttara*' (literally, 'son of a dog'). This phrase serves a double function: it is a term of endearment of a still-rustic father, which in turn, endears him to us, the audience; it is simultaneously the father's

irritation at the son turning out to be a brash yuppie. Brijesh's portrayal is full of such details; each detail an aspect of the *social* truth the character personifies; nowhere, however, do the details overwhelm with their psychological minutiae. It is character, to use Simon Callow's superb phrase, viewed in a flash of lightening;-you don't see everything, but what you do see is absolutely true.

The casting, by and large, Suggested itself during improvisations. There is, however, an obvious trap here. If the director doesn't intervene during improvisations, actors tend to pick up roles they are naturally most comfortable with, and they start playing those roles with their older, tried and tested methods. The director has to ensure against this, asking actors during improvisation to take up specific roles, or not to. This was how Bhanu got cast as the employer's son-his baby face and frail figure seemed incongruous With the verbal so only because of his class position.

The design of the play had to be sparse, to aid the pretty fast-moving narrative. But we also needed at least a couple of strong visual elements in the play. Mala devised both, with her characteristic simplicity. One was the window. The other was used to specify the interior of Shalu's house-this was a string going across the acting area, with *parande* (tassels for the hair) hanging from it. The simple-looking prop-or is it the set?-achieves quite a few things: it shows Shalu's source of income; it associates colour with the figure of Shalu; it cuts across the acting area, creating a visual barrier between the earning daughter and her alcoholic father; and it is easy to pack and transport. In this case, in fact, the design largely suggested the details of the scene. Apart from the hair tassels, the younger employer's wind-cheater, and the red flags (towards the end), there is virtually no colour in the play, except black. I decided to have actors wear shirts, instead of our trademark *kurtas* I don't know why, it just seemed more appropriate to dress the 'new' workers in shirts. The poster and card for the occasion also reflected the essential design and mood of the play: single colour, stark lines, and the emblem of militancy bang in the centre.

The last week of rehearsal was agonizing. The basic outline of the play, and of each scene, was ready; the songs were all written and composed; the properties had been designed and were being made. Yet, the whole thing was not making senserather, it wasn't clicking, wasn't falling into place. There was, of course, an awful lot of polishing to be done gestures, dialogues,

movements, emotions had to be honed and polished and shined-which I was getting the actors to do, but *something* was missing. The actors also sensed this and there was a listless sort of feeling often visible. When someone who had dropped in at rehearsal whispered in my ear, 'It's like boiled vegetables without salt', all I could do was to smile helplessly in response. I knew she was right; worse, I knew I was being unable to do anything about it.

This created more problems. The actors forgot their lines more often than was normal, it took incredibly long to work out small details, I was losing my temper at a more-than-usual frequency, the singing was pathetic, movements slothful, gestures tired. Or was I imagining all this? Was it a case of frayed nerves: because I wanted *desperately* for the play to be good, because I could not *imagine* a less-than-good play being performed in memory of *Safdar* at Sahibabad, below my admittedly high expectations unnerved me, made me nervous, made me imagine the very worst? What was *actually* happening? Was the play *really* bad, or was I simply paranoid? I still don't quite know, but at that time, the play tasted like warm beer gone flat for a week.

Then, three days before the actual performance, came the crushing blow. For a few years now, we have been inviting friends over for a kind of preview of every play when it is nearly ready to be performed, usually =1-5 days before the first show. This is actually quite a tricky exercise. Since the play is not yet ready, the audience reaction to the preview can often be misdirected, and, therefore, misleading-that is, very often, they react negatively to things that work very well in final performance, after things have been honed. But they, the audience, don't know that; they quite naturally react to things they see. On the other hand, they also often come up with remarkable insights, and every one of our plays in the last few years have benefitted from this exercise. So *our* job is to really see which reactions are to be taken seriously enough for making changes in the play.

The reaction, this time, was less than lukewarm; just about polite, I would say. Of the 15-20 people present, I think nobody quite liked what they saw. The humour fell flat-normally an excellent indicator of how things were going. Even in serious plays, I have found, if whatever humour there is works, one can take it that the play as a whole is also working. So when I saw the audience wasn't even smiling, my heart sank. Worse was to follow. Two of our very senior comrades, who have spent years in the trade union movement, said the play didn't seem

contemporary, it seemed a play of the early 1970s, when the trade union movement was itself just emerging in Delhi. And they were not reacting to the drama in the play, but to its content, always more difficult, if not impossible, to rectify at a late stage. That's the *end*, I said to myself.

Yet, through the several layers of my desperation, through the enormously dark and heavy feeling that hung over us all, something asserted itself. Mala's cool and rational analysis of the play, though brief, helped dispel my own paranoia. The play seemed 25 years stale, I realized, because the characters seemed as if they had never even heard of a trade Union before. Also, were looking at their factor\ - almost in isolation, as if it existed in a void. The solution to this was so simple I could not at first believe it would work. We had to indicate that a history of trade union struggle, even if largely unsuccessful, now, the problem was to create a context within which the action of the play was taking place. Obviously, we could not have created an entire world outside the play. I figured that if I could create, through references, just one more factory, we could suggest an entire world. Both these ideas already existed in an embryonic form in the play; we simply had to flesh them out. It worked. The play suddenly lost its staleness. And I realized yet again, that often the most seemingly insurmountable problems have a simple solution. If only I could think simply all the time!

If the play could become contemporary, I decided, there was nothing really intrinsically wrong with the drama; it simply had to be done well. And it wasn't even as if the individual performances were not good, the problem lay with the attitude towards the whole play. The actors were playing the scenes like cricket, where after each delivery; the ball is 'out of play'. They needed to play the scenes like football, keeping the ball 'in play', passing it around from one scene to the next. In other words, each scene had to be played in relation to its preceding and following scenes. This seemed a silly sort of realization to me then, because it was so obvious. But I have since discovered that Peter Brook has called this problem the law of falling inflections. So I guess it's a common enough problem, and since even Peter Brook has faced it, I suppose there is no shame in admitting that mere mortals have also occasionally been afflicted by it!

After talking individually to all the actors playing a few of the more important characters about the interconnections between the scenes (that is, about the growth in their characters), there was nothing to be done but to give the actors as many run throughs before

the first show as possible; eventually we could do only four. But I felt more confident and less hassled on the last day and I guess some of this confidence rubbed off on the actors-or was it that everyone realized that this was, quite simply, the last day. Whatever it was, suddenly, in the last-but-one run-through, the whole play *worked*. We were doing this runthrough in the open and sometime, I think in the second scene, a light drizzle began. Irrationally-because Delhi is rather cold on New Year's Eve, especially if you are wet-I remember thinking of the rain as a poetic metaphor of success.,

We first performed *Andhera* on the morning of 1 January 1996, followed by another performance in the evening. At present, in June, the performance in performance. there have also been at least two major changes. Some people who saw the first couple of shows complained that the play was not as complex as they would have liked, and that at points it was lapsing into emotionalism. To counter the latter problem, we have dropped one song-with apologies to Kajal, who had composed a lovely tune for it! We have also added a very short, rather dramatic scene towards the end, which not only makes the storyline more complex, it also looks at the situation from the other side, from the point of view of the older employer. The play has grown.

The really unforgettable moment, however, belongs to our first performance at Sahibabad, the scene of Safdar's martyrdom. Like every previous year, we had an enormous crowd watching us-at least 5,000, maybe more. The vast majority of these were workers, their families, and their children; they had gathered to pay tribute to a man who gave his life performing for them. They watched us in pin-drop silence, except when they burst into laughter or applause. The energy this audience creates is so tremendous, you can touch it.

I mentioned above how we worked out a scene where a window is created by the workers. That scene, I figured, was the lynchpin of the play-if that worked, the play would work. The window scene arrived. The audience loved it, watching it with complete concentration. The atmosphere was crackling, and I realized there was something else they were reacting to as well, which I initially couldn't figure out. Then it suddenly hit me they were reacting to the *metaphorical* meaning of the scene; they realized what it means to create, and open, a *window*. This other, metaphorical, meaning of the play was there all along, like Poe's purloined letter, only I hadn't seen it. Familiarity breeds blindness, I thought, and kicked myself silently.



Yet, I also know that this was a moment of magic, what Peter Brook calls the 'golden fish' that the theatrical net hopes to catch-the very stuff theatre is made of. Or ought to be.

*Photographs of Andhera Aftaab Mangega are by the author*

*An earlier shorter version Of his article is slated to appear in - Hindi translation in Me Janam magazine Nukkad Janam Samvad. Thanks tire due to Molt) yashree Hashmi Brijesh Sharma, arid Brijendar Singh for reading Mat version in part or full and correcting the inevitable lapses of memory and to Raju for typing this article. Thanks also to Nathan Kumar Scott for Iris careful reading aril valuable suggestions*

*“The lines roughly translate as: Oppression is but oppression no sooner does it grow than it is wiped out.*

**Andhera Aftaab Mangega (*Darkness Will Beget the Dawn*)**

Jana Natya Manch

*' Below is n rough working translation from Hindi of n few key scenes front the street play discussed in 'Sculpting n Play.' ] '*

*(The circular acting area is bare. The actors enter and sing the song of blood and dreams*

**This is a story of alleyway sighs**

**This is a story of smoke yearning for the sky**

**This is a story of slums drenched in blood**

**This is a story of death's silent plot**

**This is a story of love's joyous throes**

**This is a story where life changed its course.**

*Exit*

**Scene 1**

*Three friends, Badal Vikram- called Vikky by friends- and Ajay-Ajju-are playing gulli daoda.' All three are in their late teens or early twenties. Badal probably the youngest, is about 18.*

Ajju. Ready?

VIKKY. Yes.

*Ajju strikes the gulli. Badal stops it. He takes aim and hits Ajju's danda. Ajju is out.*

AJJU (to Vikky). His aim is damn good.

BADAL. See? I'm playing today after four years, and still on target, every time.

VIKKY. Stop bragging. It's your turn now.

BADAL. Get ready-the *gulli* is going to go miles.

AJJU. We'll see.

*Badal strikes the gulli. Vikky stops it in mid-air*

BADAL. Why did you stop it?

VIKKY. Oh, so I shouldn't field, right?

*Vicky takes AIM with the gulli. As he throws it, Badal moves the danda a fraction, so that the gulli misses the danda.*

BADAL See? Missed!

AJJU: Why did you move the *danda*?

BADAL. It would have hit my hand. Ajju to Vicky). See-he's cheating. Bloody cheat.

VICKY.(*taking the gulli danda from Badal's hand*). Go on, now play.

BADAL. Vikky, it missed. I swear it did. Upon my mother. *Ajju* But you don't have a mother.

*Badal hurt, is silent. Vikky senses this.*

VIKKY(*good humouredly*). Everyone swears upon their mother. You swear upon your father.

BADAL. Upon my father, it missed.

AJJU. God! Lying after swearing on his father!

VIKKY Shut up, *will you?* (*To Badal*) Come, here's the gulli. Let's play.

*They resume their game. The following conversation takes place while they are playing.*

AJJU. Vikky, what was the racket near your house last night?

VIKKY(*laughs*). Baldy was drunk. He was making a scene.

BADAL. Don't you dare talk like that about Baldy uncle.

VIKKY Why shouldn't I? He's from my village. I'll talk about him any way I choose.

AJJU. (*to Badal*) Anyway, who are you to object? His son-in-law or something?

BADAL I will be, one day.

VIKKY. All right, when you marry Shalu we won't talk like this. But for now ... *(laughs. to Ajju)*  
You know, he was pissed drunk, and was screaming at the top of his voice, 'I'll burn down this bloody factory'-and he was trying to burn his own *jhuggi* ! *Till* Shalu came, scolded him real hard, and Baldy ran right in! *(Vikky and Ajju laugh.)*

BADAL. You guys have no manners at all. Talking like this about elders!

AJJU. That Baldy is really crazy. Since the time his wife ran away, all he does is drink and make scenes.

BADAL. Shut up and play. -

VIKKY Ajju, what's happened at the Rao Saw Mill?

AJJU. You know Ramdin? He was cutting wood at the sawing machine. There was an accident. Half his arm was sawed off. God! You should've seen the blood! How he howled!

VIKKY. What did your union do?

AJJU. They have demanded compensation-20-25,000, I think.

VIKKY I know that union. Bloody frauds. They'll get him 5-7,000, and take away 10 percent commission even from that.

AJJU Shit! The poor chap lost an arm, and all he'll get is 4-5,000 rupees?

BADAL. There you go again, talking about your stupid bloody factories even when you're playing. Can't you talk about anything else?

VIKKY (rhetorically) What else should we talk about?

AJJU. Madhuri Dixit?

BADAL. Yes! Let's talk about Madhuri. What a smile-just like Shalu's.

VIKKY Shalu, Shalu, Shalu! That's all he thinks about. *(Suddenl y)* To hell with Shalu Badal, get your father's new bicycle. We'll go up the hill and pick berries.

BADAL *(excitedly)*. Yeah, let's go.

AJJU. Get the cycle.

BADAL. No, let's walk.

AJJU. Acting pricey.

BADAL (*indignantly*). I'm *not* acting pricey. Tell you what-when I get a job, we'll go oil a motorcycle and pick berries. (*Vikky and Aju laugh*)

VIKKY. Motorcycle! To pick berries! Ever *seen* a motorcycle in your life?

BADAL. I have, and I'll show you too once I get a job.

AJU. A job, he says! I've done nothing but odd jobs all over the place for six months now. No *hope* of a steady job.

VIKKY. *I have* a steady job-but still can't afford even a decent lunch box!

BADAL (*pointing to Aju*). Wants a steady job! Bloody dropout, failed the eighth standard. (To Vikky) Look at you-laughing at him. All you do is stick shoe bottoms! (Now *Aju laughs*) Watch *me*, guys. I'll clear school, then go on to college. After college, I'll get a swanky job in a big company. With my first pay, I'll buy myself a motorcycle. Vim we'll go up the hill to pick berries. Once up, we'll switch off the engine. Yahoo! Down we roll!

*They mime riding n motorcycle and sing the popular Hindi film song 'Yeh dosti hum nahin todenge [We'll never break this friendship]. After a line or two Badal mimes braking the vehicle*

BADAL. I'll stop right at Shalu's door, and say, 'Come, Shalu, my sweetheart'.

VIKKY (*mimicking him*) 'Come, Shalu, my sweetheart!' (Laughs) When he's with her, he can't utter a single word.

Allu (*also laughing*) And she just passes him by!

BADAL. Just wait and see. Once I get my bike, I'll propose to her

VIKKY. Is that so?

BADAL. Of Course.

VIKKY All right. Now (*pointing at Aju*), he's Shalu, okay? Here comes Shalu. Come on, tell her.

*Aju WALKS past, as if he is Shalu Badal tries to say something to him, but cannot. He's tongue-tied Aju and Vikky burst out laughing*

Aju Badal is a *lallu* can't do a damn thing.

BALDY. How can sunlight enter? There's not a single window here.

VIKKY. Then let's make a window.

BALDY Window?

Ajju Window ...

BANKELAL. Window!

*The workers make a window. After it is made, they exult. There is much laughter, happiness.*

BANKELAL. Wow! Great! A window, totally free! You know, if this had been bought in the market, it would have cost a) of 600 rupees!

VIKKY. So who says this window is for free?

BANKELAL. But it is. What have we spent?

VIKKY. OK, look: one, two, three, four, five-five rods, 50 rupees. Then these two horizontal rods, 75 each, that makes 50 plus 150, 200 rupees, OK? Now, suppose there is =10 rupees of bricks, cement, and other material ...

Ajju And what about the cost of tools?

VIKKY. All right, 10 rupees for that. So that makes 40 plus 10-50, and the total cost goes up to 250, right? So a window, that has 250 rupees of stuff in it, is sold in the market for a full 600 rupees! That still leaves 350. Where did this 350 come from? (*Looks around* No one answers This has come from labour.

PRAKASH. What's that?

VIKKY. Look, the raw material this window contains is of less value than the finished window. This extra value that the window now has, this surplus value, is given to it only by the workers' labour.

BANKELAL So what about our wage? You didn't count that.

VIKKY. I will. Suppose our wage for two hours' work is 60 rupees ...

BADAL. No, no. 60 is too little. It should be ... 100.

BANKELAL Yes, 100 is more like it.

VIKKY. All right, our wage is 100 rupees. That still leaves a surplus of 250 rupees. Where did that go?

AJJU (*Laughing*). That went into Vikky's pocket!

VIKKY. No, not mine. It went into the pocket of the father of the son of a dog! (All laugh except *Badal*)

BADAL. Well, why shouldn't it? The factory belongs to him, the machines belong to him. It's quite simple. We sell our labour and he buys it. *All* our labour, all our toil, don't we get well paid for that?

*The workers sing the song of those who created this world.*

*Workers*

Can you ever buy the twinkling of the stars?

Can you name a price for the fragrance of the breeze? Can you ever sell the depth of the seas?

Can you name a price for this lovely universe? Can you quote a price for the creator's hard work? *Badal*

*All* our labour, all our toil, don't we get well paid for that?

*Workers*

Can you fix a price for this body exhausted?

Can you fix a price for this sweat that trickles down? Can you fix a price for the wrinkles above our brows? For the story told by every scar and mark our bodies bear? Can you quote a price for the creator's hard work?

*Badal*

All our labour, all our toil, don't we get well paid for that?

Workers

The labour that goes into the making of everything

The labour that goes into the running of this world

The labour that goes into prices being doubled

Will Tata and Birla ever talk about this labour? Can you quote a price for the creator's hard work?

*Workers*

A day will soon dawn when we ourselves will speak  
We will then decide what labour's price should be  
We will see the rule of those who labour and toil

"A new world order we will create.

Ajju: Workers of the world, unite!

Scene 6

*Badal is alone on the factory floor. He gets back to work. Suddenly, he hears noises, off. The workers are on strike, shouting slogans Badal goes to the window to see what is happening Enter factory owner's son*

SON (*in a rage, shouting at no one in particular*). Bloody bastards! Why isn't anyone working? Where are all the motherfuckers? (*Spots Badal lit in corner near the window.*) Motherfucker! (*Rushes at Badal and starts beating him up. Badal is taken completely by surprise The soil punctures the rest of the scene with blows to Badal.*) Not working, eh? Watching the drama Outside, eh? Up, up, you bastard-get to work. (*Badal obeys. He's pretty badly hurt, can barely walk.*) Your father died, you begged for a job. We gave it to you as charity ... This factory has been here for 20 years. My father's slogged hard to build it. You bastards now want to ... The factory runs because of its, not you ...

BADAL. But sir, I *was* working ...

SON. You dare answer *me* back? (*Hits him again.*)

BADAL. I *was* working, sir. The others ... *they* were fighting. . . disrupting work ... I was being faithful. . . thinking of your interests ...

SON *laughs cynically, angrily*. Say that again.. . *my* interests! (*Hits him*) What are *you*, eh, bloody worm ... *my* interests! No fucking worker has ever thought about the owners' interests, nobody ever will. You bastards could sell your fathers!

Badal (*hurt and angry*). Don't talk about my father, sir, or ...

SON. Or what? What will you do? You dare threaten me, you bloody insect ... you worm ... bastard ... (*hits him*) get out! You're fired! Settle your dues with the supervisor ... Out, motherfucker ... OUT!



*The soil exits. Badal is lying on the ground-hurt, humiliated, angry. The workers sing the song of anger]*

*Workers*

This is what my life is all about Take it, or leave it-it's the truth. This back-breaking toil is all my lot This abuse and turmoil is all my lot Pay-cuts, a few paise, abuses and threats Take it or leave it-it's the truth.

This is what my life is all about Take it, or leave it-it's the truth.

BADAL. How am I to sing about a beautiful life?

*Badal exits.*

*Scene 7*

*Factory owner's house He is ill n rage, scolding Iris son.*

OWNER. Son of a dog! Son of a bloody dog! You couldn't handle the one tin Running a factory is not like playing a bloody video game-you can't just go around smashing bloody brain. Son of a dog!

SON. But Dad, that bastard was being insolent.

OWNER. Look who's talking! Son of a dog. In the entire assembly section, there was one worker, just one bloody worker, who was with its, who wasn't on strike-and you fired him? Son of a dog!

SON. But Dad, weren't you talking about retrenchment? What's wrong if I fired a Worker? OWNER. If you have to fire, fire older workers, the ones with permanent jobs. How could you fire a worker who was against a strike? Son of a dog!

SON. We could call him back.

OWNER. We could call him back-and screw ourselves good and proper. The union's now demanding his reinstatement. So you'll go and call him back. And then you'll lay out tile red carpet for the union as well. Tell you what-why don't you become a union leader? Soil of a dog! Thank your lucky stars that this fellow-Badal-disappeared. If he'd gone back to the union, there'd be a police case against you.

SON (*thinking*). Dad, why don't we file a case against the workers? Not just Badal, but the whole lot?

OWNER. Hey-now you're talking like my son. Ring Lip DCP Singh: I'll talk to him.

*The Son calls up Singh on the cellular phone. When he comes on the line, he hands the phone to his father*

OWNER (*on the phone*). Singh? How are you? Long time since we met.... Write down four names-I want them arrested.... The charge is murderous assault. On my son. Take the names. Vikram, alias Vikky. A known goon. (*In English*) 'Notorious bad character'... Then there's Bankelal. Been with me for years, but has now joined the goons ... Ajay, alias Ajju. Young fellow. And Badal. His father died in that accident in my factory; he's now taking revenge. I want these four arrested. Fast ... (*Laughs*) Yes, it's been a long time-why don't you come over some evening? How about a binge, eh? ... OK, I'll send my son over.

Son. Why don't you also speak to Rao uncle, Dad?

OWNER. Rao? Of Rao Saw Mill? Why?

SON. His workers are also agitating, because that chap-whose arm got chopped off-has died OWNER. Oh? (*On the phone*) Rao? What's this I hear? ... Why did you let that fellow die? YOU should've taken him to a bloody hospital. How could you just let him die, for God's sake? ... Don't be an ass. I'm worried only about agitations ... Yes, we're both in the same Soup. Now listen, you know that fellow Balli-the Labour Minister-call him. Say that tile Industrial Association wants to meet him. Say it's very urgent. We'll meet him over dinner. My place ... Yes, I know. I'll keep the suitcase ready... All right. (*Switches off the phone. To son*) I'll go around to the factories, meet the others. You go and meet Singh.

SON. Should I take the Esteem?

OWNER. No, its AC isn't working. Take the Sierra.

*Both exit.*

*Rough working translation from Sudhanva Deshpande The songs have been rendered into English by Paramita Banerjee*

*Gulli danda* is a common Indian game for boys, played with a wooden stick (the *danda*) slightly longer than a foot and a wooden piece (the *gulli*) resembling a cylinder tapering

off at both ends, about half the size of the stick. Boys make their own *gullis* and *dandas* with whatever spare wood they can lay their hands on, for this toy is never available in shops-probably because it's a game for rural and poor children really. Traditionally, girls are not supposed to play this game.

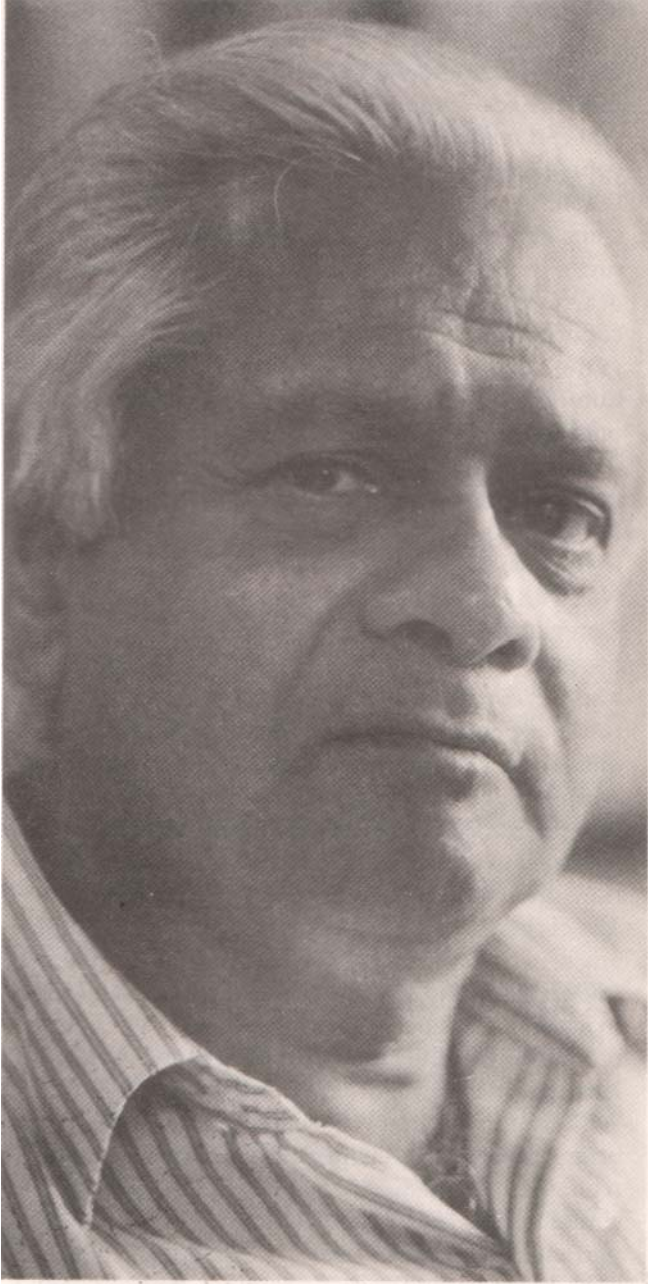
**'I really don't know where theatre ends and life begins'**

**G. P Deshpande**

G. P. Deshpande, veteran Marathi playwright, Marxist intellectual, and professor of Chinese Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, talks to SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY for STQ. The text of the conversation, held in Calcutta in 1994, has been transcribed and edited by Samik Bandyopadhyay, interjections and questions by whom appear in italics within square brackets.

In the last two decades has come the awareness of a sharp division more evident in writing for the theatre than in any other kind of writing, asserting, 'Look, our writing is of a different brand, and shall remain writing -of a different brand from the writing of the usual variety.' I daresay even Dalit writing is not so distant from upper-caste writing in spite of all its proclamations to that effect, as this writing for theatre is from conventional, traditional playwriting. This particular movement is a post-Tendulkar development. Mahesh [Elkunchwar] once put it very neatly; he said that four people were responsible for this, viz. Achyut Vaze, who gave up writing, Mahesh himself, Satish Alekar, and myself. Mahesh's description of the features or marks of this movement would be very different from mine, but essentially I would go along with his formulation. This shift made by the post-Tendulkar generation has not been commented upon or written about seriously. In many ways, this shift has more far-reaching implications than the divide between Dalit and caste writing-that divide is gradually collapsing, for Dalit writing is getting into, I might even say, brahmanical attitudes, of which several Dalit critics are themselves quite aware.

The other thing involved in this shift-or, should we say, the new territory opened up-would be evident in the space defined by Mahesh Elkunchwar as he appears in *Wctda Clairebandi* and *Atmakatha*. For the Elkunchwar of these plays is so different from the Elkunchwar of the one-acts or *Raktapushp* and *Vasanakand*. Without necessarily putting it into so many words, for he is not inclined to put things in this manner, Elkunchwar is now somewhere raising the question: What is modernity? As Charles Taylor once argued, as there are going to be several avatars of modernity, it will not be enough any longer to defend the principle of modernity vis-a-vis Foucault, Derrida, a la Habermas, but it is also important to realize that these modernities could be



Photograph Naveen Kishore

into this kind of formulation, a play like *Wada Chirebandi* (of which I am not particularly fond, quite honestly I don't like that play) makes some attempt at capturing the local colour that the collapse of feudalism has in a particular locale. Reality here is sometimes internalized, sometimes exteriorized. That interplay between internalization and exteriorization gives that play a special quality; if that play has any worth, it lies there. That kind of an approach is new. Unfortunately it is never produced with that dialectic W mind. I can think only of Satyadev Dubey's production in Delhi which attempted to do it.

Or if you take someone like Alekar, at least in three or four of his plays, there is a use of humour which is very typical of him. Even in the Marathi literary tradition, which humourwise is quite rich in many ways, there is no theatre humour to which you can relate Alekar's humour. There are, of course, non-theatre humourists in Marathi to whom you can relate Alekar, e.g. C.V. Joshi, or to some extent Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar in his prose writings (in contrast to his plays, the humour of which is rather poor). There are some connections that you can see there, but none at all in the kind of humour in Marathi theatre. This humour has sprung from the fact that he is the only one who has so successfully recorded the disintegration and disappearance of the lower middle class, as we have commonly come to understand this term. The people who used to live in the various *peths* in Pune, in Sadashiv Peth and Narayan Peth and so on, or in older Bombay in Goregaon, they formed the lower middle class. It has now totally disappeared and disintegrated into a smug, completely self-satisfied, reasonably well-to-do upper middle class living in self-contained flats, maybe in Pune across the river and on the western side, or in the case of Bombay, moving into the northern suburbs, the northwestern suburbs, to be more precise. This is the class which now gives you the business management people. The class which has no patience or concern with any sense of values. It is a class which would never understand why anybody should give up anything to achieve something for society or change society or anything of the kind. Each such family has at least one member working in a bank, inevitably. Alekar captures that combination that change, and brings a humorous element into it. Without your realizing it, he demonstrates how in this kind of a

situation, this kind of a social change in a particular section of society, the distinction between the humorous and laughable disappears;

to his perspective on society. Satish would probably not agree with my analysis, just as Mahesh would not share my analysis of his work: but I still think I am right.

But in all this there has been one element missing in Marathi theatre, which is particularly surprising because all other constituent element<sup>7</sup> of modernity came to this part of the Country reasonably early-at least you can say that Tamil Nadu, Bengal, and Maharashtra were the first areas where these elements came, and you actually see politics dominating the thought of the people. But in Maharashtra we did not have any kind of a political theatre. Atre wrote some plays which had politics in them, but are not political plays in the proper sense of the term. Besides there was a semihumorous kind of piece on local elections, with the title *Munanicpnlity*. This was not by Atre, who had also written on local elections. In such plays there was a reflection of what was going on, in a purely institutional sense. But there was no effort whatsoever in trying to understand it. At about the same time as Utpal Dutt's play on Michael Madhusudan Dutt being staged [W Bengal], we have Vishram Bedekar writing on *Tilak ani Agarkar*

r . The coincidence is interesting. They are both talking about nineteenth century politics. They are both at some level talking about the Indian response to the British. But there is far more conscious politics in Utpal Dutt's writing than in Bedekar's. In fact the manner in which this play has been constructed-it has been a very successful play, by the way-plays upon the Maharashtrian middle-class weakness for Tilak. Agarkar was a social reformer, a social revolutionary, who took positions on women's issues, education, everything. It begins with a note of sympathy and celebration for Agarkar, but the last scene ruins whatever politics may have originally been intended. Tilak and Agarkar had a big quarrel, and did not see each other till the end of their lives. In fact, Agarkar was the first editor of *Kesari* They were close colleagues at one stage. The play ends soon after Agarkar has just died. Tilak enters, to meet the family and condole the death. And you hear a newborn baby crying. Tilak turns around and asks: Who is crying? Somebody answers: That is the gardener's baby girl. Now you have Tilak centre stage. He says: Tell her it is no longer necessary in this country for baby girls to cry, for there has been a Gopal Ganesh Agarkar in this land. The entire play is taken over by Tilak. That is where the play ends. But the professed politics even of the liberal kind with which the

play began are very carefully and consciously subverted by Bedekar himself. At one level it is a good political play in that it is a conscious subversion of liberal politics. As an example of that, it is worth looking at the play. And then, you have to be in a hall to realize its impact, in the thunderous applause to which the play ends, because Tilak adds ten feet to his height by the time he completes the sentence, and Agarkar naturally loses those many, for he was a small fellow anyway, and it was left to Tilak to discover his greatness. You have this against a scene which I vaguely remember in Dutt's play about Michael Madhusudan Dutt, where Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar is seen carrying vegetables or fruits into the Governor-General's chamber. Many people will have problems with the presentation of politics of that kind also. At any rate there is a certain consistency to that politics which is maintained throughout the text, whereas Bedekar does not quite do it. My submission, therefore, is that it is in this situation that someone has to see what some of us were trying to do. This is what most of our theatre criticism misses when it goes into talking in terms of doing great things or not doing great things, etc., in which we are not interested.

Each particular theatre activity has a particular sociological context, within which its experimentation has to be seen. There can be no absolute criteria for experimentation. The question is: what is the actual territory that a given writer covers in an attempt that he undertakes? I think I shall go back to what one of our earlier essayists and novelists, S. V. Ketkar, said. He said that the greatest damage that the British did to this country was not really the silver drain, but the end of comparative literature in India. I think that somewhere that perspective has to be restored, to see what Indian playwrights are doing. I think, in the European context it is quite consciously done. When a Bulgarian playwright or a German playwright does something, he is not judged against a faceless, universal kind of modernity. He is judged against a given Bulgarian or German situation within which he is trying to do something, and then related to the European experience. This is something not happening in India, and that is why somebody like me has suffered. I maintain quite seriously that what I've tried to do W Marathi theatre is neither fully appreciated nor grasped, precisely because this awareness of history has not been there. Nietzsche has said at one place that anything which has no history can be very easily defined. This is the reason why my theatre cannot be defined. This makes most people uncomfortable.



Whether it is Marathi theatre criticism, or the Marathi way of looking at reality, as long as it does not take account of history, or the manner in which a genre evolved, you are following the Nietzschean dictum and failing to define anything at all. But that is the negative aspect of it. On the positive side at the same time, there is, however vaguely, an awareness that something is happening. Whereas no one would particularly celebrate me, yet there is this vague awareness, at any rate, so that if you ask the people who this playwright is, though they may not quite know or care about what I am doing, they are vaguely aware that something worthwhile is being done.

Bringing politics to the centre is the problem. Of course it will take one form in Maharashtra, and another in Bengal. But the question to be asked is: how political, really, is our political theatre? If that question is asked, I would like to believe that in the twenty-one years that I have been writing (exactly twenty-one years, for *Uddhwasta (Dharmashala, A Man in Dark Times)* was written in 1973, and last Saturday I have completed another play-*Raastey, The Roads, the roads taken and not taken-* and [Satyadev] Dubey will do it), I attempted to do three things: one, I said that I shall now look at this political process, for I have been fairly close to politics in one manner or the other. For me, writing is not a literary exercise, or even simple artistic creation. I think it is much more than that; at least that is what I would like to believe. In view of that, one would like to look at how and why movements are breaking down, value systems are breaking down, a certain social consciousness, the communitarian consciousness, is breaking down, languages are dying. What is it that explains these phenomena, and what does it mean to my social existence, etc. etc.? As a consequence, although I bring in a lot of Marx and Lenin and all that, I think I bring in more bhakti literature in my writing than any other living Marathi playwright.~In fact I think that never has so much by way of bhakti literature and themes from that literature come into Marathi theatre over its entire history in the modern phase than they have in mine, in terms of the debates between the Vaidic and Aavidic schools. It is possible to argue that I have not been able to retain the dramatic interest, etc. That kind of criticism is valid. But this feature itself has not been noted; though, of course, Jagantathan had noticed it, when he interviewed me for the Nehru Shatabdi Samaroha publication of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Incidentally, I am the only living writer in that volume who has not been honoured by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. And I am not surprised at all. I am saying this more in the sense Kenneth Williams, said: Last year I looked

at his diaries and I discovered that in the index my name featured. So I got hold of the diary, opened at page 600 or something, and came across the following I found A. N. Wilson very witty, particularly when writing in *The Spectator*. So I decided to look for his books, located one, started reading it, got bored, and in a word, it was utter shit. A. N. Wilson concludes by saying: To this day I am unable to explain why I find this so endearing and amusing! I am in a similar position vis-a-vis the Akademi. Somehow I find it very endearing and amusing that my play is selected as one of the milestones of contemporary Indian theatre by the Akademi itself and yet when it comes to honours the Akademi quietly forgets me. Perhaps even that is not quite right. As the only one left out, it is an honour of a kind. I am not speaking in the spirit of a complaint. The only complaint I might make would be a premodern complaint in the sense that a brahman would always be unhappy at losing some *dakshina!* But we are not talking of pre-modern or precapitalist notions, are we?

Now to raise the question: What kind of political theatre are we doing in this country? I would have expected, for example, two responses to my kind of writing, which never materialized. One is-is there something new about this handling of political history and political debate within this country in the overall context of the Indian situation? I suspect there is. But nobody quite says it. What I am saying is: in terms of the total theatre enterprise in this country, are we actually asking this question? Somebody could have asked it in terms of Bengal, somebody in terms of Tamil Nadu, somebody in terms of Andhra Pradesh, etc. Then there are those other questions: When does a political play become a poster play? When does a play become not a political play but a play with politics in it? These distinctions should be made, and made obvious. This kind of questioning does not quite happen. Still one thought one should go on doing one's job, with the concept of '*nirnvadhishchn kalo bipula cha prithvi*' (time is endless, the universe is vast), as Bhavabhuti said. There will be a time when somebody will raise these questions.

The second thing that fwanfedto question and attack was the too unambiguous, too uncomplicated view of history, particularly in Maharashtra. I was trying to make the point that our history is far more complicated than we are willing to grant. In fact I'll tell you of an interesting conversation that happened in Baroda where I was reading *Andharyatra* [A Passage to Darkness] in Gujarat. Somebody asked me: With so many people getting killed in Punjab-Punjab terrorism at that point of time was at its height-and in Kashmir, why

don't you write plays about those places? I told him: You've got your Maharashtra geography quite wrong. Garhchiroli and Chandrapur districts are near Nagpur. From any part of Maharashtra they are closer than either Punjab or Kashmir. While I am not preventing your writing a play on those experiences, if you feel strongly enough about them, I can very well ask: Why shouldn't I be writing about the Maharashtrian youth getting killed at Garhchiroli? Not because it's a Maharashtrian youth getting killed, but because there is a manner in which politics is getting more and more violent. And violence, like democracy and peace, is indivisible. Understanding violence at one place should help you understand violence somewhere else. But what had started as a discussion of a play ended up as a near-quarrel; for my interlocutor would not grant that there is such a thing as a 'police encounter'. He said, 'You progressives have invented all these stories, and are weakening India's integrity, sovereignty, solidarity etc. etc.' Why I am citing this debate is because at a very basic level, my play was extracting its response. If it made this man angry, Andharyatra had achieved its purpose. I was only reading it anyway. If he had seen Satyadev Dubey's productions he would have been no less angry, for it was hard-hitting or if he had seen Sharad Bhutadia's production. With either of these productions, he would have blown his head off.

What one is trying to say is that one has to reject the notion of history as a grand, well-defined glory. If you desire to break this notion, you've got to break it by saying that it is going to be a passage to darkness, to begin with, anyway. This fresh look at history amounts to coming to terms with one's own surroundings, with one's own errors and mistakes, because someone like me has come through very different kinds of ideological and political positions, and been tormented in the process. I'm not at all apologetic about it, and yet I would say, yes, one did make mistakes—at one level, they were my mistakes, at another level, they were not. For example, in my recent article in *Economic and Political Weekly*, with the title 'The Kingdom of Darkness: The Problem of Culture,' I have argued about the two-nation theory, that the entire Indian elite was working towards fashioning it over a hundred-odd years. The Marxists only gave it a theoretical formulation. But to blame the Marxists alone for defending the two-nation theory is simply getting the Partition totally wrong. It amounts to an attempt on the part of the elite to absolve itself of any responsibility. This is something that in

my opinion cannot be done. History is not a well-defined totality, standing outside of which I can take positions. I have to be within it.

In one of the open discussions I have had on my plays, there was an argument that in all my plays, every character seems to speak G. P. Deshpande's language; to which Dubey gave a response, which was typically Dubey. He said: 'Don't you think that happens in Shaw's plays also? That all characters in Shaw's plays speak Shaw's language? So what is wrong if the characters speak the playwright's language?' That put the interlocutor on the defensive. But it was a polemical kind of exchange. My position would be: Yes, sure enough, because ultimately one is making oneself polyphonic, and that is the only way of writing political theatre. So that is how I would indicate my second objective, to make a polyphonic exercise at a given point of time to record Indian history in its Marathi formulation. And if this involves rejection of naturalism of language, which I think it does, I will and do reject it in my plays.

My third objective, of course, is the retrieval of the language. In fact, you had pointed out in your introduction to the translation of *Uddhwasta Dharmashala* how proud I am of Marathi, or something to that effect. Yes, to a certain extent, I am, and I think any significant writer will be proud of his language. He has to be. It is part of the post-colonial ethos, but it is not only just being proud of one's language, but also feeling obliged to retrieve the language, for it has been pushed down. In fact a post-modernist like Lyotard in his famous essays on Algeria says that the French Republic deprived the Algerians of their culture and imposed a culture on them. You don't expect a post-modernist to take a position like that. This sentence could have come from any of the Habermasian modernists. All our post-modernists would be surprised if they were to read Lyotard's political writings. The whole point is that this is precisely the issue. To a certain extent, there were the brief moments, shall we say, if you take the Bengal-Maharashtra scene roughly between 1880 and the mid-1930s, when you can identify authors, poets, prose writers-and I'm sure this would be true of Malayalam or Tamil as well, and to a certain extent in Hindi poetry, perhaps, at a slightly later period-who made a conscious -effort to retrieve the language. Now, as we approach World War II, things start collapsing. After World War II, the damage that we have done to our languages and cultural sensibilities is so extraordinary that it is now commonplace, and nobody bothers about it. It is all-pervasive. There was a time when every significant person in most parts of India would be a bilingual person in the good sense of the term. Now all of them are virtually monolingual,

and not monolingual in terms of Hindi, Bengali, Tamil or Malayalam but in terms of pulp literature in English. Nothing more, nothing less. And that is what makes people believe that if you read Indo-Anglian writers, it is not necessary to read the authors in the original language of the country. Such a statement, made at a seminar recently, does not hurt me at all, for this is a symptom that we are able to identify: it is the Marxist who can actually see it, for he understands the phenomenon of imperialism and what it does to the internal process. It is with this realization that the retrieval of language becomes absolutely necessary. The Marathi of Popular Marathi theatre-it's not a question of simple Marathi, poor Marathi, or bad Marathi-is just not Marathi. It is a kind of nameless speech which gets translated into Marathi or Bengali or Malayalam. It is this kind of a phenomenon that we are facing at this instant. We have to recognize this.

Again, to go back to Lyotard-I'm rather apologetic that I'm turning to a post-modernist so often, I rarely do that-he says at one point- don't remember his exact words-that we live in times when a playwright like Beckett couldn't care less if his plays were understood by anyone or not. There is an element of irony in this statement, which is not a statement disapproving of Beckett at all. For one thing, I don't think I'm not understood. Maybe there are some references in my plays that the generations of the thirties or the forties would easily have picked up, because of their true bilingualism, which would get lost today. One of the criticisms of *Andharyatra* that appeared in Delhi was: Why is the Hindi translation so Sanskritic? It was not really Sanskritic; it just so happened that there were many mythological references that would have registered immediately even fifteen to twenty years ago. I am not dismissing this kind of comment outright; I am only saying that it also gives you the situation as far as our sensibility is concerned. And therefore one will have to take an interventionist position, even at the cost of not being understood, even at the cost of being rejected, even at the cost of being highly unpopular, or, as my friend Mahesh [Elkunchwar] considers me, of being a fearful sort of personality. Everybody in Maharashtra seems to be afraid of me. I'm imagined to be somebody sitting on the something and throw it at anyone approaching me. Mahesh makes a lot of fun of me on this score, but in a sense he is right; not that people are actually in awe of me, but there is no doubt that I have a peculiar relationship with my audience and Mahesh is pointing to it. And that relationship creates in the minds of people an impression so heavy that my only piece of light, completely funny and humorous writing has

never been done: This is the parody on *Kanyadaan*. It has now been translated into Bengali, by the way. The name of the play *Assn Navra Surekh Bai!* (What a nice husband!)-is taken from a little girl's song-a near-absurd kind of song sung in the month of Shravana. A pot with a coconut in it is kept in the centre and little girls go around it singing rhythmic compositions. There is one with the refrain 'Surekh Bai', meaning 'O my dear, how beautiful!' I changed it a little to culminate in 'O what a nice husband, we must protect him and not let him slip out of our hands!' The only explanation for this play not getting to be performed lies in people not being willing to accept the fact that I can write something very funny and comic.

Intervention, in my terms, involves the introduction of extra-theatrical elements, for I really don't know where theatre ends and life begins. Maybe I would go by Walter Benjamin's advice to the playwright-that, for the dramatist, life is continuous mourning, can't be otherwise. As somebody else put it, it is a permanent catastrophe in our cultural life.

So now we have to ask: Are significant answers being given to the issue? Are there playwrights who are raising questions that are really bothering them leading to their writing? If we start looking for this, then new paradigms of theatre criticism can possibly emerge. If in that process, someone came to reject me as a playwright, I would accept it.

*Unlike a lot of your peers who came to discover it later, you grew in your given circumstances within particularly rich cultural and political milieu, into an ideological position which you then developed and matured, of course. HOW do you rend it in retrospect and locate yourself in it?-SB*

For that, two or three historical accidents are actually responsible. One of these would be the kind of politics in which my father was involved. He was with the Socialists, and ran unsuccessfully for the Assembly once, in 1967. In fact, the scene of the disturbed election meeting in *Uddhwasta Dharmashala* was when I was canvassing for him, in 1967. There one increasingly got a feeling that held, were in fact positions at a dead end, that there was really nowhere for him to go. I had travelled through that entire *taluk* in Satara, my own district, in the middle of the district, on the banks of the river Krishna, and had seen for myself that the kind of politics my father had in mind had come to naught, and that the people were increasingly finding his discourse incomprehensible, or, at any rate; irrelevant. Calling it 'irrelevant' may be putting it

too harshly, my father perhaps wouldn't like it even now! But that set me thinking. That would be one part of it.

The other part of it has perhaps something to do with my work on China, seeing how the Chinese use Confucius or Lao-Tse; when the People's Communes were launched in 1955, the Chinese Press declared, among other things, that these World create 'the great togetherness.' This 'great togetherness' is an expression lifted straight from Lao-Tse, as the nature of an ideal society. One suddenly became aware that this was something very much in the air or in the ground which these fellows must have found useful and picked up; in other words, the linguistic culture is so alive in China that it was possible for the Chinese Communist to coin a whole set of words, to re-invent words, to re-structure words, to give them totally different meanings, to give new life to words. In that context, when I thought of the Left movement in this country, for which I have great sympathy-still-and in spite of all that has happened in the erstwhile Soviet Union and eastern Europe, I still think that till such time as capitalism survives and racism and the North-South conflicts endure, Marxism will remain a legitimate critique of capitalism and things like that. I would maintain all that, but supposing I were to make a balance sheet of the achievements of the Left movement in India, then I would have to grant that people who have contributed to the languages of this country have not belonged to the Left. The Left did not make any effort whatsoever in that direction. I do not know the situation in Bengal, but while everybody speaks of the plural society or the composite society, in Marathi to date we do not have a satisfactory or uniform word for it. One can translate it, in the sense of *m<sup>a</sup>kshikasthanē makshikashabdah* in that Sanskrit characterization of the bad translation, i.e. you put a word for fly when you see a fly, from the story of the translator who found a fly sitting on the page he was translating, thought it a part of the text, and put the word *makshika-* for fly-into his translation. That kind of translation may be done.

But some kind of a creative use of language, something that the Left has done everywhere-they made me conscious of this in many ways-we haven't done. And one started asking: why can't we do it? And this is in spite of IPTA, mind you. This is not to deny or undermine the achievements of IPTA, but its problem lay in what may be considered as part of the modern world's sufferings, as it were, that one thinks all the time in terms of polarities. The kind of polarities postulated at that time were between folk music and classical music, or between classics and the literature of the masses, little realizing that our folk traditions are not

the kind our rightwing revivalists are thinking of them today, or our leftwing progressives were thinking of them day before yesterday; the classical and the folk traditions are in fact one spectrum, as W music, between *desi* and *margi* what is *desi* once becomes *margi* over a period of time. This continuous spectrum is something we lost sight of.

Entire poetic traditions have been generated in this country to advocate the Vaishnava *parampara* or whatever. If you take Marathi writing from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth, you have a situation where poetry is consciously used to put across a metaphysical point of view, and also to take a position against the caste system, in however mild and diluted a form it might have been. Why is it that the Left could not do what the *bhakti* movement has been able to do?

For my third theme, I confronted the split in *the* Left movement in the late sixties and early seventies. That is something that has always perplexed me. I still belong to that small community which likes to look at the Left movement as a movement. And I think that the *Left* has no future if it cannot look at itself as a movement. When in the cultural revolution in China, they looked at the split, they had the hope -that what was one would multiply; but even there it did not work. There they already had a richer tradition. All movements aiming at social transformation, or improving the quality of life, have to be concerned with this awareness of a movement as movement. This would apply to poetry as poetry, theatre as theatre, journalism as journalism. One was wondering about that also.

Those are the concerns with which I began to write a novel. *Uddhwasta Dharamshala* was not originally planned as a play. But as I started writing it, large portions came simply as dialogues. And then one fine morning, after three weeks spent on producing quite bad stuff, I burnt it all up. By then I had discovered that it was a play. I had also just read the report of the proceedings of *the* (American) House Committee on Un-American *Activities*. *One* could have simply translated the report and staged it. Parts of it have been staged since. But I thought there would be very little point in it. Then I thought I should integrate my experience, my history, and therefore- Maharashtra's history, and therefore India's history and present them as some kind of UnIndian Activities. I go back again to Ketkar whom I quoted a little while ago on the end of comparative literature in India. He also made a statement that the only way for a Maharashtrian to become an Indian is to become a Maharashtrian. There is a point in what he said. It is, in fact, part of the process of the retrieval of language. You cannot become an Indian



if you are unable to retrieve at least one single Indian language for yourself or for your generation. One has to do this, if one has chosen to write in an interventionist manner, one in a sense has chosen to write what might appear to some to be ephemeral stuff, and has certainly chosen to write unpopular stuff.

Generally speaking, political theatre in India, apart from the street theatre bit, is a relatively underdeveloped area, so to speak, with Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar as perhaps the only exceptions in the case of Sircar, we are referring to the later Sircar, for there is a break there, which does not obtain in the case of Dutt. One cannot think of any other names, unless there is some writing in Telugu -I have been told that there are some people there, but no translations are available yet. That is precisely the reason why intervention in political theatre becomes important.

At another level, while you have fairly strong BJP and RSS forces in Maharashtra, particularly in the upper castes-quite a few of our writers are upper=caste, some of them may even have direct sympathies with BJP-still you do not really see any open kind of playwriting defending the Hindutva cult or the Sangh Parivar, -or anything of the kind. The chances of these people actually using theatre and turning it into a powerful theatre movement seem to be very remote. And the reason for it is simply that political theatre by its very nature cannot look for consolidation, it looks for change. It is inherent in the nature of political theatre that one cannot write significant theatre of consolidation. In fact, the more conventional political theatre starts losing its charm the more, within the context of the Left movement it becomes a theatre of consolidation rather than of change. If this can happen within the Left, then you can imagine how much more difficult it will be outside. You will be able to cite, any number of instances sitting in Bengal. On the contrary, I may not be able to cite any, for the simple reason that in movement at all. Basically, you can't talk of politics unless you are prepared to talk of some kind of polarities. These polarities in their turn have to be necessarily within a given worldview. In that sense Hindu and Muslim cannot be polarities. There has to be an intellectual polarity, not just polarity between two social units. And it is these polarities sorting themselves out over a period of time that makes political theatre worthwhile. It is only with a consolidationist thrust that political theatre sometimes becomes propaganda theatre, and ceases to be theatre precisely because of this-in other words, when change is replaced by consolidation. I would like to believe that I have attempted in all my plays so far to precisely avoid that tendency to

consolidation. I have always had change at the centre of the situation in my. playwhether it is the possibility of change, or impossibility of change, or non-possibilities of change. Either it happens or does not happen that is political theatre.

Let me illustrate this with reference to a play belonging to a very different movement altogether. There's a play written about Ambedkar, which has at least one show every month in Pune or Bombay, and I'm sure they are having good houses. But I haven't yet met anyone, even among the Dalits, who has actually asked me: 'Have you seen the play?' Understandably, under the circumstances it is difficult to write a play about Ambedkar, for you cannot write a play about a perfect human being. That is why a Hindutva play is also not possible. For a Hindu, in that scheme of things, has nothing further to achieve. And if you are a Brahman, even better! R.C. Majumdar once wrote a history of the Indian nationalist movement, which, if I remember right, was reviewed in *Shankar's Weekly*, which said-If you read this book, you will get the following impression: that between the Hindus and the Muslims, the Hindus were nationalists, among the Hindus, the Bengalis were nationalists; among the Bengalis, the Brahmans were nationalists; among the Brahmans, the Majumdars were nationalists; and among the Majumdars, R. C. Majumdar was nationalist. The point of the anecdote is important. You can have a poetry of *adbhuta*, or even *bibhatsa* but I find it difficult to believe that there can be a poetry of the *shanta rasa*. A product of thirteenth century *bhakti* literature, describing a situation in the *Gita* or somewhere, writes: 'Aga *shantachiya ghara adbhuta ala pahunera* i.e. the *adbhuta* has come as a guest in the house of the *shanta* It is the *adbhuta* which accounts for the poetry there. *Shanta* is so completely at peace with itself that it cannot produce worthwhile literature. Anybody who is in that state is so completely at peace with himself that he cannot be a writer. Fortunately, the Hindutva forces are so completely at peace with themselves-they are not at peace with the Muslims, that's another story-that I do not see anything coming from their end at all. Going to the Ambedkar play, I suspect, would he like going to a *pravachana* or *kirtan*.

The other possibility is much more serious, where leftwing political theatre:degenerates into a theatre of consolidation-which I consider a far more dangerous thing; for example, the manner in which we often present the problem of communalism. The secularist language about the

communal problem in this country has remained unchanged for the last sixty years, whereas the communalist language has changed. If you listen to a typical Hindutvavadi talking in the 1930s one of Savarkar's followers, or a Hindu Sabha-ite maybe, or if you take N. C. Chatterjee (or Shyamaprasad Mukherjee), and see the kind of language he used, there is a world of difference between that language and the language Ashok Singhal of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad uses today; but I don't see that change reflected in any number of street plays against communalism I see performed in Delhi. I don't have the feeling that they've absorbed this change. The Hindu discourse has changed over a period of time, and that is the discourse that has to be countered now. The progressive today is simply unfamiliar with it, *if I* might say so, or he doesn't find it necessary to go into that. This happens because there is a strong tendency towards consolidation. You know the problem. We have only out-of-date teachers who make no attempt at the Brechtian didactic theatre which insisted that those who teach also need to be taught. I am sure that if someone is going to do an objective history of leftwing theatre in India, in its various parts, there would be enough evidence to support such a hypothesis.

Another concern of mine has been language, its abuse and misuse and distortion, and the need to retrieve it, particularly in the context of what the media have been doing to language. To give you another instance of how the trick operates, on Pune Radio in the early morning around 6.30 there is a programme called *Mangala Prabhata* I have no objection to the programme in itself. What the *Mangala Prabhata* programme does is have one *rachana* by Tukaram, the seventeenth century poet, and another by Namdeva, some of the finest gems of *bhakti* literature, and quite often in between the two a religious poem by a contemporary poet pretender. When you do that you are doing two things at the same time. You are bringing Tukaram down to date; and a cultural expression of the people is being equated with religious expression-consciously. Otherwise there is no reason why a third-rate poet should find a place between Tukaram and Namdev. And this cannot be an accident. I am sure that if one were to make a content analysis of our radio programmes, it would be possible to establish such a tendency in several languages of the country. And then, when you have thus ridiculed the literary tradition of our people, the only thing that they can go back to is the *Ramayana*. Against that background you make Rama real. You now have a viewer who has no language left, no literary tradition to be proud of, because he does not know it. That is how he jumps straight into

prehistoric or protohistoric styles. Somebody who is proud of Tukaram or NAMdev even for religious reasons, is, in my opinion, a far more advanced person, for somewhere he is relating to a cultural tradition, to a literary tradition. The media have been considerably successful in throwing all that out of the window. What we can do about it will emerge only when we internalize the problem. I have a feeling that we don't even recognize the problem for what it is. How many Left papers around this country have even cared to comment on it? When i wrote about Ramanand Sagar's *Rnrnaynaa* in the *EPW I* drew a reaction from an American Indologist in the *TDR*, who cited eight articles criticizing Sagar's *Ramayana* in India including mine, and went on to say that all these people do not like it because they have been exposed to very fine Western cinema, like Spielberg's films. That American sitting there thinks that Spielberg is the ultimate in cinema-he did not even have the courtesy, or shall we say the familiarity with the best in western cinema, to say that these people have seen Tarkovsky. That American probably does not know much about cinema anyway. This kind of arrogance only Americans and the *TDR* are capable of. It is part of a concerted effort to reduce Indians to dirt.

Schechner, in his Indian Diary, writes one whole paragraph waxing eloquent over the episode of his ballpoint pen being lifted in a Calcutta bus. He gets quite a kick out of it. For him it's almost a theatrical experience. That's India for Schechner. And then there are the educated Indians following Schechner on the Ramlila of Ramnagar trip. I have heard three people over the last ten years giving lectures on the Ramlila of Ramnagar. Or there are those on a concerted campaign for the folk forms, the spirit of the Chhau, the Pandavani the Tamasha.:etc. I'm not saying that they are not energetic: forms What I don't understand how is somebody doing theatre in Calcutta or Bombay or Pune can do anything with them. What does he do with them? You can't do modern theatre in the Tamasha form. It is just not possible. You must, of course, know the technique of the Tamasha It Should be part of any training process. I understand all that. I just don't see how problems of modernity or the problems of my life can be 'sorted out in terms of Pandavani or Tamasha or whatever. So basically it means that you are simply appropriating THESE forms because they have a market somewhere else, since you know very well that the problems of living in a city like Calcutta or Bombay cannot be analysed in terms of a Tamasha or Mayurbhanj Chhau or whatever. So obviously you are doing it with an eye on some market. We have thus not only devalued our culture in our own terms, but we have also devalued it in terms of the

international market. It is not only the currency that gets devalued. Culture gets devalued too. I don't think there's enough protest against it yet. It's Nautanki for the London culture market. Commodity fetishism masquerading as high culture!

At the other extreme you have the major fiction writer in my part of the country who thinks that unless you have an urban sensibility and unless your literature discusses urban problems there cannot be literature, as far as India is concerned. In other words, you have to be a person from Bombay, Pune or Nagpur in order to write. You cannot write about Satara district for example, or my home town! Fortunately, I still qualify as modern by his standards because I write about urban problems. But he rejects me for different reasons altogether, because he doesn't like Marxism at all. I've never spoken to him, but I'm reasonably certain that he dismisses me.

Our Left is either all European-I call immediately cite ten names who are extremely knowledgeable about whatever is happening in Yugoslav theatre or Romanian theatre, etc., and don't know a single Indian language: well, and cannot write ten lines in any Indian language-and yet are the commentators on culture in this country. Why don't they write on European Culture? But they insist on writing on Indian culture, and that is the problem. Or alternately, the consolidationist position is so strong in the Left circles that it seems to have all the answers already. This kind of a politics is not going to take us anywhere. In other words, we have simply failed to see what politics of art is. I think the principle of didactic theatre will have to be followed. The teachers have to be taught. And that's why if someone says I have written didactic theatre I'd be quite happy.

Responses to my plays have not followed any set pattern, or been appreciated only in the urban centres. A play like *Uddhwasta Dharmashala* has been played at what we call the *taluka* headquarters, which are small towns with 20,000 people or 15,000 people. Is Kolhapura an urban centre? Yes and no. It is not urban in the sense in which Calcutta or Bombay is urban. But it is not rural in the sense in which my home Rahimatpur is rural. How does one assess this audience? All my plays have worked very well in Kolhapur. In fact, I've had better reviews and responses from district towns. But again Bombay, relatively speaking, has been more open to my writing than Pune has been, though they are barely separated by about a hundred odd miles. When *Uddhwasta* was read for the first time at Satyadev Dubey's workshop in Pune, nobody apart from Mahesh Elkunchwar, Satish Alekar, Sriram Lagoo, and Dubey himself thought that

there was a play to it-Dubey was the lord of the workshop anyway, so I'm leaving him out of consideration for the moment, he had arranged for the reading, so he obviously knew there was something in dramatic terms to that script. If you mention it to all those who were present there, everybody will deny it. And all those three, mind you, do not share my politics. Dr Lagoo says, 'I'm not interested in your politics'. Mahesh Elkunchwar keeps on saying that he doesn't understand my politics. And Satish, in his typical Satishian humour, uses the word *prabodhan* which we use for 'enlightenment' in Marathi. He says, 'When I see or hear anything done by you it contributes to my *prabodhan* You can see that there is a disdain for -the positions I take, and yet they were the only ones who accepted the playfor its drama.

It happened again with *Andharyatra* It was the same four again who recognized its worth, and they do not share my politics at all. That is a mystery I have no answer for. How does it happen? Maybe there is some kind of autonomy of theatre which helps you see theatre irrespective of what political positions are being taken. In terms of urbanity, you can't distinguish much between Bombay and Pune, but the reactions have been markedly different, and I've noticed this for some time, consistently.

Kolhapur would be a typical example. Three of my plays have been done there, and all of them have been extremely well received. Kolhapur happens to be a peculiar mix. It is not an entirely urban place. It has its own older tradition. It is where the Marathi cinema had a history of its own. There was a social reformist movement there a kind of modernity and yet it is feudal also III some respects. It is possible for Kolhapur audiences to relate to what I'm saying. So far that has been my experience. But if *Uddhwasta* or *Raastey* which I finished last week, is done in Rahimatpur, there might be a problem, because any number of references could be missed.

In *Raastey* a Buddhist text is quoted: In spite of the fact that there might be adequate rain, something that is not proper seed will not grow; no matter how many Buddhas might come, somebody who is not likely to become great will never meet with *bhadra* i.e. good. In our part of the country, at any rate, there is a common experience that the rain is adequate, and yet nothing grows The peasant will inevitably say in rural Marathi that OK, it rained a lot, but with this kuid of seed, nothing will grow. I suspect that the Buddhist text and this common peasant experience cannot be totally unrelated. So I have a feeling that this verse will reach. There are elements within my writing that will not reach in Bombay, but which might reach in

Satara. I think I can claim that Much. I Carl still write unpopular plays without being that complicated! These days, in any case, several things get lost on a Bombay audience. Our urbans lack urbanity in many ways. So let us not take these urbans at their face value at all, because deep down you never know what kind of personality you are dealing with. I am not necessarily saying this pejoratively at all. I think it is the lot of the decolonized world, where there will be not only stages of development areawise, but even within the same city you will see three centuries coexisting. In Calcutta itself you can see that.

Being a shade autobiographical might help, to begin with. If you take the post-Tendulkar' generation of playwrights, including the younger ones like Rajiv Naik, or Shafaat Khan or people like Mahesh or Satish from the middle link, or Achyut Vaze, most of them are essentially urban people, from Pune, Bombay or Nagpur. Though Mahesh has had a different background, his sensibility is essentially a mature urban sensibility; whereas when I think of myself I sometimes wonder what it is in my personal history, as it were, which has had a bearing on my later makeup. It would be difficult to put my finger on it, but let us begin like this.

I belong to a small town near Satara, 22 or 24 km east of Satara. All my primary and secondary school education was in that dusty little town, and I had not seen Bombay till I was due to enter University. I had not seen the sea, not seen a ship, till then. That is the kind of background I had. And did not quite like it. One wanted to go to a school in Pune, or in Bombay. And once I remember I had a little fight with my father. I had got angry with a teacher of mine, and I came home and said, 'Father, I've had enough of this school, it's not worth it. I want to go to school in Pune.' As was the custom at that time, my father gave the only answer that fathers usually gave to their sons, and closed the conversation. So one had that peculiar relationship with that town. And yet when I now look back at it, in a *bhakti* in a manner of speaking, I seem to have absorbed that town in spite of myself. And that is why I am probably more conscious of the social constituent of one's own being and consciousness than perhaps many other writers of my generation, for somewhere, in spite of me, that town is me. There was obviously *bhakti* going along with *virodha*.

Another aspect of that life as I remember it now is the kind of tension and agony in society that I have actually seen there. You know, in most of hinterland Maharashtra-and Maharashtra has one advantage which probably will increasingly lose its meaning for somebody living in Bombay or

Calcutta, in the sense that people now living in Bombay or Calcutta have lost their hinterland-there is a feeling of and for that hinterland. Somehow that loss of hinterland also works in a particular way. My relationship with the hinterland is a contradictory relationship. And it is that contradictory relationship with the hinterland that I am somewhere conscious of, for example, the kind of agrarian relations, or the anti-Brahmanism you see in Satara or Kolhapur, the major part of the country I come from-which in its turn was closely related to the agrarian relations of the time. Once, I remember-the memory is vivid in my mind-I had gone to a local *chamaar* who for the last sixtyseventy years had been making *chappals* for our family. Even now, whenever I go there, I bring a pair with me just for the fun of it, for old times' sake. As a schoolboy I had gone to collect my *chappal*. In rural Marathi we have a peculiar expression for this. You never get your *chappals n'iade*. You always get your *chappals built*, for a rural *chappal* has to be very strong, to be used in the fields, on bad roads and so on. Whenever I used that expression to my Bombay or Pune cousins, they would be thoroughly amused. In the *chamaar's* house, you know they inevitably have that stone pot for water. The *chamaar asked* me to sit beside it, and continued his conversation with the other man; and quite unmindful of the fact that I was sitting there. He said that right in my presence, turned around, smiled, and said, 'Son, you've come to collect your *chappal* haven't you? Hold on. Will you drink a cup of tea?' I said, 'OK, why not?' Because back home, there were always restrictions on how many cups of tea you could have. He gave me tea. So he makes that statement on the Brahmans, and thirty seconds later makes me an exception. And there I discovered that we haven't understood the complexities of our society at all! There is an undercurrent in whatever I've written that tries to bring out these aspects of the Indian social reality that generally get ignored.

Then there was another case. Around 1948, when I was ten years old-I was in primary school at the time there was a major peasant leader, Babuji Patankar, who came from our district. He used to command audiences of lakhs and lakhs of peasants. And he was quite a phenomenon. One fine "Morning we heard the story that Babuji Patankar had been presumably Murdered. From the day we heard that he was no more-God knows what the reality was-the story that travelled to our parts was that even his body could not be traced at all. Somewhere that impression stuck in my mind.

Then there was another thing. There was a teacher in our school. He was a Marathi-speaking Kannadiga. A Gandhian of a kind, he took a certain fondness for me. He wore khadi.



He introduced me to the *ashrama prarthana* on the model of the practice at Gandhi's Sevagram. And I used to say morning *prarthana* and evening *prarthana* I became a regular reader of the *Gita* in Vinoba's Marathi verse translation. I became a Gandhian for a while. For quite a number of years, the only fast I observed was for the killing of Gandhi, on 30 January. Partly because of this *saniskara* and partly from a peculiar fondness, not so much for this particular teacher, but because he had made me conscious that there were leaders around us, and movements around us, and that you have to relate to them.

Then of course I drifted, under my father's influence, you might say. He was a socialist. While I was in college I actually became a member of the Socialist Party. I stayed a member for two years as an activist in the students' wing. At that time membership amounted to only attending their meetings. I became a full member after I had passed my B.A. For one year-into my M.A. studies-I remained a member. I suddenly discovered-and it created a peculiar kind of reaction-Marxism. Till that time my familiarity of anti-communism that PSP preached at that time made me suddenly sit up and think that if these fellows are being attacked like this, there must be something to them and their ideology. What is it? Then I started reading Marx carefully. That is how I developed my interest in China. Those were the days of Vietnam. It's ultimately the Vietnam War which in the last analysis made me change politically. I vividly remember that my father was a shade unhappy about it. When people asked him what I was doing, he would say: he reads Marx all right, but he is not a Marxist, don't worry about that. After a while, he also probably realized, and stopped giving these weak defences. Once he asked me: 'You read Marx, all right, but don't become a member of the Communist Party. That's my only advice to you. Otherwise you'll get-caught in it, and you'll suffer.' It was a very genuine concern. I naturally did not argue with him.

From 1960 onwards, I started systematically reading Marx and Marxist texts. I remember greedily reading several volumes. From my interest in China, I had to read Mao anyway. Then one read Stalin. Incidentally, Stalin is a very fine writer, stylistically. Or at least his writer is, if he did not write the stuff himself. Stalin's prose is excellent. What a prose stylist! Paradoxically, it is the reading of Stalin that somehow created a consciousness in me that you can be both a Marxist, and a writer. The polemical energy that Marx generates or Lenin generates, or the lucidity with which Stalin explains things-if this is not fine prose, I would like to know what is! Let me hasten to add that this did not make me a Stalinist.

The whole point is that one was absorbing all these influences. I would like to believe that there is one set of influences I get from Rahimatpur, Satara, Kolhapur; and another set of influences which comes from the War in Vietnam, the Chinese example, and, of course, these three writers. You will remember, when Stalin died, my friend Ashok Mitra reminded me more than once, M. N. Roy wrote in an obituary note that Stalin was not a good man, but he was a great man. You can see the fascination his generation felt for him.

The other strong thing that I have carried with-me is the tremendous fascination I personally have for two personalities in the Indian Communist movement-and I can assure you that it is not because they are Maharashtrians. I can be quite parochial, but in this case I'm not being so. One is Dange, the other is Ranadive. For two different sets of reasons altogether. Dange I barely met a Couple of times. He was a fascinating speaker, and his Marathi was fabulous prose. Once that man sarded talking in Marathi, one could go on listening for hours and hours. He spoke with wit, humour and clarity. Fantastic. This man once spoke to me about Tilak. And, believe me, I discovered Tilak because of Dange. A number of my Left critics in Maharashtra-though We don't have much of a Left, we have Left critics all righthave problems with my fascination for Tilak. It's actually not a fascination for Tilak per se. In a manner of speaking, it's a transferred fascination. It comes directly from Dange, and I'm not ashamed at all of saying so; because I think that you somehow create personal bond', with historical, political or cultural figures. i was just fortunate in meeting these people. I cannot simply judge Dange just as a leader of the CPI or this Communist party or that. He is part of the main history of India. And somewhere he made me conscious of this. He could laugh at himself, for example. I had two or three long meetings with him, in the sixties. He once started talking about Kosambi. He told me that he had gone to see Kosambi in I'une, and Kosambi had told him, 'All right, you've come all the way to Pune, but that does not mean that my review of yOur book will be very favourable' and started laughing. How many political leaders-for after all, Dange was the leader of a movement, an international leader whom the Russians and the Chinese were both defending or attacking for some time-would come out with something like that? This man is somewhere admiring Kosambi, saying that he had the guts to say this to me! It is that kind of a quality I admired, that quality of gentleness about him. Tremendous gentleness. On one of those occasions, he said: 'Yes, yes, I know the Left criticism of Tilak. It is easy to criticize him. But how else could one have stood up to British rule at that time? And

people must be aware that he was somebody about whom Lenin was writing at the time! Grant him his anti-imperialism and then attack him. Those who knew the Dange of later years may not even believe me, but this was an actual conversation.

Let me now bring you to another encounter of mine, part of my later introduction to the Left movement, so to say! Ranadive once sent for me. This was much later than the Dange story-some time in the seventies. He sent me a message through the SFI [Student Federation of India, the CPI(M) students' union] boys at JNU. Ranadive asked: 'Have you written anything new?' I said, 'Yes, I have been writing off and on.' He said, 'I hope you wouldn't mind if I say that I didn't like *Uddhwasta Dharamshala You will* understand why I don't like that sort of thing.' I didn't know how to react. The next thing he said was, 'But don't give up writing. People like me will dislike you. Ignore us, because nobody writes as good a Marathi as you seem to be doing, and I read Marathi a lot.' Now, this man had the image of a very rigid, very doctrinaire man, *the* Stalinist, as it were. Then suddenly I discovered that here was a generation which had its own dialectical way of relating to reality, which again may have mellowed somewhat over the years. In fact I remember in my last meeting with the man, Dange had by that time seen some of my writing, on China, presumably, and had obviously not liked it-he said, 'So, you're an admirer of Mao Tse-Tung and China! OK, you're a young man, but I hope you will learn-I never give up hope, you see, even about you'-and laughed.

In the three long meetings I have had with Dange, once I found him quoting from Sanskrit and I'm rather fond of that language, as you very well know. Somehow I have a distinct admiration for those who can easily quote Sanskrit-and Dange could [*He would do it with élan*-yes with élan, lovely. And when he quoted something, it would be so apt, I would say to myself, 'Ah, my God, that's it!' So here was somebody who knew what classicism is all about, and what our rich tradition is-and, mind you, this was in the sixties. And then I think-though I admit my memory on this question is now quite vague-on one occasion I made a reference to Tukaram. And he said, 'Oh yes, I remember that particular *abhang*.' I will partially at least attribute my interest in *bhakti* poetry to these people, because I consciously reread the entire available *bhakti* literature in Marathi from the sixties onwards. There would be very few among people of my persuasion who have read Dnyaneshwar, Namdeva, and Tukaram in the entirety. Dange in those three meetings was somewhere making me conscious of the fact that one needs to be alert and open to facts and ideashe was the one who

mentioned Rajwade, who had written this book on the history of the family system in India which nobody was willing to publish at that time because it went against all the accepted Hindu norms; and Rajwade was a conservative, outright unrepentant Sanatani Brahman, no doubt about that! And yet Dange writes in his introduction to the book that if this data had been available to Engels when he wrote his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* it might have slightly changed the book, and I think there is a point in what he said. Here was a conservative gentleman of the nineteenth and early twentieth century who was somewhere conservative only in terms of his behaviour pattern, but his thinking horizons were wide and open. These people, being dialecticians, were able to accommodate this contradiction, a capacity which I think our generation has probably lost. I went back to Rajwade because of Dange. If Dange were alive today, what I am saying would have come to him as a total surprise; because the day he discovered that I was getting so fond of the cultural revolution, he must have thought that I was a lost cause. Or maybe it wouldn't have been such a surprise to him, for if he could see what Rajwade did, he could see what I was doing. Or contrary wise, he could have seen why I was seeing these things in him. These two personalities Dange and Ranadive have interested me a lot. Ranadive talked to me on Phule, and the kind of perspective he brought to bear was different, and some of it has gone into my play. I do not know whether he ever wrote out what he told me that day, but certainly the kind of conversation he carried on with me was a virtual Marxist interpretation of Phule. That opened my eyes to Phule. I re-read Phule because of Ranadive. One had read these people at one stage or another-I was and am a very avid reader, I read for hours, and I am a disorganized reader also-but one has to go back to these people. What I am therefore suggesting partially is that one was attracted to Marxism perhaps for totally non-Marxist reasons (*On the plane of human contacts, meeting of minds*) yes, at a level of awareness, and there was one Marxist part in it-these people explained to me, as it were, parts of Maharashtra history in terms of history as a science. I think that is how one became aware, and somewhere that bit definitely contributed to the Marxist element in my making.

I've known any number of Socialist leaders, and without any disrespect to them-I've known men in the nationalist movement, who have made great sacrifices-I haven't seen much of this kind of thing, this kind of an all-pervasive worldview, a kind of readiness to accept an opposite position. I have very carefully read as much Marx as I could, I have carefully read

Lenin, carefully read Mao, but somewhere I get a feeling that it is these personal experiences also which have convinced me. Men like Dange or Ranadive had a sense of history. Then I can only at worst have a non-antagonistic contradictory relationship with it-that is at the worst-to put it in Maoist terms. Hence, in spite of all the failures of this branch of the Left movement, or that branch of the Left movement, one still keeps hoping that something will come out of it. Probably nothing will, I don't know.

At the other end is my early rural background, where of course the *pravachanas* were happening, and the *kirtana*, which, particularly in exposed to performances of classical music as part of the *kirtana* in which they would tell stories, and as I have said elsewhere, speaking is performance. In the *kirtana* tradition, this is particularly true, for in the given space, the *kirtana* performer moves around, jumps around, all kinds of things. One had that kind of an introduction, but in the *virodhabhakti* one was not conscious of what one was absorbing. It is only later that one suddenly discovered that one seemed to remember all this [and *by then it must have got historicized*] ... yes ... [and *you have read a lot of history*]

you I'll give you an instance of how it works. In the beginning of *Andharyatra* there is a *lavani* and there is also a *natyageet* both being played together. When I was reading this play out in Pune, Bhaskar Chandavarkar asked me: 'Gopu did you know that the *natyasangeet* used there--*vad jau kunala sharana/karil jo harana sankatache* from a khadilkar play, I think, is in fact based on a *lavani* I said, 'To tell you the truth, I cannot now in all honesty say that I knew it. But it is quite possible that twenty-five years or so ago, somebody might have mentioned it to me. It might have stayed there, and it must have simply come up again.' *virodha-bhakti* works in a peculiar kind of way. Bhaskar actually sang both to me. The *lavani* he sang was, of course, different from the one I had used. But there was a specific *lavani* Then he said, 'Now listen to this carefully.' And when he sang the *natyasangeet* it was obvious that it had a *lavani* base on which classical music had been superimposed.

*(It's Satara-Sangli where the natyasangeet tradition actually began. And the first time I went to Sangli I found that they took great pride in the fact that G. P. Deshpande is a product of those parts, and they showed me your picture.)*

One absorbed all these influences, but what Satara, Sangli and Kolhapur have given me is very difficult to say. Still, I think *virodha-bhakti* or better *still*, *viraha-bhakti* would sum it up in many ways.

**Chanakya Vishnugupta** *G. P. Deshpande*

*Translated by Maya Paiidit*

'Today's tale is a saga of the creation of a nation, a state ... And the tale we are going to narrate today is about the man who presented modern political thought in third century B. C. . . . Chanakya Vishnugupta, son of Arya Chanakya . . .' Veteran Marathi playwright and Marxist intellectual G. P. Deshpande turns to India's ancient past to pinpoint the historical moment of empire in the context of the history of the subcontinent. The central character of the play, Acharya Chanakya Vishnugupta, theoretician and strategist of state, is perceived to be the force behind the rise of young Chandragupta Maurya from a mere rebel to the status of Emperor of Magadha. What drives Chanakya is a historical vision. He sees in Chandragupta the ideal vessel to carry out his theories of state; and ruthlessly manipulates his young disciple to fulfil his grand vision of an all-powerful empire, the first centralized state.

As with all Deshpande's plays, this is a fierce theatre of ideas, in which the debate over concepts of state rages back and forth between the characters. The questions raised in the process result in an investigation of history rarely undertaken in dramatic form. This is political theatre in the true sense of the term.

The playwright's detailed introduction explores the ideas that went into the play, and his approach to the main characters and what they mean to him.

**ZISBN 817046 133 2**

**RS 70**

## **Forthcoming**

### **Political Plays**

*A Man in Dark Times/Past One o'Clock/A Passage to Darkness*

*G. P. Deshpande*

G. P. Deshpande is a Marxist scholar, an academic, and a widely produced and translated playwright. Every one of his plays has been put on stage by major directors. His plays have a reputation for being dense in ideas, discussion and debate. This set of three plays deals with the

impact on human beings, and their relationships, of the collapse of the Communist ideal, the vacuum left by the loss of belief. The volume contains, in addition to the playscripts, introductions to each play as well as essays by the author.

## **Bhramyaman: The Travelling Theatre of Assam**

**DR. BHABENDRANATH Saikia is a prominent writer and theatre personality of Assam.**

**This piece is reconstructed from an interview with BIREN DAS SHARMA**

I believe that nowhere in India do we find what we understand by 'Bhramyaman Theatre'. Its inception is probably due to Braja Sharma-the person responsible for developing this unique form of travelling theatre-and his touring unit, since it began then and a few other units emulated it. This was around the late 40s and Braja Sharma was working on a much smaller scale than what we see today. Now, there are these huge platforms carried around in trucks, a huge tent, a wooden gallery, chairs, props, sets, lights and sound equipment-the 'travelling' character of the theatre began around the 60s. The manner in which Braja Sharma did it had strains of jatra, and it was not on as massive a scale as it is now. They usually had a few trunks, harmonium and tabla, and things like the stage, lights etc. would be provided by those who had invited them. But in the 60s it all changed. A person called Achyut Lahakar began this improvised concept of 'Bhramyaman Theatre' as a new form with his unit Nataraj Theatre, at a place called Pathshala about 100 km from Guwahati. Soon others took it up, and gradually new units were formed.

In our childhood we had seen the jatra of Bengal in central Assam and we too had a form which was the same as the jatra, in that the people sit around on four sides and the performance is held in the middle. There was a clear influence of the Bengali jatra in the style of acting, musical tunes or the instruments used, clarinet, harmonium, *dhulki* etc. It was very popular in western Assam, in the areas of Kamrup, Barpeta and Nalbari. It used to be known as jatra and in *A dance drama in progress*





some places was also known as opera. Jatra began around the beginning of the 20th century and was quite powerful till independence. For festivals like Durga Puja, people would invite a jatra group which would come and perform as a 'party'. There would be one 'ustad', as he was known, the one who did the production. Though we usually call the music instructor the 'ustad', in jatra the producer was called 'ustad'. Some 'ustads' would form a group and the group would perhaps perform for some years. They'd get hold of various kinds of plays from *Raja Harishchandra* to *Shah Jahan* and perform them.

Braja Sharma was very closely involved in staging plays in the jatra mould, with his own troupe. He used to act and also handle some of the music and the way he presented the theatre, which travelled and performed in various places, is now known as the 'Bhramyaman theatre' in Assam.

Bhramyaman Theatre has many interesting features. The most striking of them is its unique use of two stages side by side: large, wooden stages, built on a platform 5' high off the ground, 75' in length and 25' in depth. The overall height of the stage is about 14' and then there is the box where the lightsmen sit and a catwalk where backstage helpers run around and at the back there is a separate arrangement for another set of lights for projection and shadow play. It's a total audiovisual presentation.

The play is divided into and performed on the two stages. Instead of a revolving stage, the curtain comes down in one and goes up on the next stage, where the scene continues or a fresh scene starts. For example, you see the king's palace on one stage and when the scene comes to an end, the curtain drops and on the next stage the curtain goes up and you see the seashore. It's a smooth continuation without a pause between the two. Generally there are no painted

backdrops, but sets are used. The audience sits before these two stages in a big tent. At the back is the gallery and in front all the chairs are arranged. The wooden gallery and the chairs belong to the unit. In the front row one usually finds good chairs for the patrons. There was a time when theatre unit, were even using three stages one beside the other, say the king's palace, the seashore and the poor man's home, and all three would operate simultaneously. But three stages are a little inconvenient for the audience and more difficult to handle. So it has been standardized into two stages. The stages are more or less on a plain line with just a slight curvature. The tent is about 100' by 130'. The pandal or tent has a total capacity of more than 2000 people. And in front of it, behind the screen, from one side to the other, the music party and playback artistes sit, facing the stage. And behind the stage there are the arrangements for sets, the greenroom etc.

They are so professionally organized that every plank of wood is numbered, every bamboo is numbered, if one is misplaced, great dislocation will take place. Everything is marked and arranged. The main wooden stage stands on wooden pegs. They have two sets of that. Suppose the show is in Guwahati from the 1st and in Nagaon from the 5th. One stage will go on to Nagaon and the other will be set up in Guwahati. And while the Guwahati show begins and runs for 4-5 days, the Nagaon stage will be set up. And on the last day, when the play ends, immediately the settings, costumes, chairs -everything goes into the truck so that those essential items reach the next spot by the morning. In the morning you won't find the tent and the stage at Guwahati. All the materials will have left in the truck. And suppose the next venue after Nagaon is Jorhat then the Guwahati structure will go to Jorhat. Each travelling group has at least one truck of their own. If need be, they hire more trucks. They lure buses for the artistes to go from one place to another. They stay for 4-5 days in each place and a minimum of four performances are held at each venue.

For stage lighting they have the most modern equipment, like we see in cinema studios, from dimmers to various other kinds of sophisticated equipment necessary for the tricks and techniques of lighting, which they usually get from Bombay and Calcutta. THEY also have slide projector,. They have their own generators because they travel to places where there is no



electricity, or with chances of hover failure. ]here is one person who constantly sits next to the generator bef<sup>o</sup>re the play begins He is not allowed to move C one light burns there and the poor s<sup>o</sup>ul sits there and reads books, just in case the electricity suddenly fails. The actors will remain frozen in their pose for only a few seconds and the generator will start immediately. Apart from the generator and the light equipment they have to carry numerous other things with them.. For example, a sound system suitable for 2000 people who are seated practically in the open air, with each spectator being able to hear every word of dialogue. This needs technical instrument'-; of very good quality, positioned so that no one in the audience has difficulty hearing the dialogue at any point in time. Then there are publicity and decorating materials.

On an average every travelling group has four plays. These four plays have the costumes of each character and requisite: props. Each and every item has to be maintained professionally and carried from place to place. Most of these performances begin in early September. They usually begin rehearsing by the beginning of July and continue through August. From around 20 August they put up pandals in the home town where the head office is, and perform each play three or four times for the local people. These are ticketed shows, although the rate is slightly lower, and they get sponsorship from local organizations and those local organizations. But the greatest advantage of this is that before the travelling begins they get to have practice run-throughs, in front of a home-town audience. It erases their fears, and 'frees' the play, as we call it. So after these 15-16 days of performing each play almost 34 times, they start travelling as per schedule.

The venues are fixed on the basis of invitations offered by various organizations, clubs, institutions etc., which are popularly known as 'committees' in the travelling theatre circle. The owner of a theatre group selects suitable committees and enters into an agreement with them. The agreement fixes the terms and conditions including financial transaction. The profit made by the committees are generally used for the welfare of their organization, club etc. In this respect the travelling theatres are rendering laudable service to certain social causes besides the cause of the theatre. A large number of educational institutions have been greatly benefitted by inviting the travelling theatre.

The season is from the first week of September to 12 or 13 April because on 14 April we have our *Bohag Bihu* and on that day every actor/actress and worker has to come back home. So usually they have their last performance of the year on the 12th or 13th of April, and there is a feast on that day after which every one returns home. Another interesting thing is that a good number of representatives of the committees join the closing feast and book the group for the following year to perform at their respective places. Some of them even pay advance money to confirm the booking. In April, May, June, the theatre companies look around for new plays although some preliminary talks have already been held-getting a new play, new artistes. During this period repair work is also done. Say the tent material is torn or the gallery planks are broken or chairs need to be repaired, all this is done in these three months. So the head office functions throughout the year. Only the actors and actresses and the musicians sit at home. **After the**

*Sets props and other stage material*



begin in the first week of July.

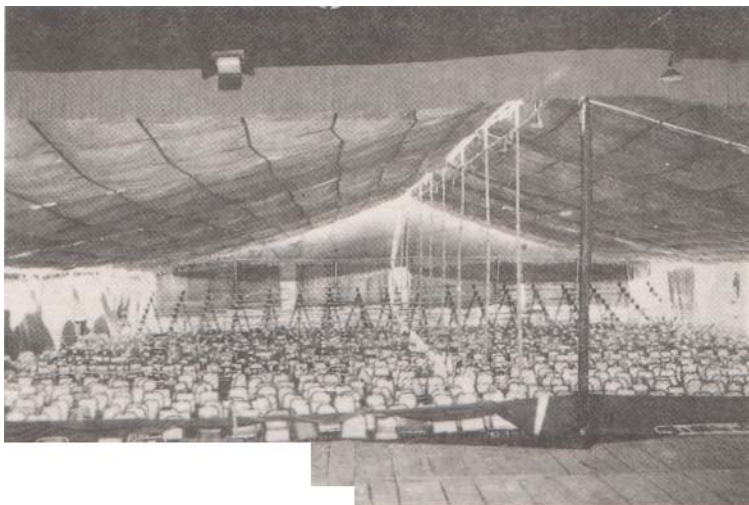
The programme begins with a dance drama before the play is performed. It lasts for about 20-30 minutes and its presence is imperative. If we go back in history, the need for this was perhaps felt because, in the olden days, before each show there used to be musical instruments played or perhaps a comic interlude or a dance numbers before the show. Dance numbers before the performance were very popular and this tradition is still continuing in a different format. Nowadays, within the main drama there may not be any song or dance at all But the companies have to face various kinds of audiences in villages and towns and there are many people among them who have an inclination for songs and being *loaded Mr n truck* dances and expect them. There is another, very practical, functional aspect. The audience usually takes time to enter and they do so while the dance drama is on. By the time the play begins, the commotion of people entering and leaving stops. So it is something like a prelude also. The dance drama usually has a theme which may be a modern political one, low corruption is occurring, who is ruling whom; or it can be a natural calamity like a poor farmer in the village whose livelihood is destroyed by floods. It may have old stories like *Cinderella*, *Don Quixote* or *Shakuntala* (which is a very popular dance drama). Songs and instrumental music are in the background and in the foreground there's dance and mime-acting, in which gestures may have playback dialogue and songs narrating the story line. So one such dance drama troupe of at least 6 boys and 6 girls has to go along with the main theatre team. Although the musicians are the same for both the dance drama and the play. The dance director is different. They have their own costumes, too. The dance drama troupe has its own costumes and sets.

For four dance dramas based on anything from *Shakuntala* to a modern theme, and four plays, the group has to carry at least 10-12 huge boxes. And then there are boxes for lights and wiring of the entire pandal's lighting and sound. This dance is some kind of creative dance. In their styles, you'll see, as per requirement, a trace of Bharatanatyam, somewhere Manipuri dance, elsewhere the Assamese Satriya dance, and traces of various other dances. But on the whole it is popular creative dance. In some theatres the directors have an inclination even for the kind of dances you see in Hindi films nowadays. But primarily the style will match the kind of theme they have chosen.

Travelling theatres invariably use background music for their plays. Lots of parties also use songs, modern or folk, to be sung by the characters of the plays. But there is nothing

distinctive or characteristic about the tune or the music as such. Sometimes, on the other hand, it is a little too businessminded. The background music is supposed to help the action of the play as the wind aids the sail. It should be as per the situation and the feelings/moods of the characters. But the original orchestra with which the travelling theatres began was very different. There you'll find the elements of jatra, the clarinet and those strains. In contrast, now we use more contemporary instruments and perhaps some strains of the more modern music. The tune of the opening music is common to all plays, it is just a few chords, informing the audience that the curtain is going up. Then there is another piece of music for the credits, which is composed according to the 'mood' of the play, while the names are slide-projected.

In the main theatre campus where a company is situated, rehearsal of the dance drama goes on in one room separately while on the main rehearsal stage, drama rehearsals are held. Normally rehearsal begins by 7.45 or 8 in the morning. At around 10.30 there is a break, then rehearsal is resumed and again around 1 pm there is a break. Then again it starts in the evening at about 5 o'clock. It continues till about 11-12 at night and towards the end, when the time of performance is drawing close, practice is on till 2-3



through on Stage, it may even I go on upto dawn w n n. And even if they are a little late the next day it still begins at 10 am. Within the campus once the pla v is nearly ready for performance, the big 60' by 30' stage is set up at a convenient location and rehearsals are shifted there. In the mean time arrangements are made for sets. One day the music director and the director of the play sit together and as the rehearsal proceeds, at every point it is halted

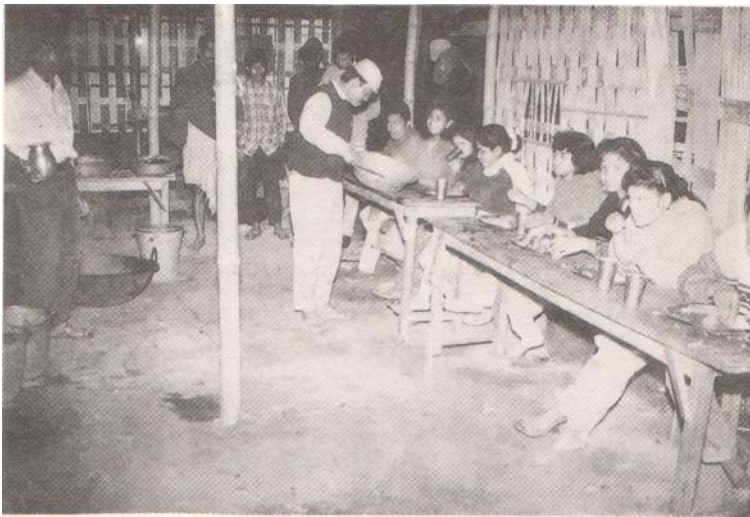
and the music scores are set. Then, toward the end rehearsals are held with lull props, Sets and music. The dance drama is also rehearsed alongside. The lights and music are all double checked at that time of it reaches a stage when very little prompting is required. That is when the public performances begin.

I have noticed that once the groups start performing outside and after two or three performances, when the production becomes absolutely 'free', the prompter may as well go home. He stays on only for the odd emergency like suddenly an artist falls sick, and the understudy goes on, then the prompter is needed. It is impossible to maintain two people for each role which means ten more boys and five more girls in the party. For the smaller roles, some boys and girls from the dance drama section can help. But for the other artists, it is not possible to maintain an understudy for each. So there is a great risk involved when performances begin in the first week of September and continue upto 13 April. Performances are scheduled every day, and the main female lead may be the heroine in all four plays. She is not supposed to fall sick even for a single day during this span. This is a great risk because people are bound to fall sick. They are travelling around all over the place, somewhere the water is bad, somewhere the food is not suitable to someone; in this situation people are liable to fall sick. But they are very careful in that sense. The audience cannot be turned away. One has to look after one's health. In emergencies, when the second-most important artiste is given the protagonist's role, immediately there has to be a reshuffling and the prompter is required. Although they have all seen one another perform many times and perhaps even know what they are supposed to do in the new role, they need a little prompting with the dialogues.

There is a 'star' system in Bhramyaman theatre. There are some girls and boys in Assam who are very famous as actors and actresses and there is a demand for them. Perhaps before the shows are over in April of a particular season, one party's people will try to draw another party's stars through offers of more pay. At the same time, many glamorous screen stars who do not have enough work to keep busy throughout the year join travelling theatres and get a fixed annual income—maybe for one season. If they do not like it, they do not come back. This also happens because the travelling theatre is strenuous in terms of health. Those who are a little comfort-loving among them have a great deal of difficulty. Some have seen that they can endure the hardship and their earnings are good and they enjoy it; in that case they give up the cinema and stay on here.

Then there are some who try to manage both film and theatre simultaneously by suitable adjustments. So there's a group that has made its name in the travelling theatre itself, and another group which has made a name in films and then gone to theatre. Yet another group has gone from theatre to films for its glamour.

Gradually the number of women in travelling theatres has decreased. There is no dearth of them for TV serials because that is work before the camera, and after a few days' shooting they return home. But if they want to come into travelling theatres, they have to quit home and move around for about nine months. This is not possible for many women. Hence there'll be plenty of women for radio plays, serials and even film shooting. But in totally professional travelling theatre, one has to act before 1500-2000 people *every* night and travel all over the state of Assam. It is difficult to find women for this. If someone has



*The kitchen and the eating space behind the greenroom*

the inclination, there may be problems from guardians, and some of them have their own personal lives. The girls in the dance dramas are generally from ordinary village homes. The main incentive is the income; it is usually not a childhood fantasy of becoming a dancer that impels them to come here. They certainly have the talent to be dancers; but they mainly leave their homes due to poverty. Their earning helps their home and families. I have also seen in the last 145 years that those who initially come in as dancers, after doing smaller roles, become heroines. This depends upon their knowledge of Verbal language. Those of them who speak well, with good pronunciation, perhaps get a small role followed by a bigger role



later. Since the women who collide into theatre have to wander around for nine months, they have either completed their education, or quit it. There have been graduates here, too. But most of them are drop-outs. Or they've got married midway. Many of them are married with husbands in a theatre group, maybe not in the same group but in a different one. Or it may be that the husband is a musician and the wife acts. I have seen some women who are running their households on their income.

Over the years I have seen how the plays have changed. At first, just as the theatre began with jatra, the stories too were inspired by it. Achyut Lahakar's most famous play is *Sati Behula*. In it, live snakes were shown on stage. This was very popular and staged many times. Then later, there was *Abhisapta Chambal* a story about the dacoits of Chambal. There was a tendency to select plays which would grip the audience easily, which had powerful plots, where the acting required was pretty intense and in which an attractive mixture of jatra and theatre could be achieved. Then when the number of travelling theatre groups increased the need for new plays was felt very strongly. Where would each group get four plays? If there are four groups, this means sixteen plays. For sixteen good plays there have to be good days. Out of these sixteen, say ten would be local plays and the remaining six were collected by the producer from current performances in Calcutta. These would be popular Bengali plays which were translated, with maybe minor changes made. But over the last 14-15 years plays have evolved and the most significant change is that the plays are now more inclined to reflect the contemporary political, social and family scenario. Political corruption forms the basis for many plays of the travelling theatre now. Almost every group has some plays about the corruption of ministers, MLAs, bureaucrats, their attitudes towards the common people. My feeling is that social injustice and corruption have become the most important themes. But then again this overemphasis on political corruption and the lapses of the ministers and bureaucracy will also become monotonous after a point and the trend will change again a few years down the line. Simultaneously there are 'serious' plays too, like *Mrichchhakatika* or a play on the legend of Amrapali. But the trend is more towards what we understand as plain and simple modern drama.

What I see as the element most common to these plays is excitement and suspense. These are still the essential ingredients of the travelling theatre plays, and then the power of the dialogue and the complexity of the plot., And also a content-that is an audience

expectation-some sort of a message. Comedy is also demanded by the audience. We often say that we have forgotten how to laugh and generate laughter. Hence the audience really expects the comic. Most people try to perpetrate the old brand of slapstick comedy, but the audience is far more intelligent now. Somebody stumbling and falling doesn't quite work anymore. But the audience wants comedy, they want to laugh, definitely so. There are comic characters, but that too has its problems-just because the audience wants to laugh should I create a comic character and make them laugh? Often that would impede my theme. So when I write I try to discover elements of comedy from within my story. The characters, in their lives too, favour of situational comedy and I try to evolve it out of them and the plot rather than create a distinctly separate comic character. But a lot of people do that and place them quite strategically within the framework of the plot and there are several actors and actresses who are known for their comic histrionics. So, if a party has employed a comedian, and the play doesn't have a role for him, he will be underutilized or misutilized Often plays are written with them in mind.

Speaking of audience composition, it may be said that it consists mostly of middle class people. I've



noticed that people of the lower Assani region, where jatra used to be common, have a greater affinity for this theatre. Now, since they are informed so much in advance, the organization would like to gather as large an audience as they can, for economic gain. So for three or four months they do some marketing locally, sonu• push-sales, sell some season tickets. Under this system, the engineer or deputy commissioner or big businessman who may not have come otherwise, gets roped in by this local organization. That is how we also

get to see the so-called 'Upper class' in the front rows. So the audience for travelling theatre is now quite organized and systematized by the local groups who invite and promote travelling theatres. Under the terms and conditions of the agreement between the theatre group and the organization, the space, four temporary walls around it, a greenroom and accommodation for the group has to be provided by the organization. That is one of the reasons why the audience for travelling theatres has not decreased. I think such a system would have been very helpful for the regional films also, the audience for which is fast declining in number.

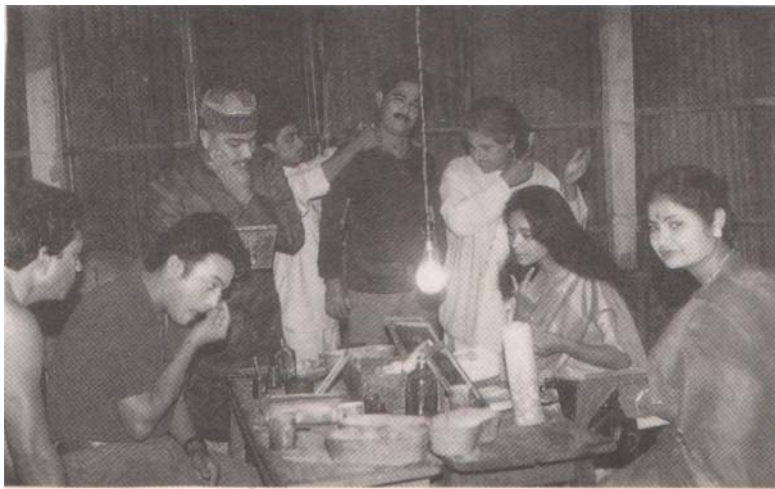
A travelling theatre is a very big enterprise. My rough idea is that these groups-from the beginning of rehearsal to the commencement of travel for seven months-have to bear the cost of feeding around 100 people every day; there are costs of rehearsals, costumes, settings, new tents, new lighting equipment, transportation, salaries of the artistes and the staff, and many other incidental expenses. Altogether this works out to nearly 30 lakhs a season. If the plays are good, if the company is good and the actors and actresses are good, then it brings in about 33 lakhs.

These companies are owned by individuals. The artistes' salary depends on their talent and glamour. Those who have made a name on the travelling theatre stage, whom the audience wants to see, or who have come from the films, their rates for the entire season may be between Rs 60,000 to 4 lakhs. I have seen the entire range, including people who have danced for Rs 1000 for a month. The musicians get around Rs 10-15 thousand for the whole season, depending upon the instrument they are playing. The keyboard players or violinists get paid in the higher range.

I feel that people have a natural inclination for theatre, the live performance before their eyes, be it travelling or any other kind of theatre; the performance has a different attraction from that of films. In the towns or villages of Assam there are no regular ongoing theatre performances. For example, in Guwahati city, there is no specific theatre auditorium as such. There is the Rabindra Bhavan, where sets are erected and theatre performances take place, while the next day there may be a political meeting there. Similarly the District Library auditorium. These are multipurpose auditoriums. The general theatre scene is not very impressive at present. The reasons are various, like maybe those who were involved with it earlier have now gone into Bhramyaman or into TV serials or films. This gap has been filled by travelling theatres. The

efficiency and the professionalism with which they perform and come to the people, is very important. They arrive in the fields next door and you feel compelled to go and see what they are doing. As if performing for you! So if your works for these have been high art, absurdist plays, they would not have appealed to the general audience. What they appreciate are the simple nodes of performing—entry, dialogue and exit. Most people are still enjoying that, a good plot, good acting and a professional presentation. Over the years, travelling theatre has nurtured and created an audience whose numbers are swelling.

I have always had a relationship with the stage, mainly one-act plays. In the 60s and a little



popular I wrote them regularly. (I wrote only one full-length play in those years **also** had some training in acting and production from Habib Tanvir in Madhya Pradesh. Then it was radio-plays that had me totally involved. Then, around the beginning of 1981—by then I was known only as a writer of short stories and radio and one-act plays—some of the members of Awahan theatre approached me. Before that some people used to tell me to write for the travelling theatres. I had this impression then that they were purely a commercial organization, having seen only a few of the older plays long ago. That's why I had no interest. But when the members of Awahan theatre came to me, I pondered over the matter from a different angle. In the mean time I had the occasion of observing closely the activities of a number of travelling theatres. Their professional discipline and organizational ability impressed me. I felt that they had many good qualities and the one thing that could help them the most was to get good plays. It appeared to me as if a plot of land had been cleared of forest, ploughed, irrigated, treated with fertilizer and made ready for cultivation. The only thing needed now was good seeds. I felt that if I could write plays then I

should write for them also. If I did not, then I had no right to criticize them for putting up only commercialized performances. Just because I sit in Guwahati and hold a pen I the travelling theatres-but when they ask for a play I don't give it. That is unfair. So I started writing for them in 1981. It was my first play for Awahan theatre and it was called *Ramdhenu* It was a family drama. It went off quite well. For that play's performance and direction I went with them. After that, for the next few years all their plays used to be under my direction. So that's how I came to be involved with them Since then I have taken it as a kind of sacred duty and believe that I shall continue for as long as t can because the trends have changed now and travelling theatres have gained a respectability. I feel I have made sonic contribution to that. Nobody can really laugh them off. They may criticize a specific play. But by and large the groups claim recognition.

I am basically a short-story writer.

And then I have *Lighting controls and the musicians* come into the theatre world through my one-act plays, which usually last 30 or 40 minutes. Within this time the play has to go through the entire evolution from beginning to end. This gives it a very tight structure. I try to maintain that tightness of structure even in these 2 hour 20 minute plays I write for the travelling theatre, so that the audience's attention is held at every single moment. I tell my artistes that there is a game of tug-of-war between them and the audience and if they slacken the rope even slightly the audience will pull them over and that's catastrophic. The tension of this rope has to be there at every moment. That I believe is the most essential thing for any performance, but most so for travelling theatres because the audience is extremely heterogenous in terms of social class. I am not doing the job for the money alone; money is essential but what is also essential is creating a certain aesthetic sensibility. I want to gradually make the gallery-audience too appreciate a serious play. If I were to work solely for the pleasure of the gallery audience I myself would slide downhill. But the opposite is happening. I try to dramatize the quotidian, daily life, in my plays. Sometimes I have also taken recourse to melodrama, but only to make a point, if need be.

When I come into travelling theatre with my the play that is getting affected, but also the presentation of it. As I have already mentioned here, I get two stages, side by side. On one it I show someone talking on the phone I can raise the other curtain and show the person who's receiving it as well. I can show both simultaneously It is like parallel editing or cross cutting.

So that's an immediate advantage. You can show a character's, thoughts in flashback. So the space usage can be very innovative. It can be a lot like in the films. I believe that I have understood this form well and I have tried to *use* it in very experimental



ways I had a Play called *Andha Koop a detective story* There, on *the right* stage, you see the DSP on a platform, below him is the inspector we 'how a conversation between the two and from the point in the narrative where the mystery begins, we shift to the other stage and the rest of the action continues there and it appeared to be continuous. These moves were very interesting. *In* general, stage-craft is very important in travelling theatre. In fact, 'trick' scenes were quite popular in these theatres upto the 80s. Even now, it works with the common people. But now such effects are situated within a 'realistic' framework rather than within the 'conjuring' framework. In one production for example, the headlights of a jeep are shown frontstage. The lights turn around and fade off backstage and then there's the sound of a crash. So technically these are very well managed audiovisual presentations. Like showing the churning of the ocean in the mythological, fountains *flowing ill* a contemporary play and so on are very well received by the audience. When travelling theatres began, so did the double stage. The idea was to keep the cinematic element and capture the audience. I must also mention the Use of projectors, widely used to create visual effects. For the initial credits and effects; and for the dance-drama, multiple slide projectors are used.

As a social institution travelling theatre has become an important cultural expression of the society for a large number of people. Secondly, in trying to find new plays, new techniques, new ways of expression; this also has some influence on the society. Then, every play has a certain message over and above the entertainment element. In this too, the

plays have been influenced by the populace and their general feelings and experiences. So, we see the professional way in which this theatre has evolved a methodology of involving itself with the society very systematically. It has interacted with society continuously, and that is how it has become a part of the society. It's the same with films, they too interact with society, perform a social function in their own way.

It is true that a section of travelling theatre is influenced by the popular media like films and TV, and has to some extent been vulgarized in the cut-out on car process. One thing we need to know here is that in Assam right now there are about 15 theatre groups or so, including the lesser known ones. Among them about six are financially very strong and stable and they have an urge to present good plays, and they have the organizational and crowd-pulling capacity, as well as the artistepulling capacity. The rest are not so big or strong. Each group needs four new plays every year. Now the first six, say, require 24 plays altogether. Does Assam have the people to write 24 plays in a year? No. Even if we do find the people to do that, 36 more plays for the remaining 9 parties cannot be found. So they have to work within these limitations: Like the larger parties travel around and make money, the smaller ones too need to survive. So they have a different strategy. Even when they do not get good plays or good artistes they make do with whatever they have; the hundred people who are in their party have to be maintained. We cannot expect the same kind of contribution from all the parties for very practical reasons. So in these smaller parties one or two may try to somehow get by with some song and dance routines, you might suddenly find a Hindi film plot in its midst, with the hero's movements and acting completely stylized like those of a to some audiences. To avoid such a trap a group needs someone in the production line to monitor it. For example, as a writer-director I can tell an actor that in this play you can prance around like this, but you shall not. This character has to be played like this. If I let it go, he will probably try to imitate something from a popular TV serial he has seen. That definitely has an element of crowd-pulling power. Now which party has kept it under Control depends upon the strength of the party and that of the director. So it is quite Possible that many parties here and there follow the 'trends' of recent Hindi films or TV serials because there is nothing Mr nobody to stop that but that is not the general trend. There is always an attempt to draw good crowds despite constant competition from the film and TV world. But it depends on how resist it. There is a conscious



of the plays being used as a prop for one we are trying to resist because the audience can immediately point out that you have done something of the Hindi-film type. It is practically equivalent to a criticism. I think it is quite unacceptable to a good theatre party.

But the whole thing depends upon the mentality of the producer, whether he looks only for money or he is seriously interested in making some contribution towards the drama movement, or producing good drama by developing good taste among the people. He may have begun as a businessman. But explaining to the producer that drama has a different space and the audience a different facet, and drawing him in to it, is the responsibility of the playwright and the director. As the playwright and director could say now let's put this up, it's hut stuff- and pass off a Hindi film story and he'll accept it. But it is my duty to understand both his economic risk and the social commitment to the audience and strike a balance. It is possible. Thirty years ago, Bengali films did just that.

**HA-I-MU**



## **An Opera**

**Pallab Roy**

### The legend

No one is to sing about her; nor is anyone supposed to be named after her-for she had left wanting never to return to this tormenting world. But her hurt sentiments form clouds in the sky and her tears cause rain, making the land fertile again. Sometimes she is imagined as a restless spirit derecognized by the heavens, whose angry stamping causes the sky to break into rains. Sometimes she is a deserted wife who felt agonized enough to want to dissolve into clouds, just like Sita took refuge in Mother Earth's arms when asked for a second ordeal. Some fancy that she chose to starve to death instead of submitting herself to the cruel Long Dili, while others believe that she was a rebel like Kareng Rongpharpi who killed 'General' Dili with a HARPI *Ha-i-Mu* is a multi-dimensional Karbi folk legend with many different versions. On the whole, it is the sad tale of how an ordinary peasant girl got transformed into the goddess of rains and fertility.

### The story

Ha-i-Mu was the beautiful, fun-loving and hardworking daughter of a poor peasant named Soi Ronghang. Their small village on the banks of the Amtarpeng river was not very far from Ronghang Rongbong where Pinpo, the Karbi chief, held his court. Pinpo had a whole lot of flattering bureaucrats, soldiers and commanders under him, one of whom was the commander-in-chief Long Dili. His main task was to forcefully collect rent for Pinpo and his courtiers from the peasants. This Dili came to know about the beauty of Ha-i-Mu from a Khasi or perhaps Jaiantia jeweller named Rasantang. This jeweller had once attempted to take advantage of Ha-i-Mu's simplicity and ended up being insulted. Looking for revenge, he urged Dili to marry Ha-i-Mu, though he knew very well that she was already married and had a child. Dili and his people went to Ha-i's house on the pretext of participating in a family ceremony. It is difficult for Karbis to object to aristocrats participating in religious or social festivals, so her father Soi could not refuse. Dili failed in his initial attempt of winning over

Soi, but emboldened by Pinpo's support, he forcefully took Ha-i-Mu away with him to Ronghang Rongbong. Neither Soi's nor her husband Long Teron's protests made their mark on Dili. But though he managed to kidnap her, winning Ha-i over was a different story altogether. She was ready to die, but not to submit to Dili. She went on a fast, but her spirit of revenge never left her. Emaciated as she had become, she kept on looking for some means of retaliation. Finally she found one. She managed to kill Dili with her *IrRrpi* -the cross bar used in a traditional looni-while he was fast asleep. But his death did not free Ha-i, who finally died a slave. Her soul, fatigued from years of starvation and overwork, was blown away by the clouds, and ever since her tears drop down on the earth as rain.

It is interesting to note that the then feudal lords banned this ballad with a view to preventing any possible propagation of the tales of torture associated with the rule of Pinpo and Dili. That still has an impact on the belief pattern of the Karbis. No girl is ever named Ha-i-Mu as the Karbis have not quite forgotten the misfortune connected with this name. They even believe that to sing this ballad is to invite bad luck. The belief is that, if the whole saga is sung, the inevitable result is excessive rains and flood. It was only the priestmagician *kant<sup>h</sup>arpo* of Pinpo's court who had the authority to utter the hymns called botor *kikur*, the prayer for rains and fertility, where the rain goddess Ha-i-Mu's tale is included. However, the more the feudal lords tried to suppress the spread of this story, the more it captured the popular mind. Today it exists as a lullaby that grandmothers sing to put children to sleep. This dualism of prohibition and acceptance has added a special dimension to this ballad.

#### The historical context

The hilly district of Karbi Anglong is situated along the south-eastern frontier of Assam, between Meghalaya and Nagaland. It is mostly people of the Karbi tribe who reside there. Some members of the Kuki, Dimasa, Rengma-Naga, the hilly Lalung, Mon-Tai and Jaiantia tribes also live here. The Karbis, belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid line of the Tibetan-Burmese group, have been termed by many as the Columbuses of Assam, for they are the ones who settled in this region first. They had probably come through Manipur and Cachar.

The Karbis have a long history of fighting for survival and freedom. Strife between the Karbis and other tribes continued between 1200-1650 A.D. They faced Cachar aggression even before Assamese attacks forced them to move further south. The story of Cachar aggression and

Karbi resistance is available from the folktale *Rongpharpi Rongbe*. The guerrilla method of tactical retreat is a strategy often used by the Karbis and it has a special significance in the Karbi psyche. The Jaintias on the west had also tried to annex Karbi terrain to their kingdom. Resistance against this attempt and regaining freedom under the leadership of Thong Nokbe is a glorious chapter in Karbi history. It is notable that the Karbis had also lent active support to resistance struggles in neighbouring kingdoms against slavery during Assamese monarchy or against exploitation by other feudal lords. They provided shelter for many fugitives of the Moamoria peasant uprising during 1769-94. When the Assamese rulers wanted the fugitives back, the Karbis not only refused to comply-they also helped the rebels with food, arms and other supplies.

When Assam was annexed to the British colony of India on 24 February 1826, Karbi land was also included. Colonial rule and exploitation on the one hand and the spread of missionary education on the other led to the rise of a landbased middle class among the Karbis. Later they participated in the freedom struggle of the country. It may be mentioned in this context that the rate of Christianization among the Karbis is much lower than among other north-eastern tribes of India, though it was into Karbi that the Bible was translated first in the whole of north-eastern India. For whatever reason, the Karbis managed to somehow hold on to their own religion and culture.

The language policy adopted by the union government in the 1960s created tremendous discontent among the mountain tribes of Assam and protest movements started. Rebellious activities among the Nagas and Mizos were already fairly strong. The emergence of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) made these movements even stronger. The amendment of the Constitution in 1969 (Section 244A) was a result of these movements. As per this provision, not just the state's right to autonomous rule, but also self-government of the hill councils was sanctioned, for the north-eastern states of India only.

Under the North-Eastern Region Reorganization Act, Meghalaya got autonomous status in 1971 and became a fullfledged state in 1972. This separation of Meghalaya from Assam and the creation of Mizoram have sometimes made the hill people want separate state status with a view to selfrule and autonomy. When the separation of Meghalaya was almost finalized, four legislators from north Cachar and Karbi districts had submitted a memorandum entitled *Reorganization Of Assam Injustice done to Karbi and North Cachar Hills District*. In this

document, they made it clear that the proposal for inclusion in the new state of Meghalaya was not acceptable because of religious and cultural differences. Further, the Karbi and Dimasa leadership was fully convinced that the problems of economic and educational backwardness of their region could not be solved without the status of a separate state. All these four legislators belonged to the Congress and the Assam Congress was also involved in this game of keeping these two districts within Assam. They were ready to promise anything to achieve that. So, in exchange for staying within Assam, these two districts got rights for self-government on 2 February 1970. However, soon problems arose despite a lot of promises. The academic councils of Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities decided in 1972 that henceforth only Assamese would be the medium of college education, leading to strong protests from these two districts. In connection with this and several other steps towards Assamization of the Karbis, the demand for separation from Assam and separate state status gradually emerged.

Till 1982, most of the political bodies in North Cachar and Karbi Anglong were Congress led. The emergence of the People's Democratic Front in 1984 signified far-reaching changes in the political history of these districts. The Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), a declared Marxist-Leninist organization, was born in May 1986 and protracted mass movement in support of this demand was started. This organization is actively supported by the Karbi Students' Association (KSA). The real founder of the KCS is Dr Sarsing Terang, who is not a bureaucratic post-holder, but has worked indefatigably to materialize his dream for a self-reliant cultural academy for the Karbis. The ASDC chairman, Dharamsing Teron, Chandrakanta Terang, the people's representative of the Cultural department, Pator Phangcho, the people's representative of the Public Health department and many KCS full-timers like Paharsing Timung, Soi Rongpi and others, have been his constant associates.

The KCS's elaborate activities are spread over an area of almost a thousand *bighas* situated about seven kilometers away from the main sub divisional town, Difu. The KCS is trying to set up a self-reliant cultural institute here that will simultaneously carry on the activities of creating an archive for traditional forms of song, dance and instruments, and undertake cultural training and development. Plans for developing the rich heritage of weaving are also included. Residential training in arts and crafts is already available to students. The KCS organizes regular regional cultural festivals and an annual youth festival, over and above organizing national- and international-level exhibitions for Karbi handicrafts. It supervises the

activities of the Karbi Music School and the Karbi Craft Emporium. Though committed to protecting and developing Karbi traditions, this organization is not averse to change and experimentation.

At present, most of KCS's functions occur in an open-air amphitheatre at Taralangso, where the Karbi People's Hall that houses the KCS office is.

#### The Karbi Youth Festival

The twenty-second Karbi Youth Festival was held on 15-19 February 1996. The inaugural ceremony of the festival is connected to the possible etymological meaning of the word Karbi. The word *a-knr-kibi* meaning 'flame keeper' may be the origin of the word *karbi* so the festival begins with thousands of torch-bearers gradually advancing towards the amphitheatre in the semi-darkness of dusk. This year, the main attraction of the festival was the performance of the Ha-i-Mu opera by the KCS on 15 and 18 February. But of course the festival had many other programmes, some of which were competitive, the three main categories being *lun barim* or folk songs, *kekan barim* or folk dances, and *mirdong prakso* or folk instruments. Folk dances were of two main kinds: the funeral-related *chomangkan* and the agriculture-related *hachcha kekan*. It is in this first dance form that the Karbi totem of *Jambeli Athon* is used. Folk instruments also had three sub-groups: *areng kethip* or percussion instruments, *arui* or stringed instruments, and *ingho* or wind instruments.

#### The Ha-i-mu Opera

To experiment with various ways of scientific categorization, registering and developing Karbi traditional song, dance and instrument forms, filmmaker and music scholar Gautam Chattopadhyay was invited to Taralangso about eight and a half months before the festival. While other activities carried on, discussions went on about the possible combination of Karbi traditional forms and other national/ transnational forms of

To face the triple pressure of Anglo-Americanization, pan-Hinduism at the national level and Assamization within the state level, this organization was born with the following basic purposes: AR s

1. Protecting Karbi cultural traditions and creating a progressive consciousness among the people about these roots.
2. Creating a framework for the scientific development of Karbi cultural traditions.

3. Developing a democratic culture that stands opposed to cultural exploitation, communal and ethnic oppression and violence, with a view to preserving social harmony and peace.

4. Forging cultural homogeneity among Karbi people spread over different regions.



the students have learnt so far was also there. It was through these discussions that the KCS organizers hit upon the idea of creating an opera based on a local ballad.

It would be interesting to note in this context that many folk ballads are prevalent among the Karbis, most of which are heroine-centred. Apart from the Ha-i-Mu ballad already talked about, the ballads of Mir Tahin, Deng Samet, Sardi Hun, kARENG rOMIR Sabin etc. could be named. The



*r op. Rehearsing iii the open air performance spa( Below The beginning of the opera*

woman-centrism of these operas may be indicative of the status of women in the Karbi society of earlier times. Be that as it may, the Ha-i-mu ballad was selected for operatic performance in the festival.

Folk poets or singers called *lunse* sing parts of the ballad according to pre-determined rules. Since most of these ballads have survived only in the oral form, the same ballad keeps changing over time and in different regions. The singing of the entire ballad needs almost four days, but-as previously mentioned-the whole ballad is never sung. Different sections of the ballad are popular in different parts of Karbi district. Trying to get the whole ballad together for the opera, director Gautam Chattopadhyay faced a strange and sing the whole ballad was not ready to sing the last part of the ballad as that, he believed, is inevitably connected with some form of natural disaster. After repeated requests, he agreed to sing the final section only after observing a particular ritual. But from the next morning, an uninterrupted downpour started,

threatening to flood Difu. The Karbis hadn't experienced such a heavy and continuous shower since 1972.

Theatre or opera is not a part of Karbi folk cultural tradition. Songs, group dancing, playing a variety of folk instruments etc. have a long tradition; even dialogic forms like *bongoi alum* or *masera kehir* are there. But no tradition of folk theatre has ever been present. Students taking training in the KCS residential institute had no prior idea of contemporary performing arts, neither would the viewers of the festival have been exposed to them. The best way to present students of dance, song and instruments together would be an opera, as it would allow students of all these three to perform. But such an opera would have to be simple in form, inclined towards folk traditions and, at the same time, contemporary.

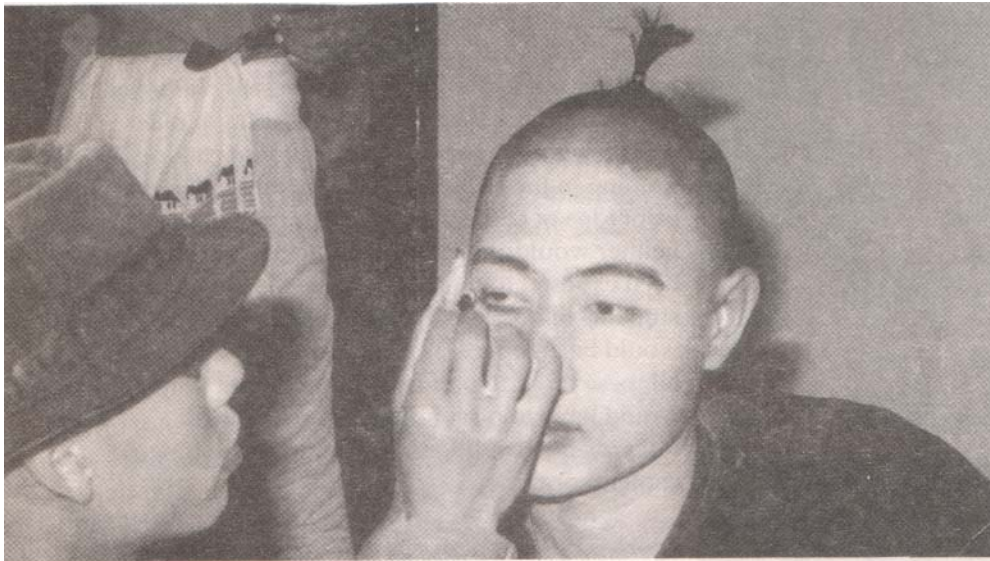
It needs to be clarified that the Ha-i-mu opera is by no means comparable to what we, understand by opera in the western context. A dramatic but rule-determined use of various voice tones like tenor, soprano etc., fixity of form and pre-defined nature of presentation characterize the western opera mode that has virtually been immobilized into a classical form with the death of Wagner and Verdi in the late nineteenth century. It is but natural that a contemporary experimental opera would have little in common with that mode. The only similarity probably lies in the eclecticism of a form so dependent on music.

The two-and-a-quarter-hour-long presentation of *Ha-i-mu* consisting of more than thirty sequences was composed with many Karbi songs, using dances and instruments that are part and parcel of their daily lives. The draft of the opera, prepared by Basanta Das, finally changed a lot in the actual performance. Assistant director Dhansing Rongpi made these necessary changes and wrote the additional dialogue following the director's instructions. Folk songs were worked upon to suit the opera by Chandrakanta Terang, himself a singer. He was assisted by Jorsing Bey. The contribution of Dharamsing Teron in planning the use of folk dance forms and in choreographing the whole thing must be mentioned. Not that all the folk forms were always used in their traditional mode or context-as a result the entire production transcended being merely an imitation of traditional folk performance styles. To cite an example, the *chomangkan* is traditionally a funeral dance, though in the opera it has been used for a completely different purpose. The use of the *hem<sup>p</sup> tap* or tree-house is also an interesting instance. The Karbis are very familiar with a tree house, but in the opera it has been used to inject an element of comedy through creating the image of romance up in a tree. Situating this tree outside the operatic space



of the stage helped in extending the stage-oriented vision of the audience. In fact, throughout the whole show, the performance kept entering the audience zone. For instance, in one sequence, things keep happening on stage while about fifty dancers dance to the beat of *chings* or drums in a semi-circle right among the audience.

If a production has to be contemporary in form, it cannot restrict itself merely to the reconstruction or renewal of performative techniques of folk traditions. The desired form can only be created through combining modern techniques with the essence of folk traditions. Only then can a production communicate its theme even without using a plot, characterizations, dialogues or detailed stage settings. Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* is a good instance of such a combination of a folk tale, Chhatisgarhi folk forms and modern techniques. In that production, the songs or group dances are not merely a means of linking together various parts of the play, but an integral part of the whole performance, giving it a unique form. But in contemporary theatre, the so-called search for roots more often than not ends up in mere ornamental performance of folk forms to create an



*Performers do the make-up for each other before a performance. Note the traditional hairstyle*

exotic spectacle. Such spectacular packages neither evoke any new thoughts, reactions or questions, nor do they create any fresh forms of audience-performer interaction.

It is not just the interpretation of an epic or a folk tale in the light of contemporaneity that matters; a well-thought-out-exchange of modern and traditional performative techniques is equally important. Just as the past needs to be reflected in the mirror of the present, so does the

past continually need to critique the present. Unless this dialectic is carefully maintained in choosing the performative techniques there are high chances of a production losing its balance. The *Ha-i-Mu* opera is a notable instance of an almost perfect balance in this regard. The jili variation of the chomangkam dance is traditionally used in Karbi society to find one's life partner. It is used in the opera for that too, but with a significant difference. The romance between Ha-i and Long Teron blossoms through this spontaneous and exuberant dance, at the end of which the men come down from the stage while the women divide up into four small groups in a choreographed composition. Then again, the *bongoi mir* is a kind of purple grass flower that is believed by the Karbis to be the symbol of love while the *bongoi alun* is a musical form for romance. In this dialogic form, the man first proposes and then the woman responds in the second part of the song and gradually through such musical dialogues they come closer to each other. In the opera this easy and spontaneous form of romantic singing has been used to create an incredibly tragic effect. Ha-i, imprisoned by Dili, sings the *bongoi alunom* one side of the stage while Long responds to her from the other end. The huge stage illuminated with melancholic lights separates the two to reflect their alienated situation and the love song of *bongoi alun* becomes extremely tragic, as the possibility of Ha-i and Long's being close to each other does not exist.

The guitar is an inseparable part of daily life for the people of the north-east. Most of them play simple folk melodies on this instrument even without any formal training. Consequently, the guitar is no more 'western' to them than their own single-stringed *kum li'eng*. But the use of many guitars along with a number of traditional percussion instruments added a new dimension to the background music of the opera. The musicians sat on a bamboo platform adjacent to the circular stage. Not that they were there only to supply the background music, as in a jatra. There were eight guitarists, two *che ng* or drum players, one *pongsi* or flute player and one *lunse* or folk singer. This complete group would sometimes get onto the stage to participate in dance sequences and choral songs. The choreographed movements of the soldiers of Pinpo are presented to the beat of this music. The sequence of these soldiers looting the villagers is an enviable application of body language. The opera starts with the roaring laughter of the plundering soldiers and the laments and cries for help of the villagers heard against the backdrop of constant drum beats and choral chants.

Along with the instruments already mentioned, *cheng burups* or small drums and *chengkumbangs* a native percussion instrument made of bamboo, were also used at times. The team of musicians also included a *harbola* (one capable of mimicking sounds of birds and beasts as well as other everyday noises), who was used to create the atmosphere of dawn with exact imitations of the cackle of fowl, or at one point to mimic the wails of a new-born infant.

It is the innocence of childhood from which one can draw unlimited resources for creativity. It is near impossible to know in advance which experience might come in handy at what point of time, causing which sequence to transcend the mundane and the hitherto-experienced with the touch of a magic wand. That is just what happened in Gautam Chattopadhyay's planning of the last scene. In many rural fairs, it is still possible to get a toy that looks like an inverted 'y'. One end of this toy made of palmyra leaves, is tied to a long, narrow stick. If one rotates the stick, the palmyra leaf part circulates very fast and makes some kind of a metallic sound. Many of us have had the experience of buying this nameless toy in our childhood. Director Chattopadhyay used eight or ten of these toys to create the background music in the last scene. Ha-i is dead and her body lies prostrate almost mid-stage. Her husband Long Teron, distressed and lamenting, sits a little farther off. The scene begins with a sudden wail from Long. Almost immediately, some fifty or sixty people come running in to surround Ha-i's corpse and they keep rapidly chanting her name in chorus. Some eight or ten soldiers go round Ha-i's body once and then exit. Each of them carries one of those toys. The metallic sound of these toys against the backdrop of Long's laments and the choral chant create an incredible atmospheric music that sounds like rains slashing against a background of thunder. The combined effect of the music and the suddenness of the incident almost make the audience forget that this ordinary peasant girl Ha-i-Mu is supposed to have become a goddess. This scene draws to a close with the musicians singing the tragic *ker-htt alun* song, but the opera is not yet finished. A brief and stark enactment of Ha-i killing the cruel Dili with the cross bar of her loom is presented last.

The use of a long blue ribbon to represent the tides of a river in the sequence of group fishing, or the use of the *adam asar* song when Dili comes to Ha-i's father's house during a family ceremony, are techniques that deserve mention. The *adam asar* is usually sung during weddings. The scene of Dili kidnapping Ha-i begins with the invitees having their meal sitting in two rows. Among them are a father and his moronic son whose funny movements and

gestures bring some comic relief. Long Dili sits among the guests and when Ha-i comes near him to serve food, he tries to force a ring on her finger. The already married Ha-i naturally refuses, but Dili ends up forcefully taking her away amidst everyone. The happy situation interspersed with comic elements changes quite suddenly. Other remarkable applications are the use of a fabulous lullaby sung by Ha-i, the solo sung by a *lunse* during the wood-felling sequence, the composition of the *hachcha kekan* dance sequence and the repeated use of *Masera kehir* the Karbi tongue twisters.

Once a famous textile giant had commented that colonialism had robbed this country even of its colours making only dull colours like gray, ash and off-white popular. He dreamt of bringing the colours back to this country again. But in Karbi Anglong, it is bright Colours all around Jet black combined with scarlet, with no white border in between. The reason for this easy co-existence of such loud colours is geographical -Karbi's angular position in respect of the sun-that reminds one of the celebration of colours in Kurosawa's films.

This festival of colours was maintained in the costumes of the opera. Though the costumes were traditional, there was certainly no dearth of colour. The traditional hair cut of Karbi men is a shaved head with a bunch of hair tied up on the middle of the head-somewhat like a punk haircut. Many students initially refused to get such a haircut, but finally they did it for each other. Hindu influence has made *dhoti* popular among the Karbi men, but their traditional male costume consists of a *rikong* or loincloth, a *choi* for the upper part of the body and a *polio* or turban. In the opera, *rikongs* were used on chust pajamas (tight cotton drainpipes). Pajamas of different colours were used to designate different strata or professions; e.g. yellow pajamas for the soldiers, purple pajamas for the musicians etc. Some had feathers stuck in their *pohos*. The only non-Karbi character was Ransantang, which is why he was dressed in a red and yellow striped *dhoti* Karbi women traditionally drew a black tattoo mark from the middle of their forehead across their nose, though now it is hardly in vogue any more. Women in the opera used this mark. Apart from some ornaments, their dress was almost completely traditional, consisting of a *jiso* or a covering for the upper part of the body, a *vamkok* or a wrap-around skirt and a *pini* or a cloth-belt on the waist. Blouses are not traditional among Karbi women, but they were used in the opera to be worn under the *jisos*, as most women now use them. A shawl was also wrapped around the shoulders. Soi Rongpi and

Shashikala Hansebi put in untiring work to supervise the costume and make-up of nearly eighty performers.

The movements or body language of a person get regulated and altered through an encounter with technology. How far the spontaneity of movements is retained depends on how little one has been exposed to technological intervention. The question of pace is also important, for the rhythm of the body depends on that. Urbanization has introduced an element of speed in this rhythm, and now a trace of fatigue is also present, for this busy and fast rhythm is not natural-it is imposed and artificial. The rhythm and movements of the Karbi opera performers were so different from this customary urbanized rhythm that it was hard to miss. They have remained unaffected by both the good and the bad effects of industrialization, which is why their expressions could be so spontaneous and distinctive. Though all of them were performing on stage for the first time, and though the scope for dialogic acting is rather limited in a musicintensive form like the opera-neither of these factors acted as a constraint on the expressive performance of the young artists. A lot of team work went into the dance, song, group acting and choreographed movements.

It is not easy to do proper casting from among so many students, but the director must be applauded for doing a very good job there. Rani as Ha-i, Sarsing as Katharpo, Joising as Long Dili and Maheswarsing as Ha-i's father Soi put in superb performances. But Sunil, as the jewellery trader Ransantang, was the most popular actor; he excelled himself in every single appearance. Mohon as Long Teron was also good. Joising's short stature and his ever-present smirk added a new dimension to the cruelty of Dili, the character he played. During rehearsals, which stretched over nearly eight and a half months, the director strove to make the troupe self-sufficient; so that they could continue to present this opera even in his absence. The opera has been performed independently in four different places after the first two shows, which were done in the presence of the director.

Uttom Bori and Chereug were in charge *of* lighting and sound respectively. In order to curfdown the high expense of hiring equipment, the KCS bought its own lights and sound system this year. Since these had a limited range, the lights and sound were somewhat plain in comparison to the other aspects of the performance, but this selfreliance is an important achievement.

In Conclusion The twenty-second Karbi Youth Festival formally drew to a close with a colourful procession on N February, 1996. This festival, that drew more than 10,000 people everyday, went *off* extremely well without any monitoring by the police or official security control. Spontaneous and prompt supervision by a handful of volunteers aged twenty or so kept the functioning of the festival absolutely smooth.

The first storm of the season broke around 12.30 in the afternoon on 20 February. The Karbis call this seasonal storm monve it signifies the end of winter and the beginning of spring. Lasting only a few minutes, it swept away all the dry leaves and debris left behind by the spectators of the festival. Taralungso was swept clean by this natural brocrn to get ready for another festival.

*References:*

Bora, Dhrubajyoti, *An Outline Social History of the Karbi People*, Lokimo 22nd Karbi Youth Festival, 15-19 February, 1996.

Datta, P.S., 'Autcmomv in Assam: A Tale of l wo Hills' in *The Statesman* , 4 January, 1990.

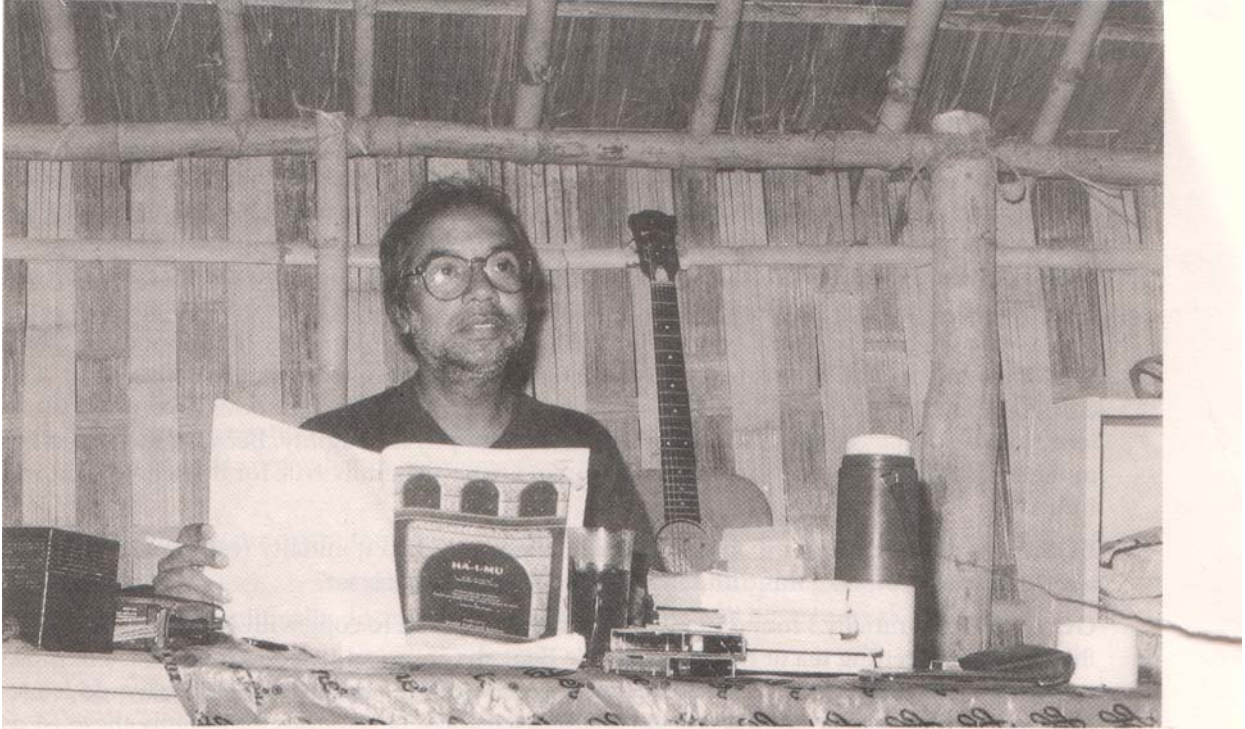
Teron, Dharamsing, *The Legen<sup>d</sup> of Ha-i-Mn* , Lokimo, 22nd Karbi Youth Festival, 15-19 February, 1996. Lokimo, Third Zone Fest, 1-3 October, 1995.

Excerpts from the *Restless Frontier Army Assam and its People*: Report prepared by the People's Union for Democratic Rights, New Delhi, May 1991., Lokimo 22nd Karbi Youth Festival, 15-19 February, 1996.

*I am infinitely grateful to Gautam Chattopadhyay and Gora Lahiri for their valuable comments all of which have helped this article and to Pallab Roy and Sudip Chatterjee for the photographs*

*Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee*

**'I wanted to work with their own sounds'**



**GAUTAM CHATTOPADHYAY, the director of the Ha-i-Mu opera, was interviewed for STQ by PARAMITA BANERJEE and BIREN DAS SHARMA. PALLAB ROY, the author of the preceding article, and SUDHIR CHATTERJEE, who had done the documentation along with the author, were also present. The interview was conducted mostly in Bengali, and translated by PARAMITA BANERJEE.**

PB: My first question to you is, how did you come in contact with these people, with whom we have comparatively much less connection than we do with other peoples, and how did you get interested in doing this opera?

GC: Karbi Anglong is India's second largest district next to Bastar, and they have an autonomous council, and they have formed this cultural organization called the KCS. I came in contact with the KCS through another film maker friend of mine, Ajit Lahiri. But that was to work on their folk music. I am basically a musician. They called me in to do the notations and to scientifically document their music. But since I don't believe in passive culture-I do some notations and then get into the library and remain there, I don't like that-I asked them for some young men and women whom I could teach how to read and write music. That really pleased them. When I started interacting with them, I could immediately see that they had a lot of theatre potential. In addition, they have-and I think in the whole of India only they have this-a natural amphitheatre.

If you look at it, you'll think that some great architect has designed it. But it is just a natural place that they have used to serve their purpose. The acoustics are terrific, since it is a kind of a valley area that doesn't allow the sound to be completely carried away. This amphitheatre was also a guiding factor.

BDS: Do they use this space?

GC: They just constructed it two years back, but their group dances and other things do happen there. They have an annual Youth Festival, for which they had used this space before. But they had never imagined that something like the Ha-i-Mu could really be performed there by their own young performers. Those who performed in the opera dwell in really remote villages. One important thing is that once I started interacting with them, I could feel that they were reacting to me very favourably. They liked the things I suggested. What happens is that here we seldom have people who get excited. You have to slog and slog and slog to get something done. But there it was so different! Whatever idea I threw out, the immediate reaction was, 'Okay, let's do it'. Their music is really strong and very sweet. But there are several different cultural onslaughts-that of the Bombay film industry, of Assamese music and of Bengali music too. Some of the elite are even making Tagore-type Karbi songs. The only way to stop this is to make them conscious of their own cultural strength. That is what I wanted to do. It is not that I had started with any definite plans for an opera. The whole thing developed through a process of improvisation, through continuous work.

As I've already said, initially I had only gone there to scientifically document their music and do notations. First I worked with their drums. They didn't know how to record the number of bars or beats and all that. That's what I did first. As I worked, I discovered how musical all the people I was working with were. And they were so free from inhibitions, hang ups-and exposure as well-that they reacted with enthusiasm to everything I suggested. And then the way urban living has cramped our body movements-our physical structure and its movements are so conditioned by the way we have to sit, work, travel etc. Their bodies are completely free from these effects. Their movements, their postures are different, and if they have to break them, they do it quite easily as they are not as conditioned like us. I could just see the tremendous potential they had in terms of performance, with their musical abilities and physical agility. Because they



live in the hills, in the midst of jungles, they are extremely agile. That is generally true for the whole of north-east India.

BDS: How did your own urban conditioning affect you? Did it initially restrain your work in any way? How did you take this difference you've been talking about?

GC: Of course, initially I found many things rather difficult to cope with-you know, simple things like not getting tea or newspapers. We Bengalis are so addicted to these! Back in those days when we were all political activists, many of us got arrested simply because we would leave our shelters in villages to go somewhere for a cup of tea and a newspaper. So initially these were problems for me.

BDS: What I mean is, what kind of problems did you face when you first started to work on their music?

GC: Language proved to be the greatest hurdle. If I at least knew Assamese, I could have managed. I slowly picked up a little of their language, but communication continued to be carried on largely through gestures. So language was a general problem, but I don't think my urbanized habits in any way affected my work with them. The only quality I think I've managed to retain is that I can still be surprised. So my work with them didn't suffer because of my bad middle-class habits. I would rather say that my middle-class identity has gained another dimension through that work, which has made me know myself better.

PB: How do you feel this completely different experience has enriched you? You've said it has enriched you, but we'd like to know how.

GC: Because I interacted with a completely new culture, because I spent more than nine months with them. Everything that I experienced there was completely new for me-I had no knowledge about them. The only thing I knew was that the Karbis were once referred to as mikirs which is a derogatory term. Everything there was so different!

PB: You've told us that their musical tradition is very strong. Does this tradition include both songs and instruments?

GC: Yes, both. They have no written history, you know-their history is entirely preserved through songs.

PB: In terms of their melodies and tunes, or the kinds of instruments they play, what are the similarities or contrasts with what is customarily projected as 'traditional Indian music'?

GC: Completely different. What we call traditional is from a very brahminical elitist point of view. For instance, they have a single-stringed instrument called the hunt li'eng which I've also seen. Among other tribes like the Gonds living in Bastar, among the Santhals, the Oraons, the Saoras of Orissa-they all play the same kind of instrument. I've also seen that all these people now use steel fibre from the trees, twirl it and use it as a string, even now. As a result, the effect is completely different. Then again, this instrument is like a violin. All over the world, the bow of a violin is made with hair from a horse's tail. But the Karbis make their bows with bamboo and it looks exactly like a real bow. Instead of using the standard resin, they just lick their bows occasionally when they play. All their instruments are different. I don't want to call these instrument'. primitive, but they produce primal sounds, deep sounds, so to say. It was quite an experience to live among these sounds and work with them. They have various other instruments also, like the *chemkumbang* which also is made from bamboo. It's similar to an African instrument, though that one is not made from bamboo but wood.

PB: Do they have string instruments, wind instruments and percussion?

GC: Yes, they do. But I think their flutes are very sophisticated. One way to know how sophisticated a flute is, is to study how many holes it has. The flutes they play have nine holes, which means it's been modified a lot. And the melodies they play sometimes sound very Mexican.

PB: Do you think that is just a coincidence, or do you think that such similarities do exist among varieties of what we might call ethnic music?

GC: Yes, they do. It is basically all pentatonic music, that's the similarity. But the expressions differ completely. Interpretations are different. They have another reed instrument called *muritombo* which sounds somewhat in between a shehnai and an oboe. And they have a Jew's harp or *krong-clrui*.

PB: Why did you choose the opera form?

GC: Because they have such an abundance of songs. Even if an anthropologist goes there to work, or someone wants to scientifically document Karbi history, she will have to work with their songs.

PB: Earlier you said that you could sense a very strong theatre potential among the Karbis. But it appears from the article that they don't have any theatrical tradition.

GC: No, they don't. There is no tradition of enactment at all, except for the various histrionics of the witch doctors.

PB: What made you feel, then, that they have very strong theatrical potential?

GC: I was doing a variety of workshops with them. Through these, I could see that they had no problems in understanding abstractions or abstract language, in playing with sounds, in doing a variety of movements, even unusual ones. The more I worked with them, the more could I sense these things. As I was saying before, they are so free from inhibition—we are physically inhibited in so many different ways, we might fight it intellectually, but we do not always manage to get rid of it at the actual bodily level. But they have no such problems. I could work with complete freedom in terms of music, non-musical sounds and bodily movements. That's what made me feel that it was an ideal situation for an acting performance. Here theatre has almost simply come to mean a straight storyline; there is hardly ever any experimentation. Not that I could break much from that—even I chose a narrative, a linear storyline. But I knew that this was not being done: for a middle-class audience. During the festival, everybody from the villages came to watch, from children to old people. I wanted to see how they would accept something new. From that angle also, it was a successful venture. The narrative was their own, and you must already know from Pallab's writing that there is a taboo on this story. But the form in which they saw it performed was completely new to them.

PB: I wanted to ask you that also. Why did you choose this particular story?

GC: Because there is a taboo on it, because it's forbidden.

PB: Since the taboo is still fully observed and they are pretty much against singing the end of the ballad, how did you manage to get the whole story?

GC: The taboo really is that no one *lunse* can sing the whole ballad. In fact no one knows the full thing. Different people know different parts of it and they firmly believe that singing the whole: ballad inevitably brings disaster. You must know from the article that they don't even name a girl Ha-i-Mu.

GC: I tried to stay as close as possible to their own histrionics, their postures, the sounds in their everyday life. Simultaneously, I made them read a little theory, to give them some theoretical

knowledge about theatre following the pattern of theatre teaching at Berkeley. And I also tried to train them a little in bio-engineering, body mechanism-like why a centre of gravity is necessary, how the larynx functions etc. But I was always careful to ensure that the whole training never felt like a school, that an element of fun was always there.

PB: Did you impart all this training and knowledge only through workshops? If yes, how extensive were your directorial interventions?

GC: It was a process of workshops throughout. And my interventions were kept to a minimum.

PB: The kind of acting that you achieved through this process, what kind of acting would you call that in terms of our familiar jargon-naturalistic acting, histrionic acting, stylized acting? Can any of these terms be used at all?

GC: I don't think so. It was something different.

PB: How was it different?

GC: I've never seen anything like this before. I've seen Peter Brook's work, Bob Wilson's work, Peking opera and many other theatre works from the west. I also have many friends in Europe who are doing a variety of experiments-I dislike this word 'experiment', but just to imply new kinds of work-I've seen all that. I've also seen performances that are quite famous in our country. And I still ... suppose when I'm returning at night, I see a group of rickshaw pullers performing *nautanki* I just stay glued there. So I'm also exposed to a lot of folk forms, as well as to works by those who approach theatre intellectually. I don't think I can quite identify this performance with any of these existing performance forms. I could easily have given it an exotic form like *kabuki* which would have made it an exportable item, but I deliberately refrained from that. Whenever I felt any such tendency, I stopped it. You know what it is like-all the years of socialization, all the acquired 'knowledge' that continuously tries to interfere with anything you do. I had to battle with these tendencies constantly.

PB: Do you think that this performance is completely different because they somehow learnt through workshops to bring to life characters and situations from a story which is very much their own?

GC: Not just that-whenver there was any tendency to impose any known style or form, I removed it firmly. But some slapstick was deliberately retained.

PB: How far or limited is the impact of contemporary media culture on them?

GC: Not much. They don't have electricity in most places, so TV can't really influence them much. But almost everybody has seen some Hindi movies at least ... Initially I thought I would do a proper classical-style opera, with soprano, alto, tenor, bass and all that. But I was also trying to explore myself, and I didn't feel like repeating what's already been done many times. I wanted to work with their own sounds. For instance, they still do *jhum* (slash and burn) cultivation, and they were nomads till pretty recently. So for their work and for communicating from one hill to another, they have different kinds of calls. I wanted to use all these. And as I've already told you, one purpose of the whole endeavour was to make them realize the value of their own cultural tradition. They would sometimes hum Assamese tunes, or Hindi film songs also, when I first started to work with them. There are a few hero-type young men now, and those kind of hair styles and tunes really spread like a contagious disease. I never told them anything, but after about a month of working with them, I could already notice that they were only singing their own songs. They could already feel the strength of their own culture, they liked singing their own songs, dancing their own dances. In fact the organizers had called me at the right moment. They had realized that many of their youth had started to reject their own culture. So it was an attempt simultaneously at revivalism and something new.

SC: Would you please explain about the guitar?

GC: Oh yes, it's very interesting-almost all of them play a guitar. They don't know which chord is called what, don't know what a minor scale or a major scale is, but they can all play and they learn the guitar very easily as well. What the KCS had done initially was to set up a guitar school. I knew everybody would be against using the guitar, as that's not, strictly speaking, one of their traditional instruments. But I used it as they all play it. Just like wearing jeans is the most common thing now and it no longer marks you in any way-the guitar for them is similar. When they play it, the tunes are so different, the strokes are so different, the interpretation is so different. I combined guitars with their traditional drums and that was a whole new sound to me.

PB: How has the guitar come to them?

GC: Missionary influence is very strong in the whole of the north-east. The Karbi in general is not Christian, though the first Bible in north-east India was in the Karbi language. But the Karbis are very elusive; they are expert dodgers who never get into direct confrontation of any sort. Anyway, the guitar has been a legacy of the missionaries.

PB: You just told us that their strumming or their strokes are different. Is it because they are accustomed to some particular string instrument of their own?

GC: Not really, but somehow it is different. Not just in Karbi Anglong, but in the whole of the north-east. They all play the guitar, but a little differently. Now on the MTV you can see Phillipino rock bands, Burmese rock bands, and somewhere they sound different from western rock bands.

PB: So their strokes are not different because of the influence of any special string instrument?

GC: No, not at all. They have just two string instruments anyway. One I've already mentioned, the one- stringed *kum li'eng* and the other is the two-stringed *kum dengdong* very similar to our do-tara. We never really had a harmonic tradition in our music. So our string instruments have a particular stroking pattern. Where their guitar strokes differ is that they somehow try to interpret the varieties of beats that are played on their drums.

PB: Did you use orchestration in your opera?

GC: A little bit. A combination of voices, eight guitarists, two drummers, one flautist and some other percussion instruments of their own. But this has just been the first phase-there is a lot more to do on this count.

PB: Do they have a tradition of orchestration, or choral instrument playing?

GC: No, it has just been introduced, though they do have their traditional orchestration and group songs-but it is very different from what we understand as orchestration or choral singing.

PB: So you really didn't use any instrument, other than the guitar, that isn't traditional. And even the guitar they are very used to. Do you think there is any scope to improve the music you composed through the use of instruments that are not traditionally theirs?

GC: Definitely, and I have no hang ups about maintaining purity. But I didn't go into all that because it was a first venture. When I go back this time, I'll work on all these things. It's not that I've produced one opera and that's it. Moreover, I prefer them to come up with new ideas. Even in the film making workshops I did with them-I tried never to impose anything.

SC: But there are some stylizations in the opera, like the death sequence of Ha-i-Mu.

GC: True, but such abstractions are there in their own culture, if you have eyes.and ears for them.

PB: Does that mean that you picked up even the stylizations from within the culture as much as possible?

GC: Yes.

PB: Did that limit you as a director?

GC: Not really.

PB: How do you envisage this in terms of continuity? You have introduced them to a new form. Do you think this exposure will help them to do similar kinds of work on their own?

GC: Yes, and other kinds of work too. They are already performing this without me around, and they are into all sorts of things. It's like a wall has broken down for them.

PB: I have another question. The article states that you had this strange experience of a heavy believe that it is bound to be. How did you react to that?

GC: I never address these things intellectually. I took it as quite natural. I just laughed and laughed when it happened. But the old man who had sung the last part will always believe in the inevitability of the consequence. I am quite used to this sort of thing. You know, I move around a lot among the mystics, the bails of Bengal, and I've faced so many similar incidents that I'm no longer surprised. Maybe they are just coincidences, maybe not.

PB: So you are quite open to this sort of thing, though you do not address them intellectually. Call I say that you are not a non-believer in such happenings?

GC: I don't really think you can put it in those terms.

SC: One thing needs to be mentioned-the pace there is very different. It is a lot slower. When we were there, we got adjusted to it, but going from the city, the lack of speed strikes one immediately. ~

GC: Yes, when I went back to see the opera for a second time, I felt that the two-and-a-half hour performance time could very easily be reduced to an hour and a half. But I never thought that there.

PB: Suppose you bring that production to Calcutta, would you shorten the performance time?

GC: No, I'd maintain that pace and see how we react to it.

SC: One thing that should be noted is that their music is sort of primitive-or maybe that is the wrong word-but there is such a lot of monotony in their music

GC: Yes, around the late seventies or early eighties, that was quite a fashion. We'd also done, some repetitive work then-their music is like that. The organizers, in fact, were a little worried at

first since their music apparently doesn't have much variation. I told them not to worry, but to allow me to find out first. As I worked, to their surprise, so many different forms and styles were discovered. I would personally say that their culture is one of the most superior ones. The myth of their origin is that they are batmen, the Karbis are supposed to have descended from the bats. In that story, it is claimed that Karbi culture is the most superior. They used to laugh when they talked about this myth, but then I made them realize that it's not so laughable after all. They have so many different forms-tongue twisters, *ntnsern kehir-it's* really like all this new age theatre. And new age music.

PB: Did you try to consciously use as many of these forms as possible?

GC: No, not at all. That would have been a display without a purpose. I used only what I thought was necessary.

PB: Another point I noted in the article is that you used some traditional forms, but transposed their usual context. Say, for instance, what is traditionally a funeral dance was used in the opera in a jovial context. Why did you do this? Is it because you felt that such a dance form suits joviality better?

GC: Their concept of a funeral is also a kind of celebration and it has a very haunting aspect. I felt that a particular sequence needed that element and so I transposed it.

SC: Another point that should be mentioned is the difference in audience reaction, which initially had us completely baffled.

GC: Yes, that's a very important point. A lot of people would gather to watch the rehearsals and at a very serious, tense situation, they would suddenly burst out laughing. At first I naturally thought that the performance was not quite upto the mark, not convincing, which is why they were laughing. But then gradually, through interacting with them, I discovered that laughing out is their natural reaction to tension. So you see, our interpretation is so completely different from theirs! This is something I've learnt-how different human emotions can be.

PB: How did you handle it?

GC: Oh, as I've just said, initially I kept condemning these two sequences as not convincing or well done enough. But then I realized that they were quite authentic, since they were prompting their natural response to tension. On both the performance nights, the response to these two



PB: Suppose you bring this production here to Calcutta. The kind of audience I can envisage for this wouldn't possibly laugh at a tense situation. How do you think your performers would react to that?

GC: I don't know, but I think they would feel kind of crestfallen, thinking that they haven't performed well enough. That's why I want to bring it over to Calcutta-so many different reactions and interpretations to note! Particularly the difference in pace and reactions-these have been the most important elements in my learning process ... One thing is that, at one time Habib Tanvir's work had inspired me very much. I used to go to Raipur to watch his methods of working. Even when he came to Calcutta, I went to see his rehearsals.

PB: Do you feel inspired by any particular production of his, or by his work in general? And in which context?

GC: By his work in general. I think of Habib as a very significant figure in Indian theatre. His way of resetting the folk forms, using them very significantly without turning them into mere spectacles-that has really been great work. I started making a documentary on him ten years back, which unfortunately has not been completed. But then I was not a performing artist, so to say. Now, I think, if I go back to completing that film, it will take quite a different turn. However, his *Bahadur Kalarin* is my most favourite.

PB: Do you think your work with the Ha-i-Mu opera was influenced by Habib Tanvir's work?

GC: No, definitely not. Because whenever I detected any shadow of any influence, I consciously did away with it.

PB: One more thing. The article tells us that the costumes were very colourful. The article also gives us some indication of how far these costumes were traditional. I would like you to elaborate on that. And secondly, what was your choice of colours based on ?

GC: The costumes they normally wear are very colourful. I didn't invent anything. And I used traditional clothes as far as possible, but with some modifications. Because you see, the boys no longer wear *rikotlgs*, they wouldn't perform in just those briefs. So I used them on tight pajamas.

PB: Did you make the women actually get a tattoo on their faces, or were these marks just painted?

GC: They were just painted, but I had to get them used to it. I would ask them to go to the village and talk to people with that mark on. Initially they were embarrassed and giggling. If I

hadn't got them used to it before the performance, they would have been distracted on the performance day. The same thing happened with the men's hair.

SC: There is another thing that I would like to put on record. In documenting the whole thing, we were specifically asked by Gautamda not to use any lights. So we were simply carrying a monitor. Even that we were not supposed to use during the performance. But I had to use it, and that was quite an experience, because nobody even bothered to be distracted by this intervention with a strange machine that they had never seen before. This was radically different from any other experience anywhere. Even when we were working right among the audience, they remained completely engrossed in the performance.

GC: Oh yes, audience reception in almost every aspect was quite astoundingly different ... Well; I hadn't approached this work very theoretically. So I don't think there is much more to talk about.

### **Just Published**

Memories in Hiding Tooppil Bhaasi

Translated by Phillip Zarrilli and Jose George

The revolutionary activist playwright draws on his autobiography to reconstruct an important period in the political history of Kerala just after Indian independence: the Suranad Revolution, a desperate attempt to resist the tyranny of the feudal landlord system which had oppressed the peasant for generations.

This volume contains the translation of the playscript, an introduction to the playwright and the sociopolitical context of his work by Phillip Zarrilli; the playwright's own introduction; and an appendix explaining the logistics of caste and land reform in Kerala, for those unfamiliar with the socio-economic structure.

**On Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* The Politics of Production and Performance**

**Angelie Multani**

A mridangam player breaks his arm tripping on a *dhoti*, and a prospective son-in-law meets the girl's family. This is the opening scene of *Dance Like A Man*, Mahesh Dattani's play, which has been one of the most successful productions in Delhi this season.

This paper focuses on the performance of Dattani's play which played for an unprecedented run in July and August, keeping the auditorium packed every evening. The play was enormously popular, fusing the supposedly 'problematic' medium of English with 'Indian' lifestyles and cultures. Dattani is one of the few Indian playwrights W English and the only one in recent years to have raised important social issues in his plays, which are firmly based in a contemporary, immediately recognizable domestic context. By 'domestic', I mean not only the family, which is Dattani's base for expression, but also familiar, as 'Indian'. Once again, 'Indian' is a problematic term: I use it here not to refer to a unifying homogeneous pan-Indian context, but to various situations and contexts which may be firmly located within a particular culture, but which are also accessible to other cultures.

The family in *Dance Like A Mail* consists of a Gujarati, Jairaj, married to a south Indian, Ratna, their daughter Lata and her fiance Viswas, whose regional origins, a must for affirming identity in our country, are hinted at in the text, but not mentioned directly.

Dattani succeeds in raising concerns which are familiar to most audiences in Delhi, Bangalore, or Bombay, not through literature or television, but through life and experience. The firm base of regional comfortability which is expressed in our jokes and daily conversation is fully exploited-Viswas talks of his mother-in-law being a tyrant, denying her 'Gujju' husband his tea and forcing him to drink coffee instead ... and the script prompts us to snigger at Viswas's 'mithaiwallah' father, a businessman owning half of Commercial Street.

It is this ability of Dattani's to write in an 'Indian' idiom which is neither strained nor self-conscious most of the time that is his basic strength. Theatre is an important medium for cultural and political expression, and theatre in English, in our urban centres particularly, attracts both an audience and corporate sponsorship. Most plays performed in English in Delhi or Bombay are foreign texts (European or American), and 'going to the theatre' is fast becoming, if it isn't already, synonymous with a particular brand of elitism and with gaining access to a particular class. The successful 'big' shows in Delhi this season have been *Evita*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* to name a few. Small groups have produced Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden Ghosts*, and *Beautiful Images*.

*Dance Like A Man* was the only original Indian English play to be produced by a 'big time' professional group, i.e. Primetime Theatre, and which ran for the longest duration, with extra performances 'due to popular public demand'. The interesting point about the corporate sponsors who financed this production is that the company associated with *Dance Like A Mail* was the Polar group, a company with a relatively low profile in aggressive marketing strategies in this area. *Evita*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* *Driving Miss Daisy* etc. were sponsored by high-profile multi-nationals such as Lufthansa, East-West Airlines, Pepsi, Armani designer wear for men and so on.

Corporations and industrial houses use theatre and other cultural activities to promote a certain image of themselves and their products. The L.T.C. group for example, sponsors Indian classical music festivals to reinforce the advertised image of one of their brands of cigarettes as meant for those with 'exclusive taste'. Ved Berry, an executive with G.T.C. said, in an interview that 'a regular percentage of the company's advertising budget is now reserved for upmarket theatre. The criteria is to adopt a particular brand of English theatre and stick with it until the company begins to 'own' the property.' (*The Times of India*, 3 October, 1995, New Delhi). Pepsi etc. are companies which target a particular group of consumers and sell a particular image-trendy, young, international, aggressive, upwardly mobile, discerning, etc. They are the ones to promote western musicals and rock-operas. Polar, on the other hand, is an 'indigenous' company which sells household goods. They choose to finance a play by an Indian in English, a play which uses the family as its base, which is concerned with family relationships and gender roles.

The play forms a link between three generations, focusing on the lives of Jairaj and Ratna, a couple who were born in British India but who matured in an independent nation. Lata and Viswas are the new generation of Indians, who are 'transcultural'. Viswas is completely ignorant of traditional forms of culture, while Lata is far removed from the shadow of her grandparent. Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's father-a wealthy landowner, businessman, freedom fighter, philanthropist and social reformer, is representative of 'the tradition', the history with which we in contemporary India are still grappling, but sometimes in complete ignorance.

At the performance the audience remains associated with Lata and Viswas as the present, as the actual time of performance, and so all the events are filtered through their perspective.

The grandfather, who is a disjointed memory for Lata, is a romantic, idealized figure in the past, but

a very real and still live restrictive standard for Jairaj. Viswas finds it disconcertingly easy to view Jairaj as his father had viewed him-as a marginalized male who chooses to dance like a woman.

If the play questions conventional male stereotypes and points out that male identity is a construction conditioned by social norms and expectations, it does so by involving those very same constructions for the female characters. Jairaj, despite his father's disappointment and his wife's accusations, is a man-his dancing is a way of expressing his own identity, he is a man who defies social norms, who stands up to his father, who refused to allow his wife to be insulted and who is also a good father. However, through the same framework, Ratna is simultaneously proved to be 'unfeminine'-she is a bad wife, a bad daughter-in-law and a bad mother. Jairaj is defeated only by Ratna's betrayal when she colludes with his father to prevent his dancing and to promote her own interests, RaWa through the play is shown as marrying Jairaj not because she loved him, or because he too had a passion for dance, but because he would not interfere with her dancing. (For the same reason she is agreeable to Lata marrying Viswas, without being concerned with any other aspect of her daughter's alliance.) Ratna 'enjoys' the male attention and admiration her dancing affords her, and her single-minded pursuit of her dance even at the cost of her infant son's life is portrayed as the ultimate damning factor in her character, but the same obsession with dance in Jairaj is valorized as a vibrant and dynamic force which his wife helped destroy. Ratna, being a woman, a wife and a mother cannot be expected to have, or even to want, a full-time career in dancing.

The text of the play moves from present to past, making direct connections between history (both personal and social) and contemporary concerns. The family is the base for this conflict which encompasses art, politics, social values, personal motivations and prejudices. Amritlal Parekh represents those who condemned Bharatanatyam as a dance form, associating it with prostitution and effeminacy. Viswas, the contemporary, good-natured, understanding hero is uncomfortable with the idea of a father-in-law who dances like a woman, and also with the sexuality of his wife's dancing.

In his 'Note to the play', Dattani writes that 'no other dance form (in my opinion) has had such a fascinating history of oppression and renaissance as Bharatanatyam.(Final Solutions and

Other Plays p. 107). However, the erasure of the distinction between public and private, of the generalizing from the particular story of Jairaj and Ratna which occurs in the written text is unfortunately missing in the performance. The Primetime Theatre production followed Dattani's text exactly in terms of the scene directions and stage sets, but in performance *Dance Like A Man* remains the story of Jairaj and Ratna.

Dattani's attempt to expose the political manoeuvring and interferences in cultural or art activities remain, in performance, at the level of suggestion, or as humour-the garlanding of a dance critic to guarantee a favourable review, or a special invitation to a minister to wangle a trip overseas are everyday occurrences in the cultural arena of our society, but this aspect of Dattani-social critique was assimilated as part of Ratna's character, rather than being viewed as a betrayal that every artiste who wishes to be publicly acknowledged must go through. They are pushy and who will *do* anything to advance her own career, thus neatly sidestepping the very real issue of artistic integrity and public compromise.

There is corruption at all levels--critics write reviews before witnessing a performance, freedom fighters talk about social reform, but only of a particular kind, and to be noticed as a good artiste it is more important to know the right people and to pull the right strings, than to be talented.

Although these issues are raised through the text, the performance of the play creates its own circle of meaning. The audience reacted most visibly to the 'entertainment' afforded by the family theme-the 'mithaiwallah' son-in-law, the bossy mother-in-law and the henpecked husband. The serious aspects of the play, the tension within the marriage relationship of Jairaj and Ratna, was explained away all too easily as related to the central mystery of the play,-the identity of Shanker (the first child of Jairaj and Ratna who was accidentally killed by a double dose of opium, one given by his ayah and the second administered by Ratna who had a dance performance scheduled at night). The familiar prejudice against the business community prevailed once again, as at the end of the performance, the circuit of meaning closes, order is restored to the chaotic family as Lata learns from history (unknowingly), has a child and is a loving mother to her mithaiwallah's, son, in spite of having a brilliant career as a dancer ahead of her. The play was a success by conforming to conventional social assumptions, rather than

by questioning any. A review of the performance says: 'Like everything that comforts by reinforcing perishing notions, the play is a success.' (Ashish Sharma in the *Indian Express*, 26 July, 1995, New Delhi).

The text, which challenged basic assumptions about gender roles and questioned the prevailing social order, remained on stage as an endorsement of traditional family norms, where, a man will always dance like a man, but a woman must also be a wife, a mother and a daughter-in-law. The construction of meaning always changes from one performance to another, and the endorsement of certain structures by one production in one show are not damning for the entire text, which remains strong and full of potential, of many meanings. Mahesh Dattani has been announced as a strong dramatist who refuses to cringe or apologize for his choice of language who has written a strong and dynamic script. The performance of *Dance Like A Mall*, like its text, is gripping, absorbing theatre which flows easily from the page/stage to the reader/ audience in an interactive and challenging manner.

Indian theatre in English is speaking to us in its own distinctive voice, of traditions, of problems and situations which we encounter in our daily lives, and it is speaking in our own accents, not borrowed or cultivated ones. There is still a long way to go and much more needs to be done, but Mahesh Dattani is emerging as one of the foremost Indian contemporary playwrights, taking English theatre in this country in a completely new direction.

**Charandas Chor** Habib Tanvi Translated by Anjum Katyal

**Just Published**

*Charandas Chor* by veteran playwright/director Habib Tanvir, performed by Naya Theatre's Chattisgarhi folk artists, is a contemporary Indian classic. When it was first staged in 1975, it made a tremendous impact. Folk actors on the contemporary stage, vibrant and self-confident, speaking their own dialect and performing their own material, albeit under the guiding hand of a master director, was a novel experiment in Indian theatre which opened *up* a new direction in theatre practice.

*Charandas Chor* has been performed all over India, and at many festivals abroad, winning the top award at the prestigious Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1982.

This volume contains, along with the translated playscript, an introduction to Habib Tanvir's work in ~theatre by well-known critic and academic Javed Malick, as well as an intensive interview with the playwright/director in which he discusses the milestones in his long

## **Telling Sacred Tales: The Art of Harikatha**

**Meera Rammohan**

Harikatha (or the story of Hari), as an entertaining, versatile and musically-rich narrative art form took distinct shape in mid-nineteenth century Tanjavur, south India. The Marathi saints such as Tukaram, Jananeswar and Samartha Ramdas who were devotees of Panduranga Vithala, had sung the stories of Vishnu and spread the *bhakti* movement through the artistic medium of *kirtan*. This movement had taken strong hold in Tanjavur during the reign of the Maratha kings. At this time the local *kthakalakshepa* form, which too propagated sacred themes, consisted largely of eloquent but serious philosophical discourses. It too was deeply *bhakti-oriented*, expressed by means of *bhajan* and *namasankirtan* along with expositions of the puranas and epics.

The *kirtans* on the other hand, were more lively and attractive, combining rhythm and movement, costume and music. The story was carried along easily by interspersing it with crisp tunes called *saki dindi ovi* etc., which were special metrical compositions. The *kirtankars* of Marathi origin, such as the famous Morgaunkar Bava, not only enjoyed great popularity but even received court patronage from kings like Shivaji II.

Harikatha was fashioned as a combination of these two forms. The person who successfully undertook this pioneering task and gave new birth to *katha* was Tanjavur Krishna Bhagavatar (1343-1903). With the learned support of Periyanna, a minister in the court of the Maratha kings, he combined brilliantly the best aspects of *katha* and *kirtan* to produce a dynamic new performance format.

Krishna Bhagavatar borrowed the typical metrical compositions of the *kirtan*] and also imbued the *katha* with greater dramatization, rhythm and musicality. He achieved classicism



by retaining the distinctive character of both Hindustani and Karnatic ragas. His masterly new expositions captured the hearts and imagination of the people. He soon became the most popular and acclaimed performer *katha* had ever seen. Those of his contemporaries who took up the art and many who came later all adopted the style of presentation as set out by him, so inspired were they by it.

Harikatha had its golden period between 1850 and 1950, during which time it saw other stalwarts enter the field. Some of these were Tiruppalanam Panchapakesa Shastri, Pandit Lakshmanacharya Mangudi Chidambara Bhagavatar, Tanjavur Natesa Bhagavatar, Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar, Embar Sringacharya, Tiruvaiyar Annaswami Bhagavatar, and C. Saraswati Bai. All of them, through their own particular talents, helped enrich and propagate the form further.

The themes traditionally adopted for *kntln* were drawn from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Bhagavata. Those typically found in the Marathi *kirtan* traditions were set out in a two-volume work entitled the *Kirtan Tarangini*. This work contained the *nirupanas* which gave the narrative outline of each theme, along with the appropriate songs. The Harikatha *bhagavatars* added considerably to this repertoire with stories of Tamil saints and savants. What thus began simply as the story of Hari turned into a vast storehouse of knowledge comprising literary, historical, mythological and musical interpretations of a great number of religious and even socio-cultural themes. Harikatha attained the status of a solo dramatic communication medium par excellence. It was no wonder, then, that most performances ran to a minimum of four to five hours.

The performance style established by Krishna Bhagavatar was powerful and evocative. The standing pose of the main performer at once introduced a sense of drama. It allowed for free movement so that the *bhagavatar* could add a few dance steps with the appropriate *abhinaya* to enliven the narrative at any point. *Bhava* or mood was conveyed colourfully. The *upagayakas* (or accompanying singers) would stand behind the main artist on either side while the *mridangam* player sat on a bench in between. At a later point of time these particular stage arrangements were abandoned to the detriment of the overall dramatic impact of the performance. While seated, the artist could only resort to the use of facial *abhinaya* after all.

The sense of sacredness and high classicism was probably enhanced by the attire of the *bhagavatar* himself. He wore the more traditional form of the *dhoti* called the *panchakacham*

leaving the upper body bare except for the *angavastram* or long cloth draped over the shoulder. Other aspects were the ritual ash marks drawn on the body and across the forehead, denoting Shaivism: Quite often he also had a *rudraksha mala* around the neck and wore earrings.

Music was vital to *katha*. In fact, many classical musicians such as Kallidakurichi Vedanta Bhagavatar, Palakkadu Anantarama Bhagavatar and Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar became *kathakars* due to this reason. When the main artist was not himself expert at music he would ask leading musicians to take up the role of the *upagayaka* rather than compromise on musical quality. The metrical compositions such as the *saki*, *dini* and *ovi* were exclusive to Harikatha and were primarily responsible for carrying along the story. Each story thus had its own special set of these. The tune for each type of composition was so characteristic that in many cases the text alone was translated from the original Marathi, leaving the music intact. Aside from these, *abhangass* folk tunes, English notes and 'Parsi' tunes were routinely used. The *kritis* of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri assumed significance not only for their musical excellence but also for their rich textual source. They were an invaluable aid in elaborating upon the main theme and improving its poetic content.

The Harikatha *bhagavatars* preserved the distinctive style of both Karnatic as well as Hindustani *ragas*. Their singing was rich in raga bhava and rasa bhava. This was remarkable especially since there was much less time than in a full-scale music concert in which to explore the depth of the ragas they portrayed. When appropriate songs were not readily available some of them simply set about composing their own. The famous song 'Chapasya Kaushalya' in raga Jaunpuri, for example, which was composed by Muthiah Bhagavatar, later became a favourite of musician Semmangudi Srinivasier for singing in concert.

Special mention needs to be made of the musical tone in which the narration itself was done. This was a characteristic high-pitched tone meant to aid in audibility and bring in a heightened sense of drama. This feature distinguished *katha* from other forms like the *upanyasa* where only the normal tone of voice was used. Another exciting feature of the narrative is a special technique called *avatarika* in this song was interpolated suddenly during the course of the story telling, often to be equally suddenly broken off to take up the

thread of the tale. During the entire time the *mridangam* played softly in the background to a predetermined beat. These aspects together kept the audience fully alert since one could not easily determine when speech left off and song began.

The role that rhythm played cannot be stressed enough. The *mridangam* the symbols in the hands of one *upagayaka* as well as the *chipla* or clappers held by the main artist provided rhythmic accompaniment. The anklets too played an important part. All these had both tonal and rhythmic importance. Unconventional and difficult beats lent the *talas* of *katha* individuality and verve. Accompanying for *katha* was therefore no simple task, for the *mridangam* player needed to be all eyes and ears to keep up with the *bhagavatar* therefore find that even the most renowned *mridangam* Players such as Tukaram Appa, Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, Dakshinamurthy Pillai and so on thought it even more of an honour to accompany senior *katha* exponents than to do so for senior musicians of the day.

At times the violin, harmonium or tabla were substituted for the usual instruments. As a rare case Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar was sometimes accompanied (exquisitely) on the flute by Sarabha Shastri. These accompanists served very specific roles without which the *katha* would certainly have been lacklustre. Indeed, one of the most important reasons for the decline of *katha* is the inadequate support the main *bhagavatar* began to receive.

Sometime about the middle of this century Harikatha began losing its shining stature and popularity. Changes took place in almost everything, from the narrative style to the individual calibre of the performers themselves. Much of its versatility and brilliance was lost as a result. Today one might go so far as to say the original Tanjavur style of Harikatha does not exist anymore.

### **Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar: A Profile**

My great-grandfather, Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar (1866-1943), was a luminary of his time. Remembered more as one of the most eminent performers of Harikatha of early-twentieth-century Tanjavur, he nevertheless made profound contributions to Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka, Karnatic: classical music, and Tamil popular theatre. Tamil film director K. Subramaniam has written of him, 'Bhagavatar possessed incomparable character and wide-ranging competence. He was known for his commitment to principles and moral truth.'

Indeed, Bhagavatar had personality enough to spare. Standing six feet tall, a long-limbed figure with large soulful eyes, his powerful voice could carry effortlessly over one and a half furlongs at a pitch of four and a half, without amplification. I was trained in the violin from a young age, and started his musical career as a violinist who played regularly in the vocal concerts of C. R. Srinivasa Iyengar. He inherited rare palm-leaf manuscripts containing about 650 original compositions by Tyagaraja, as well as details of the *nattuvangam* (choreography and rhythmic components) of the dance drama items performed typically in the Bhagavata Mela festivals. His commitment to Harikatha came later when, during the course of a posting as Inspector of Schools at Mannargudi in Tanjavur district, he attended a series of performances by the famous Tanjavur Krishna Bhagavatar. He at once recognized his vocation, trained himself for a year with the help of his brother Panehapakesa Bhagavatar, and resigned from his government job to devote himself totally to Harikatha. He rapidly rose to a position of eminence.

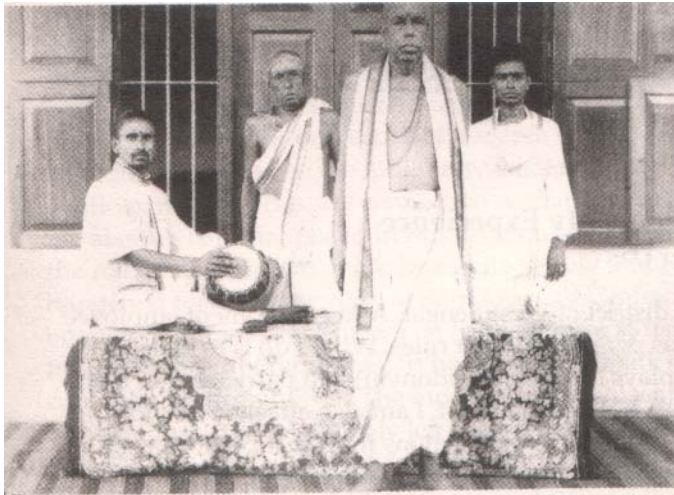
His rendering of Harikatha attracted large audiences of both laymen and scholars. He had a knack for bringing his characters vividly to life, and his *kathas* were lively with humour. Those who heard him often commented on his command over music and the apt way in which he would intersperse a song in order to evoke fully the *arthabhava* or inner meaning of each story. His most significant contribution lay in transforming sacred Tamil literature to suit the *katha* mode. The sixtythree canonized Shaivite saints or *nayanmars* of ancient Tamil history had been crucial to the *Sulamangalam Vaid yantha Bhag<sup>a</sup>vatar* (standing in front), spread of the Shaivite *bhakti* movement in south *accompanied by* the mridangam player (seated *on* the left) and India. In narrating the story of their lives, he the upagayaka (standing at the *back on* the right) created a path breaking series. This was enhanced by the contribution of the famous flautist-composer Sarabha Shastri, who composed, almost impromptu, 700 to 800 musical gems in the form of the *saki* to suit each episode.

In 1939 Avvai T. K. Shanmugham, a famous Tamil stage actor, director and producer, requested Bhagavatar to dramatize the mythological tales of Shiva based on the poetic works of the Tiruvilayadal Puranam and the Periya Puranam. He wrote a piece for the stage called Shiva Lila, and set some of the songs in classical Karnatic ragas. This drama was first

performed in Trichy in December 1939 and became an instant hit. Next followed several performances in different places, including Madurai where the play was staged for 108 days without a break in the same theatre, and became a landmark in Tamil popular theatre. Subsequently he also dramatized a series of episodes called Shakti Lila for the theatre group of Nawab Rajamanickam Pillai.

Bhagavatar also took a great interest in the productions of the Bhagavata Mela Natya Natakas in his own village of Sulamangalam. For over fifty years he was the master-choreographer and conductor of these dance dramas. He personally trained the artists who took part, including several well-known dancers. In fact, towards the end of his life he became known more for this role than as an exponent of Harikatha.

Just before his death in 1943 he took *sanyasnm*. On 17 February 1965 a memorial Gurukula Hall was inaugurated in his name, sponsored by important artists and musicians.



Note:

*Sources of information and reference include*

*Kathakalakshepa A Study*, by Dr Premeela Gurusurthy, published by International Society for the Investigation of Ancient Civilisations, 1994; articles published in the memorial journal on the occasion of the inauguration of the Sri Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar Memorial Gurukula Hall in 1965; speeches made during Radha Kalyanam celebrations held in Madras in 1994 by T. K. Murthy and B. M. Sundaram; and an interview with M. Rammohan, grandson of Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar.

## Responses

STQ articles have, in the past, evoked responses ranging from letters to lengthy articles. Since it is one of our aims to encourage debate and discussion around issues in theatre, we like to give such responses the space they demand. This time it is 'Polls on Stage' (Paramita Banerjee, STQ no. 10) which has provoked not one, but two pieces by way of response. Both are reproduced here in their totality, along with the author's rejoinder.

### **Street Plays for Elections: My Experience**

Sameer Das

I am a theatre activist in Siuri, a town in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. As a government employee I am unable to take part directly in election activities as per government rules. What I do is to attach myself to a local wing of the IPTA and write election plays (using a pseudonym) and participate in them also. I know this can create serious problems in my job, but I can't help it. I am also attached to a local theatre group called Anan, but it is not possible to do street plays for elections from that platform, as there are members of different political beliefs. As it is, producing proscenium plays requires a lot of compromises. If I bring in the issue of doing street plays for elections, this twenty-five-year-old group might face the danger of a split. So, my inner political urge compels me to do my street plays through the IPTA.

As a leftist theatre activist I feel threatened by the present political situation globally, and especially by the unhealthy political climate of this country, which creates a strong sense of revulsion towards the rulers in Delhi. When this disgust grows unbearable, I feel a kind of anguish that can only be released through writing certain plays. My repugnance does not subside till I've been able to spread it among the audience. Utpal Dutt acts as a pioneer for me in this regard.

But I experience a strange contradiction, for while I participate in election plays, I do not personally believe in the politics of elections. I am convinced that election politics cannot solve any fundamental problems. During the last panchayat elections, this comment from me irked a local leftist leader enough to prompt him into asking me, 'If you don't believe in election politics

and don't even like it, why do you write election plays and participate in them?' My response to him was, 'I use you just as you use me for election purposes. I lack the organizational capacity to take my street plays to suburbs and villages. You give me that infrastructure at poll times and I use it to spread my hatred against the ruling classes among the toiling masses of the rural areas. That's what I gain. Moreover, the whole year through you people never have a spare moment to think about cultural needs, as you are too busy to tackle political issues that are relevant for poll results. You are happy to think that cultural affairs are merely peripheral, since patronage of cultural stuff doesn't bring instant results in the ballot boxes. But come elections and you all are running around like crazy looking for plays. Then your argument is that election plays directly influence the ballots. Lenin had said a long time ago that "culture and politics are a simultaneous process and they complement each other", and I'm sure that he wasn't thinking about vote banks. He was stressing that it's a continuous process. But you people are only concerned at election times ... The only purpose of election plays is to expose the real nature of the ruling classes, to rouse hatred among the people. The whole year through your organization will do nothing; will election results improve if you put up election plays only once or twice every five years?'. . . I don't know whether to laugh or to cry at these people, because they are also the ones who deliver 'scholarly' lectures at different gatherings or in condolence meetings after the death of some famous theatre person!

There are some local leftist leaders who want to cram as many items as possible within the same street play. For instance, during the last panchayat elections one leader ordered me to write a play that would include all the welfare activities of the Left Front over the last seventeen years—things like land reforms, digging wells and ponds, literacy campaign, IRDP and DRDA loans etc. I told him that it was impossible to fit in so many things in one single play, one would need a fifty-two episode TV serial. "This government has been in power for seventeen long years and it has been taking positive measures in the rural areas for all these years. The rural population of West Bengal has been enjoying the fruits of those measures. Why then do you need to propagate your activities through a play after all these years? Had you been in power for just a single term of five years, I'd understand the need; but why after seventeen years?"

I can't write tailor-made stereotypical plays. When political events and issues that are physically and mentally detrimental to healthy human existence and the utter political

debauchery of political leaders irk me too much, plays flow from my pen. Our local leftist leaders believe theatre to be the easiest of the performing arts; it is possible to write a play in a day or two, rehearse on the third day and start performing from the fourth. They simply don't understand that even a street play is a form of theatre, that it needs to be structured within a specific time frame, that extensive rehearsals are necessary. Street plays to them are just an instant recipe.

A rising Left Front leader of our area who has managed to get a college lectureship by virtue of recommendation from the local party leadership, delivered quite a lecture to me on street theatre! This gentleman hardly has any connection with other party members, let alone the toiling masses. He lectured me about what's happened in Russia, mouthing a lot of pedantic comments on the crisis of socialism and the role of imperialism. I told him quite simply that I don't need to go to Russia to experience what's happened there; sitting right at Siuri I can see Gorbachev, Yeltsin and company daily. He felt awkward enough to immediately switch on to an attempt at flattering me, as if his adulation would give me an ego boost. My prompt reply was, 'Who are you to thank me for what I do out of my own sense of commitment to a politics? The moment people like you pocket the party membership card, you start thinking that you are the only leftists and men like us your hired henchmen. Keep in mind that I do what I do out of my own sense of duty. I don't need favours regarding a posting or transfer, nor do I need a PMRY loan sanction or a primary school teacher's post for my wife. There are many who become sudden leftists at poll times to hover around you for just those benefits-make sure not to take me as one of them.'

Except for Utpal Dutt's election plays, no scripts by other playwrights inspire me. All of them are set in the same mould, with over-simplified tenets I fail to understand if they are plays or political speeches: The electronic media has made such an impact on people today that such plays do not impress them any way. I use plenty of songs in my plays-Hindi/Bengali film songs, nationalist/ patriotic songs-whatever suits that particular script. But I never finish with songs in the 'We shall overcome' genre. One important feature of my scripts is that all my characters are real political leaders; they appear with their real names and not under some assumed name. I don't mean to change this in the future. But the strange thing is that during the last general elections, one of the Left Front candidates for the Legislative Assembly told me that my play was too direct and I should change the names of the leaders. I was amazed. In this script I had



presented corrupt Congress and BJP politicians in a mass tribunal. If I changed Narasimha Rao's name to Jadupati Rao and Kalpanath Rai to Ganapati Pai, would the play become indirect? ... It's really a 'no comment' situation!

Election plays are performed in different villages from the leftist platform in meetings organized in support of Left Front candidates. It's only local comrades, their families and some left-minded people who attend these meetings. General people who are either in sympathy with the opposition or are apolitical in attitude are never my audience. I think this is a great limitation of the local organizations. How does it matter if these plays are not performed under a red flag at poll times? It only makes a lot of people avoid seeing these plays; even if they stop for a moment, they soon leave, commenting that it's only a CPM play in progress. I have told party leaders a number of times that my plays are particularly aimed at those associated with non-left politics, who will never see them if these are performed in LeftFront-organized election meetings; they are the ones who need to know the corruption of their leaders, so that they start questioning their loyalty to such politicians. But the party's narrowminded attitude makes it impossible to reach my target audience. I don't mean to say that my plays shouldn't be performed in Left Front meetings, but we must stress the need to reach those who support other politics. The response of the local leaders is, 'Plays are needed in rallies and meetings. If you try to perform these plays elsewhere, the cadres of opposition parties may attack you.' They talk as if we are still in those dark days of the seventies when such attacks were common. But in those days we performed under the strong vigilance of local comrades. It beats me why today, after nineteen years of Left Front rule in the state, these leaders are so scared!

In general, street plays should be thematically different from election plays. For example, a play on the Dunkel Draft is not suitable for municipal polls. Whether or not I believe in poll politics personally, when the Party wants me to take charge of street plays for elections, I have to keep in mind the question of poll results. So it becomes necessary to focus on local problems rather than on international issues in municipal or panchayat elections. If a municipality or a panchayat is not under the Left Front, I find it easier to write plays as the corruption and indiscipline of the members of these bodies act as inspiration.

During the last state and parliamentary elections the main theme of my plays was the corruption of various Congress ministers at the centre as well as of the so-called honest and

transparent politicians of the BJP I just presented them in a people's tribunal, leaving it to the people to judge them as they pleased. In many places there was a positive response from the audience, especially in villages where erstwhile Congress cadres had just joined the CPI(M), there was quite a vocal reaction. Get them; fresh defectors are always over-enthusiastic!

But in general my experience is that issues like hawala/sugar/ telecom scandals have no impact on rural people and ninety percent of urban people, for none of these issues is directly relevant for them. For village folks, it is much more important to talk of how their panchayats function, how honest and efficient their panchayat members are and such issues. In case of dishonesty and corruption among Left Front panchayat members, non-committed Left Front voters react adversely to the Front and that is borne out by the poll results for it is these non-committed voters who are the deciding factors. To these people, hawala is nothing more than a strange word.

Let me cite an incident that happened while performing an election play in a village. Once the play was over, a villager who proclaimed himself to be a Left Front supporter started abusing the panchayat *pradhan* for his corruption and dishonesty. That was his reaction to the issue of corruption in the play, as he is much more directly victimized by the *pradhan's* small-scale scandals than by the high-level scandals of union ministers or national political figures. Immediately, all spectators were comparing between levels of corruption, naturally focusing on the immediacy of the corruption at panchayat level. The purpose of the play was thus totally defeated.

On the other hand, performing my play *Dharma Akhon Manush Khaachchhe* (Religion Is Feeding on People Today), exposing the real nature of fundamentalism, in a completely Muslim dominated village, brought me a totally different reward. I was a little hesitant about doing that play there as it has both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist characters, including Bukhari. I was afraid that the Muslim audience might react strongly to the way Bukhari has been attacked in the play, and the party leadership would then blame me for doing that play there. However, the Muslim audience sat in absolute silence for the whole length of the play and the moment it ended, an octogenarian Muslim gentleman stood up and said loudly, 'I congratulate you boys for your courage. You have spoken the truth with a directness that even your leaders would feel afraid to.' I was stunned for a minute, and then I asked, 'But I've attacked a whole lot of political leaders in my play-Bal Thackeray as well as Bukhari.' The old man's response was, 'But you

must! Bukhari is a *kafir*.' This experience will be an inspiration for me throughout my theatre life.

I should recount that just seven days prior to this incident, when this play was being performed for the first time, a Left Front leader of Siuri had wondered if rural people would be able to understand this play. She felt it was too complex for simple-minded village folks. I told her, 'Why do you always underestimate rural people? They may not be formally educated like you, but their political sense is a lot keener than that of urban middle-class opportunists like us. Village people stay up nights to watch jatra and they react emotionally to the blank verse of those plays. In fact, we urban middle-class people only maintain a veneer of sophistication and a careful distance from rural folks so as to inspire their awe. The day they understand our real nature, they will rip apart our pseudo-intellectual masks, leaving us no ground to stand on. That process is already on.'

To wrap up, I must say that unfortunately Left Front leaders of the Birbhum district are as ignorant about and indifferent to the utility of culture/theatre as they are concerned with poll results. It is only in the hope of instant gains in the ballot boxes that they become suddenly enthusiastic about theatre for a week or two before the polls. I respond to their needs, but my street plays do not rotate around the ballot boxes. I want to reach the vast majority of toiling masses through my street plays-I don't care which party they are attached to. That, I consider, is the aim of healthy culture, healthy theatre, and some day I am sure to reach my goal.

#### Response to a Diatribe Sudhanva Deshpande

I wish to take up issue with I'aramita Banerjee who seeks to establish, on the evidence of a handful of plays written in one state of India, Bengal, on the occasion of the recent general elections, that India's foremost communist party, the CPI(M), is marked by 'political bankruptcy'. Let me clarify at the outset that I have neither read nor seen any of these plays-I do not even claim 'an intimate relationship with Bengali theatre even as part of a serious audience'. But I do have some experience of doing political theatre, and have been involved in the creation of the plays that Jana Natya Manch Delhi, has done for the last three general-elections, in 1989, 1991 and 1996. I do not grudge Banerjee her political predilections,

whatever they may be. But surely, in order to build an argument, one must do more than simply \*prop up random 'facts' to support *n priori* judgements. I hope I am not asking for too much in saying that an argument should at least *sound* reasonable. Banerjee's doesn't.

The first quarter of Banerjee's article is devoted to talking about political theatre. And what do we get? Apart from invocations of feminism, post modernism and Foucault, and a dictionary definition of politics (no, not from Bottomore's *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* not even from the Shorter Oxford), all within two sentences, we get virtually nothing. Not only is it 'definitely not easy to define political theatre'; we are told, 'it is near impossible to think of any theatre that is not political in some sense'. Even so, for Banerjee, political theatre designates 'plays that propagate an ideology of social change'; thus, political theatre is also 'propaganda theatre'. 'Marxist/ communist theatre' is less fortunate: 'it is nearly impossible to define'.

I have tried to detect some logic in this argument, but without success. If *all* theatre is political 'in some sense', why is there any need for a separate category of 'political theatre'? If political theatre is one that 'propagate [s] an ideology of social change', what kind of 'social change' does Banerjee have in mind? Should we assume that a RSS-sponsored play calling for a systematic destruction of all progressive ideas is as much 'political theatre' as a play that upholds the values of secularism, socialism, and democracy? If 'political theatre' is also 'propaganda theatre', are the two mere synonyms for each other? Is propagating something the same as propaganda? Why is the category of Marxist/ communist theatre introduced at all, if it is 'nearly impossible to define'? Are 'political theatre', 'propaganda theatre' and 'Marxist /communist theatre' interchangeable categories? I am not squabbling over nomenclature. My basic question is: what is the point of introducing the categories if these are not serving any analytical function at all? That these categories are not marked by an inherent vacuity would be apparent to anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with the vast literature on this question. Those who don't may like to begin by reading Brecht (*Brecht on Theatre*) or Piscator (*Vie Political Theatre*), or, closer home, Safdar Hashmi (*The Right to Perform*), or one of the pioneers of political theatre in Banerjee's home state, Utpal Dutt (*What is to be Done?*).

I am therefore foxed when Banerjee begins to talk of 'Bengali political theatre in the specific sense of propaganda theatre'-what has her discussion specified that now allows her to talk of the specific?and, in the very next sentence, cites *Nabanna* as having inaugurated

'a new line of political plays'. So what was *Nabanna-political* theatre, or propaganda theatre, or the former in the specific sense of the latter?

While the reader is struggling to find a way out of this analytical labyrinth, Banerjee takes a huge leap, traversing 52 years, from *Nabanna* directly to the election plays of 1996. Since these plays have come to us from the CPI(M), she expects them to 'combine the election sentiments at the popular level with futuristic [sic] political analysis.' What on earth does *that* mean?

Banerjee's expectations would doubtless be comprehensible to those with more intellectual capabilities than I possess. With my limited intelligence, the only thing that I have actually managed to understand is that these plays have failed to satisfy Banerjee's exacting standards. As I said, I have not read them, so I cannot comment on Banerjee's interpretations of the plays. But these interpretations, and her accompanying analysis, do come under a little bit of a cloud when one considers the following. Her contention is that these plays make a 'complete travesty ... of the Marxist notion of political parties being representatives of particular classes.' To support this contention, she quotes the following lines from one of the plays:

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 till *classes of people go to hell* (Her emphasis.) leaves me speechless. Is it really the case that even when she was translating (rather awkwardly, but we can let that pass) the Bengali words into English, she failed to notice that the line just before the one she emphasizes *specifically* names the peasantry and the working class? Or is it that she does not consider these to be classes? If so; what Marxist notion is she talking about? In any case, since her expectation from these plays—that they should combine 'election sentiments at the popular level with futuristic political analysis'-does not include class issues, what is she complaining about? And what does one make of her own discussion of 'political theatre' which is remarkably shorn of any kind of class content" Since she talks of only the 'general people' (whatever that means), or 'the poorer and less powerful sections of society', is one to surmise that 'political theatre' has nothing to do with classes? What, then, is politics?

Banerjee's answer to this last question revolves around a single theme: opposing the CPI(M). In doing this, Banerjee's article can lay claim to the virtue of consistency, though not clarity. Let me try and briefly summarize her grievances against the party, even at the expense of providing her VIEWS with more coherence than they actually possess. The CPI(M), she claims, has given up its revolutionary thrust, and is marked by 'political bankruptcy'. The latest evidence of this decline in the party's Politicalideological thrust is that 'this time the CPI(M)'s major electoral slogan circled [sic] around the hawala issue'. A paragraph later, she accuses the CPI(M) of maintaining 'flirtatious relations with the Congress at the centre, despite virulent Congress opposition at the state level'. On the following page, we hear that the CPI(M) has abandoned 'the Marxist ideal of Proletarian leadership' and regards the 'general people' as 'simpletons', 'to justify their [CPI(M)'s] own silence about any kind of a revolution'. I have already quoted her allegation that the plays under consideration make a 'complete travesty ... of the Marxist notion of political parties being representatives of particular classes'. We are now told that this 'makes clear that the CPI(M) is by no means ready to antagonize any section of the Indian population at the moment'. A couple of sentences later, she wonders 'if the cultural wing of the CPI(M) was already preparing for the post-election alliances that might clash seriously with the pre-election sidings [sic]-as is obvious from this latest drama of changing ministries' (she presumably means governments). In the concluding paragraph, she laments that 'instead of taking up issues, official Marxist propaganda seems to be preoccupied more with a depoliticized moral criticism of corrupt politicians'. This is because, contrary to 'Lenin's interpretation of Marxism', the CPI(M) has given up using 'the elections ... as a step towards the revolution'.

Banerjee has clearly never bothered to read Lenin. But what is more surprising is that she has not even bothered to read newspapers before or after the elections. I do not have the space here to go into a detailed examination of Banerjee's allegations. In any case, Banerjee's ignorance is no reason why STQ readers should be subjected to a long discussion on politics. I shall therefore be brief.

First, let us consider the following allegation: the CPI(M)'s flirtatious relations with the Congress at the centre'. In the entire text of Banerjee's article, there is not a single word that substantiates this allegation. One can perhaps excuse ignorance and muddled logic, but

unsubstantiated allegations, I am afraid, are the special privilege only yellow journalism enjoys.

Next, the CPI(M)'s alleged concentration only on a 'moral criticism of corrupt politicians' by taking up the hawala issue during the general elections. In the first place, the hawala issue was not the only one the CPI(M) took up. There were several others, including the state of the economy, the burden on the poor, the attacks on women's rights, the demand for greater democratization of the political system, the state of India's security, local issues like electricity and water supply, drainage, health facilities, and so on. I was privileged enough to actually see first-hand all these issues (and more) being raised at the grassroots level. But even those who weren't, could have gathered as much by reading newspapers, or by looking at the CPI(M) election manifesto, or listening to the CPI(M) spokesperson cm Dourdarshan, or by simply taking a walk in any constituency that the CPI(M) was contesting in.

Secondly, was the hawala issue being raised simply on moral grounds? While not ignoring the very important moral aspect of the issue, to my mind the CPI(M) was the only significant political party to consistently argue that corruption cannot be delinked with the question of economic policies:

The new economic policies have opened up hitherto unknown avenues for largescale corruption and loot of the country's resources. Under the so-called supremacy of the market forces, deals are clinched under the table with multinational corporations. With huge funds at their disposal these MNCs bribe their way without compunction to capture contracts. The unscrupulous ruling class politicians and bureaucrats are ever-ready to facilitate this. These economic policies have set in motion a qualitatively different nexus between the ruling class politicians, businessmen, and bureaucrats ... ('Bofors to Hawala; The Epic Journey of Loot': CPI(M) pamphlet released on the eve of the general elections, 1996, pp. 1-2.)

And this is not simply the view from the top, as it were. This understanding-that institutionalized corruption inevitably follows 'liberalization'-was not only evident in the grassroots level campaign of the party, but was also reflected in the play that Jana Natya Manch performed no less than fifty-eight times in the fortnight preceding the elections.

Lastly, Banerjee's allegations, with what she thinks are Lenin's blessings, that the CPI(M) has deradicalized itself, that the party considers the Congress (I) a 'classless party', and that it has chalked out cynical post-poll alliances. It would perhaps be too much to expect Banerjee to exert herself to read the somewhat lengthy texts by Lenin like *The State and Revolution*, *What is to be Done* and so on. Let me refer her instead to a short text of September 1917, 'On Compromises':

The usual idea the man in the street has about us Bolsheviki, an idea encouraged by a Press which slanders them, is that the Bolsheviki will never agree to a compromise with anybody.

The idea is flattering to us ... Nevertheless, we must say that this idea is wrong . . . The task of a truly revolutionary party is not to declare that it is impossible to renounce all compromises, but to be able, *through till compromises* when they are unavoidable, to remain true to its principles, to its class, to its revolutionary purpose. ... [Emphasis in original.]

It is, of course, true that the CPI(M) has had to join alliances with partners who represent, at best, the urban and rural bourgeoisies, or at worst, only themselves, their sons, and nieces, and nephews. But what about the context in which these alliances have been forged? The Congress (I) had to be kept out of power to safeguard what remains of the country's sovereignty; the non-BJP anti-Congress (I) forces would refuse to see eye to eye on anything; the fascist BJP itself was in the meanwhile staking its claim to be ruler of the nation. The CPI(M) had to perform the unenviable task of bringing together all others to ensure that the Congress (I) and the BJP were kept out of power, and it had to do this with a mere 30-odd MPs in a parliament of 500-strong. To use Aijaz Ahmad's eloquent phrase, barbarians were at the gate; and when that happens, *somebody* has to ensure that they don't enter; *that is* the historic task of a revolutionary party. The CPI(M) performed this task, but it also did something else quite remarkable. The party, uniquely in the history of independent India, spurned the offer to take the prime ministerial chair. It did this not only because of the moral problem of sharing power with not-so-clean partners, but also because of its understanding that these partners represent certain *class* interests that are contrary to the class interests that the CPI(M) represents; and that with its very limited real strength, the party was in no position to implement *its* class agenda; and that this hard-or should one say class-reality could not be changed by merely banking on Jyoti Basu's undoubted charisma.



All this, however, is trivia for Banerjee. Sacrificing objectivity at the altar of virulence, she accuses the CPI(M) of precisely the crimes it has not committed!

One could go on and pick other holes in Banerjee's argument. One could, for instance, question the procedure of condemning an entire party on the evidence-suspect evidence, but let us ignore that-of a handful of plays. One could question the propriety of making the West Bengal unit of the CPI(M) stand for the entire party-especially since she herself questions whether 'West Bengal comprises the whole of eastern India' in context of one of the plays. One could question the honesty of a critique that doesn't reveal its own ideological location is Banerjee on the left or the right of the CPI(M). One could also question whether *Nabanna* and *Kallol* classics of political theatre, are at all comparable to election play~examples of a rather specific kind of highly polemical agit-prop theatre. One could further argue that while all theatre contains political meaning, political theatre is quite a separate category: one that attaches itself self-consciously to the larger class forces contending for supremacy outside theatre, in society as a whole. And so on.

But all that may be unnecessary. For what Banerjee has written is more diatribe than critique, and perhaps deserves only to be ignored. Let me just wind up quoting Wole Soyinka ('The Autistic Hunt; or How to Maximise Mediocrity', in Soyinka's *Art, Dialectic and Outrage* Methuen, 1985), who after describing a particularly vicious attack on him as 'demented dribble', goes on:

Mr. Hunt knows the easy way to achieve a success *de scandale* famous target, reckless, sweeping claims, a heady iconoclasm-all perfect ingredients for shooting the upstart to instant 'recognition'. In responding to such opportunism, there can be no place for inhibition on my part, for ... I have not read any attempted *summative* essay on the work and philosophy of any author ... which dared to express, in such form, such an 'interpretation' of perverted and decontextualised readings ... One thing is evident-Mr. Hunt attempts to out-Lenin Lenin in the exercise of power through the tactics of abuse ... [This] is about the only quality he shares with Lenin.

Author's Response

I am simply amazed at Sudhanva Deshpande's capacity to pick up in my article a variety of points that I had certainly not raised. I wish I had the same intellectual capacity to similarly react to a piece exclusively<sup>1</sup> on some plays about which I know nothing!

Anyway, to go point by point, Mr Deshpande has failed to see any logic in my argument at the outset of my article which, I feel, is singularly due to his lack of familiarity with the currents of thought I've referred to. Anyhow, to simplify things for him, my argument could be stated as follows:

1. Every kind of theatre is political theatre.
2. But in common parlance (not mine) political theatre stands for plays propagating social change (which I personally believe to be an extremely narrow view of what can be called political).
3. In the above sense, political theatre is propaganda theatre.
4. This genre of propaganda theatre started on the Bengali stage with the formulation of the IPTA and the staging of *Nabanna*

Apparently Mr Deshpande is also rather vexed about my picking up a definition of politics from the Collins Cobuild dictionary. I certainly wouldn't use Bottomore's Dictionary of Marxist Thought because the entire feminist critique of Marxism (especially from the camp of Marxist feminists) has made it amply clear that politics needs to be defined in much broader terms than official Marxism has done so far-but I do not understand what he has in favour of the Shorter Oxford over the Collins Cobuild. To satisfy him, I'll now quote that dictionary's definition of politics: 'Activities concerned with the acquisition of authority or status'. Does it make any difference to the point I've tried to make?

Next, keeping in mind the entire debate about cultural revolution within the official Marxist camp, and combining with it the feminist critique of Marxism, or more specifically, the feminist re-reading of Marxism, I do think it impossible to define Marxist/ communist theatre, especially if the context of the writing does not allow a detailed discussion of the entire debate both within and without the official Marxist camp. No amount of official Marxist literature on this is likely to convince me otherwise, as I well know from my long acquaintance with such literature. I'd also like to mention here that unlike Mr Deshpande, I do believe, and I am pretty certain that I share this belief with many, that an 'RSS-sponsored play calling for a

systematic destruction of all progressive ideas is as much "political theatre" as a play that upholds the values of secularism, socialism, and democracy.' Otherwise, the world would be a much simpler place with only the right kind of politics and no wrong and dangerous kind of politics at all!

Then comes the accusation about my taking a huge leap from *Nabanna* to the election plays of 1996. *Nabanna* was mentioned simply as a reference point of the beginning of a particular kind of theatre in Bengal, and the theme is certainly not Bengali political theatre since.

Again, I wish I had Mr Deshpande's capacity for commenting on someone's 'exacting standards of expectation' or even 'awkward translation' when they relate to plays that he knows nothing about by his own admission, but what has me foxed is how the mention of peasants and workers in one sentence makes the mention of 'those who create distress for all classes of people' in the next sentence refer to the peasantry and working class also. Had Marx ever claimed that they are the only classes, or does Mr. Deshpande's party now do so? I am sorry I completely fail to see the point he is trying to make through quoting back an extract I had quoted. I reiterate that through calling the Congress the tormentor of till classes, the play in question makes a complete travesty of the Marxist theory of political parties being representatives of particular classes, and so does the CPI(M) in using such a play for election campaigns.

I would love to go on debating every issue that Mr Deshpande has raised in defence of the CPI(M), which is what he has basically concentrated on in the major part of his response, but I certainly don't think STQ is quite the place for that. Moreover, I am also at a disadvantage insofar as I do not know how

to respond to a slander that does not at all address the basic- theme of my article. Whatever comments I have made about the CPI(M) in the state of West Bengal (I would, at this point, invite Mr Deshpande to read the fifth paragraph of my article a *little* more carefully) are based primarily on an analysis of the plays the party has used for its election campaigns here, and if someone responds without even going, into that analysis (except for that one reference to which I've already responded)-I honestly don't know what to say. The very *least* one can expect from a response to an article is some reference to the basic theme.

What does one do when it isn't there? However, I do need to clarify two points in this context

Firstly, I did not and do not think it necessary to elaborate on the CPI(M)'s flirtatious relations with the Congress at the centre, as any acquaintance with this state's dailies is bound to give enough evidence of that. I don't think it humanly possible to keep count of the innumerable occasions on which Jyoti Basu has rushed to New Delhi on public money at Narasimha Rao's summons, to quote just one instance. If to assume familiarity with daily news is yellow journalism, then I'm afraid Mr Deshpande speaks a different language than I do. I would also like to remind him briefly about another relevant point. Jyoti Basu had declared in a press conference here that the Congress's party character had changed with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and the take-over of the party's reins by Narasimha Rao. Am I to presume that to judge the CPI(M)'s stand on the basis of public statements made by one of its major stalwarts is wrong?

Secondly, I am sorry that Mr Deshpande has made tall claims about the election issues addressed by his party, without bothering to find out how the campaigns went on in West Bengal. I do wish he had made himself a little more familiar with things before taking up cudgels against an article that deals solely with an analysis based on election plays used here, by the Party. Moreover, since the CPI(M) in West Bengal is part of the larger CPI(M), surely what the Party does here reflects on the Party as a whole? Finally, I fail to understand why my ideological position has to be made clear vis-a-vis the CPI(M), as Mr. Deshpande desires, but I certainly would like to point out one thing about his own ideological position. He is certainly for the CPI(M), but that apparently does not make it necessary for him to support Lenin. Someone who finishes his piece with a quotation that blatantly accuses Lenin of exercising 'power through the tactics of abuse' cannot possibly claim to have any reverence for this great practitioner of Marxist thought. If he is an anti-Leninist, is he still an official Marxist? I don't believe such a combination is possible. I, however, am a Marxist (though not an official one), and perhaps that's the reason behind my seeing things about the CPI(M) very differently from the way Mr Deshpande does.

Paramita Banerjee

### An Appeal

For sixteen long years, Anandam Cultural Centre has maintained its cultural activism in the district of Coochbehar. We need you as a well-wishing member to continue our efforts unabated.

Any individual/organization can become a well-wishing member of ACC for a year for a nominal membership fee of Rs. 30/- for individuals and Rs. 50/- for organizations. In exchange, you'll receive news of and invitations to all our activities and shows. Our journal *Ranganayak* will reach you through the post. Through lottery, we'll select one group each year from among the well-wishing member organizations to come and present one of their productions in ACC'S theatre festival.

Please send your membership fees through Money Order by December 1996 to the following address:

Shankar Dutta Gupta, Director, Anandam Cultural Centre, Gunjabari, Coochbehar 736101

Our activities: Cultivating theatre on a regular basis; publishing a theatre-related journal; mime. mass songs and drawing/painting practice; drawing/painting exhibitions; paying homage to eminent personalities; theatre training workshops; theatre festivals; giving awards to the district's best theatre persons of the year; theatre-related library; organizing recitation and musical shows; seminars; anti-drug campaigns etc.

## **Theatre Log**

### **Theatre and a Taste of Childhood for Street Children**

A theatre workshop was organized at the Yuva Bharati Stadium of Salt Lake, Calcutta, on 2-4 June, 1996 with street children in the age group 8-14. This workshop was organized experimentally by the Centre for Communication and Cultural Action (CCCA); a Calcutta-based organization, and the participating children came from three other Calcutta-based organizations.

The workshop differed methodologically from the usual procedure of theatre workshops, since the aim from the beginning was to encourage the children to express their own creativity and to get them acquainted with the rhythm of everyday life, so as to help them change their own behavioural pattern.

A five-day workshop offers some scope for gradually overcoming the diffidence and awkwardness of participants, which is rather difficult to achieve in a three-day workshop. But the workshop would be meaningless unless a bridge was built between the participating children and the facilitator/s. This is why this workshop emphasized theatre games from the very outset. This made it possible to make the children overcome their diffidence and feel confident enough to go ahead in a much less stilted fashion by the second half of the second day. I used some new games in this workshop, which I think were psychologically very significant. But quite a few of the kids successfully tackled these tests of cognition and recognition. Among the games used, 'Identify Your Friend', 'Enter the Circle' 'Changing Character' etc. were the more important ones.

The games were designed to facilitate the gradual emergence of a physical play in the children's minds. Their mental framework was also revealed through their behaviour during the games. On an average, children from well-to-do families grow up accustomed to well-defined constraints which make them look for freedom whenever they can. But for the first two days, I did not notice any such urge among the street children I was working with. The reason was that these kids have never learnt to want freedom, just as their surroundings have deprived them from a lot of other sensitivities as well. Many of these young

kids confessed that they only want to grow up fast so as to be able to end the distress of their mothers. However, on the third day many of them showed the usual childlike energy and mischief that the fatigue of their situation had kept muted. That is when I tried to use games to teach discipline. These games needed concentration and a sharp eye for the surroundings; or else the games wouldn't be thrilling.

It is necessary to mention in this context that it would be wrong to presume that we had a written script as the basis on which we tried to improvise in the workshop. The aim of this workshop was a search or a quest, which may be termed a play or the theme of a play, or may even be categorized as an integrated approach to the performing arts.

Most children feel that a theatre workshop means getting ready a play as fast as possible and then performing it. So there is always a chance of their getting impatient with this combined method of games and search; especially when they badly want to perform. This is where the facilitator's role becomes crucial, as s/he has to make the children evolve their own scripts so as to reveal their own imagination and thoughts. It is also important to demarcate between this process of learning through theatre, and formal education. Such a play done by the children themselves through a workshop is not only a medium of learning, it is a medium of self-learning as well. This process transcends the cognitive aim of formal school education and helps children to articulate their own passions and emotions, which in turn boosts up their confidence in themselves without clouding their perception and rationality.

While the search for a play was always there, that never was the major objective. In between games there were interludes of discussions on discipline, morals, and the goal of life. The task is never easy for the facilitator/s and one often feels exasperated at not having a magic wand to somehow make the three days last longer.

However, it needs to be reiterated that the participating children were not used in this workshop as guinea pigs for experimenting with what the organizers had pre-determined. So what evolved through the workshop was a story told through a collage, which then was dramatized on the third day. The collage-story consisted of various things made by the children with coloured paper and also with drawings/ paintings when the story so demanded. Strangely enough, both groups seemed concerned with the environment and with snakes. As training on other aspects of theatre continued, the two concerns became fused into one. The

trainer's role is important here as s/he has to locate a simple means for communicating what the children might find difficult to express in theatrical language.

The third day was spent in both developing a storyline and getting the kids used to throwing their voices, to the space where the play was to be done. Improvisations started only after they felt confident enough about putting up a play they had created themselves. From their own stories, they developed two plays called Snake and Picnic. It was decided that the two would be integrated into one play, which would be performed on 5 June at the Eden Gardens as part of the World Environment Day celebrations.

The play that evolved through the workshop may be called an improvised drama or extended theatre, where the theme, form and dialogues are forever open to change and further polish. The other element that emerged as significant in this workshop was space, which should act as an important accessory. But the space in this workshop was quite unsuitable, causing the loss of a valuable day.

Rather than the theatrical standard of the production we should think instead of how these street urchins will glow for some time to come from this three-day experience of the childhood of which they've been deprived and the pride of an achievement unprecedented in their young lives.

Ranjana Bhattacharya

Anandam Cultural Centre: Working with Children

Theatre for and by children continues to be largely unavailable. While a handful of schoolgoing children in the metros gets some opportunity in this direction through school shows etc., the large majority of children in rural, suburban and smalltown schools and/or non-schoolgoing children seldom has any such luck. That is why any effort towards involving children with theatre as well as other forms of performance deserves special credit.

Anandam Cultural Centre (henceforth ACC) of the Coochbehar district in northern West Bengal ranks high among organizations devoted to this particular task, for they work mostly with children and adolescents. Established in 1980, ACC started functioning regularly only after five initial years of birth pangs. Since 1985, ACC started organizing training workshops for theatre persons of the district and training in mime was added to their list of activities in 1991. The idea



behind these workshops was to help theatre persons of the district learn through practical demonstration by experts in respective fields.

Since ACC works mostly with children and adolescents, and also because these young theatre enthusiasts have more energy and time for practising what they learn through workshops, training programmes specially for them were started from the following year. In response to a proposal from ACC, the National School of Drama deputed one of their graduates, Siddhartha Chakraborty, as a trainer in 1993. Till 1995, Mr. Chakraborty along with another NSD graduate Partha Banerjee conducted workshops for children and adolescents. Souri Shankar Bhattacharya, Kishore Chakraborty, Bidyut Pal, Nirmal Dev, Debabrata Bhattacharya, Shankar Dutta Gupta and other local theatre activists assisted them from time to time. The children's section takes children between 8 and 12 while the adolescent section covers the age group 13 to 15. Local theatre groups are invited to send in participants of their choice. The only criteria are that they should be already involved in theatre activities in some way, be eager to continue these activities in the future as well. This, however, clearly indicates that ACC could not have done this whole thing without hearty cooperation and support from local theatre groups.

Shankar Dutta Gupta, the director of ACC, masterminds the whole thing. Teachers are chosen on the basis of their expertise in the field they are to offer training in, which is imparted mostly through theatre games. The participants are told a story, on the basis of which they themselves develop dialogues and improvise compositions. Through games they learn about body movements, voice and speech, use of space and so on. For seven days the kids have classes for seven hours a day, and on the eighth day they present a production on the basis of that. The participants evolve their own script rather than starting with one, though they do start with a basic storyline. After each day, they also have to submit a written report. Between 1993 and 1995, plays produced in these workshops were *Ekti Ajab Gappo* (A Queer Tale) based on a Hans Anderson story, *Haarnadhanner Dashti Chhele* (Ten Sons of Haaraadhan) based on a Bengali children's rhyme, and *Rajjyotishi Brindaban* (Brindaban, the King's Astrologer) based on a Chinese folk tale.

This year also, a theatre workshop for children and adolescents was organized by ACC in June. They were actively supported by the William Carrey Study and Resource Centre (henceforth WCSRC) and Science Communicator's Forum. The authorities of Jenkins School

also helped the endeavour by providing the venue. The workshop was on June 23-29 and on June 30 was the performance. A total of three productions was the outcome of the workshop this year. Two of them were one-act plays, and the third was a shadow puppet drama.

A new performance form added to the training items this year was shadow puppet drama, which was not previously known in the district, but was found to be very attractive to children when done well. It is the WCSRC which got ACC introduced to and interested in this form, and the training workshop in shadow puppet drama was carried on with a resource person from this centre also. This form has been found to be well suited for the dramatization of different fables.

Other activities planned by ACC for the rest of this calendar year are: a training workshop and festival of mime in collaboration with Coochbehar Mime Centre in November, and a district-level theatre festival in December.

Shankar Dutta Gupta

### **Pagla Ghora: A Review**

Badal Sircar continues to be a nodal point in contemporary Bengali theatre, even on the proscenium, though he himself has left it for what has now become well known as third theatre. It is no exaggeration to say that his *Ebang Indrajit* and *Baki Itihas* are among the most significant of contemporary Bengali plays. Several of his other proscenium plays are also rated very highly by scholars and theatre enthusiasts alike, though we have not really seen any of these revived by any major group recently. Byatikram, therefore, deserves credit for going back to one of Sircar's earlier plays.

The philosophical movement known as existentialism, essentially challenging a 'rational' point of view and focusing on both the significance of emotionality and the inescapability of anguish in human existence, grew popular in the west, particularly in the period between the two world wars, and was more or less on the wane by the late sixties. One more important tenet of existentialism was to reject the universalistic approach in favour of the individualistic one. A major achievement of this philosophical project was to transcend the limits of mere academic endeavour and spread its impact over a vast area of the arts, both performative and

otherwise. Here in Bengal, Jibanananda may be cited as one of the major poets rather strongly influenced by the existentialist quest. Badal Sircar's *Pagla Ghora* may also be classified as an existentialist play, as I understand both the philosophy and the script.

The reason for my seeing *Pagla Ghora* as existentialist is that the play is based on the recurrent motif of life as a horse run berserk, which may trample one at any moment unless one steps out of its way in time; yet if this mad horse doesn't look one's way, then one's life is little more than that of a vegetable. Inbuilt into this motif are life stories of several individuals, all questioning decisions that they once thought were correct and rational. The setting is a crematorium where four men have come to cremate the body of a young girl who has committed suicide by hanging herself. The girl's spirit hovers near these men, thirsting for human company; and she brings out their self-questioning as they become more and more inebriated. Simultaneously, the girl's own story of an empty life is also revealed. What is notable is that three of these four men have caused disasters in the lives of one-time beloved women through sheer obduracy, sticking to their own sense of right and wrong, and choosing to completely ignore what the women were feeling or even what their own hearts dictated. The fourth one, a middle-aged bachelor, lacked the courage to own up to his definite interest in the girl who has just died, perhaps because of the huge gap between their ages. When he did think of doing something, it was too late. He stays back when the others make a move to return to their respective dwellings and considers suicide, but changes his mind as he reiterates his favourite cliché: anything can happen if you stay alive. To me it appears integral, not optional, to the play that the dead girl also becomes the other three girls.

One has memories of *Pagla Ghor<sup>a</sup>* directed by Sombhu Mitra, by Shyamanand Jalan in Hindi, and by Amol Palekar in Marathi: each one of them a smart production that lingers in one's memory. Byatikram, therefore, has taken a risk in choosing to redo a play that has such a history of men, portable productions by known masters of the craft. It must be said that they haven't managed to put up a show that can make one congratulate them for taking this risk. The stage design was different from the playwright's directions, but it was all different zone for the enactment of the life stories of the men wasn't smart enough, and it jarred. Also, the production failed to clarify why different women were used to play the roles of the three women in the lives of three of the men. Perhaps it was because of the director's lack of faith in the acting capacities of Sutapa Chaudhuri, who played the central character-her performance

was really weak. But if it was meant to deliver some kind of a message, then that has certainly not carried through. Aparna Roy Chaudhuri as Mili did her bit well and so did Bijoy Mukherjee as Satkari and Chiranjit Mukherjee as Sashi. But Malay Roy as Himadri and Basanti Paul in the double role of Malati and Lachhmi definitely need to do better. Alope Nath De as Kartik compounder, however, put in a memorable performance. All in all, it is a good effort, but Byatikram has to work much harder on their production to make it a success. Paramita Banerjee

Letters

In July this year, a theatre competition was held in Pune, a well-known centre for theatre. A local theatre group which has close ties with the Theatre Academy was performing in the competition; their play was a satirical one with Ram and Sita as the two central characters. Since these were contemporary characters, Ram was seen in dark glasses and Sita in high heels. The play was full of sharp dialogues pregnant with an undercurrent of sarcasm towards contemporary socio-political trends. The audience was obviously enjoying it, as bursts of laughter and applause broke out every now and then. Only appreciation and praise came to the performers when the play was over.

The next evening, another play was on and the performers of the previous evening were among the audience. The play was at a high point when suddenly there was a furore in the audience. Most people thought it was part of the play and wondered if something like the one-time great Bengali play *Natyakarer Sandhane Chhati Charitra* (Six Characters in Search of the Playwright) was being done in a new way. Everybody sat still to watch some men being dragged onto the stage from among the audience. That something untoward was happening became apparent to the spectators only when the youths who had been dragging the others broke down the set of the ongoing play and stopped it midway. These young men now declared haughtily that they were Shiv Sena members and that they held the performers

... .. previous evening guilty ... .. insulting the national Hindu hero Ram and his female counterpart Sita in their play. At this point quite a few people, including a nationally famous playwright, stealthily left their seats to push off and save their skins, maybe. The Shiv Sena activists demanded that the manuscript of the play done the previous evening be publicly burnt then and there and that each performer chant the name of Ram a thousand times. Before the performers were forced to do all that, however, their faces were blackened by way of

punishment. The audience who had cheered them so thoroughly the previous evening felt compelled to sit and watch this humiliation of the theatre workers.

This is really an example of private censorship, or party censorship to be more precise. We in West Bengal must feel a terrible sense of shame to hear about such an incident! That is why, at Akhra in Madhyamgram, about forty theatre activists who had assembled for a three-day theatre workshop condemned the incident in unequivocal terms. The Theatre Living Laboratory, a platform of some fifty theatre groups, also strongly condemned this fascist attack on theatre.

At the same time, however, these theatre workers also reminisced that this was no isolated incident; that similar incidents have been happening in different towns and villages, provinces and states for ages, really. It is not that West Bengal stands as a glorious exception, either. Memory starts playing like a movie screen the moment we remember plays like *Nil Darpan* (The Indigo Mirror), *Nabanna* (The Harvest Festival), *Din Badaler Pala* (The Saga of Times Changing), *Duhwapner Nagari* (Nightmare City) and such others. Our own memories hold a summarized history of the times, which can still confront LIS with burning questions. Why did the party [CPI(M)] start such virulent propaganda against the Alternative Living Theatre right from its inception? Why were all the sincere party cadres strictly instructed not to see its plays? Why was there such a concerted effort towards socially ostracizing the organizers of the group through a variety of slander?

I have also heard from many other theatre groups that the party has asked for scripts before production to make sure that no anti-party elements are present. We have had to face the same. West Bengal Natya Akademi has been established with the sole purpose of such monitoring. There are so many different ways to help those who are pro-establishment! There are equally varied ways to remove those against the establishment from the spotlight. This effort still continues unabated.

groups friendly with them strongly condemns such white terrorism-whether it occurs in West Bengal, Maharashtra, somewhere else in India or anywhere in the world.

Prabir Guha

*[The 'Pune Plus' of the Times of India carried the following report on July 15, 1996:*

Pune July 14. Activists of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) today burned the script of the one-act play *Rambharose* and forced an 'apology' out of the theatre group staging it, for the alleged blasphemy of Hindu deities.

The actors, directors and playwright ... were also forced to chant *jai Rain, Shri Rain, jai jai Ram* for some time as 'penance'. The organisers of the competition, Soham Pratishtan, were told by the BJYM that all scripts for future competitions, would be subjected to a 'thorough check' and plays with scripts found objectionable on 'religious, social and character assassination' grounds would not be allowed to be staged ...

The activists ... sought out the playwright Mr Shirang Godbole, the director, Mr Hrishikesh Deshpande, and the president of Soham Pratishtan, Mr Vishwas Karmakar, who were among the audience, and blackened their faces and smashed eggs on their heads. They demanded that the cast, the director and the playwright chant the name of Lord Ram a thousand times before the start of today's session ...

Meanwhile, the senior stage and film actor, Dr Shriram Lagoo, has condemned the BVS and the BJYM for yesterday's incident. He said that these organisations were taking the law in their own hands even as their own government was in power in the state ... Dr Lagoo recalled that this was the third incident within the span of a month that (sic) organisations owing allegiance to the saffron alliance had indulged in hooliganism.'

misrepresentation of my paper, which dealt with the phenomenon of an Indian play in English receiving an unusual amount of critical and popular acclaim, and the possible reasons behind its success.

My paper ['On Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like A Man*'] focused on the cultural politics of I the play], the sponsorship it attracted, and the audience reactions to the play, which made it the cultural byword in Delhi during its run in the capital. The categorisation of my discussion as a 'feminist attack' joined in by 'women participants' at the seminar is very objectionable as it completely sidelines the basic thrust of my work and misrepresents my arguments.

I have always had a very high opinion of your journal and I am sure that you will correct the false impression created by the article.

Angelie Multani *[The paper referred to appears elsewhere in this issue, giving readers ample opportunity to decide for themselves if the comments quoted are justified or otherwise]*