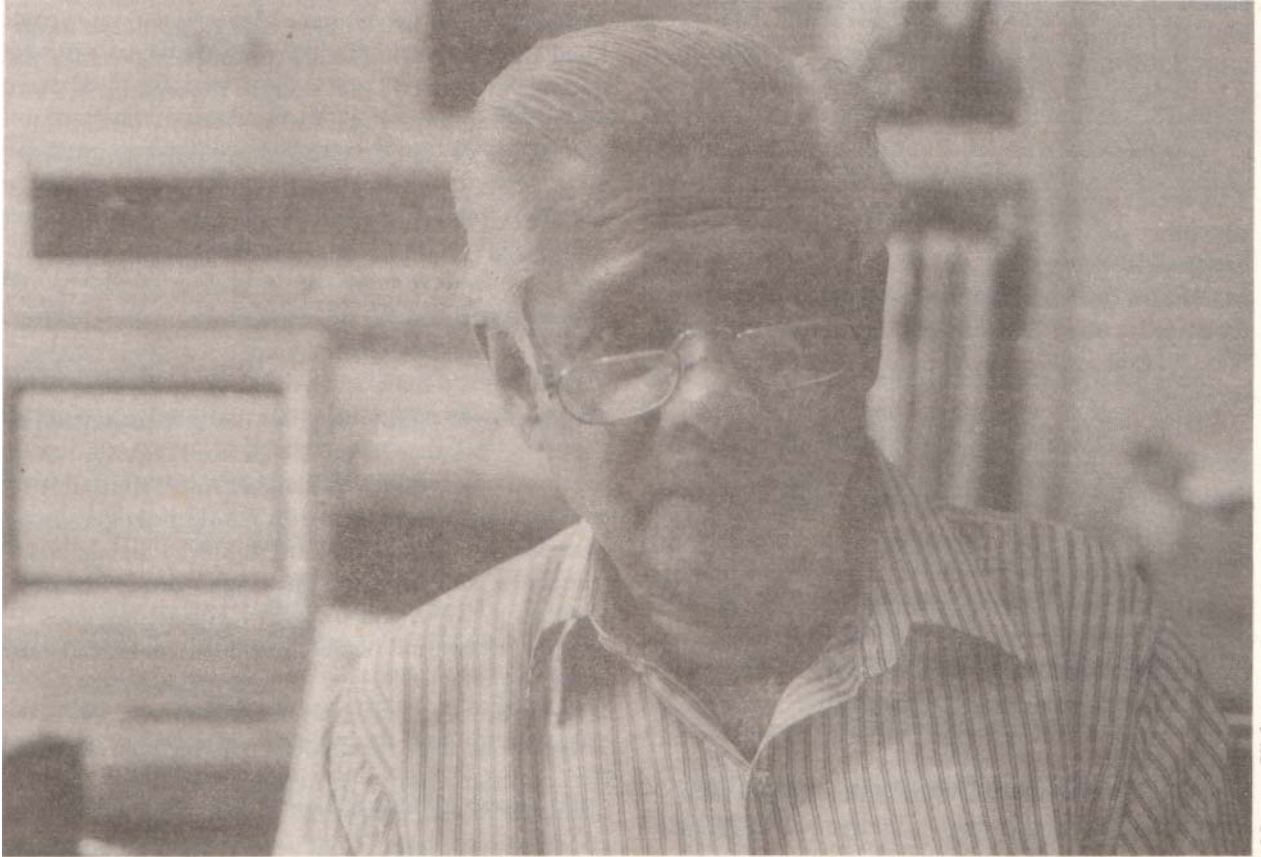


Birth of a Play: The Documentation of a Process

An Interview with G. P. Deshpande



Naveen Kishore

Earlier this year the well-known Marathi playwright G. P. Deshpande was invited to participate in an unusual project. The idea was for him as a playwright to take part in a workshop with a group of six actors (four male and two female) and director/actor Vinay Sharma, all members of the Calcutta-based Hindi theatre group Padatik, to see if a play could evolve out of the interaction. It was open-ended, as all experimentation is. STQ followed the entire process closely, holding frequent sessions with G. P. Deshpande, as well as discussions with the workshop participants. Below is the documentation of the process as it unfolded, almost day by day.

G. P. Deshpande in conversation with STQ on 25 May, after the first two days of the workshop.

STQ: What was the idea behind a workshop like this?

GPD: I don't even know if a workshop like this has happened before in India or whether it will be useful or not; it's yet to be seen. But one of my directors in Bombay said, what is the point of doing a workshop like this with actors? This should be done with directors.

We began with this idea that if you have a narrative or the bare outline of one, or a storyline ... how does it work itself out into a play. And supposing you have the actors' cooperation in that process itself, what kind of benefit will accrue to the actors and to the playwright? Accordingly we decided to try it out. It all began on the 23rd of May-I told them at some length the storyline I had in mind and the main characters involved.

STQ: That you'd thought of before?

GPD: Yes, that I'd thought of before . . . this was something which I had been wanting to try out for a while.

STQ: And what was that?

GPD: A storyline like this: there is a small group, which on the face of it, is doing social work or reformist work. And there is a couple-the husband is rich and very supportive of the wife. And the wife is a typical liberal person, to a certain extent also naive, perhaps; but driven by some kind of humanism, as it were. She gets involved with this group, thinking that they're doing something very useful. So ... when they need money, she makes it available to them. If they ask her to do small jobs, she does it for the group. It's a very small group in which there is a couple and two other people involved. Gradually what happens is, this group gets involved in some kind of militant/ terrorist activity, including a lot of violence. . . . And this lady is quite unaware of it. She still takes their non-violent affirmations quite seriously.

I told this group of six actors and actresses that I'm not interested in discussing politics here. This play is not about the politics of terrorism at all. Terrorism or violence here serves as a backdrop and it is a sort of 'given' in the situation.

Now, some foreign money comes to the group. For the first time this group faces the problem of where to keep this money. And so they decide to request this lady to route it through her joint account in the bank, and then withdraw it a couple of days later, and explain it to her husband. In this group there is the couple that I told you about and the third person who has been jilted at some point by his female co-group member, and he has not been able to live it down. He thinks that this is the time to get it out and therefore he turns-or probably he's already turned-into an informer and he spills the beans. The doctor husband gets harassed and says, I put the money

there, that although his wife had put the money there, he had asked her to. So it's a moral dilemma for everybody concerned. The doctor husband takes the position that when you're involved, I too am partially involved and I shall own up to it. And his wife says but why should you, when you didn't even know that it was there? I should've been arrested! And he's obviously a fairly rich man of the city and knows his way around. Meanwhile this other lady confronts this informer, saying, have you done this and since when are you doing this? Why did you do this? So he says, that's a silly question you're asking me. I've been in politics a long time-how does it matter now? You want me to tell you since when I'm an informer? What made you ask this kind of a question? And supposing I say no, I'm not an informer, you won't believe me. So she said, okay then answer another question-how did you get everybody arrested except me? How come I got left out? Out of sheer vengefulness he says, if you want me to answer that question you'll have to let me hold you in my arms for a while. She thinks it over and agrees on the condition that he answers the question. And then when he actually holds her in his arms, he softens because he's always looked upon her as an ideal and those things start coming back to him. So he says, ever since I met you for the first time, I've always longed for you. And maybe my desire for you had never been a particularly moral one-for all you care-but it's been there. And when I was a member of the core group, I proposed that in a group like this, there ought to be a non-member member who's not technically a member but is effectively so, always kept informed- and if it is a woman it is better, her movements are less suspect than those of a man; and you must make sure that no paper ever mentioning her name is preserved in the office. Because, even at that time I thought that this kind of job involves danger. And I'm unable to explain this and perhaps you would not even think of me as capable of that kind of kindness, but it is true. Now that you hold me in your arms, I must say this, that I always thought if something goes wrong, you should not get into trouble; I don't care what happens to the rest of them. So then she said-this doesn't seem to be the whole story. There's something that you're still hiding from me. He laughs and says-if there's something I am hiding from you, forget it. I'm not going to tell you. You have held me in your arms once and then you want so many answers in the bargain-and I know what you're heading towards; but I would not know the answer to those questions even if you were to actually marry me! She says she only has a simple question-did he make it a condition with the police, before he gave the game away, that she should be left out? At which point of time he breaks down slightly and says, yes, I did. Then she says-you've not only taken revenge on those

15 people who're jailed, but you've denied me my history; now there's no record that I've worked. You've erased my past, ruined my present and I have no future left. Then she goes to that other woman and says, we're very sorry that you had to go through all this, your husband is in jail. So we've betrayed you. But I want to make sure that you don't take this confession to mean that I think our politics was all wrong. But we've personally betrayed you, I agree, and have come here to take whatever punishment you choose to mete out. So this lady says-what punishment? I had made some decisions and I have paid the price for it. How do you come into the picture? Besides, how do you decide whether your politics was right or wrong? You don't have to answer me. But find an answer for yourself, you're going to need it. My only regret is that I did something and my husband is suffering for it. In other words, it's a mis-match of crime and punishment.

So, this is what it is. I said, these are the characters-now work it out. So first we decided to take the last situation, where these two ladies meet. So I said, now do it-you know the story; think of a situation where they'll meet-who'll lose her temper, who'll not lose it, let your instincts work. So four of them played it out-whatever they could remember of it. I said, just improvise. This is the situation-now you put it in the lines. Now while that was happening, lines started coming to me, naturally; I could see it happening. So at one stage I started reacting, and said, hold on, supposing this lady starts saying such and such a thing, and gave them some lines and asked the two girls in the group to react to them. I told them to keep in mind that we're not discussing conventional morality at all. In fact, both ladies for their own reasons have their own conventional ethics. There the only moral considerations that they have is the relationship between two individuals. The activist woman is certainly like that-her only moral consideration would be how she relates to another person. And that is what is bringing her back to this woman. It's a question of sorting out a relationship. Then yesterday morning I wrote the scene out. What I'd written turned out to be very different from what they actually did. But that doesn't matter. Then I read out to them, on a rough and ready translation basis, the actual scene.

STQ: What're you looking for in the improvisations?

GPD: I want a basic human reaction to this situation-what shape it takes. As actors, they must've done several plays where all kinds of dilemmas or predicaments must have been discussed. If they have dealt with an individual in a predicament, if I'm giving them a situation, how do they themselves work it out: *not* necessarily in terms of actual verbalization, which may or may not

be satisfactory because it is not an actor's business to provide words-it is the author's business. But to the extent that when this kind of effort is made, you get a whole lot of emotional worlds available to you. For example, as happened yesterday, while improvising this kind of a situation one of the two actresses almost made the character shout-hysterically, almost. So this makes one think, okay, this is one possible reaction and I must think about it, whether I want this or not. What I will do here is that you find this typical liberal wife has gone so much beyond normal notions of sorrow, that she is tearless, completely. She is completely un-hysterical. She's broken within but nothing shows outside. And that leads to the activist's break-up towards the end of the play-and as she reaches that pitch of anger and anguish, she almost forgets (as it is written now) that she's talking to this person and makes a general appeal-kill me; I'd much rather die than break down. This kind of a balance between the two moves was obviously not there when they did it. But what they did led me to the idea.

STQ: So you feel that this improvising with actors is helping you as a playwright? The play would've been different if you'd done it totally on your own?

GPD: I don't know. It's quite possible. This idea has been there for quite some time. In fact I'll give you a personal detail about how it started Shreeram Lagoo's wife Deepa, she's a leading actress of the Marathi stage. She once said to me in fun, I have a complaint against you: you've written two plays for Shreeram and not even one for me. So I said, okay, I'll write one. Then I started thinking of a play which revolves around this liberal wife, born almost as a consequence of Deepa's insistence that I should write something for her. Ultimately she may or may not do it.

STQ: What gave the motivation for this kind of an experiment?

GPD: The motivation was quite simple. I'd interacted with directors like Lagoo and Dubey before and the experience has changed the writing; when we were doing *Uddhwasta Dharamshala*, for example, Dubey and Lagoo interacted with me and I think several parts were rewritten as a consequence of that, with them reacting to my propositions etc. So I just wanted to do an exercise with actors because if this can work with a director-because, again, a director is not a man of words and if his interactions can lead to a new set of words or a new situation for that matter ... for example, when *Chanakya* was being turned into a play, at a point when I was reading it out (Sriram Lagoo was going to direct it in Marathi), Lagoo suddenly said, I don't want that *shikha* scene there-you know when Chanakya takes that oath that my *shikha* will remain open, that I will tie it up only when I get the Nandas down. He said, this is much too well-known

a thing and it'll now become a TV serial and therefore you can't really get any theatre out of it. Maybe in film it'll work well-you can have a close-up. But in theatre it's ineffective.

Cut that out. And I cut it out and now with hindsight I feel he was right. So it is these kinds of reactions. I've been thinking for a long time that if a director can thus throw a light on a possible way of dealing with a situation, why not an actor? Though the verbalization will always be mine.

STQ: So the final decisions on the script are yours?

GPD: Certainly. Ultimately the decision will be mine. I will observe the reaction. But let me complete what I was saying-that if these directors could stimulate me in this way, there must be some interesting way in which the actors would be able to do so too. And while I was toying with this idea, Vinay Sharma suggested this workshop-he just wanted to do a workshop. He said the younger members of Padatik are wanting to do this, there should be about six or seven of them. Then it occurred to me and I put it to him, that look, if you want to do a workshop, this is the kind of thing that I have in mind: are you willing to take the risk? And the risk is that ultimately nothing might come out of it. Then neither of us should feel cheated about it-it just didn't work. We just had some improvisations.

But two days' experience gives me the feeling that a play is happening. Maybe it's , partially that I was thinking of the storyline for a long time, it was already germinating in my mind. Arid suddenly, trying to do some kind of a functional scene with 2/3 or 4 actors gives it the necessary push and also focuses it. So it looks like it'll work. But whether this kind of a thing will work without a storyline, suppose you start completely open-minded, as it were that I do not know.

STQ: But they were expecting it to be like that, weren't they? When Vinay talked to me before you'd come, he said it was going to start from maybe an idea or a concept.

GPD: Yes, originally they didn't have an idea. But, after our meeting on Sunday, I gave them the outline and asked if they were game and they were!

STQ: When you gave them the story, how did they react initially? It's a very complex situation and I find a lot of different possibilities, of layers, actually, and there must've been different reactions? Did you try more than one actor for a role?

GPD: Yes, yes. For exaple there's these two women characters and two actresses in the group and both of them have been doing the roles alternately. What happens is that, because they're doing it-for example this informant, that he softens down, becomes a little more human in her arms, was not in the original idea; it hadn't occurred to me. Maybe it's partially the function of my general style of writing: I like to believe, that among Indian playwrights writing today, if their women characters are compared with mine, my women characters are very strong and dominant. So somewhere that kind of a thing was working. And there is a situation in Past *One o' Clock*, for example, where Uma holds Vinayak in her arms for the first time and you see that Vinayak doesn't know what to do with this happiness and pleasure. And then the father actually says so, that your life is made. Maybe that kind of a thing was happening without my consciously knowing it. But suddenly in the process of actually writing the scene, this informant changed his character. Instead of outright black, it turned a little gray. This is something that probably would've happened even otherwise. But as these people were attempting these roles, in however simplistic or complex ways at times, they were immediately presenting the possibility of alternate interpretations. In fact, there's this line in one of the scenes, which I'm now going to remove, because both the persons speaking that line gave me the feeling that this was not the meaning I had in mind. So obviously as actors they've received it very, very differently.

STQ: You're writing in which language?

GPD: I'm-writing in Marathi. But I'm reading the Marathi text to them in rough translations. And so that they have less difficulty in following the text, to the extent possible, I've put in some English sentences also. But going back to that one line, I decided to re-word it, keeping the substance intact. And that's what we tried yesterday. And it was better. That's the other advantage of such a workshop with actors-if they're reasonably competent actors, they get into the rhythm of the language which is actually somewhat connected with the structures of meaning which are not exactly symmetrical. And the two days' experience tells me that the thing might work because I'm already on the third scene now and tomorrow or the day after, yet another one will get written.

STQ: You've written the last scene first? So you're working backwards? But you've got the idea of the play sequentially?

GPD: Yes. I thought let me begin with something which is emotionally very strongly charged and let me try it out. I might not have written the last scene first, but for the fact that they enacted it first.

STQ: I was just wondering, if instead of having a definite storyline, you'd given them a situation and left it open-ended, d'you think the actors would've come up with their own ideas and changed the story completely?

GPD: But they still have that right. I told them as much. I said this narrative is a take-off point. You don't even have to stick to it.

STQ: It's actually a moral situation, right? And their reactions and responses are something that you're evolving out of them, right?

GPD: Yes and no. You see, since I've been thinking of this narrative for some time, I'm already seeing these characters in a particular way. So I will only change it if one of the actors throws up something really exciting. And I'm completely open about that.

STQ: Do the actors take the basic storyline as an imposition on their creativity or as a challenge to it?

GPD: I've explained to them that they have the freedom.

STQ: But if the last scene is written before everything else, it already determines what happens before.

GPD: I don't take its limits to be fixed at all. If it is exciting, it will stay. We are going into this with the understanding that we have the necessary emotional and intellectual preparedness to accept anything exciting, even if a signal is sent up which you may not have thought of. For example, this play which Dubey is doing, which will go on stage in September in Delhi, he's translating it into Hindi himself. Now there is an old-fashioned Communist Party fellow who's completely broken because of the East European experience, the Soviet experience and so on and his daughter is an activist-in the play it's not clear of what sort. She could be in the Narmada Bachao Andolan, she could be in the Naxalite movement, she could be in anything. She's left the house and at some stage the news of her death comes. And he's completely broken. I had originally written that he's broken for a while and then composes himself, stands grimly and raises the Communist fist in honour of a dead comrade. Dubey suggested-the character has a son also, who's completely apolitical till that point of time-let him stand there completely broken, let

this apolitical son come, give him support and raise his hand in a fist. Now it completely changes the texture of the scene. And I took Dubey's idea and that's how it appears on stage. That's why I'm saying that I'm completely open as far as ideas are concerned.

STQ: This kind of nostalgic return to idealism that this man believed in and that he felt his daughter believed in and therefore died for, it has a sense of nostalgia for the passing of something that's gone-it used to be like this. But when the son comes forward and does it, then there's a hope for the future. So it becomes. . .

GPD: I understand what you're saying. But this is also connected to the other part of the story which is that this daughter of his has had a daughter. She's somewhere out there. Now the question is, somebody has to go and fetch her. And he's in no position to do that. It's the son who does it. So in a sense his politics begins with the recovery of the niece. So how does he step into that political act? It is this kind of a gesture on his part. It is in a sense a suggestion that he's found his role, finally. Each of the characters in the play-there are two NRIs, one is a Vishwa Hindu Parishad activist, the other a Jain, who come together at this man's house. They were in college together in Baroda many years ago, but are meeting after many years. And then they start discussing things. The daughter never comes on stage in the realistic sense. There are only her letters. And as somebody is reading the letters out, the contents of the letter are enacted. That's how you see her. So for the first time a form has been employed where there's a play between illusion and reality, whereas this younger brother of her's who's completely apolitical, keeps seeing her all the time, and talking to the absent daughter, who makes fun of him. So there are several totally nonrealistic scenes employed in this way. It's the most exciting thing that I've written so far. This is what many people tell me; so far I've done many readings: I've read it out to about 100 people so far and there seems to be a general consensus on that. So we wanted to show that trajectory of the son. Although what you're saying is quite valid, because that's why I had the father collapse for a while and then recover his bearings; that's how it was originally written. Precisely because of the very idea that you have in mind. And in fact I had a long argument with Dubey-the argument lasted for 2 hours.

STQ: No, but you're saying, if the son's character is supposed to show this shift towards activism, with him actually going and getting the niece, then it makes sense, because then he's also showing his understanding of his father's involvement, by helping his father come to life.

I find, in several plays, you have dealt with this very difficult coming to terms with the postcommunism, the post-idealist communism phase-the toll it takes on people, the way people respond or react to it. And somehow I feel that this play, where you started off by saying it's not exploring politics per se, but more the question of moral responsibility, that's what you seem to be exploring in the play-who takes responsibility for a particular act; that you may think you're doing something idealistic, but is everything explained in the name of that, who d'you harm and who d'you take responsibility for-is that something that was concerning you when you were thinking of the story?

GPD: Surely. Definitely, because it started from a feeling that one has met several liberals in Delhi and elsewhere who for various reasons support this demand, support that demand. And sometimes they discover that the movements they supported in good faith had elements in them which were not exactly desirable. I was telling the participants of the workshop that this activist young girl in the play is a rebel for the purposes of the play; we had a discussion with the team on whether she is living with that man, I mean is it a deviation from wedlock or are they living together without marriage. Everybody felt that it makes more sense that they're actually living together, that's all. And that's why this informant fellow's hopes are still alive; it also allows the narrative to be a little more convincing. So once we'd talked about that, I went on to tell them, look at this girl from yet another perspective-that she's the kind of personality who, if she'd felt like going and sleeping with that informant, would have gone and done so. And wouldn't have felt a wee bit immoral or apologetic about it. But her guilt for what has happened to that family will be stupendous nevertheless. Because in the first act, there's no moral responsibility involved at all-she might say, that's my way of life. But that's something she cannot tell this woman, because she knows that she's morally responsible for the breakup of that family. And she's honest enough to take that. I said, that's why this character is so attractive, why this man went to the extent of ruining 15 people's lives just for her. So this is the kind of exchange we're having. On the whole I'm having great fun.

STQ: This informant, both his acts of treachery against the wife and against this girl-are motivated by his feeling either desire or jilted, unrequited longing or whatever, right? He doesn't have any political or ideological reasons?

GPD: No, because he's a member of the core group.

STQ: But he gains nothing from it except the dissolution of the group.

GPD: Well, yes, because he thinks he's finally taking his revenge on her. For him socio-political problems are reduced to his attraction, his lust for this woman. In sharp contrast to the other people involved, for whom the entire thing has been like a bomb explosion. And now they're desperately trying to put the broken pieces together. Then they get involved in moral problems with each other. The activist with her lover, the wife with her husband who's gone to jail for her-for a short while perhaps, because after all, the allegation against him will be that he let his bank account be used by other people. He can always say I didn't know who they were-he wasn't directly involved. He'll come off with two or three years, I'm not sure what the maximum punishment is. But again, there's his sense of loyalty to his wife, somewhere there is admiration for his wife, that she's doing something. Although he's not socio-politically active, he has the ability to appreciate it in someone else. So we had a scene where she goes to meet her husband in jail. We did that scene-I still have to write it out-where the wife goes to meet her husband in jail, asking him this question - why did you do this? Just as the activist goes and asks the informant; but on two different planes. So these two scenes would provide the balancing factors. I think if everything works out well, it will be a good play; let's see. Today we shall do that informant-activist scene which I've written out in fuller measure so that I'll know by tonight whether with some additions to the scene it can stay or whether I need to re-draft it altogether. But at this rate, my idea is that there shouldn't be more than 10 scenes in this play, which will be, I expect, a playing time of about 90-100 minutes.

Yesterday we did the last scene with the two women, when the activist ultimately gives up, as it were, almost goes down on her knees begging the other woman to kill her; at which point one of the actors asked that after all she's been an activist of such long standing, with a lot of determination; how is it that she loses hope like this? Wouldn't she start thinking of doing something else? Come back into history or something? So I said that that's possible, but it's equally possible that a good activist can simply break down. As far as I'm concerned, my play ends there. Whether she recovers or not and what happens then is not important unless you're writing a trilogy or something. And then judging the actions of the informant from her perspective-that's what I was telling them yesterday-she might think that ultimately what was this man doing all this for? He

wanted to sleep with her and what was so great about it? How can anybody go to the extent of actually ruining 15 people's lives just for the sake of sleeping with a woman? It's a shattering experience. Then it goes beyond normal categories of lust. It would frighten her. So I said, I don't see any other option for her, except to break down. These are the kinds of discussions we're having, talking very openly and exhaustively.

27 May

STQ: Two scenes are almost complete now?

GPD: Yes. Now two scenes are already written and we got hold of someone who knows a bit of Marathi and we prepared a working translation — it's not the one that'll be ultimately used. But the first immediate consequence was that I ended up adding five lines to the text—and those lines were thrown up by the way the actors were doing them. So it is very much an actor's input. They didn't provide the words. But somewhere I got a feeling, as they were doing it, that there were gaps. And it was not only a question of using silences. It was a case of a clear break—that somewhere the argument was less than complete or the mood that was being generated, the words didn't match the mood, etc. So then suddenly something occurred to me and I ended up adding five lines, and I suppose when I've finalized the text of that particular scene, total material of at least one page will go into it. Now all this has been an effect of their working with that translation. They have indicated to me the ways of working on this text. Sometimes one has thought of an idea that should've come at a much later stage, when the play is actually being blocked. But the way a man and woman are positioning themselves, it gives me an idea that there's a particular kind of relationship between the two, that I'm trying to indicate. But the way they're holding hands, a different feeling is generated as far as that relationship is concerned. It could be that this positioning itself was wrong or it could be that the words were inadequate. When we first drafted that scene, I was not sure as to what was wrong. But after the last two days of working with these young actors, I now know what's wrong, what's inadequate, where the positioning has gone wrong, whether it was too much emoting that's ruined it etc. So we tried one game today—the scene with the jilted lover and the activist. We said, okay, now think a while. The opening sentence of that scene is, 'Ever since I got your call I've been wondering, what is it that you want to see me about? I'm unable to figure that out.' So we said, let's play this game: let's take a preceding scene, i.e., a phone call has come and she's yet to arrive. What will his

reaction be? This kind of a thing does not directly add to the process of writing. But it becomes an interesting exercise for the actors. And we made all of them play that man, even the actresses. And it suddenly became clear to me that what they were not getting at is-if somebody he's admired and desired all these years suddenly calls him, his first reaction is going to be ecstatic joy. And a movement from the moment of ecstatic joy to self-doubt that happiness may not be all that is in store, that it's quite possible that he's in for a bitter disappointment-to indicate all that. All of them were doing it at a level of working out what went on in his mind; but that joyous element they missed out completely. Probably because they already know the scene ends in a particular way. And I said no, you forget the scene. Just pick up this pre-scene situation as if it's not been written. Because if you understand that more correctly, it'll be easy for you to get into the scene. And when they did that again, it was easy for them. It is something which I've not attempted at any stage; it is therefore becoming a mutually rewarding experience at one level.

The other thing that happens in this kind of a process is that over the last two days they're now discussing these characters in greater detail even at the formative stage. I've known groups or actors doing that when the text is ready. But, I think over the last two-three days what we've been witnessing is a discussion-for example, the jilted lover is the one who makes the story move the way it does, but trying to project him as an unadulterated villain or like a very traditional *khalnayak*, from there to move to when he becomes for a brief moment quite human (that's how the scene was written) and then he discovers that he's lost the game -this is the penultimate scene of the play. So there's a whole lot that's happened before -which is yet to be disclosed to them, and yet I think already they've got into the mood of the language. They are asking questions which are interesting. Like when the informant says to her that this is a very silly and meaningless question, sweetheart, later on in the scene she says to him-now you're being silly and meaningless, sweetheart: He says, however ironically, you called me sweetheart, I'm quite happy. Then she's looking for some details from him. After she hears him, she's shaken and she says you actually ruined fifteen people's lives and destroyed an entire group, only for this? Why didn't you say so? Now, I think they understood the meaning of 'why didn't you say so' today much better than earlier, just by doing it over and over again. By one sentence alone, she reduces him to an animal, denying him his brief moment of humanity. So as he's recovered it, he's lost it. So they were asking me questions, how did this process come about etc. and in reply I was saying all this. We were discussing how the desire

of a man for a woman or vice-versa is not what is animal-like; what is so, is what their conversation is moving to identify.

31 May

GPD: I have used this time to dictate into a dictaphone the rough and ready English translation of the scenes. By this evening the Hindi translations should also be ready. This is half the play. There will be 8-9 scenes in the play and we're at the end of the 5th scene already. So progress seems to be satisfactory. I think now one can say that it is possible to have a rough outline of the play ready by the time we conclude the workshop. Meanwhile, we did several other things, like yesterday we did one exercise. We threw up some ideas which go either into the text itself or hopefully into the production. We identified 15 terms, signal terms, like terrorism, crime, punishment, being in love, jilted lover, jail, social change, etc. and we asked each one of the actors to take up one of these terms and construct something around it. I thought this might help them see the central problem of the play a little more vividly, and also help them see the human relations involved. Then, I talked to them about the modern state and I asked them to talk about the modern state, what it means to take it on. I think this exercise ultimately ended in my making a statement as if I were one of the actors, except that I made a very bland kind of a statement: what is this question of taking on a modern state? One of the persons involved is saying that you cannot take on a modern state-however dilapidated it is, it still is powerful. So that seemed to give them some ideas and they tried it again and in the process their articulation on this process moved one step further and their general experience of the oral exercise also deepened a little. The same thing happened about this being in love business; they went on talking about why I'm in love with so and so. So we intervened and said that that's not what is being talked about. You have to describe this state of being in love; obviously there's another person involved and it's that person you're thinking about. And ultimately I made a statement, as one of the characters, of what being in love means.

The net result was that some of it has gone into a new scene-the next scene; all this provides a peculiar kind of stimulation with which the writing is becoming far more accurate and, I think, faster. I would've normally taken about two-three months to write all this down. Here I've virtually finished the first draft in about two weeks' time. And this speed is partly possible because I've left the university far behind and concentrated only on this. Mainly it's this interaction which is making it possible. The other thing I noticed over the last few days is that

the actors are getting involved in the characters; for example, there're two women characters in this play and about two days back we had an informal but rather heated discussion where almost everybody seemed to suggest that my presentation of character W1, is more complex and stronger than that of W2. And I was telling them that you're pre-judging the case. There're more dramatic moments in W1's life; that is because she's an activist. But the other lady also suffers in her way. She's also a strong person with a distinctive personality, and I said I'm sure that when you actually perform her or see her on stage, you'll feel that she's a person of many facets. So as you can see, by the end of the first week they're discussing and questioning the nature of these people. It's really like we'd be talking in daily life. It's at that real level that they're getting involved. By the time the final text is done and translated into Hindi, they'll have internalized a lot of the temperament, the ideological contours, of these characters; and I have a feeling that this is going to contribute to their performance, although that of course remains to be seen. Sometimes I wonder if these young actors are the protagonists, or my characters.

STQ: But d'you feel that you're shaping the characters with the characteristic features of these actors, with their faces, their mannerisms etc.?

GPD: No. In fact I've suggested to Vinay Sharma that they should keep rotating the roles. And when I'm writing, if I see any one of them in a particular passage, I reject it.

STQ: And yet you said you started writing the play in response to a particular actress?

GPD: Deepa Lagoo.

STQ: Yes, have you thought of her or visualized her while writing the play?

GPD: No, not really. But let me add that in this particular group it's relatively easier to do this because the women and men are broadly in the same age group. So it's possible to do the rotating of roles. But Deepa is a particular age, and she'll fit into one role and not the other. These are people who can rotate the roles and I want this workshop not only to throw up a play, but also to be able to walk from one role into another.

STQ: You said there're five scenes written. Can you tell us roughly what they are?

GPD: Well, in the order of writing, the last scene was written first, penultimate scene second, the first scene third, the second scene fourth and the third scene fifth. And now there're only small scenes to go. What their order will be, I'll decide later.

STQ: So, first you conceived of a story, then a plot-and you're seeing it in terms of major scenes? And then whatever loose ends are to be tied up will get tied up in the intervening scenes? Is that how it's happening?

GPD: No. I think what is perhaps happening is as the famous French director replied when he was asked if he didn't believe in a beginning, middle and end, of course I do, only not in that order! I think that's what's happening here. But it's not simply a question of constructing scenes. One was thinking of situations, and what we were throwing up as problems ... if you were with 2/3 people facing this situation, how would you tackle it improvise. Then we would all add things, to keep it moving.

STQ: Can you give an example of a situation that you chose for them to improvise on?

GPD: For example, the last scene, which we did first. The two women are both left out of the 'action', so to speak, and don't know what to do with life now. The liberal woman can't get over the fact that her husband has to pay the price for her deeds and the activist can't get over the fact that she's being denied her history. She finds that the state doesn't hold her responsible, and her acquittal makes her a non-person. So these two people are meeting each other. The activist expects anger or some reaction. But she doesn't get it. In fact, this is how the play will end: that there's no relation between crime and punishment in modern life.

So we thought, let's see if we can work this out. And when I discovered that they *were* able to work themselves up to it in spite of the play not being there, that through sheer explaining both these young ladies were able to get into the characters-I thought it's time to write it out. And I wrote it out. Then we did it again with a very rough and ready translation. So first we're working the situations out and trying to see how credible they are. And wherever I felt it's working, I ended up writing it out. Yet in one case, when this group is meeting to take- a crucial decision, what I've written is very, very different from the improvisations they have offered. So that is how the entire process moves on.

STQ: And how about Vinay, the director? Has the interaction with him been different from the interactions with the actors? Has he had any inputs that've helped you in writing?

GPD: It's been quite different at one or two levels. For example, the idea that I suddenly start talking as if I were playing MI was his. We were talking about different terms when that reference to the modern state came, in that decision-making meeting-the idea is that the man has come home and he's discussing it with his lover, the activist and suddenly I heard myself saying,

'sweetheart, you are my modern state.' That's where the conversation ended. I think the sentence will go into the text. The sheer surprise of being asked to speak as if I'm MI-and I wanted to say something and I started thinking and somewhere the entire thinking came together. Of course I've been thinking on this topic for a long time and have come to believe that many radical activists wish to take on the modern state without assessing its powers and that's why they come to grief. They claim to be Maoists, but they forget the fundamental Maoist principle that when the enemy advances, you retreat. So all that was very much in my mind, and went into the conversation and will probably go into the last scene of the text.

STQ: Technically speaking, the whole exercise has many surprise turns, particularly the key-words game. The way I understand the play, it is a modernist text about the state of mind in a certain situation. Where, ideologically, was the director's input and was it really necessary?

GPD: Now, it was Vinay's idea to choose five to fifteen key terms and we just threw them around. Then yesterday there was this interaction on 'being in love' and the modern state-two subjects far removed, but very much a part of the story. What you're saying is right, the play is discussing what it means to live a committed life in the context of modernity and therefore all the concerns, problems and dilemmas are modern. I think-I like to think at least-that the way in which the men and women are attached to each other in this particular play is also very modern. It is not a simple dedication to one another.

2 June

STQ: So today you've finished the play?

GPD: This morning I've completed the first draft of the play. I go back and do a final version of the play, go to a professional translator and by August, rehearsals should begin. We tried out some scenes-the two additional scenes. We tried them out with the group yesterday, sort of changing roles, trying to create moods, situations etc. Yesterday, in fact, Vinay and I also became actors for a while. Vinay did one scene and so did I.

STQ: Would you like to give us a breakdown of what happens in the play, scene by scene?

GPD: Very briefly, the play opens with a husband and wife talking to each other-the liberal woman and a very prosperous and rich doctor. She's back from one of the camps that she's attended with this group, and they start talking about it. This conversation also introduces the other characters as the doctor's warning his wife to make sure of the kind of group she's mixing with. I'm not pointing fingers, he says, but it's better to be wary and he cites to her a

news item about the police busting a semi-terrorist racket where nobody had suspected the group of activities of that sort. So he warns her. Then we move on to the decision making trio of the group with which she's associated. They're discussing the problem of the foreign money which has to be accommodated. It's a fairly substantial amount and it has to be deposited into somebody's account temporarily and they think of this man, who's rich enough. Then over a period of time it'll be withdrawn and distributed into three-four accounts. There's this other couple who're both simple activists. The young man is of the view that this offer should not be accepted because there is a condition that part of the money should go to another group in the area; and his logic is that this group may be a semiterrorist or terrorist group and although they haven't done anything similar, they'll have to be associated with them. And they have to be clear about what the modern state is. So there's some discussion on that. And there's another person in the group who has turned police informant. They finally request this lady to put the money into her account. Immediately the police is informed and the racket is busted. Everybody surrenders. The doctor takes the responsibility for his wife's action. The rest you know. So we see a very peculiar kind of situation—a crime is committed by someone and somebody else gets punished. The second question that's posed through this narrative is, how does one handle the modern state? A weak and ineffective government is still a part of the modern state, which is tenacious and has a framework, and people, without calculating how to take on the modern state, by sheer humanism, land themselves in problematic situations and ultimately destroy themselves. In fact there's a sentence I've used, that the modern state might collapse, but it never gives up. So it obviously has a tragic end.

STQ: So in spite of yourself you've written a political play.

GPD: Yes. But I haven't gone into the details of what these people are doing, apart from the fact that they're doing some liberal humanistic work. There're some references to politics, as in the scene between the activist husband and wife: the scene begins with their return from the meeting where the husband has picked up a volume of Lenin's collective works and has started looking at it. So the wife says, but the meeting is over, and the decisions made. Why're you looking at the collected works again? D'you want to start the fight again? And whenever he's a little emotional he says, I don't care if the whole world misunderstands me as long as you understand me. Every time I'm having difficulty with a passage from, say, Marx,

your face appears before me and I hear your laughter and I can't think of anything else. So, I might be wrong in your view, but let's sort it out. Do not accuse me of things because you presume things to be what they are. So basically I bring in the politics as something to hang on to.

STQ: The institutions of the state are alluded to, but manifested/represented/reflected through the individuals. Why this stress on individuals?

GPD: Because ultimately the suffering involved is that of the individual. For example, when the lady is forced to accommodate the money in her account, the woman activist doesn't like the coercion and begins to suspect that there's something dishonest in the whole plan. And when you do that, it's a personal problem, in the last analysis. And similarly, her anguish at being left out-it's her personal sense of loss and pain. I wanted that to come across, with everything else as the backdrop.

STQ: None of the major protagonists are portrayed in black and white. The complexity of character, the ambivalence of human nature, is very much foregrounded in the play.

GPD: Definitely, For example, the betrayer: it comes out in two scenes, one where he's with the doctor-incidentally, I know of a case where a doctor was working in an area infested with Naxalite activity: every time someone would get a bullet through his leg, he would come to his dispensary and as a doctor, he couldn't refuse treatment. And then the police would sit on his head, saying why did you do this, it's a political, legal case. So in the play this betrayer says, about 10-15 years ago you saved my life. And therefore I owe it to you to tell you, don't get involved in this. It's a political and legal matter, you'll get into trouble. But the doctor ignores it. Then, he goes to the doctor's wife when the doctor has gone away somewhere. He tells her, talk to your husband when he returns and if he says so, we'll withdraw the money immediately. But the racket is busted and the doctor's in jail. So he goes to see him in jail. He says you must be wondering how this earthquake happened and I want to tell you that I'm partially responsible for it. And I owe it to you. *I had* told you not to get involved in all this. I'd also allowed two full days after your return from Bombay before I decided to act on the matter. So he is a betrayer; but there is an attempt to recover one human moment.

STQ: How have the last two days been in terms of the actors' interaction?

GPD: When I'd practically prepared the structure of one scene, I made them do it. It was working out reasonably well. But as I was watching them perform it suddenly occurred to me that ... when

they'd gone over to persuade this lady to put the money in her account, somehow, the narrative purpose was served, but it suddenly occurred to me that the end should not be there, to immediately take it to the other household, where the activist couple start talking about honesty and integrity in public life, their sense of belonging to each other and their fear that the apocalypse is coming. So the scene begins in one household, stops there for a while and then moves to the other. Those kinds of movements were established in the last two days.

STQ: It came with the actual scene being acted out?

GPD: Yes. They started acting it out. I did not like the feeling of keeping it limited to one acting area. So then it occurred to me to try this out and that night I wrote one extra page, changed the last few lines of the first scene, changed the acting area, brought it to the focus of the other relationships, because after all, their political understanding may be different but their sense of belonging to each other is completely comparable-both the couples' and also the betrayer to the activist woman.

STQ: At one level you're thinking of how the story will illustrate the ideas you want to get across. At another level there's this whole business of writing something that has to be staged and performed and therefore has to have its elements of surprise and drama and theatricality. Can you pinpoint those moments when seeing it being done made you realize that you had to grapple with it at that level also?

GPD: With this particular play, I was certainly bothered about it. For example, we had this problem-the activist goes and confronts the betrayer, but that's in the penultimate scene of the play. For the audience to be prepared to take that scene, obviously there ought to be a scene earlier so that the fact that he's responsible and has betrayed the cause is conveyed to them. So we went on trying. I explained to them that this is the situation-what occurs to you, how would you let the audience know? They suggested several things, I also suggested that maybe he's seen making a phone-call, having a wordless conversation and then he comes and settles down and suddenly the guilt takes over and he starts seeing these characters around-they'll each say a sentence or two to him and he'll say three or four sentences in response and that'll establish his guilt, and also the purpose of letting the audience know that this is what happened. We tried it and it seemed to work. But on second thoughts it occurred to me that this may not be all that convincing. Because why should he be seeing everyone? That way I'm putting his relationships with the woman activist and the doctor on par with his other relationships, which they're not. He

is somewhere driven by his feeling for this woman, he takes it quite seriously. So it's a more enduring attraction than lust. It would make sense if he says it either to her or to the doctor. Since there already was one scene with the woman, I decided to have a scene between the doctor and the betrayer, which we'll do today. And if I feel that no, the earlier way was better, then I'll bring it back. Today I'll know. I have a feeling that this'll work better. He goes to see the doctor and says I'm responsible, but I did whatever I could as far as you're concerned. So he's wanting to recapture that one moment of humanity. He knows that he's a villain as far as everybody in the group is concerned. He also probably has the feeling that this lady'll never forgive him. So he's trying to establish a relationship with the doctor where he can retrieve that moment of humanity. We'll try it out this evening.

STQ: So that's one example where you were concerned about the staging aspect. Any other place where you can remember making note of it, or worrying about it?

GPD: Yes. This confrontation scene where she discovers that she's been denied her history, her work, everything-it occurred to me as we were doing it, that it might be better to plant a seed of doubt in her mind earlier and that's why we made, among other things, the scene where they go to persuade the lady to put the money in her bank account. For the first time, there, she gets the feeling that something dirty is happening. So then it builds up towards the end and in the last scene she goes to the doctor's wife in the hope that she'll get angry and abuse her-but she doesn't do anything of that sort. So she says, why did you stop? You want to strangle me, go ahead and strangle me. I've come here for that purpose, because then at least I'll be recognized. The psychology was that once my guilt has been established, and once I'm punished for what I am, I'm again part of history. So the dehistoricization imposed on her by the betrayer would be wiped out. But the lady says to her, there's no question of holding anything against you. And that completes her frustration. That's where the play stops.

STQ: These kinds of graphic manifestations of staging problems-do they occur even when you're writing a play on your own or is it so pronounced only because you're actually seeing it being acted out?

GPD: The kind of writing that I've done so far-I have these kinds of problems. I think I'd have taken the same decisions even if I wrote it on my own-only I'd have taken two months to do it; but I do start visualizing things. And I think ... I like to believe that my dialogue has a dramatic

tension and that somehow leads you to see things in a peculiar sort of way. And sometimes one idea thrown in here or there helps.

For instance, in my play *Chanakya* there's this totally non-historical character called Suwasini, who's a counterpoint to Chanakya: centralized state against non-centralized state, Vedic philosophy against non Vedic philosophies like the Buddhists, Jains, Charvakas and all representatives of that kind of thing; I built into the narrative a certain undercurrent that Chanakya's fascinated by this young lady and that he's carrying within him a desire for her-so the first draft of the last scene where they confront each other was slightly, on the side of Chanakya the elderly gentleman falling for a younger woman. But I felt that this element in the relationship was taking predominance over the others. Now, I felt this vaguely but I couldn't find a solution. When I first wrote it as a last scene, I was preparing these two episodes for Shyam Benegal. Now Shyam did not wish to use them, because he said, although this is very nice dramatically, I don't wish to conclude on a total imaginary character. Let there be a confrontation between Chandragupta and Chanakya if you like, because they are both historical characters. Suwasini is entirely your creation. So there was a whole lot of material which I'd gathered, which gave me the idea that I could turn it into a play. The idea was to do it in Marathi. Suddenly Shreeram Lagoo said, but where is the need of stating all this? As I read your text, I get the feeling right from the word go that this man is as struck by Chandragupta's qualities as he is by Suwasini's beauty and accomplishments: so why are you emphasizing the obvious? As a result, what does one do with it? There is a confrontation between the two; obviously *she* won't be interested in it, but he would be and I thought that would provide the confrontation. Lagoo said, it is not for me to tell you what you should do. But I think that there're several confrontation points in this text. Why don't you re-think it? Something will occur to you. So I went back to the text again and a new graph emerged because I was doing it all sitting in Delhi. When one starts thinking about these kinds of points of confrontation, then even confrontations between Vedic and non-Vedic philosophy or Brahmanism vs. Buddhism, which is what is played up in the end, can in fact have the same potency as a contradiction between the man and woman. And that's how it's played in the end. And we discovered that it is dramatically as potent as anything else, in fact one of the popular dailies of Bombay, in reviewing this play, had interesting things to say. It said that the play tends to be a little too academic, too much of history, too much of this, too much of that, but he said, the last scene is sweet-that was literally the word he used. He said it gave the whole

argument a personal and non-personal character. So one arrives at that kind of a situation. Probably it takes some time, when you're all alone.

This interaction helped because I could see, to a certain extent, what shape it was taking. But whether this kind of a thing can happen every time, I do not know. I knew the group personally, I had the story which was tying in with my idea, I was already seeing things reasonably clearly. I just wanted them to work it out. At one level one can say that I've come to this workshop having done my homework. But at other times, would that homework even be possible? So I really don't know. But certainly here it has helped. Now in spite of all that, the play might be unsatisfactory, that's an altogether different matter. What I'm interested in talking about here is the process. The outcome of it will be judged by several things. So

I'm not saying that we have an excellent play on our hands-that I do not know. I'm simply explaining the process by which it has happened.

STQ: Would you say that it was an inspiring experience for you as the playwright?

GPD: I think the rapidity with which I've written the whole text-the first draft has literally been done in about 10 days' time-I myself am reasonably fast once I start seeing things clearly. I'm surely a fast writer. But it takes time for me to see things. This has been the most surprising part: the speed with which it got written. Things started coming to me, the ideas started coming to me. Only yesterday I got stuck for a while. No, it was the day before ... when I was writing the scene between the activist husband and wife (they're not exactly husband and wife, they're living together). So when I was writing their dialogue, after about three hand-written pages-in my handwriting this virtually amounts to about three typed pages-I just got stuck. My mind just wouldn't work. So I gave that up. Then we tried out something else. But before that, I was never stuck at any point.

STQ: What kind of changes d'you foresee between the first draft and the final draft? Will the characters need more colour, the dialogues ... ?

GPD: When I start reading the whole thing together, I think maybe I'll discover that there're some areas which are a little dark still. So I may have to add something. You see, the problem with my kind of a writer is that I tend to underwrite, which has been the case, right from *Uddhwasta Dharamshala*, and the underwriting doesn't always help; so maybe I'll have to add a sentence here, another there and so on.

Day before yesterday, we started talking about what the title of the play could be. So I said, the Marathi title I'm clear about, there's a line from Tukaram, the 17th century Bhakti poet, which goes like this: All my efforts, throughout my life, went in ensuring that the last day will be sweet. It will be *Shevatacha Dees*, the last day. Vinay said, in that case do we use *Antim Din* as the title in Hindi? So I said *Antim Din* will not have the same evocative quality as *Shevatacha Dees* has in Marathi because of the particular Bhakti thing. In the confrontation between the informer and the woman activist he says, all my efforts were so that the last day would be sweet and so I've made this attempt to save you. And she says, that this might be the last day between us, but it is unlikely to be sweet. That is what it is in the original Marathi. I said, we could perhaps add something to this effect: 'Oho, you're quoting Tukaram, are you? But whenever I think of you now, I don't think of the last day, I think of the Last Supper, and you're perhaps the thirteenth man', and we can title the play *Terwan Aadmi*. Again there is the problem of associations. I might add this bit of conversation, nevertheless. And then give it to them for a simple translation like *Antim Din* or *Antim Diwas* or alternatively this *Thirteenth Man*. As I keep reading or talking to people, maybe some ideas will emerge, because it's futile to give that kind of a title for the simple reason that the urban audience, exposed to Christian /western ideas, can think of the Last Supper, even think of various paintings right upto Paul Klee. But our ordinary theatre goer probably wouldn't even have heard of the Last Supper. So there the reference may not even be understood. Whereas in Marathi, *Shevatacha Dees* will be immediately understood. She can still say it, and since Tukaram has been mentioned, *Shevatacha Dees* can still be used as a title and those who get the Last Supper reference will get it and for those who don't it will still not lose the power. But calling it *Terwan Aadmi* ... people might wonder what he is talking about. So these are the kinds of things that still need to be worked out in consultation.

STQ: Do you have a particular audience in mind when you write?

GPD: I have a feeling that most of the plays have their own kind of an audience. In fact in one of my very first interviews, the only interview that I've done with Bombay TV, I was asked this question d'you have a specific audience in mind? So I said it's a bit like the ragas-some are morning ragas, some are evening ragas; in a like manner, I think you'll have to distinguish between audiences: some plays' would have a given audience, some plays a larger or smaller audience.

I have a feeling that the people who do my plays sometimes read them as if they're essentially meant only for urban, western educated or familiar-with-oriental-tradition kind of people. Now my submission is that although the elements are there in my writing-in fact, if I might say so, I am, if not the only one, one of the very few playwrights in India who bring in so many Sanskrit texts, Buddhist texts, Bhakti texts and European texts etc. But I think, while bringing all that in, I make the effort not to lose the dramatic grip, because after all there'll never be an audience which will relate to the hundred things that you're saying there, just as I'm sure I don't relate to all the hundred things that Shakespeare says in his plays-but somewhere that dramatic tension holds me. I don't see why it can't happen in this particular case. But somewhere there is a bit of a barrier.

Yet I've done a reading of *Chanakya* in the Marathwada region and I'm sure they did not know much about Buddhism and the Charvakas etc. But somewhere the play seemed to get across to them reasonably well. So one has an audience actually a spectrum of audiences-in mind, from people who'll relate to its dramatic tension only to people who'll get a number of socio-historical, historico-political, cultural references, poetry cited, Sanskrit tradition cited and the European philosophy that comes into it. People will get a few bits here, there and everywhere or sometimes they'll read too much into it. One criticism of *Chanakya* which appeared in Nagpur was that I'm reconstructing the past to suit my present preference. He said that Mr Deshpande is obviously not very friendly to Vedic philosophy and Brahminism, and though this is a time when everybody has to quote Ambedkar and Phule, one should not carry one's enthusiasm for Phule and Ambedkar to the extent where one starts reading a third century reality in terms of philosophical conflicts. Now, one can say that he was over reading the situation; but one can also say that in however negative a form, he understood that the Vedic philosophies are being attacked. In my opinion the job is done-by the sheer fact that it held his interest and required him to react. He wasn't a regular reviewer or anything-it was a spontaneous reaction to a text; which means that some things are reaching the people. Now, I wrote a gentle reply to him, saying that you're wrong; it's not an Ambedkarian reconstruction of history. There have always been philosophical conflicts, just as in Europe, between idealistic and materialistic philosophy. Here it was a conflict between 'Vaidic' and 'Avaiddic' *darshanas*, and all our social movements are built around that. There is in fact a quotation from the Ramayana which I have used. So, unless you're suggesting that Ambedkar wrote the Ramayana, you cannot really argue that way. Then you can

say that my reading of the Brahminical philosophy is wrong. and I would agree with that because any idealist would say that the Marxist is wrong because materialists have just condemned idealism without really examining it fully etc; but that is precisely the problem of a philosophical debate-that is what a philosophical debate should be. I have a feeling that these things have a way of reaching people, because without our knowing it we carry a lot of history within us.

My problem is slightly different, however, a peculiar situation which pertains to urban Maharashtra. It's not a question of audience of this or that kind-increasingly a generation is coming up where the people who will have the necessary sensibilities to relate to the problems that I'm talking about, do not have the linguistic equipment. That was not the case during my generation or the one after that. They knew their Marathi very well. And they were modern, in the sense that they knew their Kant or Hegel or Marx or whatever, so they could relate to that sensibility. Now we have a whole generation which is coming up which hasn't a clue about classical Marathi. So they will have a problem in dealing not with the ideas I'm talking about but the prose that I'm writing. In fact, Satyadev Dubey put it very neatly the other day; he said, 'A hundred years later if somebody picks up your play, he'll actually believe that people were speaking such good Marathi as late as 1995.' It's that which worries me, really, not the kind of audience. It is the changing character of the urban modern man, who's losing his Marathi except at a very basic level. He'll be able to speak and if he started it, sure enough, he'd be able to sit through the rest of the play. In fact Dr Lagoo told me how Sunil Gavaskar sat through *Uddhwasta Dharamshala* with rapt attention and even went backstage and the first thing he said to Dr Lagoo was, 'My God, what concentration, you could remember all those words?' Sunil Gavaskar is a typical example: he's gone to convents and so on; he knows his Marathi only because it is spoken around him, perhaps in the family. He speaks it very well; he's acted in a Marathi film for that matter! Lagoo said, 'What are you talking about? If you lose your concentration, your wicket goes. I'm an actor after all'. If I lose my concentration, I recover the situation.' That was the conversation. But obviously the man was saying, 'Oh my God, so many words!'

Everybody. thinks that I write very well. Everybody thinks that my Marathi's this, my Marathi's that; and yet, everybody keeps a certain distance. That's the problem, not the audience per se, but the kind of urban audience that we have, especially in Bombay and Pune. It's much less in smaller towns like Kolhapur or Satara etc. But in Bombay and Pune, I don't think any one

of them would've read a novel of the thirties, or a poem from the beginning of the century. I may be overstating the case, but I have a feeling that this is probably true of all metropolitan cities now. These are serious problems for all kinds of serious writing, let alone theatre.

Shevatacha Dees (The Final
Day)

Scene S

Nagesh's house. The doorbell rings. Nagesh opens the door. Anasuya enters. He is a little surprised

NAGESH. Come. Ever since I got your call, I've been trying to guess why you decided to do me this honour. *(He tries to draw her close. She moves away)*

ANASUYA. I haven't come here because I have the time to spare. Understand that clearly.

NAGESH. You're so right! You wouldn't have come here to spend your spare time. You have too much of it now. One long timelessness, almost. One can't spend timelessness, can one?

ANASUYA. You seem to be enjoying my timelessness.

NAGESH. Oh no! Believe me! No, I wasn't drawing you close for pleasure-but for consolation, for sympathy.

ANASUYA. Nagesh, you and feelings like sympathy?

NAGESH. Not only sympathy, I still have feelings like love, too. ANASUYA. I see. But I hope you realize that it is all futile.

NAGESH. Oh, lovely! Your fury is majestic! When you're before me, I can't bear it any longer; just once, one last time, let me hold you in my arms? It's true that you've come to demand some answers. But if you want those answers from me, please come close-just once

Anasuya is lost in her thoughts. Few seconds of silence. She goes near him and he draws her close. He is beaming with pleasure. A little later she extracts herself from his embrace.

NAGESH. Come, sit down.

ANASUYA. Thanks. I was wondering if you would offer me a chair at all.

NAGESH. Today has been a great day, almost auspicious. Please forgive me for demanding your embrace like a tradesman. Old days and old memories never leave one, do they?

ANASUYA. Possibly. But I haven't come here to talk of those days. Now that I've repayed the debt from those days, let's turn to the catastrophe that befell us in the last two days. I

NAGESH. Want confessions?

ANASUYA. No. Only a few questions. I do not think that our relationship was ever of the kind that would enable me to extract confessions from you. In any case, even if it was, that's already history. Now, some simple questions, and some simple answers. This catastrophe hasn't harmed you at all. You've remained absolutely unscathed. This has some significance. I only want to ask you-since when have you turned informant-or have you always been one?

NAGESH (*laughs*) You often called Venkatesh a shade naive. But if someone were to hear this question of yours, they'd think that you too have hardly any sense of politics. Which reply do you want from me? In return for one embrace you want a confession from me? There is a limit to the ludicrous.

ANASUYA. But I

NAGESH. Wait, don't be in such a rush. Let others speak sometimes. Your question is ludicrous and pointless, sweetheart. If I truly am their spy, how can I own up? And if I denied it, you wouldn't believe me. Nobody would. How could an intelligent woman like you ask such a ridiculous and pointless question?

ANASUYA. Intelligent... etc. etc. Stop the nonsense! You were their man and a traitor in our organization. Just tell me this-now whatever had to happen has happened, and you can safely tell me. All our colleagues have gone to jail, an entire organization is in ruins; why was I alone! left out? All my efforts of the last 5-10 years have come to nothing. I have become a person without history, like Russia has become a state without history. Why? Who has wiped out my history?

NAGESH. You'll have to ask the police about that. How can I tell you anything?

ANASUYA. But I *am* asking the police! Alright, I haven't come here to beat about the bush. In any case there's still a lot you *can* tell me. In the police search and the raid, how is it that not a single scrap of paper

bearing my name was found? Only our office can provide this answer, not the government. And the office was your responsibility. For the last three years you were supervising the office. That's why I'm asking you-and therefore the question is neither pointless nor ludicrous, *sweetheart*.

NAGESH. Well, however ironically, you did finally call me sweetheart. My penance of over 7-\$ years has borne *some* fruit, even if in mockery. Saint Tukaram has said, 'For this alone/ I had endeavoured/ that the last day/ should be sweet.'

ANASUYA. It's true that this is the last day between us, but it will certainly not be sweet.

But don't try to avoid giving an answer in this manner. Don't try to change the topic from my straight and simple question. Give me a straightforward reply.

NAGESH. I'm not supposed to disclose official matters.

ANASUYA. Nagesh, be a gentleman for a change! You have dropped a bombshell and destroyed a very good organization. You've got every member arrested. Every single one was arrested-except for me. And now perhaps the prison cell will become their grave. All this is because of you. And now you're quoting the Official Secrets Act? If you are trying to be funny, you are being neither bright nor successful. Now tell me everything without a single omission.

NAGESH. But why should I tell you?

ANASUYA. Take me in your arms once again, if you wish, but tell me all the details.

NAGESH. Oh wow, I hadn't thought you'd find my embrace so delightful so quickly! Well, now if that is your wish, then here you *are-(forcefully draws her close. Anasuya is sombre. Her hands are behind her. In a few seconds, he lets her go)* I am sorry, Anu. You offered to let me hold you in my arms and I pounced on you like a hungry wolf! *(Softly)* It is not that. I cannot keep secrets from you. Yes, I am responsible for the fact that not a single scrap of paper with your name was traced. But this was not a recent decision. Those were the days when I had just discovered you. No words

had yet been exchanged between us, but I was full of desire for you. This decision goes back to that time. I had suggested that one of us should be a non-member member. I knew that betrayal was inevitable in this business. I did not want you to be caught. So I had suggested your name as the non-member member. I said that as a woman your movements would be less open to suspicion than ours. It would help the organization. Everybody agreed. The result was that your name was not registered anywhere in the organization.

ANASUYA. So at the time of the raid, it was you who arranged with the police that I be let off scot free. They were also told that my remaining outside would help them get more information, weren't they? Isn't that true? Tell me, why did you do this?

NAGESH. Again you're asking the wrong question. You can say that the rainbow of your presence held a fascination for me, that's why. But when I began the game of a discussion about us; why did you send it flying out the window? (*Anasuya is quiet*) I loved you. Your harsh rejection could not kill that love, couldn't you understand that? How is that possible? Please, I know that in your eyes I am a villain. But it is you who is responsible for that. That razor-sharp rejection with which you slashed my personality to pieces-that is responsible. Why did you push me away with such determination? In the intoxication of Venkatesh's love, you never gave me an answer then. Now that world is wrecked. Give me my answer now, at least.

ANASUYA (*almost loses her restraint and control due to anger and sorrow*) I'd rejected you ... rainbow of my personality! Words suited to a poem in a college magazine. You wanted my body. That's the reality behind those words of plastic ... for the sake of this one body you ruined the lives of so many people? You brute! Just for this body's sake ... if you had spoken up earlier, I'd have endured the trial by fire in order to save so many lives. Like the Anasuya of the Puranas I too would have served you naked, *without* turning you into an infant. If only you had spoken earlier. As if that were not enough, you divorced me from history. My past is wrecked. My present is burnt to ashes. Now what future do I have? No! Even these words have lost their meanings. Life is shattered. You've devastated me. You've turned the lives of these people into a sacrificial-fire and burnt my history in its flames. You-you dirty, lustful swine! (*Incensed and livid, she walks off. The music grows louder. Lights fade out.*).

Translated by Sreejata Guha, in close collaboration with the author.

The Actors Talk to STQ

STQ met the group of actors and actresses who were participating in this workshop at Padatik, in the presence of G. P. Deshpande and the director, Vinay Sharma. The group included Sanchayita Bhattacharjee, Shampa Ghosh, Mahmud Alam and Kunal Pahari. The discussion took place on 3 June, after the playwright had completed the play but before the participants had heard the entire script in sequence.

STQ: Have you taken part in an exercise like this before?

SG: Yes, well, on the first day he gave us a very skeletal outline of the plot he had in mind.

SG/SB: No, this is the first time.

STQ: D'you remember what he told you?

STQ: So did you start off with any preconceptions?

SG: No, because when the idea first came up, I was very scared. I thought that I would not be able to do anything; so I just didn't have any idea as to how I'd begin.

SB: We had never done a thing like this before, but we *have* done a lot of improvisation work with Vinay, on our own. I had no idea that this was going to be what it turned out to be.

STQ: You thought it'd be improvisations?

SB: That's exactly what I thought-that it'd be improvising and giving him a lead with which he'd go back and write; that was my understanding of it. As far as I'm concerned, it has been a very unique experience.

STQ: In what sense?

SB: I have never helped like this to evolve a play right in front of my eyes, where whatever we do turns into the reactions of the characters, or gives angles to character-reactions or impulses-to get just the outline of a character and to think of what that character will do or say, and have that translated into an actual play ...

STQ: So you felt you were a part of the development process?

SB: Yes, but it's yet to sink in.

STQ: How about you Shampa, what did you feel was the most unique thing about this workshop?

SG: Well, definitely the interaction between the playwright and the actor and actresses and director.

STQ: Can you give an example of this interaction?

SG: Yes. He just told us there're two women who have very different ideas about life and they've chosen their paths, and maybe they're not the right paths but then, they're mature enough to have taken their decisions. One of the women is living with a man and the other is married and she's very nice and sort of sincere; not that the other woman is not. The first woman belongs to some kind of a group which is non-violent, and the married woman helps them in some way. She's not really in the core group. But she always helps them in their times of need, and so does her husband. There's another person who was in love with the first woman many years back and he comes back and out of some kind of revenge-probably because he loved her so much-he says that now our group will be expanding and we're expecting some money from abroad and that money has to be put in some account where it won't be suspected. They think of the other woman's husband, who's very wealthy. So that money is transferred to his account. The wife does it without telling him, though later on she tells him; but then they all start suspecting that something is wrong somewhere. When the first woman also senses this, she tells her lover, but then it's too late. The whole group is broken up and they're arrested. Then there's some kind of meeting between the two women which is rather sad and then the first woman says that maybe I was wrong, I was into some kind of violent politics and I'm reaping the fruit of it. But you are so good, you are so virtuous, why are you being punished? That was the outline we got.

STQ: Did anything strike you at that point, say the degree of detail? Did you either feel that there's a lot of detail or that it is very bare, skeletal? '

MA: One thing that did strike us was that we could almost see a vision of the characters different traits ...

STQ: Right at the beginning?

MA: Not on the first day, but as the work progressed, as Mr Deshpande started writing. sense, in his play.

KP: As I said, it was the very first day and we were totally blank about what it was going to be. But once we were given a basic *dhancha* (shape) of what the play was going to be, we

approached it scene by scene. We were given a certain sequence. We were told that this is what has happened or



STQ: I'm trying to take you back to that very first day where you walk in and you don't really know what to expect and Govindji is giving you something to work on. At that point, the story that was given to you, did you feel that it was already quite complete and set?

MA: We felt there was a storyline, but there was no real story yet, as such.

KP: The first day when we all met together, the work we did was very skeletal, basically getting used to each other and the kind of work that'll be going on. Govindji came out with this plot, which was, again, a basic framework-just an outline of the play that he had in mind. He more or less had the characters, but I think the story progressed as it took shape and also some new dimensions were added to it once we actually got going on the plot and started discussing amongst ourselves. On looking back over the last ten days, I feel quite a lot of work has been done.

STQ: I'm interested in this whole process where you came in with some ideas about what was going to happen and then the way in which that shifted; and also how you feel you have contributed as individuals towards the entire process, because I think it's quite rare to have a playwright actually interacting to this extent with real people and then forming real people, in a what might have happened-given such a scene, how would you interact amongst each other? We'd start improvising. We've done scenes where we've improvised on the spot. We've tried to create dialogues on the spot. Then Govindji was asked to comment. He had his own criticisms

and plus he'd maybe take some ideas from it-that's how the work started, because initially there was no dialogue, nothing.

STQ: So, what d'you think you have learnt from these ten days of intensive improvising? Does it seem that basically the work has revolved around building characters?

SG: Not only characters, but ...

MA: Building a story. I don't think the work really involved building characters as such. It's very difficult to say what we've contributed; you'll have to ask Mr Deshpande that. For myself, we're used to different sorts of workshops with Vinay. Situations were thrown at us, lines were thrown at us, different emotions were given to us, words were given to us and we basically reacted to them, on a very human level. Ideas might have come from Mr Deshpande or they might not have, we might have accepted them all or rejected them all. As far as I can remember, I think we rejected most of it. We tried our best to be involved in the workshop and situations, the words, emotions that were given to us.

STQ: Do you feel attached to any of the characters at the end of it all?

MA: I feel attached to all of them, because we were asked to do almost all the characters and that's one of the interesting parts of this workshop, that sculpt out an attitude to a certain scene-what you think this actor is going to stand like, etc: and one almost *felt* like a piece of marble being broken, remade, broken, remade-probably retaining or not retaining anything in the process. But it was very interesting to watch all that being translated into words and a whole play in just eleven days.



everybody has done, or tried to do, whatever they could of the three different male characters-ever. the actresses.

STQ: What was the difference between this and other workshops that you've attended?

SB: What I found interesting, in comparison with other workshops that I have attended, is the fact that we started on the basis of an outline and just situations given to us and sometimes what the characters might feel, and each of us went onto the floor with our own interpretation. Not that Mr Deshpande needed to be told how a man or a woman would normally react to a situation-but my understanding of it is that the way they reacted to each other might've given him a picture of how that reaction is going to look; or when were acting out a scene, someone else used to write down the dialogue that we came out with spontaneously, and he has admitted at least in one instance that he has retained one or two of the words we threw at each other. The words, the vocabulary, or the attitudes, the physical or mental reaction to what is being said-I feel did help him evolve the play, because he said once, I'm at least getting a sort of stimulus; the minute I'm thinking of something, I see it happening, which I don't think I've heard of in any workshop, nor have I experienced it. That I find very interesting. It's like being a piece of marble. To take an actor as a piece of marble and

SG: My personal experience was that as an actress one has to be very genuine and sincere-as a person my genuineness and sincerity was very important for the workshop.

STQ: I still feel-what seems to have come up most is that you've helped sort of give flesh to the characters; that, even though situations were developed, you explored how people would react to

each other or how something would go because of interpersonal relations. And possibly this is the most important thing that actors can do, because you bring the human element to the whole thing. But did you ever feel at any point that you had the power to change the story?

SG: On the very first day, though it was, I think, very outlandish—we were doing that scene between W1 and W2, the last scene. I think we didn't know exactly what he wanted at that moment and I think we went into a lot of feminism—at least I think I did. I don't think that was needed here. But at that time I felt I could change it in this way.

SB: No. But I think, that if not in a big way, at least we've helped to ... I don't know what was in his mind, exactly, how much he'd formulated; but what was given to us and after that how the scenes squared out, with certain dialogues that came in and certain dialogues that were attributed to

certain characters to explain a situation in a certain scene, certain scenes which *were* introduced, which were not there in the original skeleton at all, I think' we did in some way give direction to the story too.

KP: Again, as far as the story's concerned there *were* points where even we sat down and discussed, in his presence, what the scene would be like, where it would be or whether such a scene is required, and if so, how it would be done. We *did* have such discussions and we came up with certain ideas and one of them was retained.

MA: I don't know if we've actually changed or had the power to change the storyline. Mr Deshpande will be able to say more about that. But as an actor, I feel that one of the underlying motivations for us was that we *could* -otherwise we wouldn't *be* involved in such a workshop. Apart from that I won't venture to say anything, because what actually happened was maybe totally different or totally just the opposite. But one *could* and one wanted to and one believed that, and one went ahead and did that.

STQ: Did you ever at any point disagree or feel that a character would not have behaved in a particular way?

SG: (laughs) Yes, both Sanchayita and I disagreed with Mr Deshpande about the woman who was married—the one with a wealthy husband because at one point she becomes almost numb and as if incapable of any expression, and the two of us didn't quite agree with that interpretation. Also another point we didn't agree with was that in the last scene, when her husband is in jail, she moves as if to strangle the other woman who's come to meet her. But

in the jail, the husband gives her some hope, that though I've been arrested, something'll work out, don't worry. In spite of the fact that she has some hope, why would she try to strangle the other woman? And the other woman, who's come almost wanting to be strangled-she's expecting to be strangled; and when the other woman is strangling her, she doesn't resist at all but I feel that there, as a reflex the life instinct would win over the death instinct. So that is where I disagree.

VS: But that was a directorial imperative rather than the playwright's, that particular action that you're talking about. It's important to distinguish between the two, because there were two levels to it-one when the thing was being thrown at them and the few times that I sort of intervened to say try it this way-so that difference must be noted.

STQ: What would you have preferred the women's reaction to be-both of you seem to have talked it over.

SB: The first point-about the married woman that was at the beginning and we both kept telling Mr Deshpande that we wouldn't do it. If I was to choose, I would rather do W1, because she has lovely lines, she's a very volatile character and she's somebody who activates your imagination.

STQ: And you felt the second woman character was what, too ...

SB: At that stage, I felt it wasn't fully developed. He did assure us, have patience. Because we'd come to the last scene and in the last scene she's almost a stone, because of the grief that she's gone through-to us at that point she seemed very insipid. Later, of course, the play developed and the first scene came in. That was the interesting part about this workshop; because a character looked like something on the first day, and then on the second day, when he read out to us what he'd written, we sat up and said, 'Oh my God, there she is.' So in that way we did disagree with him in the beginning about W2, the second woman character-which did emerge.

STQ: But d'you feel that it's all resolved now-I mean that the way the woman character is coming across is fine? Or do you still have problems?

SG: I still have to think about W2. W1 comes out as pretty well established. I'm still attracted to that character more than to W2.

STQ: So what're the problems with W2? What bothers you?

SG: I find her a little passive. I don't know how the director and an actress might change it-something that seems totally passive and insipid in the beginning might become the brightest of all. So ...

STQ: You feel that she's used all along the way?

SG: Yes, she is and it seems as if she's not capable of taking a decision on her own and she's so vulnerable. I don't like that character.

SB: Well, from the acting point of view it's more challenging than the first woman because the first character has the support of the playwright, the lines and the plot. She's almost the protagonist: she's the centre of the core group and even the last scene, when she's completely disillusioned, which is a very strong scene as far as acting is concerned, is hers. So the other woman character is a little more challenging because she doesn't have much to do overtly; it is more what she does by her very presence in the play; in that way she'd be a little more challenging.

STQ: Do you men have anything to add about these women characters?

MA: I would agree with what Sanchayita said. Also, we only completed the first draft of the script yesterday and we're yet to go through the play as such and react to it in totality. So it's a little early to comment on these things, I would say. Also when Sanchayita was talking about W1 and W2-the interesting thing to remember here is that that scene, the last scene, was the first scene to be written. So, at that moment maybe her feelings were justified. That was the first scene to be written and then we went almost backwards.

KP: The two women characters are right there throughout, y'know, and in fact GPD has this wonderful fascination for his women characters (lavaghs). So he's made sure that he's been very honest to both of them, and I think both the characters, at two different levels, are equally important and from the performance point of view I think both the characters are absolutely at par; it's an actress' delight to do either of the roles.

STQ: I just want to add something, which Govindji's also been talking about. He was saying that this sense of being denied a history and of having had your own responsibility, or agency, taken away from you, denied to you, by maybe men or by society-that seems to apply to both the women characters equally, because even the wife is put in a situation where

she's not being held responsible for actions she has taken; and that power to remove one's responsibility from one seems to affect both the characters, right? So I don't feel that the wife is ... less ... Maybe she's a different personality, in the sense that she maybe more introverted or quiet or whatever. But in terms of the dilemma that both of them are put into, in some sense it's almost as if they're both put into the same situation. Would you agree with that?

SG: I agree that they've been put in the same situation. I really have to go more into W2 because I was more fascinated by W1 and so I've been reading her, more, and I was not really into W2. But even then, I still feel that W1 emerges as a stronger character-more interesting, rather.

STQ: I'm just curious to know-what d'you think is the theme of the play?

SG: It's difficult to say. I'm very fascinated by the human element in the play, the relationships as they emerge, the kind of emotions and feelings the characters go through. That is very interesting. I don't know what the theme would be-maybe the humanistic element.

MA: I think it's a little early to say. But if one was to react off the cuff, obviously the human relationships. That's what the play's all about. We haven't even read the script in sequence fully and I'd like to react to that a little later. I feel inadequate to react to that now.

KP: I'd say the same thing-it is too early to react. But as far as the play is concerned, it is on a very human level. It deals with ordinary people: people committed to certain things, their beliefs and how each of them reacts. In this case it was a group and they believed in certain things. And the interactions that take place amongst them, the feeling of betrayal that happens later on; but the whole approach is at a very human level, feelings that *we* feel day to day, that *we* experience day to day; we do have our little hitches here and there, the feelings that we get, how we express ourselves-I think GPD has actually extracted right from there.

SB: It's about human commitments and it's not just commitment to a party or a person. It's about the fact that human beings have to commit to something or the other, and the ramifications of this ... all the characters in the play have been put at some time or the other in a situation where they have to make a choice and it's not always a straightforward choice. As they said, it's a little early to talk about the theme of the play as a whole. But it's true that

it's very human and it's very much from the heart. As one of us said earlier-you can't be indifferent to any of the characters.

STQ: Everybody's talked about the human aspect of it. But I think Sanchayita's the only one who's talked about the question of choices, which I think is almost central to the play-this question of who takes responsibility for the choices. D'you feel that it's a play about morality-in a very deep sense? Morality is a very misunderstood word. I mean it in the sense that it ultimately boils down to what you do, the actions you take and the responsibility you take for them. At that level would you say that it's a moral play or a play about human morality?

SG: Well, yes. I think most of the characters, if not all, *are* committed to the choices they've made, in the end. Though some might've been innocently involved in the outcome, might not have had a hand in it. But they stick to the commitments right through to the end. So in that way one can say that they live up to their beliefs to the very end, though they might feel helpless about it.

MA: I'd say it's definitely a question of choices. But I don't know if it really means that if you've made a choice, you've paid for it. We were discussing this some time ago in the workshop. For example, what W2 did in 'borrowing' the account

was paid for by M2. So I don't know if it's a morality or non-morality play as such, but it's not just a question of one person making a choice and bearing the consequences of that choice; the

STQ: Can you say something about the session when some key words were thrown up and explored?

SB: Vinay gave us a few words which GP had given to him, y'know, a list of words that the play throws up. We'd underlined about five of them and then we went into what for me was a very tough exercise-of just choosing one of them, like 'being in love'. I was asked to move from W1 to W2, just talking of being in love. I did it and then



consequences are being borne by somebody else. So a lot of questions are thrown up here. It's not a straightforward choice and consequence formula as such.

STQ: Did seeing the end of the play before you saw anything else give you a feeling of everything being sealed, like you knew how it was going to end? Did you feel that it affected the openness?

SB: Not at all. Not at all, because to us that day it was just a scene. And the way this play is, each scene is a scene in itself, a story in itself, each has a twist of its own. So that way this play *is very* strong. There is no scene that has an indication of what's going to happen in the next scene. All the characters are very human and yet very unpredictable, in a way. Though we know the choices they've made, it doesn't always predict the way they're going to react to them. So in that way it was a fantastic experience. It made no difference at all.

MA: I'd agree with Sanchayita. We definitely played it as different scenes at different times. The sequence, in fact, was told to us only yesterday. Before that we played each scene in its entirety without having to attach it to any other scene.

GP came up with the point that what you are talking about *is why* you're in love; now, the point was the experience and the state of being in love and he brought in very beautiful points like the sharing and the sensation of being in love and *then* the 'why' of it. It helped me understand the two different aspects of how the two women feel what love is—probably to one it is the adventure of it; to the other it's the security of it. So that way it was very interesting and the boys also did it as male characters.

KP: I too was asked to enact love as M2 would and again, maybe my approach was wrong, in fact GPD did comment on that, as she said. What I went into was a sort of narration as M2 and I went into the background and what love meant to me from earlier and what it means to me now, and in relation to W2, what she means to me. So I tried to connect all these-my upbringing, my childhood, my family background. I personally feel that these do add to the feeling of love in a person. But that was again a sort of a narrative, not M2 *feeling* that.

VS: This entire exercise of picking a word and talking on it is actually what one does a lot with kids. I wanted to try it in this workshop and when we threw this particular 'being in love' at the

actors, the one character that was very hazy till then was M1.

STQ: Why don't you explain why you felt like trying this exercise here?

VS: For a very simple reason-when you're confronting the issues in a play, in a workshop of this sort, it could end up being just an exercise where a play is being written. But the goal of the exercise also includes several other factors, one of which is to find out and explore the underlying

there was that M1 was a very hazy character till then. Everyday, in fact, GP was saying, I can't quite *see* M1. So we did 'being in love' for W2, for W1, for M3 (who's the character with negative shades) and after that I was in fact going to do M1 myself, when I suddenly realized that the best thing to do was to ask the playwright to do it. And he did. And he came out with lines with which we were all very thrilled, and I think he's used some of those lines, though not all. But that's just to point out how this entire process ended up



emotions and the issues. So I merely asked GP to tell me, what're the main words that come to you when you think of the play? This was about three to four days into the workshop. He gave me a few, say around fourteen or fifteen. So I said, now give me a shortlist of five, which are the basic words or the basic themes. The themes he gave us were 'being in love', 'idealism', 'crime and punishment'-which so far, in our discussions, has emerged as the basic theme of the play: who's committing the crime, who's being punished; this is, I think, tying the entire thing together. So one of the reasons for an exercise of this sort is that you identify the words, you throw them at the actors, you discover what the actors say from their personal experience as well as in reaction to a particular character that you've discussed with them. And these things bounce back onto the playwright. And whether he rejects it all and designs something as a counterpoint to that rejection or whether he appropriates something from there and then creates something-these are things which'll probably never be discovered because it's part of a live existential process, to use GPD's words.

But the interesting point I wanted to make creating at least three lines for one of the characters and helped in fleshing out perhaps one aspect of it.

MA: I think it's all yet to sink in, but definitely there's a feeling of being a part of creating something, and also a feeling of confidence.

STQ: Do you end up feeling more attached to the entire moral dilemma, the characters, than in other acting experiences?

MA: This is a different kind of experience and definitely that personal attachment is there. The most pervading feeling at this moment is the fact that we have been able to take part in creating something.

STQ: And is there a particular attachment to any one character?

MA: Not at all. In fact M3, since it was the first character to be written about, was played by all of us and I did M3 first, so I was able to see all the others who were doing M3 and it was really interesting how different people react to the same lines, and how differently it comes across to a person watching. I, frankly, given the choice, would like to do all three. They all have very different characteristics and I don't think I have any particular preferences.

KP: This has been an experience for me, to actually be there when a play's being created. Usually what you get to see is a play which is already there. This has been quite the reverse. The actors are already there and they saw the play coming up. I can't actually express the feeling, but definitely I saw the play being created right from scratch, right from the beginning. That gives me a sort of mixed feeling when I think about it, as an actor. The other thing is that, where the choice of characters is concerned, one thing very unique about all the characters here is that each of them has a definite personality. I think as an actor I would be in a dilemma to say which one I'd rather do. All of the characters believe in whatever they're doing. I think that's the forte of this play.

STQ: When you're given a play which is already there, d'you feel the same kind of openness about the characters, or d'you feel an immediate attraction towards any one particular character? Or is it only because you've been a part of developing this play, that you're feeling that way?

KP: Definitely if I'm given an already created play and there're six characters, the first thing one does is #o hunt for the role with maximum meat in it. But in this case it was quite different. It was like the six characters were created by the six of us -in fact it was as if six children were born. So in the initial instance I don't think there's any preference for any particular one. I think our love for all of them has been absolutely equal and so, at the moment, I'd accept whatever role was given to me.

STQ: D'you think this workshop helped you to understand the characters more clearly than in a normal acting situation? As an actor how do you react to this particular exercise?

KP: In other plays, as I said, the actors contribute a lot in creating a particular character, with the help of the director. But in this case even the playwright was present. So, definitely he has added his own thoughts even after the scene was created, he's given his own views about each character. But ' we'll be delving more into it over the next two days, now that we have the full pla),&. So we'll be going into each character in more depth.

MA: I think when we're given a written, existing play, it's very natural for us to go for a particular character initially. But it may also be because of our lack of understanding of some other characters; but in this particular play two very obvious things happened: one was the fact that we saw the characters develop in front of our eyes. So there was a personal attachment to each of them. And also the fact that they all turn out to be wholesome characters, in a manner of speaking. So it's definitely more difficult in this particular play than in some other plays. And because we were there, involved in it all while the characters were being created, definitely we feel that we're more attached to it or understand it better.

SB: When plays are given to us, at least to me, I usually react very favourably to the male characters, because I still feel, very honestly, that most of the plays written are partial to stronger male characters because male characters are easier to write strongly about; and given a choice, really, I'd rather first do one of the male characters. Apart from *Barishwala* and *Pratibimb*, I have not really found a play till now, where I'd, at the first instance, want to do the female character at all. Vinay is aware of this, because I've always had reactions like, I don't want to do this character - why do the men always get the better characters. But in this case, this has been a big difference almost at par with *Barishwala* -they are absolutely volatile, the women, and they almost can, if they want, carry the play on their shoulders. And that has been very interesting.

And as far as the second question's concerned, we get a play, we first go through an entire long process of getting to understand a character, discuss it, discuss the playwright's motivations, why he wrote it, what he really meant to say, the social milieu, the political milieu-all this, to a large extent, has been answered by this workshop. On looking back, I think that this would be one of the best ways to do a play, because you are part of the process when it's being formed and whether you influence the forming or not, you *see* it being formed. So now when we get the final version of the script, we've done, I would say, 50% of the job. So in that way it is a *very* relevant workshop.

STQ: Govindji, d'you want to add anything anything that struck you while they were talking?

GPD: It is gratifying to know that the people one has worked with have found the experience reasonably satisfactory. I personally think that no very major changes are likely to occur in this script except for polishing -a few sentences or adding a few lines-basically the structure will remain the same. So it is really the initial acquaintance with the draft: that is the basis on which you're getting the reactions and they are important. And that is why I want to bring certain things to your notice: One is that we have this M4 who is the leader of the group and appears in only one or two scenes-

but even within that time he goes through several changes, and it was interesting that most of the comments practically ignore that character, except for one small reference which Mahmood made. These kinds of things can happen, because it's really the initial acquaintance. The other thing which seems to be coming up again and again is this distinction between W 1 and W2. Now I'm a little perplexed to know that the plays with strong women characters which were mentioned did not include mine, which came to me as a bit of a surprise. But the point is not that. The point is that, regarding the women, there is a certain rhythm to expression, to the reactions, to life, their understanding of reality, their modes of dealing with that reality. These rhythms are distinct and different. One of my magician friends once said that in Hindustani classical music a kind of raga can evoke the volatile in you, it can contribute to the upsurge of feelings. Whereas there are ragas which are very slow, smooth, extremely pacifying. I don't deny the possibility that W2 is not as well written as W 1 But there's also the other possibility-that when you're referring to W2, you're actually talking of the latter kind of raga, that there is a certain smoothness to all that she does, right up to her stony silence in the end. And if you can maintain that rhythm and that spirit all the way through, it's no small acting achievement. I think it's as important an achievement as the sheer volatility, frustration and depression of W1 One tends to be verbal, the other tends to be inward looking. I would only suggest that an actor should never underrate these introspective moments; in fact, such a character is fascinating look at my *Uddhwasta*, for example. Saraswati appears in only one scene, but the manner in which she goes through the several moods compare her to Madhavi, who is bubbling with life. I'd be hard put to say which of them I'm in love with.

STQ: Maybe one of the reasons why the women are reacting this way is that there is a very long tradition of seeing Indian women as strong, silent sufferers, soothing and calm and

inward-looking. Maybe they're actually reacting to that-because it's almost become a stereotype of an Indian woman, though I don't think you're seeing it as that.

GPD: That's certainly not true-because if you look at W1's words, the way she analyses reality ... And that's why I was talking of the rhythm, there's a certain rhythm to her speech. She's *not* a characteristic Indian woman, simply out to suffer. Not at all! She's a very uncharacteristic Indian woman who's sorting out the problem of somebody committing a crime, and somebody else getting the punishment; she takes a political position and sticks to it, rightly or wrongly, and only once, while talking to her husband, does she say that maybe our politics was naive. And I find her as assertive as W1, except that, I'll repeat, the rhythm of that assertion is different. That is because ultimately you have to be able to sing all the ragas reasonably well if you want to be a singer.

Playwright/Actors/Director Interaction

After the actors had been through the entire play in sequence for the first time, a question-and-answer session was held between them, the director and the playwright. The proceeds of that discussion, which took place on 4 June, are reproduced below, slightly edited.

SG: Keeping in mind the intensity of the human relationships that you're showing in this play, the agonies and the ecstasies and conflicts they're going through, is there any message that you're trying to give the readers and viewers?

GPD: No, not at all. I don't usually do that. This is not the purpose here at all. So the question of trying to make people relate to the complexity of the dilemmas that each individual is facing doesn't arise. You might say, if at all it has an objective or aim, it is only that of enriching certain human understandings of a certain human predicament.

SG: In the first scene you have W2's dialogues on violence. Is there any kind of appeal to the government to awaken to the basic dignity of human life?

GPD: Let us be clear about one *thing-none* of my writings, let alone this one, has any desire to appeal to anyone about anything. It is simply speaking of an experiential world; I would even go to the extent of saying that I'm not certain that I understand morality at all. I think what is 'moral' depends upon each situation. And each situation, whether I'm actually able to put faith in it, will determine whether my action is moral or not. Secondly, I'm at least realistic enough to know that governments cannot be appealed to-they simply have to be either overthrown or replaced. There

is no such thing as appealing to the government except in terms of building up political pressures, movements and things-but that's not really an appeal. The third thing to be noted is that when

she's taking that position on violence, she's basically trying to drive at the idea that violence operates at two levels: the physical level and the psychological level. And we have a tendency to completely ignore mental violence. If we can sleep happily-and that's exactly the phrase she uses-if the authorities that be, can sleep happily when everyday people are being killed under red-line buses in Delhi, and nobody seems to worry about it, it is also in the realm of violence. And then if you have a situation of violence all around-you'll notice that W1 says in the last scene, why don't you kill me-it's easier to kill people than to talk to them. So, in other words, even ordinary language becomes so violent: she's basically saying, where do you draw the line? And if you cannot draw the line and if it means that one perishes-she says that as far as I'm concerned, I feel this group is not involved. But if it is involved, I will take the consequences for it. Because if it is, then the nature of that politics is such that-she in fact categorically says that-they won't let me know. And in fact basically her assessment of the group was not wrong, except in the assessment of M4, but she's not even aware that an M4 exists.

KP: Regarding W2, to what extent do you see her as a participant in the group? When d'you think that she actually came in contact with the group and how deeply was she involved? Is it just as a sympathizer or something more than that?

GPD: Certainly something more than that. A group of this kind basically has a whole range of activities-it's like, if one might say so, a front organization of the Communist Party, which works on the principle that a certain percentage of the members hold membership in the Party. And that is known as the 'fraction' and they usually have a fraction meeting before the group meeting, or the movement meeting, that's all. The fraction decides its policies. But that does not mean that those who do not belong to the Party fraction in a front organization, are not active-they're very, very active. She must've participated in demonstrations-it's possible that she's participated in a *morchn* to the district magistrate's office; it's quite possible that she's shouted slogans loudly. It's possible that she's-arranged a camp, as happens in big cities. Volunteers are assigned tasks; you go to the railway station, hire a tempo, contact the incoming participants and bring them to the site. People of this kind are doing a whole lot of useful work for the group. I visualize her in that kind of a role. And this

happens in all movements-this could happen in the Narmada Bachao Andolan too. I think there are any number

of movements which're like this, with a core group and a whole lot of sympathetic activists around it. And it is with the help of these sympathetic followers that ultimately the core group is recruited. So those who have already made it to the core group like W11 M1 or even M3, for that matter, have already gone through all that. And had a group like this existed in real life, I'd expect her to be a member of the core group in a few years' time-she'll be that important.

KP: M1, W1 and M3, as you say, are members of the core group, full-time activists, whereas W2 is in the outer group. Is it because she comes from a well-to-do background, a certain strata of society, is it that these organizations also want to be linked to people who are well-off and in professional fields? The group takes her for granted, in that the money can be put into her account and in that scene when the supreme holds the meeting-I guess that meeting was for the core members, and she wasn't present-but the decision was taken on her behalf; don't you think she should've been present at that meeting?

GPD: What you say was not really the case. The decision, as W1 points out later, was to persuade her, to request her. The decision itself was not made on her behalf. Secondly, M1 actually says, we are taking undue liberties with her. But, it's a perfectly human situation in the sense that, in general if its known that you're sympathetic to a project, then people have a tendency to take your support for granted. Even in a university setup, I've experienced it so many times: an appeal has to go the press on a certain issue; people are reasonably certain that I'll be providing my name for the professed services. I simply get a phone call saying, 'GPD, we have to put in a statement in Hindustan Times - we require some names'. And naturally my first reaction is that if you've seen the statement, and if you're happy with it, then go ahead. And that's precisely what W2 tells W1-if you tell me this is alright, I'll do it. This is a perfectly understandable situation, because you are sometimes pressed for time. You've got to make decisions fast and you just don't have the time to go through the usual, 'normal' bourgeois discourse. And if somebody calls me whom I know and whose political judgement I respect, and says GPD, we've given out a statement-we needed some professors, one or two writers, so we've given your name. My immediate reaction is-and I've done it several times, I assure you-to say that if you're in agreement with that statement, I don't mind. So in a number of cases it's quite possible that I might've become party to a statement, a

paragraph of which I might not have entirely gone along with. But this is what happens in real life.

VS: What is 'political'-how would you describe it?

G PD: The term 'political' in its simplest possible meaning really relates to the relationship between the state and society: that you're taking a particular position vis-a-vis the state. It could be a conflict between state and civil society, an oppressive state and the general mass of people. That view, or that action is political, which necessarily involves power: exercise of political power, either limiting it or extending it.

VS: I remember a statement by Orwell that any decision or any view is political because you either take a viewpoint or you don't. If you don't, you're not political. But if you take a viewpoint at all, it is political; keeping in mind the fact that there're choices all through this play, are the decisions taken- even though they are on the basis of human relations and man-woman relations - political decisions or not?

GPD: A Marxist would also take a similar position, that all decisions are political. But there is one small difference one has to make for practical reasons-that when we say all decisions are political, we are saying that all decisions have political implications. In that sense a decision can be political-in the sense that if I decide to go out on the street and demonstrate, shout or support and cheer-that is also another kind of politics. Then again, people use the term apolitical more for convenience, and what is meant by that is a second set of activities; beyond that the difference should not be taken too literally. In that sense, sure enough, the decisions involved in this particular play are political, definitely.

VS: Of these political decisions or actions in the play, which would you call 'acts of violence'? Could you enumerate them?

GPD: The acts of violence are-letting the Sangharsh Samiti, which is another group, virtually decide the course of action for this group. So one can even say that somebody else's politics is, in the last analysis, determining the politics of this group. To that extent there is a certain dominance relationship involved, which comes out later in the enforced statement over the telephone. That would be one act of violence. Another act of violence is-to virtually force W2 into the group, in a way already defined by the group. A third, to which W1 actually refers, is that instead of persuading W2, M3 virtually emotionally

blackmails her, saying that her association with this group will have to end if this does not happen. Then M3's attempts at trying to save W1 are also paradoxically acts of violence, without his realizing it; he still thinks that it is his love for her-I'm not really certain if it can be called love; it's simply a crush. It could be either-it could be simple lust, it could be simple attraction. Or he might be genuinely in love with her, wanting to live with her-he himself says that I proposed marriage and you didn't respond. But that attempt to 'save' her is also an act of violence. Plus, of course, what the state has done to that other group, the *rounding* up of this group-all these are acts of state violence. And then there are references to violence, like Sangharsh Samiti's violence in the name of fighting the state.

VS: Does M1 commit any acts of violence, d'you think?

GPD: No. Because M1 is acting strictly within the limits of feasibility. After all, there is a social role that he has to play. No act of violence can be judged without reference to the situation in which one happens to find oneself. In other words, it was quite possible for M3 not to be a betrayer, but he chose to be one. There were no *institutional constraints* which would have prevented him from not acting as a betrayer. But he does. That is an act of violence. If M1 does not act, it is not an act of violence because one has to remember that M1 is a person with a certain background. In other words; there are no absolute criteria of violence or nonviolence.

VS: I'm really interested in finding out if it is possible to establish that each and every character in the play, or the majority of the characters, are in fact *indulging* in acts of violence, whether they be in interpersonal or *intrapersonal* relationships.

GPD: Three characters would not fall in this category-M2, M1 and W2. They're victims of circumstances.

VS: Do you also take the same position as W2 takes vis-a-vis violence?

GPD: I take the same position as M1 does, that I have no sympathy for state violence and between the two I'll have to say that this fellow should not be victimized. But I have no interest, as he says, in that kind of violence or that kind of politics which has been a position which several of my characters have taken in more than one play.

Photographs: Naveen Kishore

On the Theatre of Possibilities Vinay Sharma

Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta. Some months ago. *Andha* Yug. Directed by Ratan Thiyam.

Performers. All in white. Stick wielding. Acrobatic. Eyes behind dark glasses. A group. Common purpose. Precise. Focused.

Then

(Some)one loses control.

(Some)one tumbles over the proscenium. On stage the performance continues. Offstage, two feet from my feet. . . Mute. Still. Disciplined. Injured. (Some)one. What is his status?

From the moment that he loses control to this moment. Mute. Still.

What is he? Performer? Non-performer? Performer turned non-performer? Ex-performer? Anything else?

We are limited in what we say. Limited by vocabulary. Our own vocabulary. And the vocabulary of the discourse(s) to which we subscribe (consciously and unconsciously) (And? ... Anything else?)

We are limited in what we mean. Limited by the above. And by the vocabulary of the discourse(s) subscribed to by those who receive us.

Every/each vocabulary engenders its limited (limited only by usage, perhaps) sets of permutations which COMBINE the contents of the vocabulary to create design-patterns of meaning and understanding (which then become officially) sanctioned by the discourse.

Which DE-FINE the CON-TEXTS within which the discourse is then understood.

This entire circle being a process of CON-CRETIZATION which is normally never questioned. There was a desire to live-in a space for De-concretization where encounters could take place in the-void-of-context and de-void of context.

A desire to 'grapple' with THE OTHER. An Other. And other Others. This was my starting point for the workshop.

Limit: 1. Orig., a boundary, a frontier; an object serving to define a boundary, a landmark. Now spec. a boundary or terminal point considered as confining or restricting.'

On stage the performance continues.

Offstage the injured (Some)one crumpled up at the feet of the audience. The audience is ~aware of him.

Some continue watching the performers on stage. Some watch the injured (Some)one.

Some look at the back of the heads of those before them, trying to see (some)one, some look from the one to the other ...

et cetera. -

What is happening here? Which is the performance? For whom? What is the difference? Does it matter?

Limit: 2. Any of the fixed points between which the possible or permitted extent, amount, duration, etc., of something is confined; a bound which may not be passed or beyond which something ceases to be possible or allowable.²

Where do I locate what cannot be-or what I am not able to-classified/classify? How do I begin to find out?

In a half-day preliminary session a month before the workshop proper, I explained and demonstrated to GPD and the actors one representative exercise which I felt was suggestive of what I wanted to achieve in the workshop. The exercise was as follows.

1. The playwright suggests a line to the actors. The line may be of any length. It must be located in a context which the playwright does not reveal.
2. The actors receive the line and start workshopping it ... saying it as meaninglessly as possible at first; in as secular a way as they can-tasting, exploring the strengths and weaknesses, the textures implicit in each word and the line.
3. The playwright heats the line said thus over and over again. He lets it encounter the context of this line in his mind.
4. The actors now say the line with varying inflexions and random meanings.
5. The playwright encounters this and notes any difference.

6. The playwright begins offering the context to the actor bit by bit ... he suggests the kind of character who is saying these lines; the actor speaks and tries to discover how his utterance changes with this piece of location; the playwright observes the change and now locates the character in a relationship; relates the line to the person addressed; then locates it in a situation.

In each case the actor instinctively, without too much thought, tries to include each limitation in his utterance.

7. The director observes the entire process. He may suggest changes to the actors. The actors re-perform accordingly.

8. The team may or may not discuss the way the process has affected them.

The point was to introduce to everyone the fact that we had to be open to each chance occurrence in the workshop. Our mode of functioning *would be* aleatory.

Point. Is. Perspective.

Point is, perspective changes.

How do you react to the following lines?

The thesis and antithesis and their proofs therefore represent nothing but the opposite assertions, that a *limit is* (eine Grenze ist), and that the limit equally is only a *sublated* (aufgehobene [releve]) one; that the limit has a beyond with which, however, it stands in relation (in Beziehung steht), and beyond which it must pass, but that in doing so there arises another such limit, which is no limit. The *solution* of these antinomies, as of those previously mentioned, is transcendental, that is.

How does your perception/ reaction change if I tell you that the quotation is from Hegel, *Science of Logic*? Does the picture in your head change any further if this quotation is located at the beginning of a passage in a book called *Margins of Philosophy* by Jacques Derrida?

If the workshop achieved anything it was mainly due to two reasons.

' One, that a playwright agreed to such a workshop. That he was open to the idea of receiving inputs and to having his ideas played around with/ workshopped.

Two, and perhaps most important, that our team at Padatik is made up of THEATRE HACKERS (if I may borrow a term from computerize).³ We are hackers because in the true sense of the term, we believe in theatre as an end in itself. And because my main condition for the actors is that they must try to outwit the 'system' or method of each moment in theatre.

In practice this means that over four years of inconsistent but intense work the actors have created an environment of doing without questioning while one is questioning what one is doing. Doing anything. To discover anything. Any other.

What did we do in the workshop?

Keeping in mind the essence of our preliminary workshop exercises we involved the playwright in our eclectic blend of theatre exercises and games which have always formed the functional model of our regular workshops. For instance:

1. The Many Version Format-nonstop improvisation on whatever inputs were provided by the playwright, with or without context-the theatre hackers adopt varying physical and vocal

characteristics, styles, stream of consciousness lines, to exhaust the spontaneous individual possibilities of each situation, relationship, text. Et cetera.

2. Sculpting-one of our primary exercises. Beginning from a neutral position, the actors sculpt each other into configurations in or out of context. When this was done in relation to a particular character or situation GPD was asked to identify that which matched his pictures, if any.

In fact, one of the first things I told GPD was that I was interested in discovering the visual counterpoints to his words. I asked him to imagine that he was sculpting with his words. My interest was in discovering whether GPD wrote with clear visual images or whether his words were images sufficient unto themselves and for him.

GPD was asked to sculpt the actors into configurations showing the relationship between the characters that existed in his mind. Very hesitantly he did create two or three such sculptures.

At first he did this in a very general way; demonstrating or speaking to the actors. I intervened and asked him to use his hands, 'like a sculptor' to design body postures. He then tried it that way very sportingly.

The last time he was asked to do this, he insisted that he play out the entire scene himself till he could fashion the image.

3. I asked GPD to suggest central themes or words which he associated with the play. Words suggested included Violence, Crime and Punishment, Being in Love, et cetera. The actors were asked to do 'stream of consciousness' utterances, personal or general, on these words.

I mention all this in such detail because they are an indication of how space encountered space in the workshop. There is no real way to measure how this changed or affected the common space that was created in the form of the rough and ready text at the end. But the spaces did touch each other.

'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.'⁴

' Multi-dimensionality exists in every space. But any dimension is located only when it is perceived as such. Rather like Schrodinger's cat in quantum physics.s

Onstage the performance continues.

Offstage a few rush to (Some)one's help. In a flash.

Or many seconds later.

He is gone. In his place, vacant space.

Vacant, unnoticed and without sign-ificance seconds ago. Vacant, un-a-void-able and sign-ifying now.

What is (being) signified?

The image of that ANDHA YUG performer seizes my imagination--seeking its own location in the context of this•workshop. (Violent and meaningful to me, it may seem insignificant and abberative to you). I cannot discard it.

All performers subscribe to a 'Circle of Performance'.

This circle circumscribes the performer.

The performer may be an actor, a director, an acrobat, a housewife, a playwright, a chess player ...

The performer's success or failure is judged by his ability to con-fine himself within this circle/limit.

The more variations that he can display within his confinement determine the perception of him as a greater or lesser performer.

The receiver (the audience?) expects and grasps easily all those displays that it is used to. It likes little surprises and applauds those small tricks and turns the performer throws in to display his 'prowess of the circle'.

If he nears the edge of the circle, the audience gasps, enjoying the 'danger' but confident that the performer will not go over or beyond.

If he stands on the edge and shows indications of going beyond, there begin murmurs of disapproval, dissatisfaction-the audience is dismayed, uncertain, straining to understand.

But when/ if the performer transgresses the circle, the audience splits into two-those that are willing to observe the violation before judging it and those who immediately censure it and refuse to accept it.

(If I may make an arbitrary but deeply felt distinction)-it is at this point that the performer touches the artist inside him-(Some)one who is forever locked in a 'grapple' with THE OTHER in an invisible ring without ropes, his fight infinite in an ever-expanding space, challenging the receiver/ audience to traverse the unknown and unexplored.

When does transgression become transcendence? For the performer? For the artist? For the receiver? For all three?

'There is always a structure of power and influence, a massed history of already articulated values and ideas, and also... an underside to them-ideas, values, people who ... have not been given a room of their own.'⁶

Halfway through this workshop we could all see that a play was emerging. Exercises were therefore geared to the fact of play-creation itself which now became more important (and exploration-in-itself was no longer the primary goal).

From then on

1. The playwright outlined a scene improvising his lines, which were noted.
2. The actors workshopped and enacted the scene on the spot, adding or deleting lines.
3. Notes were made of their improvisations and given to the playwright to use/discard in his writing.
4. Once the scene was written, the playwright helped the actors with a rough English translation from the Marathi.
5. The actors now prepared the scene with this rough text and played it.
6. We discussed the emerging characters and the possibilities of changes and what could happen before/after the scene.

And so the first draft of the full text was with us two days before the workshop was due to end. It would be easy to be happy with this. To celebrate the completeness of the experience, produce the play and move on.

But it would be unfair to the spirit of the workshop and to the sincerity of the participants, were I to sensationalize the collaborative process in this way. Or make it seem more than what it was.

Because the point, after all, is not that a play has been written or that it has been written in eleven days. Given an emergent outline for a play (as GPD had chosen and we had accepted)

and a sabbatical for play writing, GPD would probably have done the same in eight days without actors. Perhaps.

The point is that a possibility has been identified, a process has begun of a sharing interaction between the playwright, the text and the other-the physical other [i.e. director/actors](#). (And other others.)

Within constraints imposed by circumstance, personality and ability, this experience will be different for any group which tries it. And even for us the next time we try it.

For us, this experience is yet unfinished. The process is to be carried on. In rehearsal, now armed with the text and without the playwright, there are questions to be asked.

How, in our perception, does the text limit itself? How do we limit the text as performers?

How is the text limited because it has to be performed? How may the text be liberated because it is performed?

As carriers of the text from its origin (the playwright) to its ultimate destination (the audience), we have to search for ways to transgress without fear, pierce the walls of our circle(s) of performance. In ' . . . a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received

ideas steer one along'7 ... in order to give transcendence a chance to happen where it will when it will.

Foucault cited a passage from a novel by Jorge Luis Borges describing an entry in a "certain Chinese encyclopaedia".

. . . animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor (b) embalmed (c) tame (d) sucking pigs (e) sirens (f) fabulous (e) stray dogs (h) included in the present classification (i) frenzied (j) innumerable (k) drawn with a fine camel hair brush (l) et cetera (m) having just broken the water pitcher (n) that from a long way off like flies" . . .

And Foucault went on to write: "In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that."

[Foucault's book is about the limitation of the way we see and know ourselves and the world.]⁸

While every playtext may not (at first reading) necessarily be as intractable as the above entry in a Chinese encyclopaedia, this holds true only when we are bound by common discourse(s) and by common system(s) of classification(s). And only to the extent that we are persuaded that we are so bound. To illustrate, when GPD uses a term/expression like *sabyasachi pragya* (discriminating intelligence, analytical frame of mind), how does he understand it? How does he mean it? What does the actor understand of it? How should the actor express it? How does he get its meaning across to the audience? Et cetera.

Additional ironies of context, meaning and understanding surface when you consider the quote from the Chinese encyclopaedia in the passage cited above

First someone wrote it in the encyclopaedia. Then Borges used it in the novel.

Then Foucault wrote about Borges writing about it and more. Mary Anne Staniszewski then cited the passage from Foucault. . . Now I am citing Staniszewski in STQ.

The essential lines in each case are the same. The receiver/audience/reader has varied in each case.

Context? Meaning? Understanding?

In a further three-day session with GPD in late September, we compared the Hindi translation of *Antim Din* with the original.

The divergences were not negligible.

Frequently we asked, what is the original Marathi word/line? What are its associations? Is there an equivalent in Hindi? Is it even possible to express it in Hindi? Should we use a line or two to explain a word or two? Et cetera.

At times I questioned the entire translation process. I wondered how many translations were not the playwright's plays, but plays masquerading as the playwright's plays.

Ironical others. .

A playwright writes a play. The characters or speaker-doers are born. Begin inhabiting the pages of the text (written, typed, printed, xeroxed, anything else?)

Entire lifetimes represented in abstracts of lifetimes in the few moments captured within the pages of the text.

This very act has engendered THE OTHER ... but as yet it is a relatively private interface. Between the playwright and his characters and his words. (Where are the images at this moment?)

The interface changes, widens, when the text reaches the 'physical other' to the playwright-the director, the actors, the audience.

Each reading, each interpretation, each performance spawns myriad Others; but also fills up THE existing OTHER.

Thus diminishing and increasing, reducing and expanding THE OTHER at the same time. How can we translate this experience, this perception, into performance?

Perhaps one way is to not look for conclusions at the workshop stage but rather to let many conclusions hobnob with each other in a pluralistic space which admits all discourses and which does not look to resolve them. Which lets them act upon fixed ideas in the entire team-the playwright, actors, director, the translator.

Which lets each experience by each one lead to several reifications. And all this leads towards a performance which *includes* all the uncertainties of the workshop process ... a performance where the actors are sensitive to uncertainties in relation to the text and to each other; and can RE-FINE each performance to the particularities of its own aliveness.

It is not possible to be proficient in all discourses. But it is possible to observe most of them. And absorb at least a little of what we observe. In any case, attempts must be made but

for the most part this entire business from play writing to rehearsal to performance *settles down* into being just that. A business. Each venture catering to its own market-overt or concealed. No one, I think, is exempt from this. Perhaps it is not possible to be exempt.

But can we as theatrists in this country at least question it? To question means to explore THE OTHER.

Or are we too complacent in the neat packages we have made for ourselves, snug in our compact discourses, brave and comfortable in our well-rehearsed, even obsolete, conflicts?

Refusing to acknowledge our continually narrowing circle(s) of performance?

Questioning thus is only possible with/in a totally personal, individual, passionate theatre without show and unafraid of showing itself; a theatre which retains the CHANCE-of losing control like that white-clad *Andha Yug* performer-of going over the edge and wounding itself; even a self-destructive theatre.

'Only the very great are artists in that strict sense, which alone is true: that art has become a way of life for them. All the others, all of us who only occupy ourselves with art, meet on the same long road and greet each other in the same silent hope and yearn for the same distant mastery.'⁹

Notes

I use 'the other' in a personal, general sense that hopefully emerges through this piece. If it resembles, differs from or misrepresents the usage of the term in current literary/ academic discourse, I plead guilty. A useful way to look at the usage would be to think of THE OTHER in capitals as an open ended superset (and also supra-set) of all other possibilities; and in all other cases as sub-sets (but also supra-sets).

1. *New Shorter Oxford English*

Dictionary. 2. *Ibid*.

3. In computer slang, a 'hacker' engages as an end in itself, especially when this involves 'outwitting' the system-it also involves trying to break into other people's systems. For more details look up *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words*.
4. From Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*.
5. Schrodinger's Cat is a dilemma posed long ago by the famous discoverer of the Schrodinger wave equation: A cat is placed inside a box. Inside the box is a device which can release a gas, instantly killing the cat. A random event determines whether the gas is released or not. There is no way of knowing what happens inside the box apart from looking inside it. The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics says that the cat is in a kind of limbo represented by a wave function which contains the possibility that the cat is dead and also the possibility that the cat is alive. When we look in the box, and not before, one of these possibilities actualizes. Until then there is only a wave function (from *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, Gary Zukav).
6. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*. 7. Ibid.
8. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *Believing is Seeing*. 9. Rainer Maria Rilke.

'What a tremendous movement it was...'

In 1945 Gut (ZAVERI) BARDHAN joined the Central Squad of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and toured all over India with its productions; she went to Europe in 1947 to take part in reconstruction work as a member of the Second International Brigade and later formed The Little Ballet Troupe in 1952 along with Shanti Bardhan, whose choreographies of ballets like *Ramayana*, *India Immortal* and *Discovery of India* had revolutionized the modern ballet movement in India. Along with dancer-choreographer Prabhat Ganguly she still runs Ranga-sri Little Ballet Troupe, probably the longest surviving ballet troupe in India. The following autobiographical account is reconstructed from several conversations with BIREN DAS SHARMA.

Learning the meaning of democracy

I was born in 1928 into a Gujarati family in Bombay. My father was a well-to-do person working in an American cotton firm. My mother was his third wife. His first wife died leaving two daughters, his second wife had only one son and I was the only child of his third wife. My mother was a very strict disciplinarian and a very good musician. She was equally good at embroidery, both in zari and *sut*. She used to play the esraj and banjo and also knew how to sing. Father was a sportsman. So I had the advantage of inheriting both their skills.

We had a timetable at the house which we had to follow every day of the week except Sundays and holidays. For Saturdays we had a slightly different timetable. Every day we had to get up at five o'clock, and in five minutes, brush, and get ready for the morning walk. We would run up to the Hanging Garden-we used to live near the sea shore-and father and mother would follow us walking. I would be in the swing and I would jump straight from whatever height it might be as soon as my mother raised ,her hand. We would come home running and change into bathing suits, take the boys and wait near the sea shore. By that time father and mother would come down. My father would allow five minutes to my brother and five minutes to me for swimming, then we would come back, change again, have a bath and get ready for school. After coming back from school we would wash, take a bowl and go with mother to the store room. She would open each jar and give us nuts and dry fruits. But everything was counted: how many *badams*, *pistas*, etc. Then we dressed for the gymnasium and put the dry fruits in our pocket. We were not to eat it immediately. While coming back from the gym we would chew the dry fruits slowly as we were asked not to gobble it. It was indeed very difficult, for a child to chew the dry fruits and not to gobble it immediately. But we had to. We had a very controlled diet. Mother used to say, 'Children do not know how much food they should eat. We parents know how many calories you need to keep yourself healthy.'

By the time I was five we were given a separate room with a bathroom. Servants would clean it, but we were asked to keep it tidy, not to throw books here and shoes there. If mother found some dirt she would be very upset. The bathroom had China tiles and used to get dirty easily. She would stand at the door and ask us to clean it. In those days we did not appreciate it but now I realize the value of it. You cannot treat servants badly. You must respect their labour.

Dinner always took a little longer than lunch. After dinner we had to get ready again to go to the sea shore for a walk and then come back and change again. At night mother would play some instrument and father would read something. At dinner all of us would sit together and I think I learnt the first lesson of democracy there. Everyone would give their account of what he or she had done from morning till night-each one of us. First father, then mother, then my brother and myself. And we had the right to comment or criticize each other. You could say, 'This is wrong.' But you had to explain why it was wrong and confess. This was the only time we were allowed to speak and criticize. But this gave us a chance to understand the meaning of democracy. All this discipline and control also helped me to grow up a mature person, gave me dignity, taught me to respect others and not to be greedy. Since then I have got used to eating only two rotis.

'Be brave and stand up' was the first lesson I learnt There was one thing that we were not allowed to do: read detective novels. Naturally, since it was not allowed we wanted to read them. We were really very *badmash*. We would take some textbook and hide a

detective novel inside. My father said, 'Do you want books? Okay You collect whatever money you can and I will double it.' Since we were a well-to-do family, for every function or ceremony we used to get a rupee or two. Also, whenever relatives and friends visited they gave us some money. So very soon we made our own library. At that time books were not very costly and we had a library of five thousand books-a library built only by two children.

On Saturdays we had morning school. While coming back we were asked to go to a particular theatre to purchase tickets for the evening show. Once a week we would go to the cinema. Wherever we went, we went together. Sunday was a free day. So sometimes we would go to an uncle's place or somebody would visit _us. It was a fixed routine. Nothing could be changed. But whenever we had at least three days' vacation we would go out of Bombay to some hill station nearby. On longer holidays we would go somewhere far. That was how I have seen all the hill stations of India in my childhood. My father was very fond of travelling. We were also admitted to the Boy Scouts and when I was about six or seven years old father started giving us training in rifle shooting, aiming and target practice. In

the gymnasium we learnt *lathis* and *lejims*. From my mother's side we heard music, but did not learn directly from her.

We always had a teacher, a companion teacher, at home. Our first teacher was a very nice person. We did not like the teacher who came next. He was a brahmin with a *choti* and even my mother did not like him because we are not brahmins and he used to cook and eat his food separately. He Gul AS A young girl always insisted on us reading the textbooks though we had never read textbooks at home. We were attentive in the class and that was enough. We always got good ranks-between one and five-in class. But our new companion teacher would always insist on reading textbooks and complain to our parents. We wanted to get rid of him and wondered about what to do. Once we went on a vacation to rural Maharashtra and came to know that there would be a race of bullock carts. We told father that we wanted to join the race. 'Okay' he said and ordered the best cart for us. These carts were very narrow, you know. So, we planned that we would push him from the cart during the race and he would be killed under the wheels of the following carts. We were just children and did not know what death was. We were too young-six or seven at that time. We told the driver, 'Whatever happens, even if one of us falls, do not stop. We must win. If we win we will reward you. We will feed the bullock with ghee. Do not stop at all.' As soon as the cart came we sat on the cart in such a way that there was no room for our companion teacher to sit. 'Move a little bit and let me sit.' 'No, we will fall.' The poor fellow was duty bound to accompany us. He had to sit at the back with nothing to hold on to. The road was very rough. With one bump he fell. We said to the driver, 'Do not stop. *Bhaago.*' We thought that he would be run over by other carts and die, but fortunately he fell on the other side. Anyway, we won the race and forgot all about it. After some time our teacher came back limping. We were shocked to see him alive. 'Why didn't you stop the cart?' 'Were we driving the cart? We were just the riders. Being a grown up how come you fell while we, small children, did not?' Naturally he complained to father. Father called us, 'Gul, Chaman.' His tone of voice sounded different. Then he slapped us. So far we had never experienced an insult like that. Seeing this, my mother came running and confronted father, 'What are you doing? You are beating the children!' She saw the impression of five fingers on my cheek and my brother's cheek and that was too much for her. Anyway, the teacher had to leave. That was a great relief. After that we had no companion teacher.



My mother died in 1939 at the age of 33. She had TB and she was sent to Miraj sanatorium. After several operations some ribs were removed and she was completely cured. But a doctor, a specialist from Germany, told my father after studying my mother's case history, 'Yes, of course she is cured. But maybe the disease is still hidden inside and after some years it may relapse.' 'So what to do?' 'We will make a small cut and see whether the disease is there or not.' Father thought 'Why not?' My mother was not really ready for this. But after all she was an Indian woman and when father asked her, she agreed. But she said, 'Before anything I want to see my children.' At that time we were not allowed to stay with her. So I came to see her. Soon after, during the operation, which took one and half hours (they found no trace of the disease), she died. Her death came as a great shock to my father. He felt responsible for her death. Though he was a very healthy person he completely collapsed after her death. We were not staying with him so we did not know all this. When we learnt about mother's death we did not know what to do. But something had to be done and father was not in a state to do anything at all. I hunted out a cheque book and asked father to sign. With the cheque book I went round to the hospital and to the shops from where we used to buy things. I told everybody, 'We are leaving. If we owe you any money please write the amount and take a cheque. Here is the signature.' After that I

went to the post office and sent a telegram to my uncle at Bombay, 'Mother has expired and father is very ill. We are taking a train. Send the ambulance and a doctor to the station.' I purchased the tickets and arranged everything. The house was full of gifts because mother had been cured just before this mishap. 'What to do with these things?' There were many poor patients at the sanatorium who lived in the slums. I distributed everything among them. I brought father to Bombay... I was only eleven years old at that time. My brother was eight years older than me. But unlike me he was a very soft natured person... I had lost a mother but did not get a chance to cry because, after seeing my father's condition I realized that somebody must take charge. As soon as we reached Bombay the doctor examined my father and said that it was a severe heart attack. He died exactly three months after my mother's death on the same full moon night, at the same time, same day. In three month's time we lost both of them. 'Be brave and stand up' was the first lesson i learnt in my life.

'The party is not under the ground'

In Bombay we stayed for some time with my uncle and also some time with my cousin. My uncle was a very rich person. A millionaire. He had a title-'Sir'. His name was Sir Shantidas Ashakaran. I did not like the atmosphere at my uncle's place. It was a family of five people and they had more than twentyfive servants. The family lived in a huge bungalow. During this time I came in contact with Marxist literature and it was the time when the Communist Party of India went underground. I worked as a courier. I was so dumb that I once asked our seniors, 'I want to see the underground.' They laughed, 'The party is not under the ground, but very much on the ground.' Those were student days, you know. I was still in school. It was in 1939-40. My uncle came to know that we were reading Marxist literature. One day he called me, 'Beta, what does this Marxism mean?' 'Uncle, according to Marxism you are not allowed to stay in this house. This house will be turned into a library or some such institution.' After that he never asked me anything about Marxism. I requested my uncle to send me to Santiniketan. He agreed but soon Calcutta was bombarded and he said, 'No, we can't send you to Calcutta.' 'Okay, send me to Benaras.' But even that was not done.

I realized that they were not going to send me anywhere. I did not want to stay in that huge house any longer. So one day... I had a pet rabbit... I took it in my arms... I had seventy-five rupees with me ... and I walked out of the house. I went to Ahmedabad where a cousin of mine was staying. We took a room in Gujarat Commerce College Hostel and shared it. My cousin was working in a shop. In the evening she would come back with half her tiffin which we would share. In Bombay I was a student at the J. J. School of Arts. I always wanted to learn painting. So I started going to Ravishankar Rawal's painting school. In the mean time I was also looking for a job at a factory. I went to the Calico factory, met the manager and said, 'Give me a job.' I was very young at that time and was still wearing my school uniform. When I left my uncle's place I was in Xavier's College. I passed matric at the age of twelve. In those days it was allowed. Anyway, the manager asked, 'Tell me, is anything wrong with your family? Did you quarrel? We can settle it for you. We will send you back.' I said, 'I want a job. And I want to work in the dyeing section.' 'Why the dyeing section?' I knew everything about cotton mills because my uncle had a mill. The manager was startled, 'You know, the noise is so much in that section even big pathans cannot stand it for long. Can you bear such noise?' 'Yes, I know it and I will be able to bear it.' But the manager said, 'I do not want to go to jail for giving a minor a job. You are not capable of such a job. But my dear, please tell me whose daughter you are, where your family is... I will write to them.' 'Nothing doing. I want a job. If you can't give me one I will leave.' After a lot of argument he said, 'I can

only give you a job in the binding section, where women are taken. In no other section can we take women.' But that was not enough for a young revolutionary like myself! I was very fond of Bhagat Singh and I wanted to carry a gun. Then Sarat Babu's novel *Pather Dabi* and Victor Hugo's novels-they influenced me a lot and I wanted to become a revolutionary. It was indeed a very romantic idea of revolution and at that age I did not really know what revolution was. But the desire was to be a good proletarian. So I opted for the heaviest work in the textile mill. Anyway, I could not get that job. We had only seventy-five rupees to live on. Even then we managed for six months. In the morning we used to make a lot of tea and drink it, buy some *channa* for my rabbit and at night I would share half the tiffin. After about six months, my

uncle sent a message, 'Come back. We will not object to whatever you want to do. Please come back.' So I went back. Uncle asked me, 'Do you want to stay in this house?' I said, 'No.'

In short I was a dare-devil girl, not afraid of anything, not afraid to do anything. I did whatever I wanted to do. By nature I am an atheist, I don't believe in any religion. I do not go to any temple. If I go to the temple nowadays I go there to see the icon. My father was also an atheist.

My father always wanted me and my brother to be doctors. He used to say, 'Let them complete matriculation first. I will send both of them to London.' He wanted me to study surgery and my brother to become a general physician. 'She is a *shaitan*, she will be able to stand the strain of surgical incision.' When my brother passed matric my father was still alive. But he refused to study medicine. He said, 'I want to study law.' My father said, 'What will you do? You do not have the guts of Bhulabhai Desai (who was a famous lawyer). You will be a very ordinary lawyer. Take some science subject at least.' But my brother did not want that either. He said, 'I hate science. I hate surgery.' Finally he opted for arts. I was younger. I passed only after my parents' death and there was no question of going in for medicine.

Soon I joined the student movement, started working for the trade unions and finally became a full time worker of the Party. I was a very active worker. My only problem was that I was a minor. It was the pre-independence period and the whole idea was to fight against British imperialism. We were asked to prepare ourselves to carry on the task of revolution later on. In the trade unions we were fighting for the rights of the workers. I was engaged in selling papers and books of the Party, talking to common people, to the drivers and coolies at the railway station, propagating the Party's cause. At Andheri station I had lots of followers among the taxi drivers and porters. *People's War*, the party newspaper, was in Hindi. I used to sit on the bonnet of a taxi and read it to them. Later, when Little Ballet Troupe was formed, these people became my guardians. Nobody could touch me. I got so much love and affection from them.

In 1944 I had an interview with Uday Shankar-he came with his shadow-play the Ramayana-and I was in fact selected by him to join his group. But unfortunately his group broke up during the Ahmedabad strike. From 1945 my life changed. I started learning dance and wanted to become a dancer. Why? Because in 1945 I came to know Shanti-da [Shanti Bardhan] at the Central Squad of the IPTA. The Central Squad was basically the Communist

Party's organization and was financed by them. All the members, including the musicians and dancers, were either party members or people like me who had not received the party membership card till then. I did not receive it because I was a minor, I was not even eighteen years old. The only person who was not a party member was Shanti Bardhan, the artistic director and choreographer of the Central Squad. Sachin Shankar, Narendra Sharma and Ravi Shankar, who joined the Central Squad later, were also not party members. We lived in one house as a commune and were learning to perform.

I have a one-track mind, whatever I do I give it my full attention. I cannot do two things at a time. I always liked dance. My parents were lovers of the arts and in my childhood days I had seen a lot. We danced at the school functions. In those days there were hobbies in school, you know. Drill and physical exercise was also a compulsory subject. Music, yes, was another compulsory hobby. There were no examinations, but these were the subjects students had to take. So, classical music, drill, embroidery, stitching, painting-they were all there. Nowadays, the school students, I feel so sorry for them, don't get a chance to learn all these things. That is the age when you really need the help, need to know so many things, and then you select what you want be. I started learning dance when I joined the Central Squad and I am still learning and still dancing at the age of sixty-seven.

Central Squad days During the Bengal famine IPTA started a production titled *Voice of Bengal* which had the famous song 'Bhukha Hai Bangal.' I joined a little later, in 1945, during the *Spirit of India* production which came after *Voice of Bengal*. I had seen *Voice of Bengal*. The people who took part were not trained dancers but what a production it was! It brought tears to the eyes of the audience. In those days we collected one lakh of

rupees for the Bengal famine. I requested the Party, 'I love to dance and I want to be in the Central Squad.' They said, 'Okay, you may join.' Binoy Roy, Reba Roy, Dina Pathak, Shanta Gandhi, Rekha Jain, Priti Sirkar, Ruby Dutta (younger sister of the famous revolutionary Kalpana Dutta) were in the group. Abani Dasgupta and his younger brother Shushil, who was learning the flute, were also with us. Mrs Dasgupta used to look after the kitchen. They had a small daughter named Silu. Then came Sachin Shankar and Narendra Sharma.

In contemporary dance training you have to relax your muscles and joints first and then learn to control your body. I was a gymnast, so I didn't have much trouble. I started learning very fast. As I have



Left A scene from *Panchatantra*. *Right* Gul as Rama in *Ramayana*. Photos by Ghanshyam Sharma, Courtesy Gul Bardhan.

a one-track mind, learning to dance meant learning it full time. Twelve hours' practise. It was hard work but it was a joy to learn. Our main teacher was Shanti Bardhan. Later, Sachin and Narendra Sharma also started to teach us. Dasarathlal, a tram driver from Calcutta, was a very good drummer. He knew the Uttar Pradesh *dhol* very well. From Abani-da, who was a wizard on the drums, he learnt to play other kinds of drums like the *dugis*, the *khol*, the *madal* and the Bangla *dhol*. Dasarathlal was also a good poet, a village poet. The lyrics of *Panchatantra* and *Ramayana* were written by him.

In 1946 Shanti-da had produced one solo item titled *Chaturang*. He danced the solo himself and used two girls and a boy as a chorus. He used to practise very hard for hours before any performance. We used to see him rehearsing from the balcony above. He would practise under the banyan tree till midnight, sometimes even up to one or two in the morning. He would pick up cigarette butts from the compound, smoke and keep on practising. I realized that his kind of sincerity in seeking perfection should be our ideal. Having so many talented artistes visiting us, teaching us, was of great value. Even listening to them, watching them, was very educative. My greatest advantage was that being the youngest I got more chance to know them, to listen to them, to understand them. Our first-class would begin at seven o'clock in the morning. We would exercise till nine o'clock and then break for one hour for breakfast and

cleaning the house. From ten to one we would again practise till lunch break. In the afternoon from four o'clock, after tea, we learnt new movements and practised compositions. We would break for tea again at six for half an hour and then continue till nine or ten at night. In a sense our routine was fixed by the kitchen bell. Shanti-da was a very hard task master. The man had a terrific way of finding the beauty in your movements and building on that. Shanti-da did derive something from his association with Uday Shankar, but he had his own style. He had learnt two styles perfectly: Manipuri and Tiperrah, and he loved folk dances. He had indeed imbibed the essence of Indian culture. This he brought out in all his works.

I learnt costume designing from Chitta-da (Chittaprasad) who was a very fine painter. In those Central Squad days he taught us set designing, how to paint on sackcloth, how to make ornaments. Later he started drinking rather heavily. But he had no money. One day he made a drink out of the *dhutura* flower. Manik, a student, who was with him, came running. 'Didi, please come, Chitta-da is very sick.' I stopped a taxi and asked, 'I want to take a sick person to the hospital. Will you go?' 'Yes,' said Sardarji, the driver. We went inside and found Chitta-da. His eyes were red. I could not pick him up. Manik and I could not even manage to make him stand. Sardarji came in and he took him to the taxi. I was so scared that I started shouting, 'Sardarji, press the accelerator.' Anyway the hospital was not far and I got him admitted. The poison was taken out and slowly he became calm. When the doctor said that he was out of

danger I gave one hundred rupees to Manik and said, 'Now you look after him. I am going. If you need anything, please telephone me.' When I came out of the hospital I found the Sardarji still waiting for me. 'Come beti, I will take you home.' I did not know what his waiting charge would be, so I said, 'Sardarji, you should not have waited for me.' 'Since you have come for someone, I thought that I should also wait for you. I want to take you home.' So he took me to my place. 'Sardarji, would you like to have a cup of tea?' 'Yes, my daughter, I would love it.' 'But I don't have milk.' 'I don't mind black tea.' So we both drank black tea and then he left. I have received so much love and humanity from so many unknown people!



Left A scene from Discovery of India; middle A lesson with Guru Amubi Singh; right Radha in Brij Leela

When we were in the Central Squad we were given five rupees per month as pocket allowance. Food was provided by the Party. With Shanti-da amongst us, every Sunday could not be a holiday. But once in a while we would get a holiday and I would run to Bombay to see three films one after another in the four-anna section. And at twelve o'clock at night I would stealthily climb a tree and enter the bungalow. Abani-da used to visit us around ten o'clock to see whether the whole group was in bed or not. So I used to arrange the bed beforehand in such a way that it looked as if someone was sleeping in it. I saw all the New Theatre films and a lot of English films. Other members would go and spend their five rupees on a good meal. I had no interest in food and I wanted to spend that five rupees differently. I liked to see and read and observe. I was brought up that way. Somebody once said, 'Oh, your expensive habits; after all you're the daughter of a rich amir.' 'Shut up, you've got five rupees and so have I. You go out and eat and the next morning you go to the toilet. But whatever I've seen will remain with me in my mind.' We used to quarrel like children.

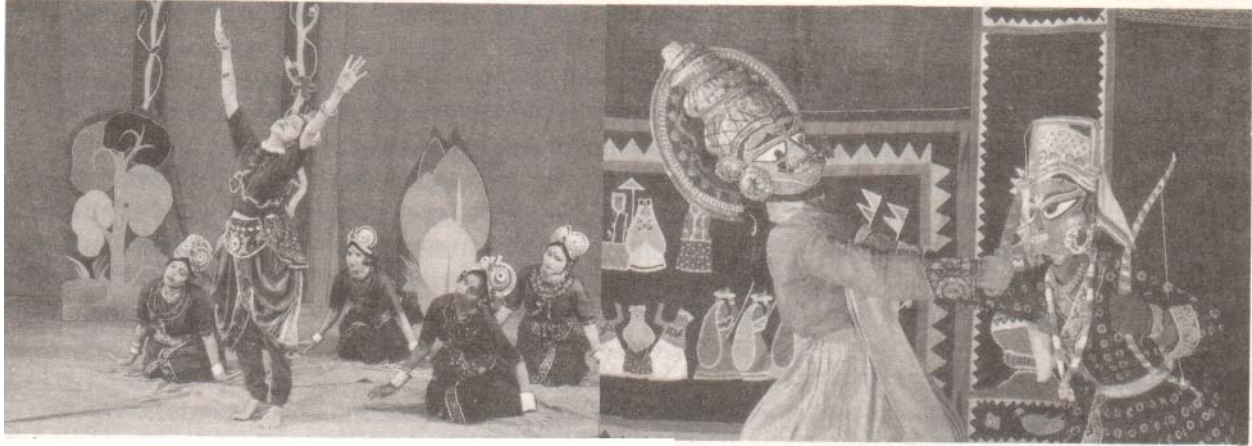
We had a manager in the Central Squad, Parvati, sister of Mohan Kumaramangalam. We always quarrelled. For example, what could I do if I didn't have enough cotton clothes? Whatever expensive clothes I had I gave away to my colleagues. And everyone was wearing them. She said, 'You are a bourgeoisie.' I protested, 'Shut up, you are equally bourgeoisie.' At a meeting of the madcaps association in the party with comrade Ghate—who was a supporter of mine—as the president and Jaswant Thakkar as the chairman, Parvati said, 'When I came I gave a list of things we needed to Comrade Ghate.' I told her, 'You have given the list, but I have

opened the boxes. That is the difference between you and me.' On the 1946 tour my sister gave me a hundred rupees to buy whatever I wanted to. During our tour, in Allahabad, I found an illustrated book on Ghalib, a book of paintings by Ismat Chughtai. I liked it and spent that one hundred rupees and purchased it. Parvati started making a lot of fuss, 'She is a bourgeoisie, she reads expensive books.' 'Shut up, reading books does not make one a bourgeoisie.' I used to hit back in the same way-manager or no manager.

In my childhood I had a Sanskrit teacher who was a very fine man. He had five sons. One was a sarangi player, one a classical singer, one played tabla, another was a poet and the last one was an esraj player, now with Bombay All India Radio. Somehow I did not like Sanskrit. But this teacher was very clever, 'I am not here to teach you but to read together with you.' He started with Kalidas. He had such a wonderful way of teaching... He would ask me to paint whatever I had understood. Soon I developed a liking for Sanskrit. My cousin was always telling me, 'Indians must learn Sanskrit if they want to know their tradition and culture So T learnt Sanskrit But T was criticized by Parvati even for this.

rupees for the Bengal famine. I requested the Party, 'I love to dance and I want to be in the Central Squad.' They said, 'Okay, you may join.' Binoy Roy, Reba Roy, Dina Pathak, Shanta Gandhi, Rekha Jain, Priti Sirkar, Ruby Dutta (younger sister of the famous revolutionary Kalpana Dutta) were in the group. Abani Dasgupta and his younger brother Shushil, who was learning the flute, were also with us. Mrs Dasgupta used to look after the kitchen. They had a small daughter named Silu. Then came Sachin Shankar and Narendra Sharma:

In contemporary dance training you have to relax your muscles and joints first and then learn to control your body. I was a gymnast, so I didn't have much trouble. I started learning very fast. As I have



Left A scene from *Panchatantra*. *Right* Gut as Kama in *Ramayana*. Photos by Ghanshyam Sharma, Courtesy Gut Bardhan.

a one-track mind, learning to dance meant learning it full time. Twelve hours' practise. It was hard work but it was a joy to learn. Our main teacher was Shanti Bardhan. Later, Sachin and Narendra Sharma also started to teach us. Dasarathlal, a tram driver from Calcutta, was a very good drummer. He knew the Uttar Pradesh *dhol* very well. From Abani-da, who was a wizard on the drums, he learnt to play other kinds of drums like the *dugis*, the *khol*, the *madal* and the Bangla *dhol*. Dasarathlal was also a good poet, a village poet. The lyrics of *Panchatantra* and *Ramayana* were written by him.

In 1946 Shanti-da had produced one solo item titled *Chaturang*. He danced the solo himself and used two girls and a boy as a chorus. He used to practise very hard for hours before any performance. We used to see him rehearsing from the balcony above. He would practise under the banyan tree till

midnight, sometimes even up to one or two in the morning. He would pick up cigarette butts from the compound, smoke and keep on practising. I realized that his kind of sincerity in seeking perfection should be our ideal. Having so many talented artistes visiting us, teaching us, was of great value. Even listening to them, watching them, was very educative. My greatest advantage was that being the youngest I got more chance to know them; to listen to them, to understand them. Our first-class would begin at seven o'clock in the morning. We would exercise till nine o'clock and then break for one hour for breakfast and cleaning the house. From ten to one we would again practise till lunch break. In the afternoon from four o'clock, after tea, we learnt new movements and practised compositions. We would break for tea again at six for half an hour and then continue till nine or ten at night. In a sense our

routine was fixed by the kitchen bell. Shanti-da was a very hard task master. The man had a terrific way of finding the beauty in your movements and building on that. Shanti-da did derive something from his association with Uday Shankar, but he had his own style. He had learnt two styles perfectly: Manipuri and Tiperrah, and he loved folk dances. He had indeed imbibed the essence of Indian culture. This he brought out in all his works.

I learnt costume designing from Chitta-da (Chittaprasad) who was a very fine painter. In those Central Squad days he taught us set designing, how to paint on sackcloth, how to make ornaments. Later he started drinking rather heavily. But he had no money. One day he made a drink out of the *dhutura* flower. Manik, a student, who was with him, came running. 'Didi, please come, Chitta-da is very sick.' I stopped a taxi and asked, 'I want to take a sick person to the hospital. Will you go?' 'Yes,' said Sardarji, the driver. We went inside and found Chitta-da. His eyes were red. I could not pick him up. Manik and I could not even manage to make him stand. Sardarji came in and he took him to the taxi. I was so scared that I started shouting, 'Sardarji, press the accelerator.' Anyway the hospital was not far and I got him

danger I gave one hundred rupees to Manik and said, 'Now you look after him. I am going. If you need anything, please telephone me.' When I came out of the hospital I found the Sardarji still waiting for me. 'Come beti, I will take you home.' I did not know what his waiting charge would be, so I said, 'Sardarji, you should not have waited for me.' 'Since you have come for someone, I thought that I should also wait for you. I want to take you home.' So he took me to my place. 'Sardarji, would you like to have a cup of tea?' 'Yes, my daughter, I would love it.' 'But I don't have milk.' 'I don't mind black tea.' So we both drank black tea and then he left. I have received so much love and humanity from so many unknown people!



Left A scene from Discovery of India; middle A lesson with Guru Amubi Singh; right Radha in Brij Leela

When we were in the Central Squad we were given five rupees per month as pocket allowance. Food was provided by the Party. With Shanti-da amongst us, every Sunday could not be a holiday. But once in a while we would get a holiday and I would run to Bombay to see three films one after another in the four-anna section. And at twelve o'clock at night I would stealthily climb a tree and enter the bungalow. Abani-da used to visit us around ten o'clock to see whether the whole group was in bed or not. So I used to arrange the bed beforehand in such a way that it looked as if someone was sleeping in it. I saw all the New Theatre films and a lot of English films. Other members would go and spend their five rupees on a good meal. I had no interest in food and I wanted to spend that five rupees differently. I liked to see and read and observe. I was brought up that way. Somebody once said, 'Oh, your expensive habits; after all you're the daughter of a rich amir.' 'Shut up, you've got five rupees and so have I. You go out and eat and the next morning you go to the toilet. But whatever I've seen will remain with me in my mind.' We used to quarrel like children.

We had a manager in the Central Squad, Parvati, sister of Mohan Kumaramangalam. We always quarrelled. For example, what could I do if I didn't have enough cotton clothes? Whatever expensive clothes I had I gave away to my colleagues. And everyone was wearing them. She said, 'You are a bourgeoisie.' I protested, 'Shut up, you are equally bourgeoisie.' At a meeting of the madcaps association in the party with comrade Ghate-who was a supporter of mine-as the president and Jaswant Thakkar as the chairman, Parvati said, 'When I came I gave a list of things we needed to Comrade Ghate.' I told her, 'You have given the list, but I have

opened the boxes. That is the difference between you and me.' On the 1946 tour my sister gave me a hundred rupees to buy whatever I wanted to. During our tour, in Allahabad, I found an illustrated book on Ghalib, a book of paintings by Ismat Chughtai. I liked it and spent that one hundred rupees and purchased it. Parvati started making a lot of fuss, 'She is a bourgeoisie, she reads expensive books.' 'Shut up, reading books does not make one a bourgeoisie.' I used to hit back in the same way-manager or no manager.

In my childhood Z had a Sanskrit teacher who was a very fine man. *He had five sons. One was a sarangi player, one a classical singer, one played tabla, another was a poet and the last one was an esraj player, now with Bombay All India Radio. Somehow I did not like Sanskrit. But this teacher was very clever, 'I am not here to teach you but to read together with you.'* He started with Kalidas. He had such a wonderful way of teaching... He would ask me to paint whatever I had understood. Soon I developed a liking for Sanskrit. My cousin was always telling me, 'Indians must learn Sanskrit if they want to know about their tradition and culture.' So I learnt Sanskrit. But I was criticized by Parvati even for this. I

replied, 'You may think that knowing your country's art and culture is a bourgeoisie practice. But Lenin and Marx have not said so.'

... and then Central Squad was disbanded ...

In 1946 we did an all-India tour and went to Lahore with *India Immortal*. There is a story behind the making of *India Immortal*. In those days the 'two nations' theory and the idea of the division of India was in the air. The Party asked Shanti-da to produce a ballet supporting the 'two nations' theory and Shantida refused, 'I don't believe in the "two nations" theory and I won't do it.' He had composed one item titled 'Gandhi Jinha Phir Mile' but never performed it. As an answer to the official line, Shanti-da, along with us, prepared the script of *India Immortal*. It was a challenge to the leadership. Shanti-da said, 'I don't believe in this kind of Party propaganda.' The leadership thought, 'These people are no longer in our control.' And with this began a division between the right and left within the Party. The left in the party felt that the Central squad was a white elephant. 'So much money is spent and they won't even work for Party propaganda. The Marathi Squad is better, there are only ten people and they sing party propaganda songs.' So, after a very successful all-India tour with *India Immortal* the Party disbanded the Central Squad. During our tour we received a lot of appreciation

everywhere we went and because of our work a large number of intellectuals and artists came closer to the Party and many became Party supporters. But the Party did not realize that. When we returned to Bombay we were told that it had been decided to disband the Central Squad. Naturally the sword first fell on Shanti Bardhan and four others who were disband party members. They had to leave. There was no debate or discussion. So Shanti-da, Ravi Shankar, Abani-da, Sachin and Narendra Sharma left together. All the members of the Central Squad felt very sad and sorry about the whole thing. We felt that this was absolutely wrong but we were too young to speak against the leadership. Nobody would listen to us. We were really sad at the way the IPTA leadership behaved... They took back everything given to us... they even took back the blankets... it was really very filthy behaviour. We were made to feel very small.

Anyway, Indian National Theatre was waiting for Shanti Bardhan because there was no one else as great as he to work for them. It was decided that they would produce *Discovery of India*. Pandit Nehru had very high regard for Shanti-da because he had seen *Voice of Bengal*, *Spirit of India* and *India Immortal* he had even brought the Cripps Mission to see it. He always liked Shanti Bardhan. When the proposal was made to produce *The Discovery of India*, which had a larger spectrum than *India Immortal*, Pandit Nehru immediately gave permission to Shanti-da to produce it for INT. In the mean time the Communist Party tried to run the group with us, but without Shanti-da they couldn't do much. After all, we had not been trained in those two years to work independently. We did one or two small items-on the Royal Indian Navy mutiny, on Kashmir-items of five to ten minutes length. The sword soon fell on me too. The reason given was that the Party wanted to make the group smaller. I was asked to go back to the students' movement. But I refused to join the students' union again because I had already spent a lot of time with the Central Squad. I wanted to do something different. So they took me to another organization called the Friends of the Soviet Union, one of the several small front organizations of the Party. Suhasini, the youngest sister of Sarojini Naidu, was in charge.

Parvati took me to Suhasini and said, 'Suhas, I have brought you a girl who knows painting. You do a lot of exhibition work. Please see if she is of any help. But I must say that she is a spoilt girl.' Suhasini-she was a great woman-said with a smile, 'I love spoilt children. Come, darling. I welcome you.' Suhasini was a woman who had never accepted defeat. She had arthritis and could not walk at all. She took to the wheel chair and did everything on her

own-running the classes, teaching English and German, running a women's centre-all from that wheel chair. A friend gave her a small loom and she started weaving. She gave me the first thing she had woven on that small loom. I still have it with me. She never accepted defeat till she died. A great woman indeed. She was really responsible for what I am today. At the Friends of the Soviet Union I started painting again and helped her prepare exhibitions.

Working for the reconstruction of war-ridden Europe The first World Youth Festival was held in Prague soon after I joined the Friends of the Soviet Union. Suhasini decided to send me there. We prepared an exhibition for the festival titled 'My Country, My People.' I was asked to collect money to meet the expenses. All together five thousand rupees were collected. She told me, 'Gul, I have only one piece of advice to give you. That is: to be friendly is very nice, but not to be familiar. Keep in mind the difference between familiarity and friendship. You are young, so you should keep this in mind.' Anyway, I took the exhibition, which had photographs, charts and other things, with me. Madan Bakaya, who died recently, was with me. When we reached London

the exhibition material and my passport were confiscated. I was travelling with a British passport. How could I enter Czechoslovakia? Krishna Menon was in the High Commission at London. I went to see him and told him about our problem. He asked somebody in the office to arrange a hotel for us. 'It will be done,' he said, 'You will get your passport back and take the exhibition to Prague.' Within seven days' time he put me on the train and we were able to take the exhibition to Prague. Krishna Menon remained a good friend till his death. I am a very lucky person in that way. I met people from different strata of society and everyone helped me, gave me their love. I went to Prague in 1947, just before the



Reconstruction work in post-war Europe.

Independence of India and I was in Prague when India was declared independent. We celebrated independence in Prague.

After the World Youth Festival I joined the Second International Brigade to work for the reconstruction of war-ridden Europe. For six months I worked all over Eastern Europe. I was working in the agricultural sector, building roads, laying railway tracks. In Bulgaria I worked at the peach farm, in

Albania and Rumania too I worked on the farms. In Yugoslavia we were laying the railway tracks in Bosnia and I was honoured by Tito. There were some students from London who attended the festival and went back. They did not join the International Brigade. Madan also joined the International Brigade. There was a person from Surat who said 'I am a Pakistani,' when the independence of India was declared. He was a hopelessly lazy person. In Yugoslavia it was raining all the time and we were living in the barracks on the shores of the Danube. It was very cold. He never came to work. I said, 'It is good that you have become a Pakistani. If you were an Indian I could have killed you.' He never worked. I charged him, 'What do you know about Pakistan? We also have comrades in the party who are muslims, very fine persons.' When someone said that all muslims should go to Pakistan, I protested, 'No. The decision should be individual.' When I joined the Communist Party in those days- now the Communist Party is very, very different-people like Namboodripad and others used to live a very simple life. People like Sundarayya had lots of land, but they did not keep it,

they gave it away. But today the Party set-up is very different. Anyway, after reconstruction work I toured other countries, I went to Italy, to the Netherlands.

My jail term in free India When I came back I had to spend a whole year in jail in free India. Morarji Desai was the chief minister of Maharashtra. A big procession was organized to protest against the firing at Sabarmati jail. I was not in the procession. I was carrying the medical bag and walking beside the procession. Near the police station-I don't know what happened-the police started firing and in a fraction of a second that huge mass of people just disappeared. I was wondering what to do. Somebody said, 'There is an injured person lying in that lane.' I went to help and got arrested. I had to spend one whole year in jail in free India. This was not my first jail term. I was often in and out of the jail for one reason or other. My father was also a great nationalist. As children we naturally got involved in all this. Anyway, I utilized that one year jail period in my own way. I was out of touch with dance. Here, I decided to go back to dance again.

We had friends in the medical service and we easily got lots of books inside and had enough material to read. Dina [Pathak] was also there. So all of us started practising.

Once a visit of the chief superintendent of Indian jails was announced. We decided to protest. Within the main jail was another jail for women. There was a bell, and whenever the door of the women's prison was opened, the bell rang. We took black umbrellas and black petticoats to make black flags out of. We practised with talcum powder to prepare ourselves to throw chilli powder in defence if we were attacked. We knew that it would be rather tough not to allow the jail superintendent to enter. So



In China, 1955. Left Mao Tse Tung and H' Chi Minh applaud a performance of Panchatantra Chinese friend.

we prepared three lines of defence-there were eleven of us. We waved black flags and shouted, 'Ninjappa go back.' He was very surprised. But he did not enter, he went back. That night after twelve o'clock suddenly there were knocks on the door. They had brought all the criminals to remove even small pebbles from the barrack courtyards! Next day we were told by the jail authority that he would visit us once again in two or three days' time. We told them that we would not protest this time. We had achieved what we wanted to. In the mean time, we had other comrades in the male section. Balraj Sahni was also in the jail. At night he went to the jailer and said, 'Put me in a separate barrack, I don't want to be with them.' We said, 'He should be thrown out. He is a renegade.' Balraj later used to say, 'This girl made me a renegade of the Party.' I used to say, 'Why not? You were a coward-I only spoke the truth.', After three or four days the jail superintendent visited us once again. We were reading in our beds. 'Good morning, young ladies,' he said. We did not answer. 'Do you want anything?' No answer. That was our protest. The whole jail was surrounded by thousands of fully armed policemen. There were no charges against us. So after six months the Party filed a *habeas corpus* petition. The first case taken up was mine and we lost it. The second case was that of some other comrades and we won it. So all the other comrades were released except me. What to do? Later a special bench was formed to consider my case and after a full year I was released. All this happened in independent India in 1949-50.

Little Ballet Troupe Since I had already decided to go back to dance I told comrade Ghate that I wanted to dance. A few days later Shanti-da came back from Kasauli sanatorium. He was staying at Boriyeli with Sachin Shankar. I went there to meet him. He was a changed person. It was a shock to see him in that state. He started laughing. After the Central Squad had disbanded Shanti-da worked for the Indian National Theatre in 1947. It was a year's assignment. He choreographed *Discovery of India* for the Asian Relations Conference. Later Shanti-da, Prabhat Ganguly, Rajendra Shankar and Ravi Shankar formed the Artists' Renaissance Group and re-produced *Discovery of India*. For this new production of *Discovery of India* all of them borrowed money from different people. The production became very popular and everybody got back their share except Shanti-da. Later, when the group broke up, Prabhat-da decided to stay with Shanti-da. They had no money-they were actually starving. Mej-da, Prabhat-da's elder brother, came to know of what had happened from the servant. He left a hundred rupee note with the servant and a message to get in touch. The cook immediately went to the market and purchased fish and made an excellent meal

and they ate good food after a long time. Prabhat-da went to see his elder brother. Mej-da asked him, 'Come and stay with me.' Prabhat-da said, 'But I am not alone.' 'Who told you to come alone? Bring Shanti with you.' So both of them went there. They used to sit by the seaside and crack jokes, 'Don't look at the sea. It will dry up.' During this time Shanti-da fell ill and went to Calcutta. He was checked up and found to have TB. He was sent to Kasauli sanatorium where a relative was in charge. He was admitted there. He had to spend three years there and five ribs were removed. In those days that was the treatment.

It almost became my routine to go every day and read biographies or autobiographies of various artistes to convince Shanti-da to do something. I told him that he had no right to say no; that he was not capable of doing nothing. 'Whichever way you can, you have to work. You can't resign.' 'What to do? There is no money.' 'We will work hard. First you must agree, the rest we will manage somehow.' Finally he agreed. I had a contact where I used to go and give Party literature, books etc. His name was Ambubhai, he was a businessman. I told him, 'Ambubhai, could you please arrange a house for us?' 'Why do you want a house?' 'We want to start a ballet troupe.' 'Is that so?' He was one of those of the 1942 generation who -used to make bombs. He had a friend in Trombay who had a little house with a big compound and a

Ram Mandir. There was one very big hall and a small room. In the out-house there were four or five rooms. We started working there. Comrade Ghate gave us two mosquito nets and one bed. I had a small heater and one utensil to make tea in. I had a dog. Shanti-da also had one. There was a cook named Gyan in the Party's common kitchen who was very fond of me. 'Even if you go to hell, I want to accompany you.' he used to say. 'We can't pay you. We don't have money.' 'Doesn't matter.' So he came to stay with us. He could not dance but he had a very good face and a good voice. He used to sing 'Heer Ranja'-Punjabi folk songs. There was another married girl in the Party. Something happened between her, her husband and a tailor who was also in the Party. Because of this incident the Party had decided to throw her out. In our madcap association we questioned it, 'How can you throw her out? She is alone. You can't throw her out. She is not educated. She is from a Kerala village. If you throw her out you will be sending her into prostitution. What else? Every one needs food. How can she manage alone?' There was a big argument. Then the Party said, 'Alright, if you feel so much for her why don't you take her in?' And we did exactly that. I took her to Shanti-da. So we now had Shanti-da-invalid Shanti;damyself, two doggies, Gyan and this girl. We started Little Ballet Troupe with 186 rupees in 1952.

When the *Ramayana*, the first production of Little Ballet Troupe, was ready, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sheela Bharatram and other executives of Indian National Theatre held a meeting at Damubhai's house with Kamaladevi as chairperson. Damubhai took Shanti-da to the meeting. Damubhai was the secretary of Indian National Theatre and a big admirer of Shanti-da. Damubhai suggested that INT sponsor the show in Bombay. The executive members said, 'For Shanti-da we will do it. But there are some Communists in the group. Shanti-da should get rid of them first.' Damubhai felt very small. They wanted to remove me, Dasarathlal and Apuda who had been in the IPTA Central Squad. Shanti-da said, 'Why should I? They are my best workers. I am not doing political work. This is a cultural institution and they do not belong to any party.' They tried to convince him, 'No, Shanti-da, you do not know how clever these people are. You will never know when they turn the tables.' Shanti-da walked out of the meeting. After two days Damubhai came to see us. 'Gul, Little Ballet Troupe will present itself and I myself and Pransukh will do whatever necessary-not as INT, but as friends of Shanti Bardhan. We will do it. Don't worry.' They did everything and the show was a great success.

In Bombay there was an institute which was affiliated to UNESCO. We applied for membership but it was rejected on the grounds that we were Communists. After the success of *Ramayana* Damubhai came and told us, 'They are ready to accept you.' I said, 'But I do not want membership now, Damubhai. I am also a disciple of Shanti Bardhan. I carry the same mentality and guts. At that time we needed help and they refused. Now that we have got some kind of recognition they want us.' When we went to Ahmedabad, even the Party tried to stop us. Some said, 'She is a renegade. She has left the Party and we should not support her.' At the same time outsiders said-she is a Communist and we should not support her. Later, just before we came to Bhopal there was a problem in the group because some members did not want to leave Gwalior. The local Communists were supporting them. There were strikes and counter-strikes. Finally I wrote a letter to B. T. Randive. Immediately they were ordered to keep away. In those days the Communists were very different. Among the old comrades I still commanded some respect.

The *Ramayana* performance created a sensation in the history of dance in India. It was a landmark in many ways. In his early days in Kumilla, now in Bangladesh, Shanti-da had seen puppet shows during Durga Puja which the local zamindars used to sponsor. These were big puppets. One scene was

performed in one area, another scene at another place. People would go around and see it. What he had seen as a child remained with him. Lying in the TB sanatorium he went back to his childhood experience and he used that experience to create live 'human puppets'. The idea of the *Ramayana* masks was taken from Jain miniature paintings as suggested by Prabha Shah and, executed by Appunni Kartha. Within a year and a half we had done 100 performances in Bombay and elsewhere. The hundredth show was held in the Century Mills. In Andheri and in Trombay no one came empty-handed-someone brought a pack of needles, another a pack of blades or some bananas. There was so much warmth. Today values have changed. At that time we had to depend solely on performance. Whenever we needed money we got it from Ambubhai and as soon as we earned some money we returned it to him.

We did shows of *Ramayana* at Ahmedabad. Dina organized them. It was a great success there. Then we were booked for three shows in Delhi to raise funds for Rishi Valley School. We were paid 1000 rupees and third class train tickets, and put up at Birla Dharamshala. We


received a note from Padmaja Naidu, 'Panditji is very eager to meet you and see your programme. But he can't come to the scheduled programme. I am sending the car tomorrow. Please come and see which venue will be suitable for a show for him.' In the evening another car came with a message. 'No, Panditji wants the show to be held at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Please come and see the venue.' So we went to Rashtrapati Bhavan and performed. After the show Nehru came on the stage and asked president Radhakrishnan to come up, greeted all of us. They were very happy.

Ambubhai, who helped us form LBT, was a man of insight. When we started LBT he said, 'I will bear all expenses till you finish your first production.' In our accounts he showed the money given as a loan, but in their own accounts this was not even recorded. I asked him, 'Ambubhai, why are you doing this?' 'Nothing will happen now. But once LBT gets some money there will be a lot of fighting. Then this account will be very useful. I have done this to protect you.' He never went abroad with the group. 'Take Motabhai. It will be good for the group.' Motabhai was his elder brother, who initially objected to Ambubhai's financial participation in LBT's work. Later Motabhai became a friend and he stood by us till the end. Once there was a quarrel among the artistes when we decided to leave Bombay. For us Bombay was becoming more and more commercial and we found it difficult to sustain a full-time group. We were next to the film studios and the artistes were leaving one after another in the hope of better prospects in the film industry. We thought that it was high time to leave Bombay. Some members didn't want to leave. They started accusing Prabhat-da. By that time Ambubhai was dead but Motabhai was there to help us. He came to the meeting and said, 'As long as all of you lived together in peace I loved to come. Now that you have started quarrelling I also want to leave. Please bring the account book. Pay me back whatever I have loaned, and I will leave.' Our loan amount was more than what we had earned. That day I realized why Ambubhai had shown it as a loan in our book. Great people. Some members said that they would stay in Bombay and I should also stay with them. Motabhai said, 'She is an independent woman. She will stay if she wants to.' 'No, she should run the group.' 'You can't demand it. Either you listen to her or you do it on your own. Take whatever LBT has and run it.' No one had the guts to take over.

In 1953, when we were performing in Delhi, a zamindar from Patna invited us to perform for a week and agreed to pay eight hundred rupees per show. When we reached

Patna there was hardly any audience. So I went out and met some comrades and asked them, 'What is the matter? Why is there no audience?' They said, 'You have come to perform for a wrong person and you do not know where you will land. It is better for you people to leave.' Next day we told the landlord, 'You are losing money. You have to look after so many people, you have to feed them and yet you are not getting a good audience. We do not insist on payment for all eight shows. Give us whatever is due and we will go back.' He said, 'No, no.' Somehow we convinced him and he agreed to make the payment. We did not even have money to buy tickets. So I prepared the group and told them, 'You leave. I will take the money and meet you at Mughalserai station. You wait for me there.' In this way all the baggage and other materials were sent off. Dasarathlal, our drummer from Bihar-he was a six footer-said, 'I will stay with you. I can't leave you with this zamindar.' We waited and waited. Finally at midnight he made the payment and we rushed to the station, met the group at Mughalserai and took the train. Under those circumstances we did not know when we would reach Bombay. Some members of the troupe formed a group within the group and started harassing us a lot in Patna. After reaching Bombay I had to tell Shanti-da about what had happened at Patna. Shanti-da called Gyan, 'Tomorrow morning please take this royal family to the station and Appu please take this girl back to Kerala.' They said, 'We want a meeting.' 'Meeting is not for you. Meeting is for those who stay. You may go.' To save the group, in twenty-four hours he had thrown out six people. 'I will train new people.' He was a thorough artiste and demanded full loyalty from his





artistes. If you are a dancer or a theatre person you don't have a personal life. You belong to the stage. The stage is your personal life, a jealous wife who does not tolerate anyone else.

'A glorious death for an artist'

When I fell in love with Shanti Bardhan he was already a sick person. But I admired him, adored him and respected him. Every morning we had a dialogue for a few minutes. We discussed what to do, how and when. When we decided to marry he was very sick and after three months he died. My family objected. 'How can you marry a TB patient?' 'Would you ask me to get a divorce if his TB was discovered after my marriage?' 'No.' 'So why don't you accept this?' No one used to come except my brother's children who sometimes sneaked in. Only Maltiben, Prabhaben and Choton used to visit us. We had applied for registration but it could not take place. But I decided that I would be known as his wife. When I loved him I never thought in terms of a physical relationship. He was already beyond that. But his work, his sincerity, his integrity, his dedication to dance, inspired me tremendously and gave me strength and courage. I don't expect more than this from a partnership between a man and a woman. At the death bed of Shanti-da I promised to him that I would work for him and I am still working. Till I die I will work. Till his last moment the man worked for dance and it was a glorious death for an artiste.



Carrying On

• After Shanti-da's death we decided to close down the troupe. But we needed some money to send Gut Bardhan at home people home. Many of them came from far away. I received a letter from Indira Gandhi, 'Father wants to see you. Please come.' So I went to see Nehru. Nehru asked me, 'What do you want to do now?' 'I want to raise some money to send everybody home. What else can I do?' 'Why do you' say so? Is this what Shanti-da has taught you? You should start working together immediately.' *Panchatantra* was half done-all characterization, costume design, dialogue everything was complete and ready. Half of the music was also ready. I said, 'I don't have the courage to work on what Shanti-da had started.' 'Ah, you have to have courage. You will do it together. If you can finish it there will be performances, if you can't you will perform the unfinished work. Please go and tell everybody and work together.' 'Okay. I'll give it a try.' 'Do you need money?' 'Yes, I do, we need money to make the costumes.' 'How much?' 'Five thousand.' 'All right. Take it.' Dance is not a business to me. I have one plus point, one credit: I never take a single paisa more than I need. So far nobody has challenged me. Anyway, I got that five thousand from Pandit Nehru and we finished *Panchatantra*. Panditji came to see it. 'Why, this is very well done. Why did you tell me that it could not be done? Shanti has sacrificed his life for the cause of ballet and you have to move forward.'

In 1957 we went to the Moscow Youth Festival. We received a telegram to participate in the festival. I sent back a telegram saying that we would love to participate, but if a tour was not offered after the festival we couldn't come. Suddenly we received another telegram confirming twenty-five shows

after the festival. We did not have passports. So I went to Delhi. Krishna Menon was the defence minister. I met him and told him about our problem. 'It is not a problem. You will get your passports and visas.' We accepted the proposal. We also needed overcoats for all of us.

Earlier, when we went to Kashmir we made overcoats from gunny bags. We did not have any money then. But we really made

very beautiful overcoats from gunny bags, with embroidery. We received a message from Panditji, 'See me before you go.' Apuda, myself and one or two other members of the group came to Delhi. A car was waiting at the airport to receive us, a hotel was booked and there was a note saying, 'Tomorrow you are having breakfast with Panditji. A car will come to pick you up.' Next day we went to see Pandit Nehru. He asked, 'Are you ready to leave?' 'Yes, we are.' 'What about the costumes and other things?' 'We have got everything.' Then he asked, 'What about your warm clothes? Have you got everything you need?' He discussed everything in detail and then he said, 'Even then, if you have any problem you should go to the Indian Embassy and inform them. They will take care of everything.' We did not know that he had already instructed the Embassy in Moscow. When we reached Moscow the embassy people came to receive us. After the festival was over I sent Homi to the office to find out where the costume boxes had to be shifted for the forthcoming tour. He rang me saying that they wanted us to return to India the next morning. 'What has happened to those twenty-five performances?' They did not know anything. I went to see them and I had nothing else except the telegram. Then I had to inform the Embassy and at the end of the day we were given one week's holiday in Moscow, the group was shifted to Ukrania hotel, there were interpreters, cars and a bus and of course we got our twenty-five shows. In the meantime a message came from Germany to go there and perform. So we went to Germany and performed there.

'You don't see that spark in the eyes...'

Now the question is, will dance theatre be able to survive amid rising commercialism, with so many television channels providing popular entertainment without a break? Yes, it is a challenge and let's see who wins ultimately. I think we will win. These are temporary temptations. They do not last long. You have to note how fast their own forms are changing every day. They don't make artistes feel dedicated to the art or want to be perfectionists. It is all glamour, like a bubble. I am sure thousands of artistes and audience want theatre and dance to live, and it will live. Yes, there are so many television channels now, but you can't

watch, such horrible programmes are being shown. You don't see anything good. Big groups, maybe of two hundred people, dancing in films-but there are only two movements, the focus is always on the hips and breasts. There is nothing else. In the earlier period, even in films, they did have dance numbers, but they were not so vulgar. They may not have been good, but they were not vulgar.

Both the Central Squad and later Shanti-da were working with young people who were not really trained dancers as such. They were committed, though they were newcomers to this field. As dancers they were not perfect, they did not have professional training. To work with a group of such people and to train them to create something very, very artistic was quite a task in itself. Individually we did have certain talents-potential rather than talents, I would say-which flowered once given a proper chance. We were not working for money, we were working for an ideal. The consciousness was there and the combination of potentiality and training helped it to flower in no time. I wish that the Party had not had that silly idea of some sort of narrow Marxism and the Central Squad of IPTA had not been disbanded at that time; the cultural scene in India could have been very different today. I say this because I have seen how IPTA became an all-India movement. There was so much dedication and love for the country everywhere and the Central Squad was only a focal point for that. There were so many talented people from villages and cities and small towns extending their help to us. During the all-India tour everywhere people would come to meet us at the stations, bring food-we never stayed in hotels. Members were staying with the local people and they lived like one family. The whole country was with us. What a tremendous movement it was! Till now I have retained that enthusiasm. Though we are doing the same thing even now in our own way-taking untrained people and training them-you don't see that spark in their eyes. Life has changed. We never thought of money in those days. We were happy with the five rupees we got. The younger generation that is coming up now doesn't have the urge to do something meaningful for the country. The general struggle is always there. We are all human beings and at times you are very petty, at times you are very generous. The good and bad in us keep on fighting within ourselves. It also goes on in the larger world around us.

Our lives are about to come to an end. Whatever days are left we will manage somehow. The future generation will have to take care of these things. Prabhat-da has already passed eighty. I am sixty-seven. But I still dance, and I love to dance. Fortunately I

am a very healthy person. I don't fall sick. I have plenty of energy and I can work continuously for fifteen days and nights. All I need is one hour's sleep after lunch. I know that the day I am not allowed to dance I will die. It is dance that keeps me alive.

Epistemes of Empire: Axiomatics of Imperialism and the Discourse of
Interculturalism

Joshua Lincoln Oppenheimer

In the fourth issue of this journal, an interview with American director and theorist Richard Schechner ('One of the Few Handcrafts Left ... ') and Sumitra Mukerji's 'Encounters with Cultures: Contemporary Indian Theatre and Interculturalism' opened up a discussion of 'interculturalism' along worrisome parameters. Both articles, and indeed the whole episteme within which Schechner and Mukerji write, seem structured through unmarked allegiances so troublingly *familiar*, which resemble and also reassemble *other* discourses with which neither writer claims any common agenda whatsoever. I am not so worried by the specific analyses of plays Mukerji endeavours, or by the particulars of Schechner's contrast between multiculturalism and interculturalism. I am more concerned with the founding assumptions and parameters within which their writings emerge, and the ideological repercussions and histories of those assumptions. While writing an earlier draft of this essay, I struggled with the question of how to articulate my positions (which are all about seeking hidden complicities between discourse and imperialism) to readers -presumably other cultural and political practitioners-without producing the illusion of conceptual mastery which the magisterial discourse of Cultural Studies so easily engenders. Such a position would establish my site as one of false neutrality, and would also strike a posture of command that is haunted by spectres of the 'foreign researcher', the ethnographer working for colonial administrators who codify 'traditional Hindu law', and others whose neutrality is but a tactical dissimulation in the project of economic and political empire. But emerging from the double-bind of these reservations, I want somehow to use the critical insight I have from postcolonial cultural studies to unpack my great discomfort with the particular axiomatic or episteme operating in Schechner's and Mukerji's writing. It is an axiomatic which constructs an ontology of

discrete cultures defined according to an opposition between inside and outside, between authentic and inauthentic representations and practices. And it is an axiomatic which pretends to deconstruct its essentialism with appeals to an 'interculturalism' whose definition in fact reinforces the axiomatic itself. (Although quite different from that axiomatic which defines an authentic culture of the oppressed, both discourses appeal to an oppositionality that betray their emergence from a common discursive economy: both appeal to essential discourses wherein identities-be they of mass, class solidarity or ethnic and religious identity-manage to acquire representational adequacy in representing members of their constituencies.)

Toward the beginning of Mukerji's essay, she argues that we must challenge the assumption that "'interculturalism" is necessarily a western-centred concept' (4), but acknowledges that 'the interculturalism that has recently been promoted by American practitioners of 'avant-garde' theatre, especially, has been rightly criticized by Rustom Bharucha as a dangerous 'cultural tourism' which treats culture as a product to be bought and sold. . .' (4).

Defining culture as 'history and ideology and the various traditions and collective practices that give different societies their sense of identity' (4) allows her to imagine a dialogical and less colonial exchange *between* different cultures (presumably on equal footing) under the name 'interculturalism'. Schechner makes this explicit: 'Interculturalism is therefore the relation *inter, between, among*, cultures, especially where it doesn't quite fit. . .' (19).

Mukerji's and Schechner's defenses of interculturalism seem to operate within, take for granted, and thus naturalize an episteme which informs the parameters of anthropology, ethnography, and Orientalism. The figure of a space between cultures (an interculturalism)

discrete, as having an inside and an outside. The boundaries between cultures drawn within this episteme are fixed according to discourses and practices which distinguish between the authentic and the unauthentic.

I'll mark the complicities between the discourse Schechner elaborates in his interview and an epistemic and mystifying focus on criteria of authenticity with its inside/outside epistemology. I also want to draw attention to the congruence between his implicit discourse of the authentic and an Orientalist appropriation of Indian cultures. The unproblematized 'cultural tourism' shaping Schechner's opening discussions in 'One of the Few Handcrafts

Left.. 'is not surprising given his faith in a neutral space between cultures defined by authenticity. Schechner says, 'because there are nine *rasas*, and some of them, like disgust or fear, are not pleasant emotions, but the idea here is that disgust and fear might be looked at as pepper or a hot spice while *sringara* might be sugar or sweet, so that even though they would be unpleasant at a certain level, in a proper mix they give you a *masala* feeling. And I'm trying to develop a whole aesthetic theory which builds on that and is in contrast to the western aesthetic Aristotelian theory which is based on the eye' (13). And '(a)lso, I'm working -with *rasa* as training [with the East Coast Artistes, a company Schechner works with]. I'm developing an exercise called the *rasa* boxes, where on a large floor the nine *rasas* are written out first in Sanskrit ... ' (13). I am not concerned with the *correctness* of Schechner's interpretation of *rasa*. What I worry about is the way 1) he counterposes his deployment of it with the 'western theory', as if his theory is *not western*, and then 2) describes the 'non-westemness' of his theory as part of an authentic, classical Indian tradition. Just as my position right now, typing this article on my laptop, is implicated in the privilege imperialist sectors have reaped through colonial exploitation, so too would I argue that Schechner's discursive and institutional sites which enable his appropriation of *rasa* theory- and this especially includes the granting mechanisms which fund his trips to India-cannot be separated from the appropriation itself. These institutions, in turn, have a history implicated in the modernity of the west and, because the following is inseparable from that modernity, its contacts with South Asia through colonialism, conquest, and economic imperialism. Like this article, his theory, it seems to me, is fundamentally borne of these histories, dynamics, and -changes proper to *both* western

The problem is that his attempts to position *his* practice within the field of a traditional and authentic *Natyasastra* aesthetic, placed in opposition to the 'western aesthetic ... theory which is based on the eye', once again places the violence of the colonial encounter under erasure by failing to mark the operation of its institutions. In short, the problem is that if interculturalism be viewed as 'progressive exchange' from one culture to another, the material site of colonial violence itself is erased: the forums, institutions, funding apparatuses, and discourses that enable the exchange in the first place, emerging in the west as products of a post-scarcity modernity constituted through the sustained underdevelopment of 'the rest' by 'the west' through imperialism.

Now the delineation of borders based on distinctions between 'authentic' and 'unauthentic' members is haunted by the possibility of violent exclusion, ethnic cleansing (genocide), cultural cleansing (fundamentalism and orthodoxy), and communalism. Mukerji seems vaguely aware of these connections:

our ... experience of Hindu nationalism in India in recent years should tell us how much a process of fundamentalist 'return to traditionalism' is implicated in the maintenance of a strict 'national identity'. This is a danger inherent in over-emphasizing differences *between* cultures on the basis of *national* 'markers'. However, an interculturalism that is sensitive to the historical specificity of, and differences *between*, cultures and *yet works towards the exchange of knowledge, traditions, performances, philosophies and so on-without the exploitation of 'underprivileged' peoples*-may be a way of overcoming this problem. (4)¹

The question is not whether Mukerji agrees with a given episteme (which implies conscious decision-making), but whether or not her discourse -and thus to some extent her institutional positions-participates in the epistemic field by taking its parameters as given and as natural, thereby contributing to the sheaf of discourses and extradiscursive practices which thus naturalize the epistemic axiomatic. The answer seems to be yes, with the careful proviso that Mukerji notes that within any given nation there may be more than one such culture, and that the national culture is a syndication of hegemonic discursive practices. Consider some of Mukerji's statements: '[Girish Kamad's] recent play, *Naga-Mandala (1988/9)* is probably the only one which shows no traces of western cultural influences . . .' (7); 'Hence we see

that Karnad's early plays ... show strong western influences and often blatant similarities' (7); 'On the other hand, Sircar succeeds in bringing *their real culture* to ordinary middle, lower-middle class and poor people...' (10. My emphasis).

Bearing in mind that the episteme shaping Mukerji's and Schechner's writings is shared by ethnography, I want to look at what processes and discourses that episteme makes possible by briefly considering some of the critiques of ethnography forwarded by Tejaswini Niranjana, Partha Chatterjee, and Rustom Bharucha.

A colonial government can plausibly appeal to exclusions of the 'unauthentic' to foster divisiveness among colonized subjects in order to facilitate policies of divide-and-rule only once one can plausibly make the anthropological claim that people are naturally organized into discrete groups whose contours can be determined by separating authentic from unauthentic practices and, from there, members. And the imperial state can only implement third-party rule (to run empire cheaply whilst claiming a pre-colonial mandate for its despots and their policies) once it is generally understood that cultures are classifiable on the basis of correlated differences in language, custom, and social organization. Moreover, if one thoroughly administers a society *as if* the citizens always belonged to discrete cultures, castes, or tribes, one retroactively produces the illusion that those tribes were always there, and that policy justly and harmoniously reflects the natural division of society. Thus we cannot say that policy preceded the episteme of cultural difference or vice versa. Both undoubtedly emerge through a matrix of mutually legitimizing practices. (It is too much to say that empire alone is responsible for this episteme, and I am not interested in speculating on origins. It is interesting to note, however, that culture came to denote the 'history and ideology and various traditions and practices.. .'at the height of the imperialist project.)

These links between ethnography and the history of empire are taken up directly by Niranjana in *Siting Translation*. She describes how the agent empowered to distinguish between 'authentic' and 'unauthentic' practices and discourses, and thus to fix the boundaries between cultures generally, has very often been the foreign researcher or ethnographer. Niranjana references the defence of the discipline by its 'founder', Bronislaw Malinowski, on the grounds that it provided an invaluable tool for the imperialist project:

In both periods [during the 1820s as the College of Fort William was dissolved and after the 1857 freedom movement], the translation of Indian culture was used to further the British technique of 'indirect rule'.

Anthropology, too, was of immediate relevance in the years when the doctrine of 'indirect rule' was explicitly formulated, 'a strategy which allowed Britain to control her colonies *cheaply*, by co-opting precolonial ruling classes into the new colonial hierarchy.' This doctrine was set out in *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922), whose author, Lord Lugard, became the first Chairman of the executive council of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures in London. The repressive measures advocated

by Lugard were fully endorsed by Malinowski, who 'believed that an important task of anthropology was to provide scientific recipes for facilitating colonial control' (74-5).

Niranjana reminds us that '(i)t has been suggested that since colonial governments (and later international foundations funded by multinational corporations) were the main sponsors of anthropological research, ethnographers tended to maintain a discreet silence as to the havoc wreaked by colonialism on their subjects' (77).

Ethnography's regime of scrutiny, interpretation, and inscription is a part of a disciplinary episteme of the exercise of power coextensive with the production of knowledge through surveillance and interpretation. But when the knowledges thus produced are deployed by a colonial state apparatus (or by a neocolonial corporate broadcast media) in determining policy, forging mass cultural representations, mobilizing political support, and instituting regimes of segregation, subjects inevitably begin to identify with-which always involves the production and investment of desire-precisely the representations designed and designated in a regime of subjugation.

Chatterjee comments on the role of ethnography in 'institut(ing) a "traditionalization" of Indian society by its rigid codification of "custom" and "tradition" . . . freezing the categories of social classification such as caste, and ... privileging of "scriptural" interpretations of social law at the expense of the fluidity of local community practices (resulting in) the creation by colonial rule of a social order that.. . was "nearer to the ideal type of Asiatic Despotism than anything South Asia had ever seen before"' (Chatterjee 31-2). And this (ethnographically) produced Asiatic Despotism served above all else the British colonial policy of third-party rule by the

'traditional' despot. Chatterjee argues that by labelling as timeless traditions and caste divisions, respectively, the specific and historically contingent practices and alliances that the colonists, missionaries, and anthropologists first encountered in South Asia, Europeans constructed an *ossified* and *permanently factioned* (communally and caste divided) subcontinent. These Europeans, as mediating agents empowered to interpret, codify, and thus constitute cultures, forged the conditions necessary for both third-party rule (the Raj) and divide-and-rule. I need not detail what conclusions this historiography might lead to in trying to make sense of the bloodshed of India's partition.

Much more subtle is Rustom Bharucha's statement that 'Along with this construction of the [western] Other, we are also seeing simultaneously and within the boundaries of our nation, an unprecedented unleashing of communal hatred, which has resulted in a perverse denunciation of entire communities as "Others" -a denunciation that has been reinforced through the celebration of monolithic [constructions] .. . of "Indian/ Hindu" culture' ('Somebody's Other', 108).

But central to the work of Bharucha, Niranjana, and Chatterjee seems to be the question of identifications with cultures constituted to facilitate repression and silencing. It does *not*, in the last analysis, matter whether or not caste differences existed as such before colonialism. (And therefore I should not be understood as writing from a nostalgia for a precolonial 'fluidity'.) I suspect that colonialism played a formative role in producing the *episteme of authenticity* with which we approach cultural difference in India today, but if that hypothesis is groundless, that should nevertheless not disqualify the political argument that we must be very wary of invoking this episteme uncritically (whether or not it finds its roots in colonialism) whether we be organizing communities or thinking about our own collective and personal identities. What all three writers indicate forcefully is the historical specificity- and thus political resonance of the axiomatic which Schechner's interview and Mukerji's article take for granted.

digression because Mukerji and Schechner suggest that interculturalism is a productive exchange of knowledge and resources so long as both parties avoid 'cultural tourism'. But the example of 'interculturalism' I want to consider is neither 'cultural tourism' nor 'progressive exchange', as an example of a process wherein contact *generates* the identities and lifestyles in contact, encounters which are not assimilable to models of 'cultural tourism', and yet which remain central technologies of colonial power. Precisely because such *generative* encounter undermines any conception of the 'authentic'-are the practices produced in such an encounter 'unauthentic'?-it is inassimilable to Mukerji's and Schechner's model of interculturalism. As such, this example begins a necessary deconstruction of the episteme of discrete cultures defined according to authenticity. Although lengthy, the hypothesis i want to outline here seems important enough to warrant the extensive discussion.

Eloquently setting the framework for the phenomena I would like to address, Rustom Bharucha writes:

One such construction of the Other continues to be the 'developed world' (which has curiously survived the death of 'development') as it is being propagated by the forces of globalization in the country ... through the invasion of the cable networks which have infiltrated to all parts of the country in the last few years.

'Invasion', I stress, not 'importation' or 'innovation' or 'influence': the phenomenon has been too swiftly engineered, monitored, and legislated to be described in more euphemistic terms. Now, in villages which continue to be denied the basic necessities of life, it is possible to see Star TV, MTV, Zee TV, cable TV, blue movies, and Doordarshan. The implications of this cultural invasion are enormous not merely because of the grotesque disparity between the consumerist representation of 'development' on television (what *is desirable*) as opposed to the abject economic conditions of its viewers (which determine what *is available*) ('Somebody's Other', 108. Emphases in original).

Satellites and psychic neocolonization ...

This is where I will undertake an all-too-extensive digression, one which will take us even further from the theatre, and yet not further at all, looping back to theatres of the psyche, the private theatre of the televisual, the commodity, consumption, and the staging of middle-class desires by western multinational media giants ... I take this risky

Now, American (big-business) 'cyberjournals' such as *Vibe* and *Wired* and *Mondo 2000* would celebrate this troubling invasion of Indian cities and villages by *Baywatch* as generating a 'hybrid' or 'intercultural' global village at once tolerant, democratic, and accessible.

The operation of such broadcasts is often termed 'westernization', but what I want to do here is to unpack how such westernization is effected and to what ends. All situational comedies, romances, soap operas, family dramas, and even cartoons to be found on American television depict nuclear families founded through unarranged marriages ideally based on love. They *never* show the extended families common in India, founded as they are through many pre-arranged marriages motivated by strategies based on honour, complex filiations, and allegiances. Moreover, the abundance of consumer goods prostituted by the advertisements and filling the homes of the families shown on the metropolitan television produces, I hypothesize, an economy of desire for both the goods and the lifestyles thus represented. The impact of such broadcasts is symptomatically noted in a facile *London*

Independent article describing the new phenomenon of old-age homes for middle-class Indians unsupported by their children: 'Others claim [the lack of support for the middle-class elderly] is the fault of satellite television, which with its western soaps and sit-coms, portrays the nuclear family of parents and kids, rather than the extended Indian family, as the ideal.'

Clearly, where representations engage a dialectical production of need and subsequent market demand for specific goods and services, representation itself forms an integral part of that material economy. But what of the desire produced for a lifestyle specific to metropolitan bourgeoisies?

Sweeping changes in family structure (such as those that go somewhat haphazardly by the name of 'westernization') imply sweeping changes in economics.² Axiomatic as 'natural man (sic)' in the philosophies of Adam Smith, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes is an abstract, entrepreneurial, and 'rationally' self-interested individual, separate from the division of labour and, given access to institutions of training, able to move from field to field as availability of profit dictates. However, 'natural man' hardly seems so natural in a society with even a partially intact caste system, wherein the division of labour, families, affiliation and lineage-and thus ethnicity-are all coextensive, and where the individual therefore has little entrepreneurial choice, since he (sic) takes the profession of his father as a matter of honour.

In zones where the division of labour is determined even partially by caste and not by the entrepreneurial choice of economic liberalism's 'rational actor' (influenced by the demand for labour in a given field), family cannot be inscribed as an autonomous space of intimacy vis-a-vis the social. In such zones, family opens out onto the division of labour; the two are coextensive; there can be no private, abstract family since family reproduces not abstract labour per se, but the division thereof that constitutes the social status quo. In a zone (geographic or demographic) where the division of labour is determined by caste filiation, family-as a social formation-must operate quite differently than in capitalist zones. Capital requires this difference, for if the division of labour were determined by lineage, available labour in a given field would not change with demand.³ The introduction of lifestyles where marital choice is determined by 'true love' and not parental arrangement can only make trouble for casteism. After all, the pre-arrangement of marriages by parents is a means of ensuring endogamy within community or caste.

Multinational corporations *as agents* have strong interests in undoing the caste system in those zones where it remains active in the determination of the division of labour. Until there is an abstract, alienated, objectified 'labour' particularly at the bureaucratic, middle-income, or managerial levels required to operate the multinational's high-tech factory-willing to work wherever demand is highest, multinational capital cannot fully exploit India's potential as a source of cheap labour. This exploitation is systemic in a neocolonial project of proletarianizing zones along roughly ⁴ international lines, extracting from those zones under-priced labour, materials, and goods to fuel the lucrative bourgeois service economies on the other side of the international division of labour.

The 'intercultural' encounter that is satellite television cannot therefore be seen outside of a neocolonial interaction between multinational corporations and an urban middle class of potential employees: This middle class is precisely the sector poised to become under-paid managers and technicians of firms whose lucrative profits go abroad. (The Bangalore software industry is only the most prominent example.) The desire to live the lives of those on *Bayzwatch* -a desire produced by the network airing *Bayzwatch* and supported by those companies whose advertisements are seen thanks to viewers' enthusiasm for *Baywatch*-is a desire to occupy a site that facilitates neocolonial exploitation, a desire representationally produced by a culture industry working in the service of (because they are not necessarily different from) the neocolonizing agents. The discursive, institutional, and personal site that is the family specific to capitalism is one whose *offspring* is an abstract individual free from specific commitments to any one profession, and thus enabled to negotiate the job market as a rational,

entrepreneurial agent. It is, of course, this subject-as-entrepreneur that makes possible the mystifying capitalist ideology that hides class oppression by figuring upward mobility as available to anybody resourceful enough to strive for it. As a social formation that reproduces the conditions of production (an abstract labour available upon demand and not bound up in the historical profession of a given lineage), the western family-in-capitalism fits Louis Althusser's definition of 'ideology'. And insofar as ideology, Althusser argues, produces subjects as effects of discursive and institutional interpellations and placements, one can see the family-in-capitalism (or, family as *subject* of capitalism) as ideology in the strongest sense of the word:

after all, family plays a central role in defining who one interacts with, one's field of discursive and active options.

In the case of the bourgeois family brought together by 'the freedom of individuals to choose their partners regardless of race, class, creed . . . ', *it defines a whole system whereby the anger and disappointment is produced through the systemic contradictions inherent in a neocolonial system that proletarianizes by televisually fostering unrealizable dreams of wealth which encourage the expenditure of all savings on expensive, imported consumer goods. The anger thus produced can be contained and displaced through a disciplinary regime of psychoanalytic surveillance, interpretation, and redemption.* We might see the western family-in-capitalism as the 'oedipal family':⁵ it is to this family that one can and does apply Freudian psychoanalytic techniques interpreting the subject's crises as symptoms of entirely extra-economic and extra-political dynamics comprising the intimate ('oedipal') interactions between mother, father and child. Freudian theory interprets crises in extra-political terms precisely because it attributes them to dynamics within a family now *private* and separate from the social, its division of labour, and fields of filiation. And we might, following Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, strategically label the oedipal family *a technology of colonial power* that defuses resistance by displacing the alienation generated by neocolonization itself. The neocolonized subject suffers the creation of desire for lifestyles which, once adopted, enable an exploitation which renders the desire unfulfilable. But because the subject has adopted the lifestyle of the private, nuclear family-in-capitalism, she may be subject to the discourses of western psychoanalytic interpretation that would (*mis*)*interpret* her crisis as the product of dysfunctional, allegedly apolitical relations within a *privatized* and intimate family triangle. Thus is

foreclosed the possibility of understanding her crisis as symptomatic of neocolonial exploitation or, for that matter, any other social condition.

To be sure, 'oedipalization' as neocolonial project is specific and contested. Deleuze and Guattari write that 'in the peripheral zones of capitalism ... the colonizer's efforts at oedipalizing indigenous populations -African Oedipus -find themselves contradicted by the breakup of the family along the lines of social exploitation and oppression' (*Anti-Oedipus*, 269).

However, in the postcolonial nations, oppression based on what Partha Chatterjee has called 'a rule of colonial [racial] difference' is no longer legally sanctioned, and despite problems

persisting among the vast sectors of post colonial society that remain desperately poor and exploited, an emerging postcolonial middle and upper class is able to comfortably enjoy a very fragmented process of oedipalization through the 'intercultural encounter' of satellite television as well as national broadcast media operating under the cover of cultural indigenism. (In India, I am thinking of those orgies of expensive consumer goods, palatial real estate, food, and music gently advocating marriage based on love such as Hindi blockbusters like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun ... ?*) Still, the difficulties that technologies of oedipalization face certainly contribute to the crisis in Freudian psychoanalysis' claims to universality. These difficulties include the resistance to the invasions of western media by progressive, radical and fundamentalist organizations alike, the coexistence of casteism and capitalism alongside each other, and the frequent collaboration of non-capitalist casteism *within* a proletarianized zone in the service of an international capital operating from outside that zone. One sees the consummate example of this collaboration in the production of grossly under-priced raw materials for multinational corporations through a feudal . agricultural system where the difference between *jotedar* and bonded agricultural labourer is originally one of caste, and where caste is still appealed to by *both* the *jotedars* and the bond slaves to legitimize the former's position of mastery and to recuperate the latter's honour and respect.

Oedipalization as the import of the western family is a technology of the sustained and uneven development by which capitalism expands. It is a technology used in India by multinational corporations (such as James Rupert Murdoch's media conglomerate which controls Star TV and Channel V)) for multinational corporate interests. And with this import comes much of the cultural change simplistically described as 'westernization'.

The potential for a vast supply of cheap and unregulated labour, as well as an enormous market for the expensive goods and services of multinationals whose profits do not end up in India, is actualized through the cultural invasions which, as technologies of oedipalization and, in other sectors, the creation of demand for multinationals' products people cannot really afford (consumerism), ensures that vast sectors of India remain firmly on the proletarian side of a (roughly international) division of labour even in the absence of the colonial state's continuous administration of colour bars and other measures to ensure the subordination of the colonized. Neocolonization is thus made possible after colonization has officially been replaced by self-determination.

It is not enough to say that media representations of family as subject of capitalism necessarily lead to widespread change in middle class India. Ideally, I would attempt a solid and rigorous exploration of the *operation* of the representations in broadcast media, taking into account variations with target audience, class, channel, venue, and genre. I cannot attempt this vast and important project here, but I do want to suggest that the examples listed above use tropes of commodity fetishism and a certain misogynist and heteronormative representational eroticism to produce desire not only for the products shown, but also for the nuclear-familial lifestyles.

I need not say that this analysis is in no way a defense of casteism. It only questions the stakes in one specific process by which caste is being dismantled in some specifically upper-middleclass sectors. Other far less pernicious attacks on caste come from innumerable grassroots organizations (including two which I worked with while in India called Jana Sanskriti and Sanlaap) which attack casteism directly or which build grassroots movements whose solidarity extends across caste or ignores caste entirely. But in addition to the importance of the hypothesis itself, I offer this analysis in order to illustrate the highly subtle and complex operations of colonialism in altering and producing cultures and societies and then, in a double movement, erasing the violence of these *alterations* with the euphemistic 'interculturalism' which implies nonexistent economic and political symmetries, enabling what Mukerji called a progressive exchange of knowledge and practices. I specifically chose this example because its mechanism is so often described as an example of 'intercultural hybridity', because of the obvious and vast material repercussions of this encounter in society and culture, because it is happening today in such enormous volume, and because it reveals that , colonialism is complex enough to generate 'bad' interculturalisms other than the commodification and subsequent cultural tourism identified by Mukerji and Schechner.^b

Strategic reappropriations ...

What then are we to do with the troubled yet unavoidable lexicon left us by an (imperial) axiomatic of 'authenticity', 'cultural difference', 'interculturalism', and 'cultural exchange'? Rather than attempt the impossible task of purging our writing and thinking of these terms, it seems more productive to redeploy them, displace them, subvert their meaning, and thereby interrupt that which is seamless about their episteme's operation. Terms otherwise problematic can thus become tools in political or cultural disruption.

I think we can do this by staging an unsanctioned contact between rhetorics of cultural authenticity and opposed notions of class solidarity, constructions of class-based (rather than ethnic or caste) 'people's culture', and the cultural products of popular struggle.

The cultural activist sceptical of 'authenticity' can reappropriate and subvert the term by claiming the validation it confers for practices which would normally be considered part of a 'proletarian' counter-culture. Those practices are not often conferred the validation of 'authentic' by conventional discursive regimes. Speaking in a difficult shorthand, I suggest the following: *one can try to authenticate cultures of resistance by suturing disruptive cultural-political practices to one's life in the self fashioned continuity marked as 'authentic'*. Such practices might include the gay/lesbian publications of *Bombay Dost*, Jana Sanskriti's village based 'theatre of the oppressed' projects launched to help organize the West Bengal Agricultural Worker's Union, the Third Theatre of Satabdi, Sanlaap's organizing efforts in Calcutta's red light districts, or Mahasweta Devi's activism and fiction. Not only would such a move provide a certain sort of validation-and thus what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital'-to practices and practitioners situated on the institutional and financial periphery; it would also displace the meaning of 'authentic' itself; and thus, it would disrupt discourses wherein the people of zones proletarianized by imperialism are figured as members of timeless, ahistorical, and ritualistic cultures, as opposed to the narratives of historical Progress that converge to construct and focus 'Western' High Cultural identities.

We need here an example: in contrast to the rasaesthetic project outlined in Schechner's interview, consider claiming 'authentic Indianness' for street theatre made to help catalyze the formation of a sex workers' union in Calcutta's Kalighat red light district. (A project spearheaded by a women's organization called Sanlaap.) Such theatre is intended not for the Calcutta theatre audiences but for passers-by, clients, other sex workers, the police, politicians, and the Indian and international print media. It speaks (perhaps too simplistically) to these audiences of the historical vectors of economic and gender discrimination constituting the diverse conditions and realities of the Kalighat red light district. (The sex workers there include bond slaves from Bihar, abductees from Nepal, wealthy and entrepreneuring older women, children and many more.) Discussions leading to performances include fairly extensive analysis of the role of proletarianization by western multinationals in

creating the poverty driven families' 'decisions' to sell their daughters to Calcutta madames as well as women's 'decisions' to become sex workers. And the scenes analyse the processes of stigmatization that make career changes practically impossible for even the well-paid, unbonded sex worker. Suppose when organizing events in Kalighat, we described them in our press releases as part of *an* 'authentic Indian [or Bengali] culture': We would perhaps be able to resignify 'India' as a historically constituted nation subject to imperialism's project of sustained underdevelopment, its hybridity understood not as 'a masala feeling' created by the mix of western and non-western elements, but as the specific coexistence of different modes of production, different symbolic economies brought together not by a benevolent chef presiding over a cultural

salad bowl,⁷ but by very specific, violent, contingent yet intelligible histories bearing traces of capital's relentless expansion through the sustained underdevelopment of empire, by Indians who collaborated with multinational corporate patrons, and by collectivities which developed in opposition and resistance to these vectors. I note for clarity that these vectors include the deliberate production of famine by, for example, *jotedars* who refuse to irrigate their lands so as to lower their costs and thus increase profits by turning sharecroppers into bonded labour.\$

To call plays by sex workers constituted as resistance to these vectors of subjugation 'authentically Indian' is to supplement and displace the discursive tradition that inscribes for foreigners *as well as Indians themselves* a timeless, traditional, non-western, sometimes 'enlightened' and sometimes 'savage' India. Such a project would not only provide a useful interruption of the tourist image of India-if directed at a national audience (via, say, a Hindi daily) such a redeployment of 'authentic India' would participate in a critical disruption of the spectres of colonialism, intolerance, and syndication haunting both the axiomatic of discrete cultures contoured according to criteria of authenticity as well as the national, regional, religious, and caste identities available within India today.

Notes

1. My emphases are placed to focus on certain questions: 1) is the cause of the bloodiest communalism and factionalism so simply reducible to the exclusions constitutive of the authorized national culture that emerged, in the case of the Indian National Congress, through the anti-colonial

struggle? 2) What is the significance of the Enlightenment rhetoric lauding the exchange of knowledge for social progress, and how does one deal with questions of who does the exchanging, and how is the knowledge exchanged used and circulated? 3) Is it a viable strategy to tack on 'without the exploitation of . . .' a people whose poverty and struggle is placed in inverted commas? I ask this very pointedly because I will argue that colonialism cannot be excluded from histories of both underdevelopment (and thus underprivilege) and the ontology of discrete cultures which enables her to make these suggestions.

2. Not that changes in something as complex and pervasive as family ever are sweeping. Only that certain agents might find it in their interests to promote change on as large a scale as possible

...

3. This is absolutely not to suggest that the caste system has not remained at least partially intact despite changes in the division of labour brought on by the dialectics of specialization outlined in classical economic theory. An interesting study, if such does not already exist, would chart the invention of tradition

justifying how existing castes were extended, if they were at all, to include specifically contemporary professions such as computer programming, airline piloting, telecommunications, and aerospace welding.

4. 'Roughly' because: 'In every first world is a third world, and vice versa' (Trinh T. Minh-ha).

5. Here and throughout this section I am deeply indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. For a difficult, brilliant, insensitive, and zealous study of these issues and the relationships between psychoanalysis, the western family and colonialism, see 'Savages, Barbarians, and Civilized Men' in *Anti-Oedipus*.

b. Brilliant critiques of mimicry, westernization, and assimilation are made by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. I note them in this indulgent footnote because they provide still more texture to the vast workings of colonial power which, if not properly acknowledged, lead to the formulation of those mystifying parameters for interculturalism found in the fourth issue of this journal. Fanon, writing in the context of a French colonial policy that advocated assimilation (as opposed to a British policy emphasizing traditional cultural difference in the service of indirect rule), argues that assimilationism produces a desire to be like the white colonizer. However, not only is the assimilated colonial subject alienated from himself (Fanon's subject is problematically male), he is also subject to the gaze of the colonizer

which 1) is always empowered to determine when the subject is finally and properly assimilated and 2) appeals to a racial (visible) difference in order to deny the colonized the colonizer's status after the work of assimilation is undertaken, thus alienating the colonized from himself under the gaze of the colonizer in order to maintain the asymmetrical colonial relationship. Bhabha's highly complex accounts of assimilation deal with the issue of mimicry, which he inscribes as profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, Fanon's critique stands: 'colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite' (86. Emphasis in original). On the other hand, he locates in the colonial subject of mimicry the agency necessary to disrupt the project of discursive colonization. Bhabha argues that the 'reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double' (86). And precisely because the colonized is always marked as different for the reasons elaborated by Fanon, s/he is able to throw the transcendental universality of the colonizer's signifying apparatus into question, by returning its gaze with one identical yet constituted from a place of difference. The colonizer, in turn, must oscillate according to the double logic of the fetish, both standing in for the colonizer and standing next to the colonizer as a dangerous and supplementary other announcing the incompleteness and alienation of the colonizer (76-8). The colonizer must oscillate then between denying and asserting this difference between the colonized and the colonizer. This oscillation, Bhabha discovers, produces the doubleness of colonial fantasies and stereotypes: the colonized man 'is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces' (82).

7. And I do not say 'melting pot' because Schechner correctly notes that the 'American dream was first the melting pot. People would come here from different ... cultures, enter this American culture... and the children would come out roughly northern European, however they looked' (18).

8. See Mahasweta Devi's *Bashai Tudu*.

Works Cited

Bharucha, Rustom. 'Somebody's Other: Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of Our Times'. In *Economic and Political Weekly*. New Delhi, 15 January 1994.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *Anti-Oedipus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Tr. Robert Hurley, Helen Lane, and Mark Seem. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Mahasweta Devi. *Bashai Tudu*. Tr. Samik Bandyopadhyay and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Thema, 1990.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto, 1986.

Folk Philosophy in K. N. Panikkar's Poetic Theatre of
Transformation

An interview with K. N. Panikkar by Erin B. Mee

KAVALAM NARAYANA PANIKKAR 15 the Founding Director of Thiruvarang, a dramatic troupe which works as the theatre unit of Sopanam. His plays include *Sakshi* (1964); *Jabala Satyakaman* (1971); *Avanavankadamba* (1975); *Ottayan* (1988); *Karimkutty* (1983); *Koyma* (1986); *Arani* (1989); and *Theyya Theyyam* (1990). He has directed his own plays (*Karimkutty*, *Ottayan*, *Koyma*, *Arani* and *Theyya Theyyam*) as well as the plays of Bhasa (*Madhyama Vyayogam*, *Urubhangam* and *Karnabharam*).

EM: What exactly is folk theatre?

KNP: I have been attracted, as a theatre person, to folk forms, idioms, usage, concepts and images. Folk contains the archetypal elementary expression of man, which is related to the soil of the land, to the earthbound life of man. It may be difficult to understand the rationale of a particular folk element, because the rationale may be very complicated, or the rationale may be inexplicable, or it may be inexplicable to us, which is very interesting for me-I don't want to have a reason for everything. The absence of rationale-as-far-as we-are-concerned is interesting to me.

EM: Does this imply that there is another kind of sense?

KNP: Exactly. A 'para-rationale', where it is difficult to apply your normal reasoning to what happens or what is known in folk as *thanathul*. This para-rationale comes from the folk tradition. I try to keep my work at this level for the sake of dramatic potential.

The word *thanathu* literally means 'our own'. But in the context of our theatre *thanathu* seeks to reach the extreme point of imagination. It has elements of anthropology, landscape and nature, inherent consciousness of rhythm and mythicized versions of community experience. Sometimes it is referred to as the 'theatre of roots'. But *thanathu* involves more than 'roots'. It is a totality of imagined experience realized through performance-visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory-supersensory experience evoking atavistic responses. So *thanathu* is to be understood as the discovery of the self, including the supreme self.

Myths have this same quality-you can even create a myth from the elements in folk, or you can recreate an already existing myth. I am attracted to creating new myths using folk qualities-to creating original folk myths interpreted by the modern sensibility. All this is possible when you come into contact with the folk tradition. The folk sensibility is not something which belongs to a bygone era, but is something very contemporary, which can be very useful for contemporary man while interpreted to the modern sensibility. You cannot dismiss these tools as not contemporary, you cannot dismiss them as belonging to some other age. In that case, what right has folk to exist?

A very contemporary realistic situation which happens in our midst can assume the attributes of poetry, the attributes of myth, using ritual as an essential ingredient. The whole thing can develop as a theatre with a deep-rooted native quality when you take the myth of the region. For example, *theyyam*.² I have used *theyyam* in many productions-*Theyya Theyyam* was the culmination, but I have also used it in *Llrubhangam*, where I used the *theyyam* of Duryodhana's character, Suryodhana. Suryodhana is a character created by me in my interpretive performance text. Similarly, in *Koyma*, I have created a new myth-a king being loved by a vagabond. In *Karimkutty*, the selling of a slave to a person against payment has taken on different dimensions.

But in all these plays, whether I wrote or directed them, I have not created a realistic situation, using the -tools of realism. I have used only the tools of folk or tribal traditions.

To me folk means folk philosophy where language, rhythm, imagery-everything should contribute to the creation of the folk philosophy.

EM: What is folk philosophy?

KNP: That is what I have been trying to explain: it has its relationship to the soil, to the people-in



if

Left Theyyam a ritual dance. Photo by Erin Mee. *Right Patayani: Kutira Kolam*. Photo credit: Sasha Mohan, Subha Studios. Courtesy Erin Mee.

that sense it is popular, in the sense that it comes from the life of the people. Some critics say, when I use rhythm in my work, that it has nothing to do with life. But they are wrong, there is rhythm in life.

EM: Are these critics urban?

KNP: Mostly. The criticism comes from those people who don't take the values, the folk background of our life, as a philosophy which is ever-present, ever-living-it lives with us as a part of our tradition, part of our present tradition.

EM: What are the folk forms that have influenced you the most?

KNP: I will be committing a confusion if I say that I am inspired by *patayani*³, that I am inspired by *theyyam*, that I am trying to take elements of *theyyam*-it is not like that. It is not just imitating a folk art situation-you cannot repeat in theatre what the folk artists do. That is why we make it a philosophy.

Whether a particular prop or material is to be used on stage depends on the situation-we decide based upon what the situation warrants. The use of a curtain, the use of material from nature,

whatever it is, we have to use it in such a way that it suits the situation. That is our guideline.

The parameter which is used in folk to make this decision is not the same as in classical theatre.

That is why I stress the point that the use of folk is more a philosophy.

The basic thing which has influenced me as a

philosophy, as an essential ingredient of folk, is the rhythm. Here we have to discuss at length-how rhythm becomes an effective tool: it is not merely the use of percussion instruments which constitute folk rhythm. The character depicted has a structured rhythm. I might use a percussion instrument, or I might use silence, or I might use non-sound (not silence, but non-sound, because it is dramatic non-sound-the dramatic area where there is no sound is non-sound) but the rhythm created by a percussion instrument alone is not the rhythm. It is the rhythm of the theatre language that is used.

More than a tool, an ingredient which effectively combines the performance or a technique to signify an idea or punctuate a feeling, rhythm works as an expressive element which has a direct impact on the meaning and its emotion. Poetry is the next element of folk philosophy. What is poetry in folk? It is not rendered poetry, it is visual poetry. It is the visual poetry that interprets through poetic images. Even in the so-called classical tradition-plays of Bhasa and Kalidasa-we have this. These constitute folk philosophy.

EM: What are some examples of visual poetry?

KNP: Visual poetry is certain unsaid things: in *Madhyama Vyayogam* there is the visual poetry of an idea touching a whole theme: the concept of 'threeness' is nothing but poetry. The term

madhyama implies that one person is in the middle of two other people, which creates an image that

can be- taken to its poetic heights. In every important part of the play you find this threeness: when the father loses his son, he says my family hill had three peaks and the central peak has been broken. Everywhere in the play you find an inner structure and an outer structure.

EM: Earlier you said 'so-called classical.' Why?

KNP: When you try to differentiate between classical and folk, you get a confused picture. To what extent can you say that a thing is classical or folk? Even in the so-called classical, there is folk interpenetration. There is no meticulous dividing line. It is inter-mixed. It is a question of degree.

EM: So why do people try to make this distinction?

KNP: Sometimes we feel that there are certain rules and regulations in classical.

EM: That it has become codified?

KNP: Yes, codified.

EM: But there is codification in folk.

KNP: Yes, again this is wrong, because when you see an art like *patayani*, it is full of rhythms which are well codified and well defined. My feeling is that in folk the relationship to the soil, to the 'archetypal inspiration, is predominant, and where it attains more of an intellectual level you can say it is more Sanskritized, but it reaches a point where you can't go any further, and you have to report back to the original spring-source to get more energy to revitalize the whole.

Generally there is a feeling that folk uses more *lokadharmi*, and classical uses more *natyadharmi*. *Natyadharmi* is usually translated as stylization. *Laukika* means real life. But if you take rhythm, the rhythm is also used in *lokadharmi*, for example in our folk forms (our so-called folk forms) like in *patayani*, we use rhythm. *Theyyam* has very, very complicated rhythms, and the rhythms are essential. Still, in spite of the use of rhythm, we can call it *lokadharmi*.

In *patayani*, there is a *kolam* called '*kutira*'⁴ and, wearing that, they make the movements to depict a horse. What do you call it? Is it *lokadharmi* or *natyadharmi*? It is not a horse-no horse is required to depict a horse.

Now starts the point of imagination between the actor and the audience-the horse is created *between* the actor and the audience. The stage space is a charged arena, charged by the

imagination, and by the interaction between the actor and the audience. And for it to work, everyone has to keep the same *sruti*. If an outsider keeps a different *sruti*, he will see the whole thing as being funny.

EM: Another example is in your play *Ottayan*, where the Chakyar says to the Woodsmen: I can only build this house if you are ready to believe.

KNP: Exactly. 'Are you prepared to believe? Then half the work is over,' he says. If somebody stands up and says 'what nonsense!' then the whole thing will collapse.

The difference between *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi* begins here. An areca leaf is enough to create a horse. But what is really required? It is not the *horse* that is required, it is the *horse-ness*. This horse-ness is created by a combination of things: the areca leaf, the posture of the dancer, the rhythm. This is taken to be the beginning of *natyadharmi*, but it is not full-fledged *natyadharmi*, it is *lokadharmi-at* the other end of the spectrum, you wouldn't even need that prop, you could make it more suggestive. So the range of possibilities is very interesting. There is *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi* in both folk and classical-which is why I don't believe in the distinction between folk and classical.

Let us not take the categories folk/classical or *natyadharmi/lokadharmi*. Let us take painting, for example. In Picasso's paintings you don't directly see what is being painted. You don't have to, because it depends on your imagination. Here we have to consider the process of abstraction: what is concrete is made abstract and what is abstract is made concrete.

Take, for example, a hill. The hill is concrete. By seeing the hill, by experiencing the hill, by climbing up and down the hill in your life, you have some experience of what a hill is. When you see the hill, it is concrete. But when you take it into your mind, you conceive the quality of a hill. It becomes the idea of a hill, which now turns out to be a concept, and then you are asked to create a hill without the hill being present. This depends upon the imagination of the actor. Now you create a hill with your body, with your mind, your expression. It is not the same hill, it is different. So in art we are doing what is being done by god, we are also creating something. But the creation is definitely a recreation. When you recreate, you cross the frontiers of reality. What you recreate from your conceptual idea is another creation. This concrete thing passes through all processes of creation: when the idea requires sound, you use sound; when the theme requires lines, you use your own lines. This medium of creation is different from the medium of creation

which is used in the original context-which someone who we call god, or nature, or whatever, has done.

I have been directly influenced by my surroundings, by the art forms which I have had occasion to witness, to dabble with, to get completely immersed in. And from the beginning I developed myself as a playwright on the one hand, and as a director on the other. But the creation of a play as a text, and then making a subtext out of this text is very difficult for the same author. So in order to take it as a challenge, I had to take a third line of activity, which is the production of Sanskrit plays. And of course this is again why I don't believe there is a distinction between classical and folk, because you can't say that Bhasa is a Sanskrit playwright so his plays are totally classical-there are so many elements which are conceptually folk: *Madhyama Vyayogam* has all the qualities of folk, all the archetypal qualities are there, so you can't just dismiss that this is classical or folk.

And while looking at the whole picture of theatre-modern, past, folk, traditional, everything, I started getting the idea that our theatre is basically not conflict oriented, as is generally understood, it is definitely transformation oriented: Theatre is basically storytelling. The actor while communicating the story transforms into a character and further in the process of elaboration of a situation passes on from one *bhava* to another. Here it is not a linear process that takes place in the theatre of transformation. The actor takes a curvature in interpreting the character as well as the *bhava*. The whole process is 'known in the tradition as *anukirthanam*-celebration of the mood by stretching it only to enhance the ultimate rasa. This basic nature of theatre is found even in day to day life where the common folk communicate life situations.

What you have to do is make *artha* into *kriya*, into *renga kriya*. *Renga* means theatre. Theatre action. You can easily read a line in a play, but in storytelling it takes on so much. A wide treatment is required. Go into details to make it interesting. All these things you think of first in a storytelling process, and then make it an action, convert the whole thing into action. Otherwise it cannot be theatrically viable, or theatrically meaningful.

There are many tools for the artist to create with. We come across folk or classical in any region of the world, any state or country-it is all material for enriching your tools. But the tools which you use should be commensurate with the textual situation, or the situation which you create-if not in the text, in the interpretive text.

Notes

1. *Thanathu* is the extreme point of imagination.
2. *Theyyam* is a ritual dance performed in the private and community temples of Cannanore District in Northern Kerala. *Theyyam* means 'god', and the *theyyam* performances are organized to propitiate a particular god or a dead local hero who became deified. The deity is propitiated through the *theyyakaran*, or 'man who takes the form of god', who is thought to literally embody the spirit of the deity being propitiated. Wayne Ashley, 'Theyyam Kettu of Northern Kerala', TDR 23:2, 99-112.
3. *Patayani* is a ritual dance performed in the Bhagavati temples of Central Kerala. It commemorates the story of Bhadrakali after her fight with Darika. However, other stories are also associated with *patayani*, among them the story associated with *Kutira Kolam* (see footnote number 4)
4. 'This *kolam* (mask) is made ... with the face of a horse and the rest of the body composed of *kuruthola*; if the *kolam* is fastened to the waist of the dancer, the illusion of a man sitting on horseback is created. When the King of Madurai came to attack Kerala, Ulakutaya Perumal's kingdom, men were sent to Arabia to buy good horses. They go to Arabia by ship and negotiate with a horse merchant named Aliyar and buy several horses from him ... Then they sail back to Kerala and land on the coast called Narayana. This is the theme of the song sung for the performance of this *kolam*.' G. Venu, *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala* (Natana Kairali: Irinjalakuda, 1990).
5. *Artha* means 'meaning'.
6. *Kriya* means 'action'.

Karimukutty From Written Script to Action Text

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar

This is an attempt to recollect and reflect over the theatre adaptation of a myth that existed in the dim past of my native village. It was a story closely entwined with the customs and beliefs of that place. The underlying emotional content of the style and sound of its narration and the organic involvement of the language with the soil made the story come alive; it had fascinated me in my childhood.

While swimming and diving in the Pamba river, I could hear the symphony of the eastern mountains and the Arabian sea producing the music of life in unison. Within earshot of my traditional home were the vast fields where we cultivated rice. Sometimes from the northeastern corner of those fields, blowing along with the breeze that fondled the greenery, came the sound of a flute. Every morning I got up with an intense desire to trace the source of this music but fell asleep without success. Much later I found the origin of that sweet untamed tune which I consider my initiation into the enchanting world of music. Even though it was a grand experience for me, there is nothing spectacular about it when put into words. Once, quite unexpectedly, I came across him. He was a farmer. Sitting in a little hut beside the fields he was blowing his living breath into the bamboo reed, trying to express his soul's desires by caressing and controlling his inward breathing. I asked him, 'Will you please give it to me!' He promptly gave me the reed and did not take anything for it. Nor did I offer him anything. Years after, I blamed myself for not reciprocating the grand gesture of my first guru. Even now, blowing a flute in my own untrained manner, I think of the Kuttanadan soil that brought out the musician in him and feel proud that the same soil belongs to me too.

In those days my mother used to tell me stories about the tragedies of the slave-like existence of the poor people. The slaves, who were loyal to their lords, and the lords who in their obsessive craving for power and prestige manipulated them and drew on their life blood to enrich themselves, belonged equally to the history of our place. 'Parappeti' and 'Irupathettichar' were myths that had roots in our native soil. ('Parappeti' is the fear of the low born: a psycho-mania once prevailed among the higher castes, who believed that the low castes would turn against the upper castes on their day of victory.) I don't know when one of them acquired definite shape and occupied a place in my mind. But it was the starting point to the further creation of the drama *Karimkutty*.

Sometimes, the poetic aspirations in me surface during the prenatal period of a drama and it helps me reach new dimensions in my imagery. Thus, in the name of a play, a poem might precede. Even after the completion of a play, a poem may bloom from the very same roots or sometimes from the main branch. I can't remember whether the poem 'Parappeti' came before or after the play, *Karimkutty*. But one thing is certain. Both have come from the same seed and soil. Bhartruhari says in *Vakyapadeeyam* that the principle of sound is one, unbreakable and invariable and it is so because it contains in itself the potential to divide and differentiate.

According to the difference in medium the same burst of sound shines differently. Bhartruhari compares the outcome of sound to a tree that stands beside a lake, and the medium to the moving water that reflects the tree. This is very significant and meaningful. In the myth 'Parappeti' when light and shade mingled and reflected in the medium of poetry, the rhyme and rhythm of the Kuttanadan soil poured out thus.

'Parappeti Parappeti a fear unidentified' The Black and the Dark the fear
of the white Parappeti Parappeti -

a danger to home and life Those who have fenced their possessions
And kept them close, hanging on to it, They fear when darkness
barks
And hating it

they are afraid still. Parappeti Parappeti - the light fears darkness And
darkness is

afraid of light Today is the twenty eighth of the month of 'Makara'

(When the fears come back into the open and recede again
to the past)

happened or could have happened, but mainly remain dormant in the collective
consciousness—a sort of racial memory. The credibility of such a story goes beyond the
structure and content of it and appeals to some hidden urge in the human

The Karimkutty of my mother's tales lay as an earthen sculpture—a massive figure
made from the sticky dark clay of Kuttanadu in the vast realms of my mind. Its features
were those of my first guru, the farmer who played the tunes with his reed and touched the
innerstrings of my being. From the very next day, after he gave me the flute, I never heard
his music, though I longed for it. He just left the place. But his face came alive on my
Karimkutty. Lying like a historical fact in the vastness of my imagination, he did not seem
averse to being transformed into a myth. In the false unidentified glow of the falling night,
the shape had undergone a lot of change. Even its colour seemed different. In the twilight
rays of my dreams it dissolved and frightened me in the dark nights. But I didn't object to it.
Then I wrote!

The dizzy height of the local hill The shiny oily body, like

The dark water clouds melting over him
The eyes that sparkle in lightning gleam
And the rumbling noise of the receding thunder.

A gait that sidesteps the humanity in front
He is unseen to all for you will fall for him
If you meet-he is my loyal page chattan.

I have written this poem with the traditional rhyme because it goes well with the rural content. Perhaps also because it forms part of another myth-the magic adventures of the Brahmin magician Kondadimadan. But when the verbal text was enacted on the stage after a reassessment of the literary rhythmic structure, even the basic ideas on caste and colour changed: When we tear a piece off the traditional poem and depict it on the stage with added stamina to the verbal, and correct projection of movement, a change comes about which is caused by the rhythmic quality of music. Music is recreated here by the combination of the principles of space and time. That forms the core of all drama-the acting potential that transforms music into episodes.

Because the tactics and parameters of pure literature are radically changed here, in this new interpretation even the social values sometimes undergo a shift of emphasis. To go back to the myth underlying *Karimkutty*, it definitely draws its life source from the roots of the myth. All myths are based on real life stories that may have



Karimkutti the play.

mind. This legendary feature is retained even when the story is adapted to be shared socially. Developing into something beyond the confines of an episode it widens its sphere, offering an opportunity to analyse the psyche. Meanwhile it also becomes necessary to bring forth the contemporaneity that interprets the present in the light of the racial memory, in the myth. This new interpretation enables us to recognize the broad connotation of the myth and helps to juxtapose the single present incident meaningfully with the eternal truth contained in the myth.

What is attempted in *Karimkutti* is to depict the falling social values and relationships through a triangular structure made up of the land owners (Kondadimadan) who reach false heights because of their ownership over land, the labour class (Karimkutti and friends) who are destined to be nothing more than the equipment to bring yet more money and power to the higher class, and the middle meddlers whose only object is to fool

both to gain riches and prestige for themselves (Mantravanan). Mantravanan, whose request to his own guru Kondadimadan for a chathan was unsuccessful in every way, represents the *nouveau riche* who have no social sense at all. The tragic involvement of Kondadimadan's daughter with the handsome *chathan* also draws a picture of degenerating human values. Knowing of his daughter's secret alliance with the *chathan* he pushes her out of the home and even performs the last rites for her, proclaiming her to have died. This adds to the pathos of the situation.

Such illustrations of ideas or concepts through the myths have undergone structural variations at different levels before they are adapted to make a stage script of a written play. Sometimes in the midst of all this preparation an independent creation emerges. An objective approach to this phenomenon leads one to discover certain habitual traits in acting, choice of costumes and in the discipline of rhythm. In fact such an attempt to unravel the inexplicable and spontaneous experience of creation took me back to the very place from where I started. Hence my search for the new mode of presentation also started once again from the beginning. At one time Mought I had successfully finished my search for the identity of Karimkutty, and in my written work I gave a more or less complete picture of him. But in the extended suggestive stage interpretation I found that it was not adequate.

If there is scepticism about this neverending search for the implied in art, I can understand it, for I myself feel so at times. That massive figure made of wet clay, lying straight and strong in the open fields of my mind, could have been my own native village. I made that definite form lose its shape and become an abstraction in my mind. Now the task is to reshape it into an artistic whole which I can convey to the spectators. Meanwhile it is not to shed the duality-the abstract-concrete dichotomy-either. It is a challenge that our dramatic tradition has taken up and given a lot of attention to.

When Kondadimadan moves his magic wand and evokes the deities, the stage language just pours out spontaneously-'Chathan. Karimkutty Chathan.' Though Karimkutty is not visible to the spectators, he gives the impression that he can see him. Like a dog, Chathan is cowering at Kondadimadan's feet and he places his foot on Chathan's bent back. This dog-like stance of Chathan is created and conveyed through acting alone. Now he has to develop this abstract, formless idea into the perceptible shape of Chathan, to offer to the spectators, represented by Kundunni on the stage. This is done through signs and suggestions. Sometimes

just one sign is enough to produce the effect. In the above mentioned piece of poetry the composition of words producing the vibrations in the air, along with the emotion-charged voice, break the barriers of the disciplined rhyme and grow into imagery. The creative impulse lying dormant in the field of my mind rises and Karimkutty gains the height of a mountain. This solo is complete when the character really enters the stage and performs the stormy dance in front of Kundunni and the spectators. While the spectators remain in the grip of the high credibility of the performance, Kundunni falls down unconscious at the sight of Chathan. The scene continues, to show Karimkutty shrinking back to the size of a dog under Kondadimadan's raised wand, sitting at his feet once more.

This is only the beginning of the long process of transforming the written script into an action text. But this is enough to introduce one to the search for the essence of the complex art of stage representation.

This is an excerpt from Music and Movement, a book being written by the author and edited by Sudha Warriar.

Forthcoming from Seagull

Playscripts

A Passage through Darkness (*Andhar Yatra*) G. P. Deshpande (*transl. by Arundhati Deosthale*)

Chanakya Vishnugupta G. P. Deshpande (*transl. by Maya Pandit*)

Charandas Chor Habib Tanvir (*transl. by Anjum Katyal*)

Memories in Hiding Tooppil Bhaasi (*transl. by Phillip Zarrilli and Jose George*)

Theatrescapes Samik

Bandyopadhyay

I was delighted when I found the neat little grid for the theatre scenario in India I had charted out in STQ 2, cracking up in Balurghat, the lively little district town in north Bengal, where I was serving on the faculty of a workshop seeking ways and means and techniques to bring theatre into the massive literacy campaign launched in the district under the National Literacy Mission.

We had begun work in the four-day stint, briefing the participants (including volunteers and teachers in the project, and theatre workers in what I had described in my grid as the Big Little Theatre) on the scope and needs and messages of the literacy campaign, which is no longer at a stage where people have to be 'taught' the advantages of literacy in terms of how it enables one to read labels, street signs, bus directions, telegrams, and sign money order receipts, but has come to a point where empowerment and conscientization are the issues in play. The participants were soon doing variations/ improvisations on a couple of 'ideas' they had come up with, and my young director colleague, Sangramjit Sengupta, was 'improving' on and developing on their pieces. But the exercise lacked something, and had all the typical features of one of those workshops in which either an NSD 'product' or one of those Little Little or Big Little Theatre knowalls descends on a 'backward' little place or theatre community with his/her bag of tricks and tools, and teaches *them* to do theatre the only way it can and should be done. The young people from the local urban theatre (Balurghat has quite a number of theatre groups, two theatres, and at least one major director Harimadhab Mukherjee, with excellent production of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Devigarjan*, Mahasweta Devi's *Jawl*, Brecht's *Galileo*, Duerrenmatt's *The Physicists*, and Kleist's *The Broken Jug* to his credit-there are not too many directors in Bengal with such a track record) were quite happy at this opportunity of picking up some fresh ideas, bits and pieces of information, and some of the tricks of the trade.

The first day had gone by before we discovered that among the participants we had two directors who were performing their literacy plays widely throughout the region. Khushi Sarkar, who works with the State Government's Health Department, in Kushmandi a small town in the district, has staged his *Chalo Podiba jai* ('Come, let's go to read') more than eighty times in two years. Prashanta Maitra, better known by his pseudonym Pandava, has staged his *Dhakka* (The Push), usually described as *Pandav-er Dhakka* (lit. Pandava's Push), a one-man performance, more than fifty times in a year or so. Participants were referring to these productions quite often and quite casually and familiarly, and that is how we got to know about these, and requested the directors to put up performances at the workshop site itself. Pandava had no problem at all. Usually performing in a version nearly two hours long, he asked me if we had time for a forty minute version! He could lengthen it or cut it at will as occasion demanded. It was his own baby after all! Khushi had to get his group of thirteen together. While most of the cast were farmers, labourers, or shopkeepers, the three musicians-with their drums and other percussion instruments

and shehnais and clarinets-and the two actresses, one of them an adolescent and really 'strong', were professionals. *Chalo Podiba jai* in performance lasts anything between an hour and a half and four hours. A farmhand, illiterate and hence humiliated and cheated continuously, is spurred to go to the local literacy centre by the taunts of the landlord's (not one of those cruel, enormous, monstrous tyrants of the popular leftwing plays or commerical films) daughter, who brings him his midday meal to the field, where he is busy ploughing for the master, and is in love with him-in a typically hard-to-get provocative manner! The provocation and insult of a single *word-bhajua* -hurled at the young man by the girl does the trick. The play reaches its first climax when the master discovers the farmhand reading his first book in the field itself, resents the gross dereliction of duty, and even as he raises his voice in admonition, is felled by 'the oxen'-in masks and skin costumes-who kick at him with their rear legs. The second climax comes when the farmhand comes back to the village educated now!-and claims his share of the land (out of which he had been cheated by the landlord) and the daughter of the landlord.

Khushi's company or Prashanta-Pandava has a spread and a reach and a natural support system in his 'community' stretching through more than half the extent of the district that few companies/ groups identified in my original grid would enjoy. I have just begun to become aware of the existence of more such groups in different parts of the country, committed to and involved in an enlightenment/ activist programme. A group like this has to establish its credibility with its community, and rely on its support to give to its voice authenticity. With the community getting suspicious of the source of the financial and other resources of the group, the group is likely to become suspect. The community is then likely to

become wary and read motives into the political suggestions that the group offers or the strategies that it adopts.

The people's theatre movement in the late forties failed to develop this potential, when it opened up for the first time in Indian theatre history a network of local and regional groups scattered, if not throughout the country, at least in a number of states in Bengal, Maharashtra, Assam, Hyderabad, Travancore, Cochin, Punjab and Manipur in particular, committed to a commonly agreed programme of conscientization. What is most disturbing in whatever documents of the IPTA have come down is that the ideologues and party functionaries on the job did not seem to have a clearly enough thought out ideological reading of the role or function of the IPTA. As a consequence, the IPTA soon enough degenerated into an urban

show window 'platform' (a widely used term in IPTA or communist Party cultural parlance) for a wide range of performances characterized by a mild radical thrust-too often tempered by more liberal positions derived from a United Front position-and a continuing discovery and 'use' of folk forms and folk modes of expression. Trying to mobilize the stars of the performing arts scene and throwing them up as signs or icons, and offering a 'national' programme all too soon, the IPTA neglected the possibility of building at/from the roots. Too many of the folk artistes or party activists with artistic talents in the regions were hauled up to the cities-and to the unrealistically romantic and ultimately futile central squad 'stationed' in Bombay, offering an easy hunting field to the commercial Bombay cinema and the first generation of impresarios looking for items and stars for the long-run, travelling dance-and-music-and-acting packages they planned to put together. The 'national'/all-India trap that the IPTA dug to dig itself in proved to be deadly. It was the IPTA that offered the model for the post-independence nationalization/ institutionalization of literature and the arts in the form of the central Akademis in 1953 and the National School of Drama that soon followed.

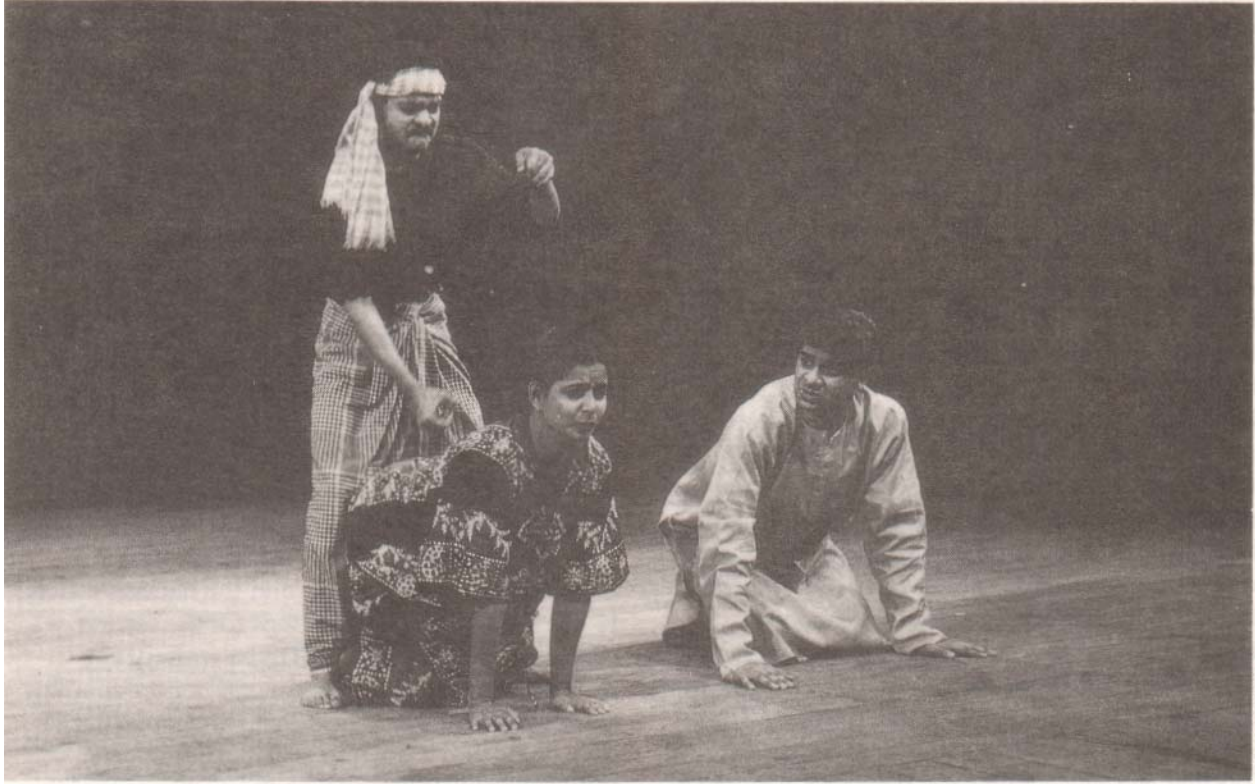
The 'nationalization' naturally cut artistes and forms alike from their roots in specific regional tastes and cultures, more often than not bearing the marks of historical processes and struggles, and helped in the construction of sanitized objects of 'national', urban, and export consumption.

In the 1940s, the Communist Party, isolated from the politics of the nationalist mainstream, from its position on the movement of 1942, sought to use the anti-fascist and national integration-as-a-war-effort 'programme platform to regain a foothold in the nationalist movement, and the IPTA served for its cultural route to the goal. At the end of the War and later with independence, the original issues were lost. In a rather stupid and facile attempt to keep up the pretence of humanitarian liberalism, the Party and the IPTA had kept ideology too carefully underground, and naturally lost the artistes to a performance scenario sans ideology, soon broken up into imperfect and rather weak exercises in original and individual creativity, declining eventually into spasms of short-lived creative group activity in a few urban centres. Even the values of modern theatre, defined in terms of directorial determination centring on a meaning, soon gave way to a return to the ego-centrism of the actor-managerial tradition on the one hand, and inventions of traditions on the other. With the dependence of both on expectations of support initially from

the State, and later from the commercial establishment, and the slow construction of a 'national' model, safe for funding, there followed the inevitable alienation of an audience that was discovering theatre for itself in a post-colonial situation. In the late seventies and early eighties, the TV and the consequent video boom served as an excuse for the withdrawal of the audience, but theatre itself had started withdrawing already-into a kind of mindlessness, and performance for the sake of performance. To locate itself on a genuinely popular base, theatre in India has to look for a regional/local identity, and concerns and traditions that are real and living. The literacy theatre, as it grows in the small towns, out of intensely felt needs, has touched a rich vein, in areas where it has been able to draw on local traditions. But in the cases where the Big Little Theatre has taken the initiative and sought to teach or train the grassroots performer, or where it has tried to 'serve' the literacy cause, the products have been generally utterly useless.

In one of the dialogues in Calcutta between literacy activists and theatre workers, Jayoti Bose, who has produced two of the finest Grips plays in the country; said that she would like to go down to one of the villages where the literacy programmes or the post-literacy programme was on, stay with the people for a spell, and find out how she could bring theatre into the scene. There were very few among theatre people prepared to take any risks or plunge into uncertainties-for literacy! There were fewer still to feel curious about what Khushi and Pandav were doing in Dinajpur, or Debesh Thakur in Bardhaman. The literacy cause offers a possibility of freedom for theatre-from the cautious benevolence of patrons of various kinds! For the audiences who need this theatre are capable of supporting and sustaining it, as a political programme.

Theatre Log



The Dancing Dolphins

On 27 and 28 August The Action Players presented *The Dancing Dolphins* at the G.D.Birla Sabhaghar in Calcutta, directed by Zarin Chaudhuri and Astad Deboo. What is the singularity of this group? Jayashree Mundkur begins her review of the performance for *The Telegraph* (Friday, 8 September, 1995) with:

Performers with all five senses intact often make little sense with their stage presentations. This could never be said of The Action Players, a group of hearing-impaired men and women, who, in their performance ... most aptly and ably communicated through mime and dance, sympathetic yet tongue-in-cheek messages about people and society.

Although the fact that the performers are hearing-impaired does give the performance a 'difference', it isn't by any means a primary identity-construction of the group. The reason for this reading is that the performers launched into their first mime-sequence vignette, 'Dhobi', without any 'cautionary' foreword to the audience to mark a 'difference' in the performers; and as a mime item, there *was* no perceptible Otherness from the audience-both performer and viewer voluntarily indulged in a suspension of verbalization due to the aesthetic requirements of the form.

At the end of 'Dhobi', Astad Deboo-an internationally acclaimed modern dancer announced the first of three poems from Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, which The Action Players had chosen to enact; and in the course of this announcement he casually mentioned that the performers had an impairment in common. The rest of the performance, discursively at least, consistently bore out this nonchalance about the much-vaunted impairment (foregrounded both by Mundkur and a few other members of the audience I chanced to speak to). Astad's announcement contextualized the adaptations of Seth's poems that the Players had indulged in, with the poet's permission. Seth's fables in verse are allegorical, with animals/beasts re-presenting human behavioural patterns. The Action Players perform a unique operation on it by divesting the fables of their allegorical aspects and re-inscribing the metaphors on the human world. Hence, 'The Frog and The Nightingale' was repositioned in the world of the performing arts, 'The Hare and the Tortoise' in that of advertising and media and 'The Crocodile and the Monkey' into a corporate tug-of-war. Priyali Ghosh gave voice to the poems and the actors enacted them much in the fashion of the mime sequences. The synchronic solidarity between Ms Ghosh and the players was a treat for the senses. The sincerity and the genuineness of the performers' involvement visibly affects the viewers. But another singular feature of this performance was interesting. For each of the three *Beastly Tales*, while the text was being voiced by Ms Ghosh, the performers themselves communicated the dialogue-exchanges through the highly specialized American Sign Language. This parallel communication worked in perfect harmony and I had a unique sense of wholeness vis-a-vis the performance. It occurred to me that the 'normal' performance excludes the hearing-impaired audience (and any other such marginalized category of viewers) and The Action Players, without going in for any elaborate speeches, drive this point home. In that sense this one identifiable impairment has given the players an additional perceptual domain. Hence The Action Players not only communicated to the 'normal' audience with ease, they also included a 'normal'[ly] excluded section of the audience into this interactive space.

Interspersed with the *Beastly Tales* pieces were mime-vignettes showing a dhobi, mochi, and barber, along with sequences on film-shooting a-la Bollywood and a Miss World pageant where the surprise winner, much to the other participants' shock, is a man who happens to have strayed into the pageant and also has the best answers. These vignettes were enriched by self-reflexive representations of socially constructed identities. Each persona on stage was a pre-

defined 'type' and dynamizing the action was the *interaction* between these 'types'-an interaction not always pre-defined. For example, in the Miss World pageant, the entire structure of the beauty contest, with its socio-political implications, is being parodied through the exaggeratedly 'typical' presenter and contestants, to the extent that at the end it's completely subverted, with the male on display alongside the female, being tested and found most suitable! In another piece the dhobi receives two dresses to clean; these clothes are played by two players. The entire mime-sequence of the act of washing, drying and ironing is accompanied by expressive gestures by the players playing clothes. It made the children (and adults) laugh and also blurred the conceptual boundaries between human selves and non-human Otherness.

The post-intermission section of the performance consisted of a dance sequence called 'Tapestry in Movement', which was directed by Astad Deboo. Astad's association with The Action Players goes back seven to eight years and he clarified that their primary focus is not dance, although they address it with enthusiasm and diligence. 'Tapestry in Movement' comprises four interlinked dance sequences in which the group's coordination and almost organic mutual understanding was impressive. As Astad reiterated in his concluding speech, the players conducted the entire performance by keeping beat counts. In the first and the final dance sequence, Astad, as per his announcement, appeared on stage and did a sequence of impromptu dance movements of which the players had no a-priori knowledge. The group was supposed to 'mirror' Astad. It was admirably executed.

At the end of the first sequence, Astad moved back into the wings and the dancers moved to one side, taking up positions for the second sequence, which turned out to be without *any* musical or audio accompaniment! For the first few seconds there was a whispered wave of 'What're they doing ... ?' 'The music isn't coming on. . .' until suddenly it dawned on the audience that this was an innovation-and the players continued amid pin-drop silence in the auditorium. I for one sat rigid as a coiled spring, anticipating with horror a sudden lack of co-ordination that'd mar the performance. There was no such moment. Later, on analysing my reaction, I realized how effective that one sequence was in communicating to the 'hearing' audience the nature of the 'difference' between them and the performers. It also brought into focus the audience's insecurity/ discomfort within the Other's space. What excited me most about this performance was the treatment of 'difference' and Otherness which wasn't projected onto any single group-viewers or performers-but operated interchangeably between the two. But over and above this, I

enjoyed the performance as one executed by skilled and professional performers who conveyed their need to communicate through their work; the fastest and surest catalyst to a firm rapport with the audience for the entire duration of the performance.

Sreejata Guha