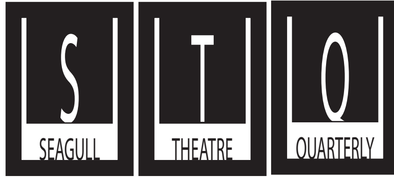

Issue 19 September 1998

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We apologize for two inadvertent errors in our previous issue, STQ 18. On p.85, Harin Ghosh should read Haren Ghosh. On p.88, P. C. Doshi should read P. C. Joshi.

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THEATRE NOTEBOOK

Editorial

Border musings . . .

If one drew an imaginary map joining all the criss-crossing lines in this issue, it would connect up India–Poland–Pakistan–Sri Lanka–Canada in a way that rendered geographical borders and boundaries irrelevant, or, at best, mere technical irritants. Ideas and influences recognize no checkposts. It is this characteristic ability of human culture to absorb and adapt, to learn and take in, that prevents me from being able to subscribe to monolithic, exclusionist, or fundamentalist attitudes to human history and culture. But that's another story. Here, the connections are not mere spatial linkages. They speak of deeper confluences, of sharing and give-and-take, of ideas exchanged and emotions like flint sparked off one another's experiences.

'A production' said Ingmar Bergman, who was more a theatre director than a filmmaker, 'stretches its tentacle roots a long way down through time and dreams. I like to imagine the roots as dwelling in the special room of the soul, where they lie maturing comfortably like mighty cheeses. Some, reluctantly or quite enthusiastically and quite often, come into view; others do not emerge at all . . .' He continues on to describe this deeprooted resource bank as a 'store of slow ideas and swift flashes of inspiration.'

In a postmodern landscape of pastiche and surface mappings, depth needs reaffirmation. Perhaps our only true borders have always been layered vertically, inside our minds, strata of memory and experience which each of us, in our own journey, must cross; internal borders which bind and limit us, but which also, once transgressed, mark freedom.

Anjum Katyal

Unshackling the Human Instrument

Khalid Tyabji

Khalid Tyabji's theatre career spans experiences ranging from urban theatre to rural performance. Here he looks back over his journey in theatre, discusses his approach and philosophy, and talks of where he sees himself situated today.

Notes On Myself

Self in World · World in Self

I would like to describe my professional performing life as comprising several streams which coalesce to form the river on which I attempt to steer my boat. Each stream consists of a type of theatrical activity or an attempt to bridge two or more domains of life and/or work. I do not follow a practice of staging one production after another. Each of my performances has evolved (and continues to evolve) over a period of time in response to a particular problem, situation or desire. Each remains an ongoing site of research in a particular area.

My initiation into the theatre began most unexpectedly, almost by accident, certainly without premonition, in 1974. My legs used to shake when I stood in front of people on a stage in school. It never occurred to me that I might have something to do with the theatre. When I joined college in 1974, my father one day suggested at dinner that I perform in the theatre. I am not sure if the suggestion came out of his own love of the theatre or a feeling that it might instil in me a certain self-confidence. Probably a combination of both.

I dismissed the idea, saying it was not for me, but only two weeks later stumbled into Barry John's Theatre Action Group, which I didn't leave for six years! In fact, I consider my BA and much of my MA to have been education from Barry, and work in the theatre group rather than the university. The theatre gave me an arena to uncover aspects of myself I had not suspected were there. I also found many things in the theatre that I had never imagined to be connected with it.

I served a wonderful apprenticeship under Barry John with Theatre Action Group in Delhi. Working with the group as actor, production assistant and eventually, Administrative Director, was a complete theatre education not only in all aspects of theatre production but in a vast variety of styles and subjects, with Barry's meticulous thoroughness running as a thread through it all.

My primary interest remained, however, with what had ensnared me in the first place—a form of ensemble work with the psychic and physical being of the actor as its central focus. Wanting to explore this direction further and weary of repeatedly mounting half-finished productions of great possibility, I left TAG and began a phase of workshops with a number of groups and institutions.

This constituted the beginning of the first stream of my personal theatre practice—the didactic. Evolving a means of training that leads the actor into an endless realm of possibility by unshackling the human instrument.

I was trapped into a love of the space of the theatre in the very first workshop-production I was in. This was based, then unknown to me, on the work of Jerry Grotowski and in turn led me

to the Natyashastra, the work of the human actor as creator, medium and instrument of the theatre, the possibilities of an unaided and unadorned actor and the idea of the theatre as being something that transcends everyday life. I also became fascinated by a kind of human 'meeting' that occurred without words in so-called 'theatre-workshops' that had much more to do with abandoning masks than putting them on. For several years I explored these areas of interest with a number of groups—more for intrinsic value than any aim at 'production'.

I began to lead workshops because I wanted to participate in a type of work that nobody seemed to be doing. I found that most people inclined towards the theatre could not function without the carrot of performance being defined and scheduled in advance. I, on the other hand, was trying to break away from that system. Moving away from 'actors', I worked with people who were not interested in performance but in a type of phenomena that occurred between people in the theatre workspace—an encounter on a basis different from the conventions of everyday life (including language). I hoped to find a group of people who would stay over a long period. No one did. Neither was I ready to be the leader of a company.

As teacher and conductor of workshops I have learnt a lot from playwright, actor, director Badal Sircar, who along with his group Satabdi, has been friend, stimulus and inspiration for over two decades.

The powerful, magical quality brought to the workspace by Zbigniew Cynkutis (at the DSW in Poland shortly before his tragic death in 1987) will always remain a vivid impression. Jola Cynkutis has taught me a great deal. A brief spell with the Gardzienice Theatre Association in Poland beautifully demonstrated some of the possibilities embodied in this type of human encounter. Barry John threw me into my first session as leader and encouraged me to continue.

Most educative in the course of my evolution as a teacher has been a 3-month workshop with three people on the lawns of Delhi University (1979); a 7-month stint leading the training course with the National School of Drama Repertory Company in Delhi (1989); teaching at the National School of Drama, Delhi (1979, 1989-1997); conducting workshops with members of the International Company at the Drugie Studio WrocTakskie in Poland (1986-1988), with 'Third Theatre' groups in Bengal (1979-1996), and a group of drama students in the Swedish countryside (1987).

I have, till recently, avoided any adventure as a theatre director because of two unfulfilled requirements in any situation where I have been called upon to perform that role, namely, a period of training and an open time-frame. I have not wanted to work another way. Ironically and unexpectedly, I was instrumental this month in a 'guerrilla style' creation of a solo performance by a Sri Lankan actor, Soumaratne Malimbada, over six days! But that was a very exceptional circumstance.

During my MA, I had begun to travel and to live in the tribal world of central India during the holidays and then in term-time, lived the role of a modern Indian university student. I had extraordinary theatrical encounters with tribal peoples across a total mutual incomprehension of language. In the city, I was also an actor in the contemporary theatre. I could not bridge these two worlds and was leading a painfully schizophrenic existence until I discovered the role of the Fool from Shakespeare's King Lear. (I played the Fool to Barry's Lear in a production directed by him). This helped me to make two bridges. Firstly, as the joker in a pack of cards (who can become anything while remaining essentially himself), who— as an actor on the stage of the world— could step out of loincloth and into sherwani or suit (and back again) without either feeling he had lost his soul in the process or was unable to fit both life-worlds into a single system or world of thought. Secondly, because until modern times, the function of the fool has been a life-role and not merely a stage character, I could begin to bridge my life on

Khalid Tyabji. Foolsong. Version 3, New Delhi, 1992. Bhava from a series of photographs
by Sheba Chhachhi.

‘where the female body is sold as a commodity . . .’ Foolsong. Version 4. New Delhi, 1994. Photo: Tyagarajan.

‘. . . . where the yogi’s sadhana ends in bloated materialism . . .’ Foolsong. Version 4. New Delhi, 1994. Photo: Tyagarajan.

stage with my life outside—my various roles in the realms of my life. The necessity to do so had become evident to me through what has become a continuing dialogue with Badal-da in Calcutta, through the challenge posed by tribal people, by the Bauls, by the Natyashastra, by Grotowski . . . over the years I have been trying to answer (in life) Prof. J. P. S. Uberoi’s challenging riddle: how to be a modern Indian and yet remain oneself.

My first encounters with tribal peoples in 1978 led to the first stream of personal performative activity which later came to be called ‘General Tomfoolery’. This, as its name suggests, is more a mode of performance than a ‘performance’ per se. As such, it is possible anywhere and at any time. The minimum condition is that there be at least one ‘other’ with whom it is possible to interACT. My original intention, in tribal Orissa, was primarily to ‘meet’ with the closely-knit communities amongst whom I was an outsider who shared no common language and who, by virtue of being a stranger, was treated with a certain amount of suspicion. I sought a self-evident theatrical presence in order to ‘explain’ who I was and communicate the friendly nature of my visit; to give a gift that was non-material, but of oneself. The result went far beyond anything I could have previously imagined and considerably changed my idea of the possibilities of theatre. I found an openness to laughter, an immediate recognition of play, willing participation and even a continuation of the ‘performance’ from where I left off.

Many years after these ‘first encounters’, I extended the arena of this type of activity to include urban and other rural environ-ments in Europe and in India. Attempting to describe it some years ago, I wrote:

> ‘General Tomfoolery involves playing with people as opposed to playing before them. It seeks to elicit from people an attitude of playfulness, laughter, good humour. Situations and events follow each other by a logic of their own—in a spirit of improvisation—

‘where film heroines and rock-shows are the idols of popular culture . . .’ Foolsong. Version 4. New Delhi, 1994. Photo: Tyagarajan.

often involving a transgression of boundaries between the fool and his public, the boundaries of public space, and also boundaries between members of the public. The aim is not subversion for its own sake but what may be described as a theatrical meeting, an open event, an opening. Theatre is by definition a transgression of the everyday. Here it is not confined to a special place: a stage. Where the Fool goes he transforms the environment into a theatrical arena by virtue of his costumed presence.’

In this way, General Tomfoolery bridges the divide between the stage and the world by injecting the theatrical into everyday space.

General Tomfoolery has itself been mother to several other performance streams. First among these is a theatrical event entitled ‘Foolshow’, involving the participation of the public in a series of increasingly elaborate pranks that dissolve the distinction between children and adults. This is an attempt to elicit active participation from a would-be passive ‘spectator’, involving him or her in the process of the creative act, the act of play. This type of activity usually takes place in open public environments (town square, street, park, village centre. . .) where only those willing and wishing to be there need remain; where no one is forced into an undesired act. As in General Tomfoolery, I use no conventional verbal language but sometimes, in literate urban cultures, I take recourse to written and painted signs (in the local language of course!). Most of

‘where the tribal, deprived of his pristine hunting grounds, is forced into construction labour . . .’ Foolsong. Version 4. New Delhi, 1994. Photo: Tyagarajan.

An artist surveying his work. Foolshow. Covent Garden, London, 1986. Photo: David Thomas.

my communication is through gesture, sound and a versatile whistle. On one occasion, in Poland, I used this performance to make a comment (through actions and signs) on the racism of which I was a butt. I received very warm applause in solidarity. Otherwise, no 'messages' so far.

Both General Tomfoolery and Foolshow have combined to form a third stream of theatrical activity, in 'special institutions' for the mentally and/or physically handicapped, old people, prisoners, alcoholics, and the like. There is no change of rule or attitude here: only the same seeking of an interesting, enjoyable and active 'meeting' in whatever circumstance and with whoever it may take place. Such meetings may be one-off events or a series. There has often been a powerful exchange and release of energies, relaxation, much laughter . . . 'Patients' feel at ease as they see someone madder and more peculiar than any of them! People on the street relax and lower their defences for the same reason.

General Tomfoolery (in being an open system of improvisation in relation to the physical and social environment) has also provided the means for meeting and interacting with other performers of different types. I have performed in conjunction with a Swedish clown, danced with Chattisgarhi performers and Bauls from Bengal, interacted with street acrobats from Delhi and gypsies in the Polish Tatra. . . and of course played all kinds of pranks with the tribal peoples of central India.

Another stream that has sprung out of the rich wellsprings of General Tomfoolery is a way of moving through space with song and dance, which I call 'Dance of the Mirror'. Unlike its predecessor, it is a mode of performance that does not require even one 'other', as the environment fulfils that role. It is a kind of response through one's organism to the total environment and its components—channelled through melody, rhythm, movement through space . . .

During this period, I had also become more seriously interested in academic study, once it had turned into one's own research. I did an M. Phil. and then spent eleven years leaping between work on a doctoral thesis in social anthropology and the theatre. Eventually, I found riding two horses simultaneously too taxing and unsatisfactory. I had to choose and opted for the more active life of the theatre. The theatre I do, however, owes much to the understanding of the world I acquired in interaction with my supervisor Prof. J. P. S. Uberoi at Delhi University.

Rather than create a succession of 'shows', I have tried to develop several streams of theatre work. Performance in the space known as the 'theatre' is one stream. Development of training for the theatre and didactic work is another stream. A third involves the turning of everyday space into a theatrical arena by virtue of one's own theatrical presence—as in General Tomfoolery. Then there's theatrical interaction in institutions for those with mental or physical disabilities. (I prove to them that I am a far worse case and it is apparently therapeutic!)

Now, turning into the arena of 'theatre' proper, there is an area of research entitled 'Foolsong' which has so far resulted in seven versions of a performance. An eighth is under preparation. This is a site where several paths converge:

First of all, by way of content, there is a search for a means of confronting in the theatre what is dark and nebulous to one outside; a struggle to turn these dark elements into an alternative possibility through this medium of artistic expression. In this performance I have sought to span the divide between what is personal and what is public, trying at the same time to provoke, in the spectator, reflection on the self and world.

Then there is the search for a theatrical language of gesture and sound that transcends the boundaries of regional languages. The movement away from language is also dictated by a

desire to explore realms beyond the actions of everydayness; to search for physical icons and archetypes; to discover the meanings of sounds rather than of words; to touch and engage the spectator through a perception that veers away from the purely cerebral; to treat the theatre space as a heated-up place where reality is lived at another level.

Finally, (in opposition to General Tomfoolery where there is elaborate costume and make-up—aharyabhinaya—in order to theatricalize everyday space) there is the search for a theatre where the actor, stripped of all but the barest essentials, is the sole instrument for the achievement of the theatrical act. One of the consequences of this poverty of means (aimed at developing the actors' art) is a theatre that is extremely flexible, mobile and inexpensive.

Recently I began work on a new type of research which includes language, involving a kind of auto-archeology. In this particular case I first developed a physical score—through doing—and then linked it with texts, remembered and found, that correspond with its inner vision. The result has been the rough structure or scaffolding of a performance entitled In Search of Monér Manush.

In working towards the creation of theatre performances, I have been fortunate in collaborating with two excellent people who have acted as my 'outside eyes': Jola Cynkutis in Poland and Shaupon Boshu in Pondicherry. I created the first two versions of Foolsong with Jola in WrocTaw during 1987 and 1988. Last year in Poznan, she was midwife in the birthing of Monér Manush. Shaupon has been instrumental in seeing Foolsong through a number of incarnations. Both are extraordinary teachers with the remarkable capacity to help one grope towards ones' self-set goals without the interference of their personal fantasies. With both I share a rare sympathy in the work-space.

Finally, what is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of all my work is what may be called the all-encompassing stream of the sadhana of the performer—an attempt to bring together interior life and external expression. In this context I look towards the traditions for principles rather than forms. I have been much influenced and inspired by Pelash Mutak, Deb, their families and others amongst the Durvas of Bastar; by the Baul bridge between personal sadhana and public performance; by the Natyashastra and the Kudiyattam tradition as embodied in the person of Guru Ammanur Chakyar, who is also one of the most extraordinary performers I have witnessed. In the context of inside-outside, studying eye exercises with Venuji in Irinjalakuda have been an intellectual eye-opener into the practice of performance. Gour Khepa, my Baul guru, opened my eyes in other unexpected ways. He taught me many things and helped me make an important crossing. Unfortunately, he was too khepa (crazy) and individualistic an ego to live with. I learnt I had to steer my own boat. I am indebted to Debdas Baul, Lakhan Das and Ramchandra Mondal, for labouring with me on sur and tal; to Swami Vibhuti, for illuminating their connection with interior life. Professor J. P. S Uberoi, my university guru, has turned my world-view upside down and been instrumental in provoking it towards greater self-definition. Barry John was, of course, my first teacher in the theatre and I learnt almost everything I know about theatre-production from his meticulous example. I owe a great deal to my work, friendship and mutual criticism over the years with Badal Sircar.

Ramble or Preamble

Theatre · Reflection · Vitality

If the theatre is a mirror to the world, showing the latter its cracks and flaws; twisting the image of reality into possibility. . . dreaming the future; questioning, providing a vital life-experience—it is rather becoming the reflection of that which it is meant to reflect, reflect upon, and

‘Theatre-ecological engineering . . . giving birth to a “tree of life”.’ Foolshow. Covent Garden, London, 1986. Photo: Steve Epstein.

transform.

Part of the trouble is that any kind of vital bodily experience that involves the human being in his or her entirety seems to be the antithesis of our aim in life. With a 'high standard' of living connoting minimal bodily activity and effort, it has become necessary to include such a category (time-space) as 'exercise' in the daily schedule in order that our bodies even function properly! Despite the plethora of Mahabharatas, it is increasingly forgotten that 'this body is the field', the seat and source of sukha and dukha; that sukha may sometimes be ananda (a state of body, of being).

In contrast to those leading an urban sedentary existence, modern sportsmen and women take the extension of physical possibilities to the other extreme but unlike the hatha-yogis and adepts of the earlier martial arts (for example), they miss out on the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of bodily experience. The latter are treated as belonging to other domains of professional or personal activity. Obviously, intellectual and spiritual experiences may occur in sport but more as a fallout than from systematic pursuit.

The theatre, involving a live exchange of energies between performers and spectators, has the possibility of being a site for such an experience of totality which combines the physical with the intellectual and spiritual being of man.

Let me say that for me, personally, the most important element or aspect of the theatrical event (whatever its form) is a phenomenon that is not connected with text or words but is something like a re-affirmation of oneself as a living being. How often have I experienced this in a theatre performance? Maybe five or six times, sufficient confirmation that it is possible.

Dead Or Alive?

Theatre · Cinema · TV · Video

Many people in the theatre today behave as though it has been dealt a death-blow by the television and film industries (now united through the video). Also, that acting in the former is merely a less well-paid (and therefore less 'successful') version of the latter. That the theatre is really struggling to keep afloat.

My own opinion is quite the reverse. It is that the theatre has tremendous possibilities which have scarcely been explored and that it constitutes a totally different experience from both film and TV/video, both for actor and spectator. I do agree that most of what goes for 'theatre' these days make one wish it were dead!

General Complaint!

Natya · Swadharma · Swaraj

The ruling framework of life and living, centred not in ourselves but in the world-view bestowed by our erstwhile colonizers, is reflected also in the arts and the theatre.

The idea of art or 'culture' as a category separate from the science and technology of how we should live in the world, separate from work, seriousness and the practical, occupying its own enclave (where tradition may even be honoured), is what might be called the general malaise.

Within this enclave (of 'art'), there is either the direct import/reproduction of western produce or, more dangerously, the vivisection of 'traditional forms' and modes of expression from the skein of life with which they were formerly interwoven; from which they drew their

meaning and inspiration.

What were once rituals of community life involving active performative elements are now staged as 'shows', owing to their ability to titillate alien (largely urban) spectators. Originally 'performed' in a variety of spaces, they are now thrust into the one-sided picture-box proscenium format (which was already outdated following the advent of film) even when performances are 'open air'. The only alternative seems to be a Republic Day float!

Where originally intimately associated with a season or time of year and integrally connected with other human activities such as harvesting or hunting, birth or marriage, they are now taken out of occasion and fitted into the schedule of 'theatre festivals', trade fairs, tourism melas and diplomatic summits—again as 'entertainment', outside the orbit of central, serious activity.

So-called 'serious theatre' is also fitted into that titillating addenda to life known as entertainment. It conforms to and reaffirms the notion that the utilitarian and the symbolic (aesthetic) are two independent domains with little practical connection. The one is the stuff of life whereas the other is what provides relaxation from its stresses.

To be an 'artist' is to be on the periphery; irrelevant to real living. In recent years, the attempt to bridge the gulf between the traditional and the modern in the performing arts has been confined to the realm of form within the bounds of this modern European frame of reference. The most important aspect of 'traditional art' (is there such a thing?), that it exists in intimate relation to the other domains of life, is not a consideration at all.

All this does not mean that there are no hopeful developments. There are, but far too few for such a rolling landscape.

The Traditions And Us

Self, World, and the Other in Performance, Daily Life, the Here, Now

What can we learn from the traditions? Many things. Whatever interests us.

Most especially that the performer, as chief instrument in the theatre, must engage in daily—

riyaz

(sadhana, training/practice) throughout life and not just once in drama course or school. Performance has the possibility of constant and unending self-development.

Secondly, that the theatre, which has partly grown out of the ashes of 'ritual' has the possibility of connecting with the world outside the 'performance'/ 'stage' (i.e. the rest of life) and that it can be a—

rite of passage

from one living state to another (not just from a state of tedium to one of utter boredom!).

That the performer is a vehicle of the work which, since it occurs in public space, for the 'public'—is a kind of 'public service'. Theatre is a—

service station

for the experience of the life of the human spirit.

That the theatre can be a place of 'extra-daily'—

natyadharmi

reality and not merely a replication of the world outside. The theatre is a place where performers may occupy different bodies and where both performers and spectators may experience different dimensions of reality.

Traces In The Air

Theatre is an ephemeral art, leaving only a trace in those individuals present together on a particular occasion.

Perhaps the very fact of its ephemerality, the fact that it concerns itself with non-material produce, is a sign to us in this age of the material God. It is a gift of the spirit and the spirit has defied definition throughout history.

The World Of The Theatre And The Theatre Of The World

Acts on Stage · Acts in Life

I consider it important to re-open and examine questions of the relation between ourselves on the stage of the world (i.e. in 'life'; the 'real' world; the world outside the theatre) and in the world of the stage.

At a personal level, in the life of each individual actor, and also with a vision of the relation between 'Art' and 'Society' (art and culture, art and civilization, art and the world we live in).

In the theatre—as in anything else—we have to respond to a rapidly changing life-world. One has to define one's role and modus operandi; discover whether we indeed have something to offer that is important for people, for ourselves.

*****

Notes By Khalid Tyabji on:
In Search of Monér Manush

Scenes from a waking dream of a journey in search of the man of my heart:

First Version: Mainly English

Created in collaboration with Jola Cynkutis

Scenography: Jola Cynkutis; lighting: Deesh Mariwala and the performing ensemble; text: chosen, edited and composed by Khalid Tyabji out of words and sentences from the following:

The Bhagvadagita - Isa Upanishada - Prashna Upanishada - Bhobha Pagla - T.S. Eliot - Paul Celan - Al-Ghazzali - Don JucYevtushenko - Rabindranath Tagore - Nietzsche - Lalan Fakir - Jayadeva - Milarepa - Toulet - Euripides - Thanatos Polski - Nammalvar - Phillippe Petit - Czestav Mitosz - Manikkavacak - R. D. Laing - Gagana Harakara - Jaga Kaivarta - Thomas Randolph - Saraha - Johannes Eckart - Paulo Coelho - T. E. Lawrence - Laotse - Tukaram.

I have used the Bengali Monér Manush in the title as translation gives rise to semantic problems: (Hu)Man of my Heart-Mind; that human in me, that human in the world outside of me . . . This is a point in the groping towards a kind of theatrical poem which was begun last summer in Poznan—Poland—in collaboration with Jola Cynkutis.

For about a year and a half I had felt somehow that a new performance was taking shape inside me. I could not finds words to formulate even a sentence about what it might be but could feel it growing! I wrote to an old friend and collaborator in Poland, Jola—with whom I

had first created Foolsong in 1987—she being the one person I could think of who not only understood that a performer may be 'born' out of silence, out of the body—but was also capable of being midwife in the process. At the end of two periods of work together, there is now a scaffolding: a script and a physical score.

What remains? The script and physical score have now to be properly fused, played with, excavated. This process has just re-commenced in India, with my colleagues in the group as my 'outside eyes'. Later I shall continue with Jola as well.

It is a privilege to be able to present something of this nature to a special audience. Something that is as yet incomplete, groping towards final form, towards self-articulation. Such an encounter or opening will, I am sure, have a profound effect on the work that is to follow.

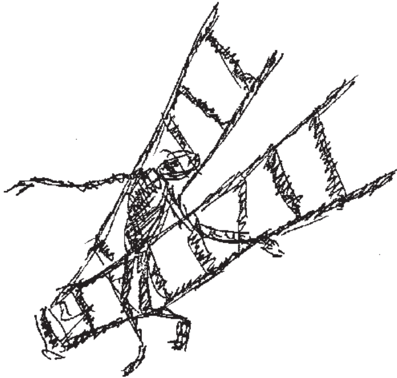
The dreamers of the day are dangerous, for they act out their dream with open eyes to make it possible . . .

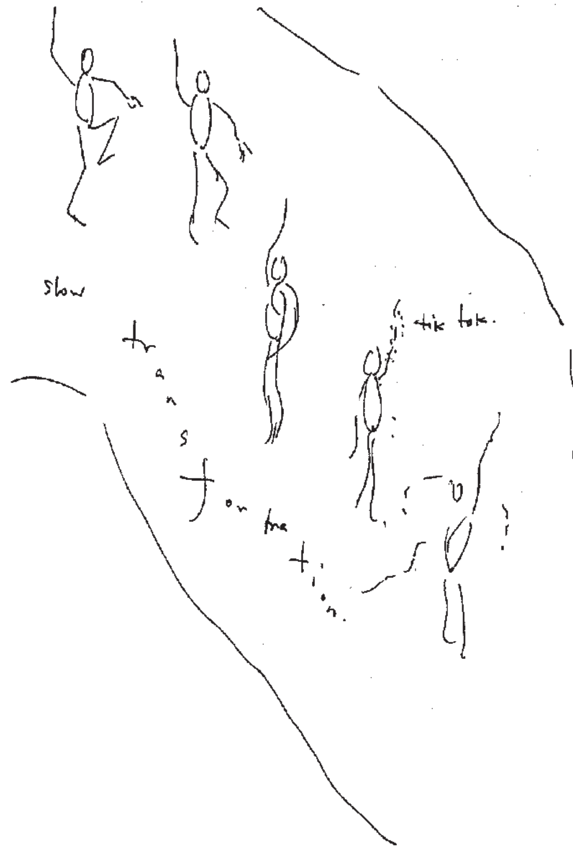
Monér Manush : Adapted From T. E. Lawrence.

'Something that hides in the wind and looks like a whorl, a mist, a face that twirls around . . .' In Search of Monér Manush. Mahesh Dattani Studio, Bangalore, 1998. Photo: Adil Hussain.

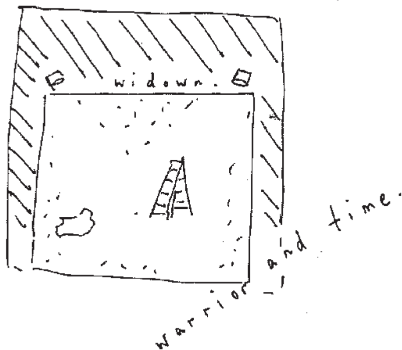
81

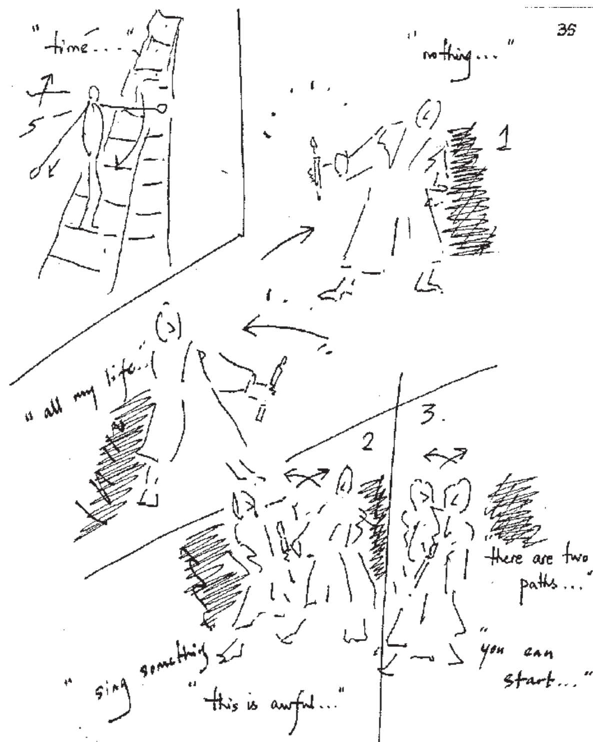
begins to float up & then very slowly sway, flutter
begin to turn in wind — from inside.
reczatec.

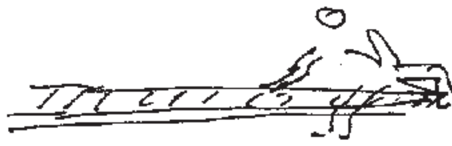


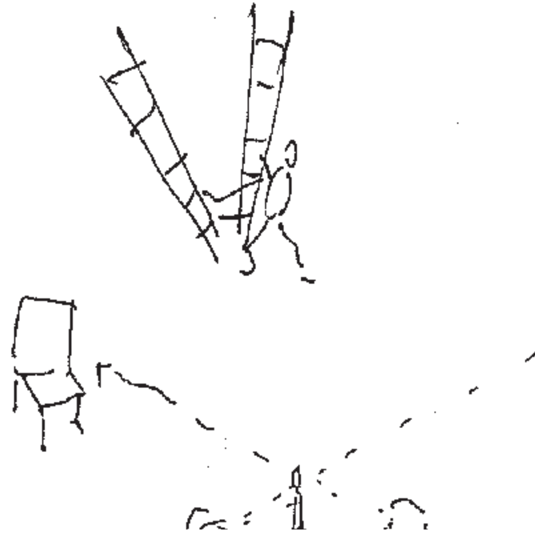


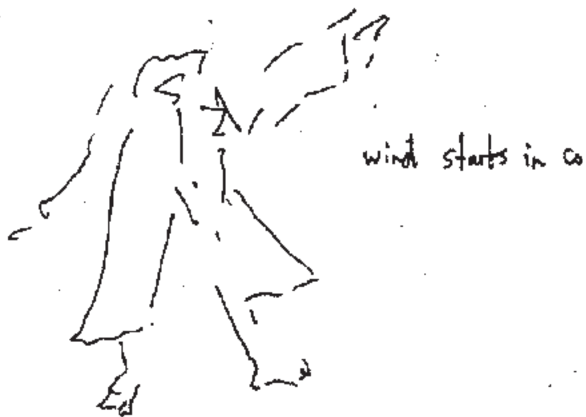
find song of wind.







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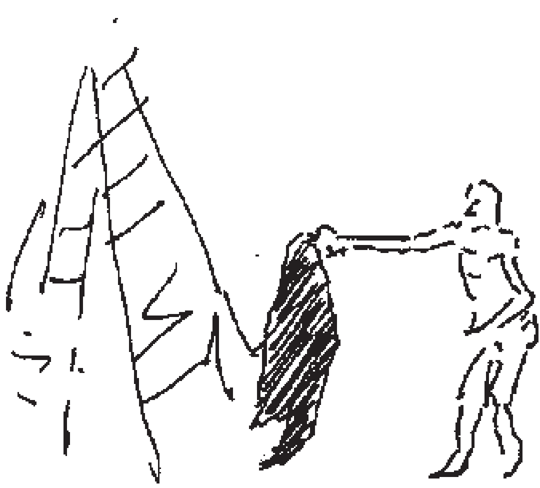

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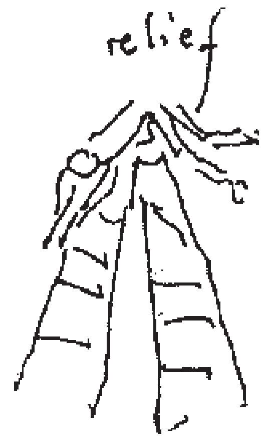

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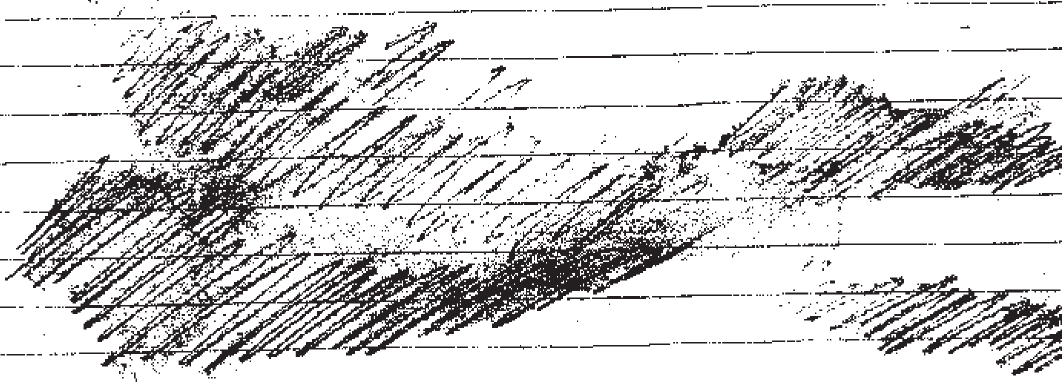


Against all Odds

An Interview with Madeeha Gauhar

Ajoka Theatre of Lahore is one of the most prominent and active theatre groups in Pakistan, which describes itself as a non-profit-making, non-commercial voluntary democratic organization. Its members, who are volunteers, come from varied classes and social backgrounds. Madeeha Gauhar is the Artistic Director. Ajoka was set up in 1983 at the height of the military dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq, at a time when 'all forms of political or social dissent were made punishable under Martial Law.'

In fact, as the Ajoka publicity brochure goes on to state: 'Free and unhindered cultural activity is a luxury which a people's theatre group can only dream of in Pakistan. The state has always considered theatre as subversive, the colonially-trained establishment has been antagonistic at any expression of popular culture and the powerful fundamentalist lobby has been openly hostile towards the performing arts. The corporate sector has never been interested in supporting any meaningful cultural activity in the country. Acting is still regarded a taboo for girls and a waste of time for boys.

'The survival of Ajoka Theatre and the parallel theatre movement in Pakistan is a story of resilience, hit-and-run tactics and personal sacrifices.'

In a country like India, which celebrates its rich and vibrant theatre traditions, it is hard to comprehend an atmosphere where theatre is officially frowned upon as unacceptable, traditional indigenous performance forms are ignored and allowed to die out unsupported, and there is no theatre history, no active theatre culture, for a contemporary group to refer to or feel part of. In the circumstances, it is only to be expected that contemporary theatre in Pakistan continues to develop slowly and in isolation.

Anjum Katyal spoke to Ms Gauhar on a recent visit to India, about the origins of Ajoka and the kind of theatre they do.

AK: When did you first feel attracted by theatre?

MG: I think . . . in my earliest memories . . . Actually, when I was about six years old and I was at the Convent of Jesus and Mary in Lahore, they used to put up an annual Christmas thing; and the year I was in Class I (I think), it was going to be Snow White. They were sort of auditioning the little ones for the little dwarfs and the creatures. And I was longing to get a part, but there was a slight discrimination in that the Catholic girls used to be preferred for these performances. And that thing always remained with me. That unfulfilled desire, you know, because I was not taken and another girl, a Catholic girl, was taken instead. Many years later I realized that the nuns used to do that. And it was like a childhood deprivation that I always remembered.

But anyhow—after that, I did start off in school, and then later on in senior classes, and, of course, in the college I went to, Kinnaird, which is quite an exclusive girls' college in Lahore and very famous from pre-Partition days as well.

AK: So within schools and colleges, drama was allowed?

MG: Yes, it was. When I was in college—I think why I got seriously involved in it later on was because I . . . During a college production (I was pretty young, hardly seventeen), a television producer had come to see the play and he sort of asked if I would like to act in a serial. And my mother was a bit hesitant but eventually she agreed, and so I started out in television and pretty soon I became quite a, I mean—

AK: —well established—

MG: Yes. While I was still in college. I hadn't even done my BA as yet.

AK: There was no problem with the college authorities about your acting?

MG: There was. Though, since I wasn't in the hostel, I was [living] at home, and it didn't really interfere with my academic work, it wasn't really all that problematic.

AK: And socially? Did you get a sense that people were not quite pleased?

MG: Yes, definitely! My relatives, my father's family and my mother's friends—They said, why are you encouraging her to go into this, girls from respectable families don't do such things. But I must say [my mother] took a stand. It was not just a matter of acting in college plays any more, it was like being seen by the whole country. And she did face criticism. She faced more of it at that stage than I did. But, of course, she was very particular, you know, about my timings, about coming home late after the recordings, certain restrictions, but still, I feel . . . This was in 1973 or so, and at that time, you know, to think of a 17-year-old going off to the television station was, I think, quite unusual.

AK: Your mother, Khadija Gauhar, is herself a writer and a social activist. Did she support you because she knew you wanted it very badly? Did you discuss it with her?

MG: Yes. I think, initially, she was hesitant [but] I was already quite involved in theatre, at college. I had started writing plays and directing as well. So it was more than the normal interest, perhaps. And, I think, with my involvement with television, she probably realized that this was something that I would really want to do. And she was always very encouraging—when we were quite small, she took me and my sister to join dance classes. Not that we continued for very long, but even that was quite a [bold step]. So she did that. We didn't turn out to be dancers, but at least we had an initial introduction.

AK: Do you think she did that because it may have been something she missed, that she would have liked, or because she felt that you liked it?

MG: You see, she's of Gujarati parentage, people who had migrated to South Africa, and she grew up in a comparatively liberal atmosphere as far as her schooling and her education was concerned [though from a] very conservative home. But I think she is a very exceptional person. If you compare her to my aunts and others who are still living in South Africa, their children are wearing the hijab now. Whereas she studied at Trafalgar High in Cape Town, which is the hotbed of the anti-apartheid struggle and the ANC. A lot of people from the ANC were there, a lot of the teachers . . . And all that turned her into a very dynamic person. She is also a creative person and there were many things that she was probably not allowed to do as a child, because my grandfather was very religious and the whole Indian/Gujarati community in Cape Town was very conservative. Then she came to Pakistan to study in an environment like Kinnaird, just post-Partition, I mean immediately after, like 1948. All the Hindu and Sikh girls had left. Only the Muslim girls were left, who were the daughters of feudal lords and . . . there was a conservative atmosphere. She felt quite out of place there in the initial years. Then, of course, she met my father in Lahore; his sisters were studying with her in college. And they got married later. That's how she just happened to be in Pakistan.

One big factor was that—as far as relatives go (which is the biggest pressure, I think, on anyone), my father's relatives were all in Peshawar. He was also a sort of rebel and, in marrying my mother, he married out of his community. He's Persian-speaking from Peshawar—of, I suppose, Iranian origin. And from a Shia family. My mother [is] Sunni. And so it was a strange sort of a match, which both their families were not very happy with, but ultimately, of course, they were reconciled. So my parents just brought us up as they felt like. My father died when I was about fourteen. I think, had he been alive, it would have been difficult for me to work on television. For his time, he was very liberal. He encouraged my mother—she gave up her education when she got married but he encouraged her to do her Masters later, and she started writing, freelancing and things like that. So he was quite encouraging, but I think that it would have been a bit too much for him to see his daughter on television. I really don't know, but I have a feeling . . .

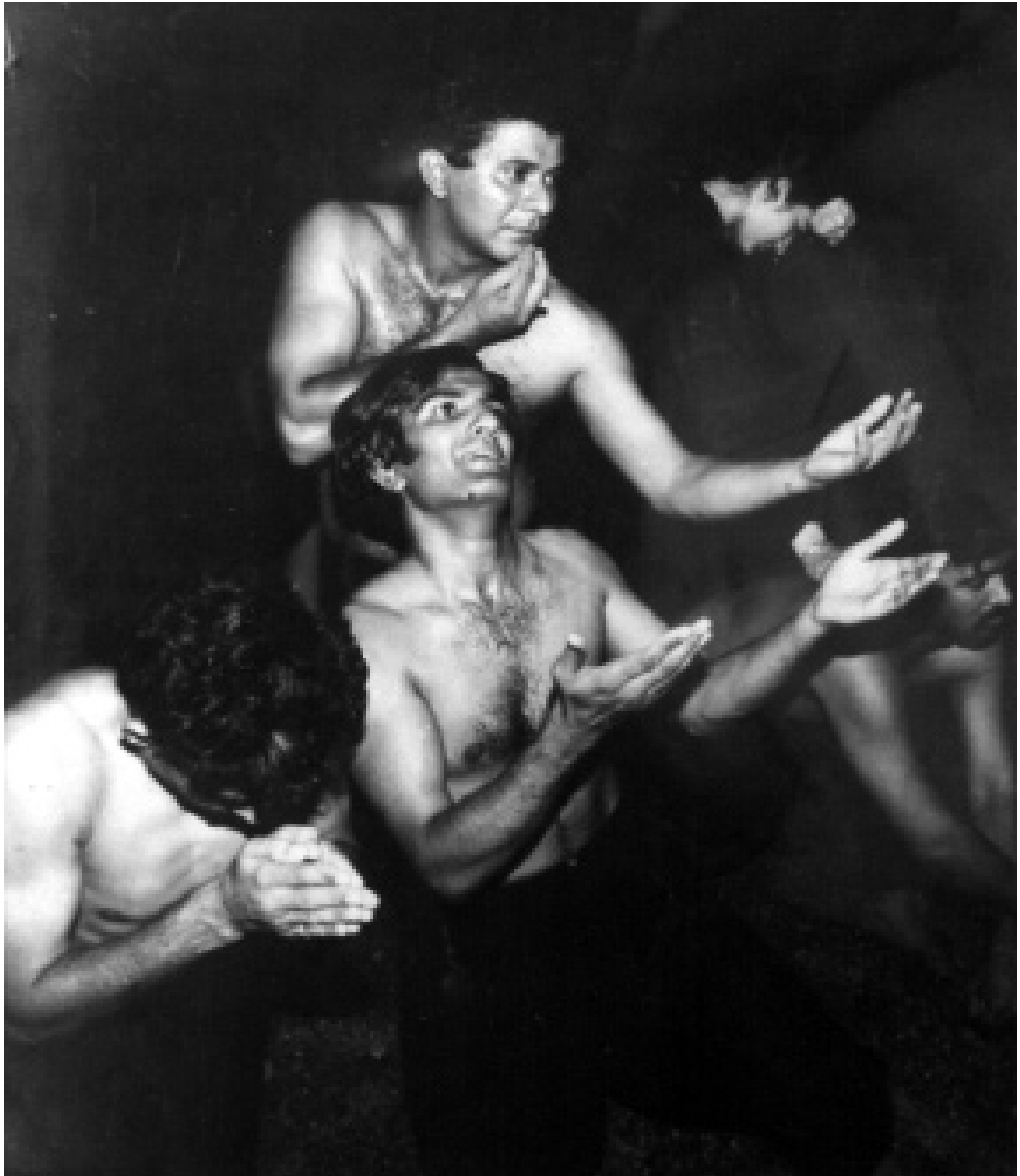
AK: It must have been even tougher for your mother. She must be a very strong person, because to do something unconservative when bringing up daughters—

MG: Yes, she was very strong, because her own friends were very critical of her. I feel that, if it had not been for her, I don't think that I . . . I have never really faced that sort of real [obstacle]; I didn't have to fight against all odds. Later on in life, when I was married, then I did face problems in my marriage but not while I was single. Except for the usual stuff while growing up and coming home late after recordings or work or rehearsals, that I suppose everyone does, but not any major hassles. She never wanted us to do certain things. I mean, she was always very keen that we should excel academically and take up some sort of a career, but whatever we wanted to do, she encouraged it.

AK: So while you were acting in TV serials, were you still continuing with your theatre?

MG: Yes, because that was in college. Soon after I finished my BA in 1975, I went off to China. We were all very influenced (again, I think, my mother's influence) by what was happening in China, and the Maoists . . . She and her friends were, I suppose, aggressive leftists in a way. And because of the political instability at that time, we knew that there was going to be a year before I could get admission into university for my MA. I couldn't sit at home, so I went and did this Chinese language course in Islamabad with the idea that they would give you scholarships to go to China. I got a scholarship and I went off. Actually, the scholarship was for about four years, to study Chinese history. This was in 1976.

I landed there the week Mao died, and I was there when this whole change took place. It



Itt (The Brick). Written and directed by Shahid Nadeem. August 1988. Also performed in Delhi in April 1989.

was the end of the cultural revolution and the new regime came into power, an extremely interesting time to be there. I was there for a year, I did a language course. Then, when it was time to go on to university . . . In those days, there was no option: you couldn't study the arts, you had to study certain subjects. The whole structure was still very, very rigid. Now I believe they've opened up and there are people studying theatre and fine arts, and everything is possible, but not at that time. So the only options I had were Chinese History, International History, and things like that. After a year, even though I enjoyed myself immensely, and it really was a different world altogether, I was then about 21-22 and I think I felt that this is not really what I wanted to do. It was fine for a year, the experience. Because there was no other way of getting into China, you could only go there either as a diplomat or as a student. You couldn't get tourist visas, it was still very closed. So I think I felt that this was not really my line, and I came back after finishing my language course.

AK: What are your main impressions of China? Anything that fed into your later work?

MG: Well, in a way, because it was such an important phase in Chinese history. Because we'd literally been brought up thinking that China is IT, you know. Of course, there were certain things that really impressed you. I mean there was no prostitution, and you could leave something anywhere and no one would steal it. But at the same time . . . my room-mate was a Chinese girl from a little village in the north. She was really simple. And her mother used to send me boiled eggs and things like that. Then there was another girl who was in the opposite room and she was a beautiful girl from Shanghai. She was pretty sophisticated and she used to borrow our lipstick, because they weren't allowed to use any make-up or wear coloured clothes. They just had to go around in that Mao uniform. But not the foreign students. I was at the Peking Language Institute, so there were a lot of foreign students there as well as Chinese students, learning different languages.

But this girl—talking to her, you could feel the longing of a young woman who wanted to wear nice things. And she would take out jewellery but check to see that there was no one around and just wear it because she couldn't dare step out of the hostel or the room. If anyone had seen her, she would have come in for a lot of criticism. And my-room mate was just a simple peasant girl, it didn't interest her at all because, for her, it was such a great big thing to come from a village into a language institute in Beijing and see foreigners for the first time in her life . . .

At the time there was this whole campaign to denounce the cultural revolution, [though] not in such a big way as later on. But you could see and feel how things had really gone wrong during the cultural revolution. And, for the first time, people started talking about it and things started coming out in the open. It's amazing when you think back. Then they started giving demonstrations of traditional Chinese art, which had been totally prohibited, because only poster art was allowed. So for the foreigners, they held [exhibitions]. The old artists were brought out. And I remember going to this institution, Institute of Fine Arts or something, and we were shown how they did their traditional paintings on rice paper and all that. It was all just starting. At that time, of course, there was no question of Beijing Opera or any of their traditional forms. I mean, the forms were there, but they were being used in those, sort of, ballets. Like the famous The East is Red, The Detachment of Women and The White-Haired Girl. These were all operas produced and created under the guidance of Jiang Chin, Mao's wife, a very powerful woman. And the poster campaigns were very interesting because they continued with the tradition of the cultural revolution. Everyone used to be criticised and denounced through these campaigns. So in every factory, institution, college, school, university, whatever, there were these huge walls meant for posters.

The whole vilification of the Gang of Four had started, so there were these extremely interesting posters being put up and these broadcasts over the loudspeaker. Early in the morning, everyone gets up and does exercises and you are fed all that . . . propaganda, basically! We also used to get that. So it was an interesting period, and I think one of the reasons why I left (apart from probably realizing that I was trying to find my own bearings) was also a disappointment with what we had thought that China had been. And now you were actually discovering the reality but [there was a sense of] disappointment at the way in which they were swinging to the other extreme. Of course, they hadn't yet started attacking Mao, which they did later on. At that point, Chou En Lai had really become the hero, a much revered and loved figure (we were surprised to discover), much more than Mao, actually. People had much more respect and love for him. So, yes, one was full of contradictory feelings. . .

AK: So what you're saying is you felt a combination: the idealism with which you'd associated that country and then the contradictions of seeing that idealism slightly tarnished, and also unhappiness that the earlier values were being attacked.

MG: Yes, because what happened then . . . I've been back to China many times after that. In 1991, Shahid [Nadeem, her husband] was working for Amnesty International in Hong Kong for two years. While we were there, we went [to China] very frequently. Before that, in fact, when we'd just got married, in 1987, was the first time I went back after 1977. After ten years. So I've been visiting China often, and my last visit was for the Women's Conference, two years ago. So I've seen it grow and evolve and become a totally different world now. The first time I went back after ten years, I was quite shocked at the changes.

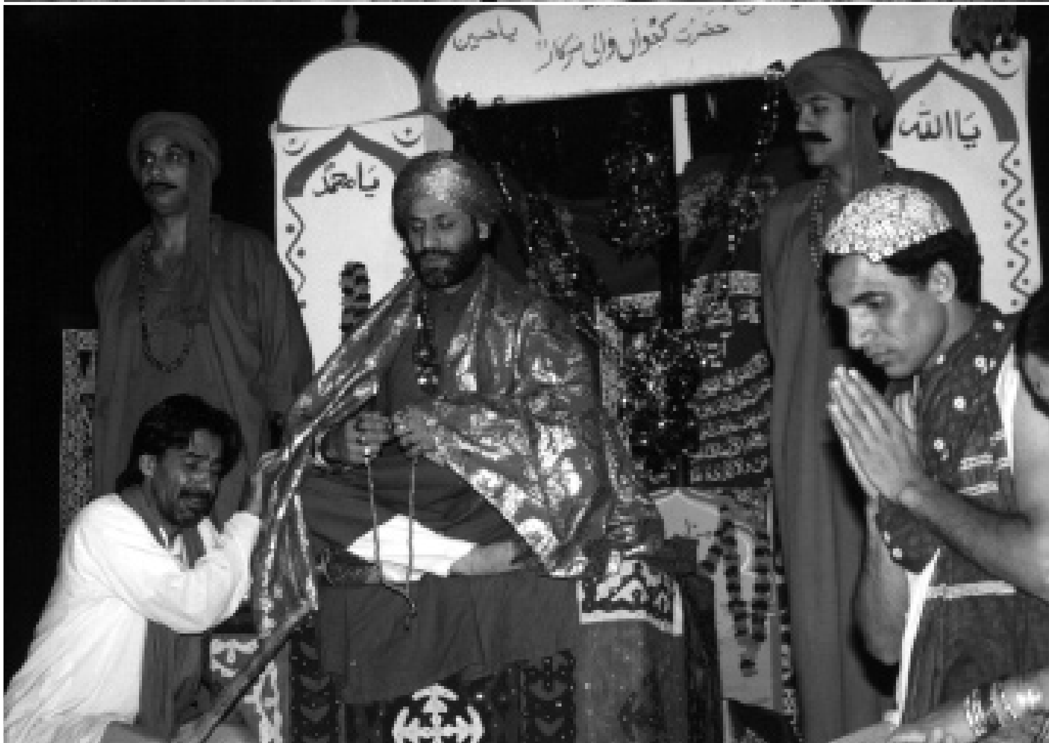
AK: Shocked in what way?

MG: For one, it's become a much more open society, gradually, through the years. Initially, you're quite impressed because you see all this development and you see people [being] more open and you see women wearing whatever they want. And then you start seeing the ugly side of it as well, because you see prostitution, then you see McDonalds, and all these things are pretty visible.

My connection with China has lasted over 20 years now, and we've travelled quite extensively, we've seen that there's a great difference between the cities and the rural areas. A great difference. I mean, there you can still find people in their blue traditional jackets, because, after all, that's part of traditional Chinese wear. And [there is] poverty, not, of course, as stark as in the subcontinent, but even so. Compared to the affluence in the bigger cities, compared to the little fat children (you know their one-child policy—they're over-fed and over-dressed), the big skyscrapers coming up in Beijing and the shopping malls. We travelled very extensively and went into these smaller villages, where you feel more at home and you remember what it was like twenty years ago. Because it is as if time has stood still. They even have more children. They've not been able to control that in the rural areas really, because I think people still feel (as they do here) that children are their wealth and their investment, and they'd rather pay the fines than restrict themselves to one child. There's obviously not so much control. So it was a fascinating experience.

Anyhow, I decided not to spend the next four years of my life just studying Chinese history. I came back to Pakistan and got admission into Government College to do my Masters in English Literature, much to my mother's disappointment, in a way. Because she had thought that I would probably go on to study something like Economics, but I just didn't have the slightest inclination to do so.

Government College is also one of the old, renowned colleges here. Every second person you meet is from Government College, especially all the old retired bureaucrats and all the



Above. Dekh Tamasha Chalta Ban. A play on religious tolerance written by Shahid Nadeem and directed by Madeeha Gauhar. First performance, November 1992.
Below. Kaala Mainda Bhes. Written by Shahid Nadeem and directed by Madeeha Gauhar. First performance, May 1996.

intellectuals, especially in Punjab and in Delhi. When I joined Government College, Martial Law had just come in, it was 1977-78. [During] my two years there, you could feel very tangibly the effects of Martial Law on the educational system, on the attitudes, through the restrictions. I had gone to Government College with great hopes and plans, because Government College Dramatic Club, the GCDC, is a very famous institution. A lot of renowned people also came from there, I think Balraj Sahni was in GCDC. But there were these terrible restrictions and work had just stopped. I was also joint editor of The Ravi, which was the magazine there, a very liberal magazine. And I resigned because of the restrictions, because you couldn't publish and write or say what you wanted to. So I just resigned. I could have gone on to become editor, but I just couldn't function in that atmosphere.

AK: So when you say restrictions, do you mean wanting to see the scripts or just a general . . .?

MG: No, just a general atmosphere of 'this is not to be done'. Under Martial Law, the first thing which they banned on television—it was so symbolic—was this Kathak dance programme called Payal. That just was an indication of what was to come: women had to wear dupattas on television, and saris were banned. I used to wear a lot of saris on television even at that age, when I was acting—I had been acting throughout—and then we couldn't wear saris any more. Strange . . . the concept of a dress code emerged on television and, of course, [there was] very strict censorship. Every script used to be just scored through with red lines and lots of pages cut out, paragraphs cut out.

AK: Was the censorship on political or on moral and religious lines?

MG: Moral, religious and political, of course, mainly political. And this whole thing of promoting Islamic ideology, which basically meant very reactionary writers started coming to the forefront. During Bhutto's time, whatever else went wrong, there was a much more progressive attitude and approach, which was reflected on television as well. But now they really cut down everything. So women in colleges had to wear [if you were] teachers (after my MA, I was immediately appointed as a lecturer) either a chadar or those medical coats, you know those white coats. I wore neither. All I used to wear was a dupatta. But you had to wear a chadar and I remember really getting into a clash with the Principal, and I said, I just refuse to. Saris you couldn't wear to college. These were instructions the women government servants had to obey.

In Government College, my main problem was that they were completely discouraging any sort of activities like debates, drama, anything. We, in fact, wanted to do Sartre's Men without Shadows. Now that also talks about resistance, to the establishment and to the military, specifically, it's about the resistance movement during World War II, collaborators and all that. Although we were going to do it in English, it was a very powerful and strong script. And we were rehearsing on our own. Somehow word got to the Principal, and just a day before the performance, the night before, he had the hall locked. When we went there that evening for rehearsal, we found it was locked. So we really created a great hue and cry and broke the lock because we had already sent out invitations and all that. And despite his not wanting us to do it, we still did it. And it was quite a breakthrough. I directed. We'd got some old college students to come to act in it. By that time, I was banned from television, because they had banned a lot of progressive people who were either writing for or acting on television, people like Faiz Ahmed Faiz's daughter and son-in-law, Salima and Shoaib Hashmi. Then other playwrights, progressive playwrights, were banned, actors were banned.

I'd finished college by then and this was the early 80s, and I was working as a lecturer. And this was the time when the women's movement, the Women's Action Forum, had started. It was the first, and the only, big platform for different women's organizations. They came together in

the early 80s, and formed the Women's Action Forum as a reaction against the laws which were relegating women to second-class status, like the Law of Evidence, the Had'ud Laws, the impending Shariat Bill, which was later introduced. All these were very detrimental to women and women's rights. And in 1983, by the time I had finished my Masters and was teaching at a girls' college, there was this demonstration of women which was lathi-charged. And it became quite famous internationally because it was one of the first organized [women's protests in Pakistan], although there were not that many women, about three-four hundred. A sort of voice against Martial Law, really. I was there and I was easily recognizable because of my [work on] television and all that, so they arrested me. I was charge-sheeted, because government servants are not allowed to participate in demonstrations and political activities. Of course, that takes some time, they can't throw you out instantly! At the second demonstration I went in a burqa so that they wouldn't recognize me, but the burqa fell off. They came to my house and arrested me.

That time a lot of us were sent into Kot Lakhpat, where Bhutto had been. People like Asma Jahangir and her sister, Hina Gilani, and many of these women activists were with us, and Rubina Saigal, who has now become quite an authority on women's studies in Pakistan. So there were 14 of us and we were all locked up for about a week. That actually proved to be an inspiration for our play, Bari, because of what I experienced there . . . Because we were initially taken to the C-class jail with the common prisoners, the so-called criminal women. But then we were shifted, because they give you B-class, political status.

We were just there for a week. We were in one barrack, so we had a whale of a time, giving galis to the jail authorities, who were most amused [at] all these women coming in. The first night I was a bit—you know, because you didn't know what was going to happen and what was happening to a lot of people. But the same thing happened that happens today: the question of 'class' comes in. Most of us were from [good families]. Rubina Saigal was from one of the top industrialist families. Asma Jahangir was very actively involved in the women's movement. They were all very well-connected. There were one or two amongst us who were from the Peoples' Party, but the rest of us were not affiliated with any political party as such. That was the time when a lot of people from the Peoples' Party had been arrested, put in jails, women workers had been raped and molested. But we were not in that category. Anyhow, when I was arrested for the second time, I was thrown out of my job.

AK: When did this arrest take place?

MG: October 1983, I think. This was now also the beginning of the MRD [the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy]. And the two things sort of [went together] . . . I was arrested because of a demonstration which we had staged to protest the killings of young students in Sind by the military. So this [demonstration] was one of the first of its kind. Simultaneously, of course, the whole political party also got activated and our theatre also started. It was all at the same time.

Meanwhile I had also got married to a class fellow. We were together at Government College and he was an Ahmadi. His family never accepted me, so we just went and got married on our own. My mother was pretty cut up about it because she felt that it was the wrong match, and she was proved right in the end. Anyhow, at that time, of course, no one listens. We both did our Masters together and he went on to join the Civil Services. When I was arrested, he was actually an Assistant Commissioner, so it became quite problematic for him to have a wife who was . . . but, anyhow, even if he was not supportive, he didn't really stop me. I think it would have been difficult to stop me, in any case.

That was an interesting point in my life, because we were married for just about three years,

and most of that time we were away because he was on his different postings. And then, in 1984, I got the British Council Scholarship to go to London, and it was at the time when I was being thrown out of my job, because they asked me to apologize and to give a written [commitment] that I would not participate in such activities again, which I refused to do. We started Ajoka—which means aaj ka, contemporary—that same year; at the end of 1983-84, we did our first production.

AK: Who were the first people to start it?

MG: Apart from me, there was a person called Salman Shahid, who was just there for the initial year or so, an actor and director. A boy called Rana Fawwad, students, mostly young students. Rashid Rehman, the editor of one of our leading English dailies now. So there were about six-seven of us, basically. Rubina Saigal was there also.

AK: So tell me, what was the impulse to start Ajoka? What was the thought behind it?

MG: For six years I'd been involved with theatre in college, in both Kinnaird and Government College. I had made many breakthroughs even at that point, because in Kinnaird we never used to do anything except in English. I think, pre-Partition, there had been a couple of Punjabi or Urdu plays done, but after Partition the first play that was ever staged in Kinnaird—in Urdu and Punjabi—was [mine]. I had written it along with a friend of mine, and I directed it. It was called Sirab, which means 'mirage'. It was a girl's story, about a woman who comes from the village. They are refugees from the 1965 war and she's seduced by her employer's son. A simple little story. But anyway, it was quite a break. For one, it was the first time you were talking about reality, what was happening in our society and the way servants are regularly abused and used. And also, the language . . . It was shocking also because this girl gets pregnant and, you know, to talk about that in a college! So in that way—

AK: So that was one breakthrough.

MG: That was one breakthrough. Then, when I went to Government College, the first play [we did] was in English, but the second play that we wanted to do was in Punjabi. Actually, it was a translation of a Bengali play.

I had finished my academic life, so the one outlet that I had was now gone. I mean, you could do your plays through the college dramatics society, and apart from that . . . Yes, the other bit that I was talking about was that I directed The House of Bernard Alva in Kinnaird, which again was not usual. You know, full-length plays were never directed on such a large scale by students. It was always the teachers who used to do it. And the choice of Bernard Alva! It was International Women's Year. So I connected with that and got Rs.300 from the college to put it up! We did it in English. But it was also a very relevant play, not really [like] doing Lady Windermere's Fan or The Importance of Being Earnest, you know, the usual sort of stuff. So that was quite shocking to that very cloistered sort of existence, the ivory-tower life which these girls in colleges can lead. So I already had that urge to speak out, particularly about women, through theatre. I think that was already there.

So now that my academic life had come to an end, I was at a loss because there was no platform. Television was out because I had been banned. And anyway, the sort of things that were going on in television, even were I not banned, I think I would have refused, because it was really unbearable, the sort of propaganda being churned out and the sort of values being promoted. For someone with my sort of consciousness and my leanings—I just couldn't. It was nauseating, literally, what was happening on television. There were plays, they were called aur drama, aur, you know, just aur. And these were written by Ishwaque Ahmed Gadariya, who, incidentally, was one of the great Urdu short-story writers. His story Gadaria is one of the classics of Urdu literature, in which he talks about a Hindu teacher at the time of Partition and what happened and [he is] very sympathetic to the whole question of anti-fundamentalism.

But he took an about-turn and, despite his stature and his renown as one of the leading short-story writers of the subcontinent, he became a mouthpiece for the Zia government and he started churning out these aur dramas, which were just basically long sermons. The standard dialogue was four pages. For television! These characters would just go on speaking and speaking and voicing these platitudes and cliches, and the terminology, and the themes also! Anything progressive—educated women, for instance, educated mothers, working mothers are a danger to society because they leave their children and they neglect their homes, and it's better to remain poor: which were really lethal [ideas]. It's better to remain poor because you are content with what you have, you don't want anything. Look at the gareeb admi: all he wants is Allah and nothing else. I mean, you know, really lethal. And these sermons became a matter for jokes. In the long term, I don't know what effect they had, but at that time people were pretty irritated. But people used to still watch, because there was no alternative. There were no satellite [channels], nothing, there was no video, and Doordarshan you could only see in Lahore and near the border. So those channels were totally closed.

In college I had managed, despite the restrictions, despite whatever the prohibitions were, to do what I wanted to. That play I was talking about, Jungle da Rakha, that was also very significant. It's a Bengali play, written by Saeed Ahmed, who is a well-known playwright in Bangladesh now. It had been translated into Punjabi by another progressive poet and playwright in Pakistan called Najm Hosain Syed. Basically, it's a story of a jungle and animals, but it's all allegorical. It was banned. We were still rehearsing it and, when the Principal got to know about it and saw the script, he banned it. I had almost left college by that time, my results were out, so it was just abandoned. I mean, it was banned, he didn't allow us to go on with it.

Anyway, by that time I was pretty actively involved with the women's movement in as much as [I was] participating in demonstrations and going off to jail, or there were meetings and so on, but I think that part of me wanted an outlet also. My creative self, the performing artiste inside me . . . So I think that's when we . . .

There was really [stringent] censorship against the Press. So there was no form of expression, really. And I felt that just participating in demonstrations was not really enough for me. I mean, I'm not really a political animal in that way. That's when I started thinking, why not start doing our own thing? Because we wanted to do a play.

In fact, we had started rehearsing Juloos [Badal Sircar's Michhil] with some of the students just when I had finished with Government College and we didn't have [any] space [to rehearse in]. We couldn't go into Government College, so we just went ahead and started rehearsing it. And then, while rehearsing it the idea came to me, why not start our own group? In fact, the name Ajoka, it's a very interesting and strange coincidence. In the early 70s, when I was still in school, Shahid [Nadeem] and a group of people, had set up a planned theatre group, done everything, made a constitution and all that, but they never actually got down to doing a production. (Amongst them was this famous lawyer, Aizaz Ahsan, who's a senator in the Peoples' Party, he's quite a prominent person in the Party now. In fact he's written a book now, The Indus Saga, in which he's trying to say that this was always a separate area, the Indus area. So [he] and a few other young intellectuals set this up and it was called Ajoka. Shahid named it. I didn't know that, just as I never knew that Shahid had ever worked on television. He was a producer on television but we never met. Somehow or the other, we never met.

Years later, I met Shahid in London in 1985—by that time, Ajoka had got quite a lot of media coverage in papers [and] magazines like The Herald, the slightly more progressive ones. And he was in England at that time, in exile. So he used to wonder who these people were. He knew about me, because I was known as an actress, but where did you start this Ajoka from?

This is what we wanted to do so many years ago, like in 1970-71. And we were never able to do it. I think maybe they did one play, Shahid's own play Mara Hua Kutta, his first play, which he'd written when he was a student. So it was a strange coincidence. Later on, we got married and he started writing for Ajoka. It was a very strange and uncanny sort of a connection.

So we did Juloos on the lawns of my mother's house. Again, she was very encouraging and audiences were just invited through word of mouth about seven-eight days before. At first we didn't even know how the audience was going to react, it was a very different form for people there. Nothing like this had ever been done. It was a highly political play and we had adapted it. We showed army men instead of policemen and things like that, showed a Maulvi in-between and [changed] the dialogue and everything. It's all there, anyway, but we made it more hard-hitting and relevant. Two-three days later, the Special Branch and such people had reached there to enquire about what was happening. By that time, it was at the tail-end and it was finishing. But they got the names of all the people who had come to see it and the registration numbers of the cars and motorcycles. It was an event, you see, of its own kind.

AK: And it was on your mother's lawn?

MG: On my mother's lawn. It could accommodate about a hundred people or so. The play was done in the round, and people were sitting on the ground and on charpais on whatever they could get hold of in the house. And I think it was the success of Juloos and the tremendous response that we received from the audience that was the incentive that made us continue with this work, made us decide that it's not going to be a one-off thing as usually happens. There was no concept of group theatre at the time—that there is a group, and you do plays, mostly for a purpose.

Our second play was an original work by a person called Sarmad Sehbai, who had been writing in the 60s and 70s. It was a Punjabi play, Panjva Chirag. Again we did it in that lawn. It was directed by Salman Shayed. The audience began to come in such numbers that there wasn't enough place to accommodate them. And then the magistrate arrived, saying you cannot do this in a residential area. So now we had to think about what to do. We stopped that play after three days.

That was when I left for England. I had got my scholarship, I had lost my job, they had asked me to give an apology and sign a bond, but I just didn't do it and I went off. I thought it was a brilliant opportunity. It was a scholarship for theatre studies.

This was 1984 or 1985. I went off to do my Masters. And everyone thought that was the end of Ajoka, now that we had done two plays. Because it was in my mother's house and basically I was the main person pushing it. So there were these articles [which said] that this used to happen and now it's over and so on. But the group continued working after I had gone, because the next year Faiz died and on his next birth anniversary, during my absence, they planned a play, Jahan Se Shahr Ko Dekho, which was based on Faiz's poetry. And through his poetry, the history of Pakistan, which was quite an ambitious venture. My sister, Faryal Gauhar, directed it. (She later became quite a star, actually, and now she's making her own films.) She directed it and it was not allowed to be staged in Lahore. Because you needed an auditorium to do it, there was a lot of dance and movement, and you needed proper lighting and everything. Whichever auditorium we went to, they would tell us to get [clearance] because of the Dramatic Performances Act. When they saw the script, with this poetry . . . we couldn't do it. But we did it in Karachi at the Progressive Writers' golden jubilee celebrations. Some people had gone from India, too. This was while I was not there. It was a great success. So it was obvious that Ajoka hadn't died. I mean, they were still pulling on, even without me.

And in the mean while, I completed my year of MA, during which I even came to Calcutta,

as I was doing my thesis on western influences on Indian theatre, and met people like Probir Guha and Badal Sircar.

That was 1985. Then I came back to Pakistan and we did our first production of Brecht, The Caucasian Chalk Circle. Because it was Brecht, and because space had become a problem at my mother's house (they had completely stopped it there, and in any case, the audience had grown and couldn't be accommodated), we approached the Goethe Institute and they gave us the space to rehearse and to perform. They had a big lawn outside, they didn't have an auditorium, and we improvised a stage on their terrace. Later, we built a mud stage in a corner, it's very beautiful. There's a mango tree, and trees in the middle of the stage. Unfortunately, they are now closing it down, which is a great setback for us, really. It's heartbreaking. So we just started off from there.

I was away for a year and my husband was in Pakistan. I think we separated about a year later. In fact, he was a musician also, played the sitar quite well. And he also got a scholarship to go and study Ethnomusicology in London. I went back with him. I was basically away for almost two years, but I stayed on in Lahore to do The Caucasian Chalk Circle and we did this Faiz production again. Then we were able to do it. And then we did Imtiaz Khan's To This Night A Dawn, a play on South Africa which I had directed during my student days when I was in Government College. I had done it with the foreign students in the Punjab University. They asked me to direct it. It was very interesting. It had a mixture of Palestinians and Iraqis and Somalis and South African students, and some Pakistanis too. It was really wonderful. At that time, of course, we did it in English but then we had it translated into Urdu and we did it again.

So I did all these things and then went back to join Khalid, my first husband, in London. And we started having problems, mainly this tremendous pressure from his family. They wanted me to convert and become an Ahmedi. Basically, I am nothing. I suppose, technically, I am a Shia because my father was one, but otherwise mine was a very secular sort of upbringing because my mother is a very non-religious person. For Pakistan, we were brought up in a very strange way because we were not taught our namaaz, we were not taught to read the Koran—I don't know my namaaz even now. So it was a totally a-religious atmosphere. And he came from a very religious, very conservative family. And they said, all right even if she does not become an Ahmedi, she should leave TV and all that stuff. I was not acting anyway, because they had banned me. So they thought, she's not acting because it was our wish. But later, when theatre began to be a major part of my life again, and there was quite a lot of publicity in the Press, there was a lot of pressure on him to make me conform. And ultimately, when we were in England, away from all sorts of pressures, I think we probably really sat down and thought about our future, how we would carry on. Because his family was extremely important to him. And I couldn't see how I was going to compromise to that level. To be fair to him, even when we got married, he had hinted at the possibilities of these sort of expectations from me. But, you know, love and all that . . . you don't consider . . . And these were exactly the things that my mother was afraid of, you see. But, of course, you don't listen to anyone at that age. Then afterwards, these problems come up in a big way, these pressures and these expectations. I think we just sort of decided that it was best to separate. So, when we came back in 1986, we decided to split.

I had met Shahid when my relationship with Khalid was really fizzling out. And we'd got to know each other. At that point he was in England as a political exile. He'd really gone through a bad time during Martial Law because he was very actively involved with trade union activities within television, and he was a student leader—he was always quite an activist. And he had been in and out of Ayub Khan's prison in the student movement in 1968. When Martial Law was announced, the workers tried to take over television stations all over Pakistan. That was

Above. Baza King. An adaptation of Brecht's Arturo Ui by Shahid Nadeem, directed by Madeeha Gauhar. Performed in March 1998. Below. Aik Thi Nani. Directed by Madeeha Gauhar in April 1998.

ruthlessly suppressed and they were all thrown into this very high-security prison, the worst in Pakistan, Mianwali Jail. There he had to undergo a year of rigorous imprisonment. They were sentenced to lashes but that was not carried out. But he was doing hard labour. Finally he was released. There were other people with him as well. They threw him out of his job, threw him out of TV, and he went into political exile. He got asylum in England and started working for Amnesty International.

He had written the first play that Ajoka did, Mara Hua Kutta. It's interesting and strange, you know, these connections! As a schoolgirl, when I was in my Senior Cambridge [class] at that time, I must have been about fifteen, I had gone to see this festival of one-act plays, student productions, which was held at Kinnaird. He was at the university at that time, he had entered this play from the university. And it was a very good play. And I remember, after I started directing plays and getting involved in theatre, we were always looking around for scripts because no one in Pakistan was writing. There was only Sarmad Sehbai, no one else. And I remember asking people, the person who wrote that play, where had he disappeared? Then, later, of course, I got to know that he was in television and he'd gone away. But we never met, even though we were working right at the same centre. He was not a drama producer at that time, he was doing documentaries.

When I met him in London, through the Pakistani community there, he had just written two plays at that point, Mara Hua Kutta and Teesri Dastak. That, too, [was written] during his student days in university. After that he came into TV and he just completely stopped. And then, of course, he went off to jail and to England. And I said, oh, you are the person who wrote that play—why don't you write again? By that time we had started Ajoka. I said, we really need texts, we keep going to India to get scripts. There are so many things of our own that we should be able to talk about and your play was so good. Why don't you write for us? So actually, that's how it started, our romance or whatever. While we were discussing how to do Bari. He wrote it really brilliantly because of his own experience in prison. You know, all the technicalities of what happens, and how they deal with you

And, by that time, he was separated from his wife. She had gone back to Pakistan with their children, and my marriage was on the verge of breaking up. So it was very natural, but I was quite hesitant. And when I told my mother, she threw a fit because she thought this is even worse, this is from the frying-pan into the fire. A married man with children. Shahid was well-known for his political views, he'd been in and out of jail all his life, so [he was] not quite the ideal husband. And she said, take your time. Why are you jumping straight from one marriage into another? But I said, why waste time? I think this is the right choice this time. I was older (I think I was about twenty-nine at that point), and I thought I was sensible enough. Anyhow, how does one know whether a marriage will work or not?

AK: So when you came back you brought Bari with you as a script?

MG: No, Shahid took about a month or so to finish it after I came back and he sent the script later. He mailed it together with [a letter] asking me to marry him. And I, sort of not knowing, because nothing had been settled. So it was a strange time.

We did Bari in March 1987. And he did not see Bari then because he still couldn't come back to Pakistan. We made a video of sorts, which he saw. And that summer Bari was a great success.

AK: And this was at Goethe Institute?

MG: At Goethe Institute.

AK: What kind of audiences did you get?

MG: At that point in time, it was mainly an activist sort of an audience. The middle-class intellectuals, working class, political activists, students, a lot of women, women activists, women workers, Peoples' Party and all that. The atmosphere was very charged. In the larger context, the prison can be taken as a metaphor for society. And it doesn't talk about just what is happening because of Martial Law or that peculiar situation, but it can be done in any point in time because it talks about women. Traditional, patriarchal society, what happens there. The contemporary input was really this woman activist who was thrown into prison with these common criminal women and how she . . . It's a journey to discover not only the reality and the story of the real women of our country, but also a journey within herself to come to terms with the contradictions within her as a middle-class activist who has her own notions of justice or her own value-judgements, morality. At the same time, it's also a critique of the women's movement. Because it was criticizing this slightly elitist approach, of not really going out and working amongst the people. And unfortunately, to a great extent, this is what it has remained. Woman's Action Forum is more or less middle-class, upper-middle-class, educated, western-educated. It has made a valuable contribution, but it's not been able to permeate down into any sort of grassroot-level activity. There are other organizations, particularly in Sind, which have done that, but not like what you might have here in India or even what one sees in Bangladesh. A lot of women have now formed their own NGOs, doing research, data-collecting, resource centres, all that. It's even got somewhat diffused, the whole struggle. So though it was ten-eleven years ago, it was, even at that time, a critique of what was happening.

Throughout I had remained a member of WAF but I was now less actively involved because Ajoka was really picking up, and I was doing more and more work with Ajoka. But we always worked very closely despite our differences, and there were many differences at certain points in time. At one point, WAF split into two because of this whole question of secularism, and people like Asma Jehangir and myself and Rubina Saigal split from WAF. Because there were quite a few women who said that whatever interpretation we give to our rights, we should do it through Islam. We wanted to start out from a totally secular point of view, the notion of contemporary human rights and the equality of women, and leave religion aside, because we felt that once you get into that, there are many pitfalls and you get caught in them in your interpretations. And you can't fight the maulvi on his own ground. But this is actually what women in a lot of Muslim countries are trying to do. In fact there's this whole organization called Muslim Women Living Under Muslim Law, and this is their point of view, to give your own interpretation of Islam. We were totally opposed to that. We wanted the word 'secular' to be included in the constitution of WAF. Quite a few people were opposing it, people who were perhaps not so radical or did not want to tread on too many toes, moderates, among whom the founder-members of WAF were also included. But in the end, we prevailed and it was included because we felt it was something very important. Because the word 'secular' in Pakistan is considered a form of abuse. Even now, the very meaning of the word is mistaken to mean anti-religion, and people dare not use this word openly. There are very few people who would use it openly. I mean, we've used it in the Ajoka brochure, and WAF ultimately included it after a lot of pressure from us. Earlier it was 'apolitical'. We said, what is 'apolitical'? You can say you're not affiliated to any political party, but how can you . . . there was a long discussion [on] these two terms.

I got quite put off with all this. Through my theatre work, I then tried to . . . I felt that I was doing much more meaningful work, even if it's for women, for the women's cause. Bari was used a lot, since we had made a video of it. Even in India, quite a few people like Kamala Bhasin used it in various workshops. So it was, I think, as far as women's groups were concerned, quite a useful sort of a thing.

And then what happened? Then, as far as my personal life is concerned, soon after that I decided that I was going to marry Shahid. My divorce had come through and so had his, and in 1987 we got married in London, and then we came back to Pakistan. Shahid was quite [nervous]. I mean we were wondering what would happen, hoping that he wouldn't be arrested, but nothing happened. He left his job and he came back, not really knowing what was going to happen next. But within a year Zia-ul-Haque died, then Benazir came to power and her government re-employed many of the people who had been thrown out for political reasons. Shahid was also re-employed as a producer on television. This was in 1989.

And meanwhile, he had started writing plays, amongst them Itt (The Brick) on bonded labour, which we brought to India on Safdar Hashmi's first birthday after he was killed, as a tribute, because we'd met him. That was the first time we performed here. And we came totally on our own, spending our own money, on trains. In fact, my son was just three months old at that time and he was carted along as well. We performed in the open, in the round, at Mandi House.

At that time Shahid had also written Chullah. About a lower-middle-class woman, whose life revolves around the stove and the kitchen, her thoughts, her relationship with her mother-in-law, and all the time, off-stage, there is this other story of bride-burning, and the sweeperess who is not allowed to enter the kitchen, but who is her link to the outside world, and who keeps her abreast of the developments over the bride-burning case; and her own reactions . . .

AK: So the choice of doing women-related themes has been part of Ajoka right from the beginning?

MG: Yes. It has. Predominantly our work has been related to this area. Even in Kala Mainda Bhes, the basic story is about the exchange of a woman for an ox. So somewhere or the other, this preoccupation appears. And Shahid writes with tremendous empathy for women.

AK: Do you feel, when you use his material, that your being a woman gives it certain inflections, certain emphases?

MG: I think so. Because whatever he [writes], whenever he writes, we always discuss. It's a process in which we're both involved, maybe a couple of other people, but mainly myself and him. Invariably what happens is, we first discuss. Sometimes even the idea is mine, like the basic story of Ek Thi Nani was mine.

Sometimes it's my idea, sometimes it's his, but once he starts writing, then of course . . . sometimes Shahid writes in one go. He'll sit down for a few days and write, and then, of course, he reads it to me. Then I sort of suggest or whatever . . .

AK: Is the rehearsal improvised?

MG: Most of our plays are scripted so we don't really improvise to that extent. But of course some dialogues or words do come in. Especially in the comedies, because some of our boys have a tremendous sense of humour, I allow it as a director. Sometimes things creep in. But that's maybe just a line here or a line there or a word here: things like that. Otherwise, because most of our plays have songs and things, they're all written by Shahid.

AK: Have you ever been tempted to try a totally improvised play, either the theme or the whole structure?

MG: Yes, we've done that. We've done shorter plays like that, on particular issues. The whole group has just got together and done it.

There was one called Talaq. It was on talaq and we were doing it with Asma Jehangir's group of paralegal workers, who work in villages. They wanted us to do little plays telling

women about their existing rights which, as you know, they're not aware of. So that was a play which the whole group got together and wrote and did together.

AK: Are there other occasions where you've done plays of this sort, on specific issues, on women's rights?

MG: Yes. For instance, we've done [a play] on family planning for an NGO. They gave us a free hand to do what we wanted, and it turned into a very nice play called Jam Jam Jeeve Jammanpura. Again, Shahid wrote it. They just wanted us to do a short play but it turned into a full-length play which was later converted into a serial for television which ran for about 32 episodes and was very successful. Most of the Ajoka boys made their entry in a big way into TV with that serial.

AK: So now your actors act regularly on TV and theatre?

MG: They act on television as well. But these days, because they're all out of favour with this present government, they don't get taken. Some of them, yes, but not many. This happens a lot over there, who's in and who's out . . .

One of the things we're very particular about is that our first commitment is to Ajoka. None of us are allowed to work with any other group if it clashes. So our first priority has to be Ajoka. Of course, we make compromises with rehearsal schedules for television and things like that, because it's an important source of income.

AK: Your members, you had stressed, were all volunteers . . .

MG: It's an understood thing. Especially in recent years, because now most of them, a lot of them, are getting married, having children, and one really feels grieved that some of them are still unemployed. And one really wants them to get some money. So whenever we can get someone to sponsor [us] . . . Like this family planning play, we got some money for it, so everyone was given some money. We did something for the WWF, on the environment. So sometimes we take these up, maybe once a year or so. But then we don't use all the money, we keep it for other productions. That's how we manage our other productions.

Recently we got a grant from the Global Fund. They have helped us, they were very taken with our work. In fact a person came from the Global Fund to see our work and meet us, and was very impressed. So they've given us a grant and we've got a small space now, which is very important, just for rehearsals and a little office. Because with the closing down of the Goethe Institute, it's absolutely imperative that we have a space to rehearse in. I don't know what will happen about a performance space but at least we have a space which we can call our own for all our props and office things and whatever. And I'm also able to have a part-time person from the group; he's paid a little bit and he comes in and helps with the office work, the organizing work. Basically I do all the organizing but he works with me in doing the actual running about. I don't get anything, but he gets a little bit.

AK: You meet regularly?

MG: Almost all the time; we are rehearsing something or the other, or performing something or the other.

AK: And everybody does it after hours, after work?

MG: Yes, yes. The same as here. We rehearse from five to about eight, never during the day, unless it's a Sunday and people can come for the whole day. Most people are working. And those who aren't can't come and rehearse on their own. So finances, like

here, are a big problem. Of course this Global Fund grant has been a great help. This year, they renewed it also. If they keep on doing it, it will be really good. Then at least we can pay people for conveyance, we can pay people a little bit. Then also, for instance, we also work with the Swang . .

AK: Can you tell us a bit more about the form?

MG: Swang is a very old Punjabi folk form of the Potohar region, which is northern Punjab, where [I. K.] Gujral also comes from. Like most folk-theatre in the subcontinent, it has lots of music, and is based on folk stories of the region. And, of course, it's all men, no women, a lot of music, musicians . . .

AK: And are the stories they take up folk tales, or religious . . . ?

MG: Not religious. Religious themes we cannot have at all. Not in theatre. In music, we have a lot of the Sufi music, a lot of Bulle Shah and Baba Farid and Shah Hussain, but not plays based on that. They're mostly love stories. Mirza Sahiba, Sassi Punnu, Heer Ranjha, folk stories of the Punjab. Then I found these two performers [who were] particularly talented. I felt that they could give us a lot in terms of the way they do theatre. For Kala Mainda Bhes, when we were writing the script, Shahid and I had them in mind, because they play the narrators in this play. This is the only production in which they've worked with us. We did this for the first time last year. But I hope that we can continue working with them. The only thing is, they are extremely poor, because now their theatre work has really died out, and when they perform at weddings and at melas, there's more demand for Indian film songs than their plays, because they're all very good singers and they have their own musicians. So they have become like a singing party, basically, and no one is very interested in the plays any more. Which is really a pity. So we try to pay them.

AK: And of course there can't be any support from the government?

MG: There's no support from the government. In fact, during Zia's time, the mela theatre and its offshoots were actually banned. The melas themselves were banned.

Swang is a folk form. But there's also another theatre which I think, interestingly enough, is now found only in the Punjab. [It is an] offshoot of Parsi theatre and it's called Company Theatre. There are these various [companies]: Rashid Company, and R. F. Lohar Ki Company and Bali Jatti Ki Company. Until a few years ago, you could see them in villages outside the big cities, performing at melas. They do Parsi theatre-type [plays] but in Punjabi, using local stories—

AK: With sets, painted backdrops . . .

MG: Painted backdrops and camels on the stage. And in one play, he has to swim across the river, and there was a river, a stream, flowing right by so—it was cold, December—he actually went and jumped into the river and swam across it. And there was a cow on the stage and things like that. Of course, it's now very shabby, all the songs are film songs, not their original theatre songs, but it has touches of that same style. Because [in] folk theatre, there's no set, and they use torches and things like that. But here there is, and also the technology for changing the backdrops, quite run-down now.

Performances don't happen regularly. Now there are few, very few. And we grew up not seeing these things at all because they never took place in cities. It is performed in totally rural areas, and you have huge audiences—when I saw one performance, there were about 5000 people and there were mikes and stuff.

So that's another kind of local theatre which is now nearly extinct. It's never been supported by any government, instead they're banning it. Because in the midst of it, you get hijras dancing, and a lot of . . . They were banned because now female roles are done by females, and most of the women are from the red-light area. And they do all these vulgar Indian film numbers. On the grounds of morality, they were banned, deemed obscene. Again, using the Dramatic Performances Act. So it's [dying], but it's still there.

There was a great woman who used to run her own company—Bali Jatti. She died some years ago. Tremendous performer, actress and a singer. She ran her own company and she used to sing herself, act herself. They travel a lot.

AK: There are still Companies. For example, in Karnataka there are a few. There's one called Gubbi Theatre Company. There's Surabhi . . . they are not in such bad shape as—

MG: These poor people are in very dire straits. And they live like that. They have tents. The manager's tent has an air-conditioner fitted in. And he has all these females around him, it's a totally different world. Many of them are in the circus also. There's a big circus company called the Lucky Irani's Circus. Some Russian woman started it. I don't know what the origins of that are. Pakistan being so closed, that's the only time you actually see women up on the trapezes with little frocks on, you know, [and] people trying to look. They're also connected with these theatre companies. They perform in both places.

'. . . if you have bad politics, you can't have brilliant theatre . . .'

An Interview with Gamini Hottatagama

Amid political violence, widespread uncertainty and chaos, street theatre in Sri Lanka has not only survived but also found a prominent place in the cultural life of the people. In the following interview, Gamini Hottatagama, one of the founders of the Wayside and Open Theatre, established in 1974 and the oldest street theatre group in the country, talks to Biren Das Sharma for STQ.

BDS: What was the ideological and cultural condition when street theatre activities became a reality in the cultural scene in Sri Lanka?

GH: Street theatre as a concept was vaguely known to me and the younger people who started this off in Sri Lanka in 1974. We can't say that we were not influenced by activities which we had heard of abroad, but I think that the pressure of circumstances in the 70s was extremely important in this regard.

Economically, the country was going through a very bad phase. We had to cut down imports, it was a period of adversity and food scarcity—in fact, the economic situation was hitting the political consciousness the way it had not done before. There was an insurrection which failed, and a lot of youths lost their lives. Economically, we felt that we had gone through false periods of transient prosperity and now it was bursting open, exploding. There was a shortage of newsprint. We had some kind of cheap publication on a few sheets of paper where critical reviews and comments were made. Then there were a lot of non-formal discussions, meetings. As far as conventional media was concerned, the critical line tended to be squashed. But this emerging critical attitude could not be stopped easily. In fact, all those forms of expression found their way to some kind of prominence. Poets, writers and artists were talking about socially and politically relevant topics and their contemporary relevance. People were looking for more non-conventional forms. Suddenly, in this atmosphere, we became aware of the limitations of the formal proscenium theatre of Sri Lanka.

BDS: Were you interested in theatre earlier, or did it start with those changes taking place in the 70s?

GH: In fact, I was doing more cinema work than theatre in the early 60s. There was a period when I was president of the Film Critics and Journalists' Association of Sri Lanka. But I was always interested in doing things in a non-formalist manner—it may not have been a conscious attempt at that time—and experimenting with drama forms. When I was at the University, I presented a series of plays, very short plays, five minutes, ten to twenty-five minutes, and this was an interesting experimentation. We were trying to project 'relevant', 'meaningful' theatre, where the content was very important. There were debates among the students on the importance and primacy of form and content, and we realized that this was a ground for experimentation. This experimentation took place before I came into street theatre.

BDS: What really motivated you to take up street theatre?

GH: In 1974, a theatre friend of mine, a well-known artist who had gone abroad and practised and made his name, conducted a theatre workshop. He was the man who introduced the modern style of theatre workshops, training workshops, in Sri Lanka. I

joined his workshop as a director. There were many adventurous young people—adventurous both in the romantic and in a subtler form—who had joined the workshop with me. We had no very clear ideology or consciously defined objective in the beginning. I would be dishonest if I said otherwise. But I think we had something more than just an interest in a different kind of theatre. After this workshop, the Wayside and Open Theatre was born. We opted away from the Colombo-centred theatre. We had to react also to the formal theatre which we felt was catering largely to the urban middle class. We performed for the first time on the railway platform and the playground on the day when Buddhism was officially brought to Sri Lanka from India. That was the beginning of street theatre in Sri Lanka.

BDS: Creatively, what motivated you most?

GH: The urge to do theatre was always there, but then came the urge to do something unusual in the theatre, to break away from the [established] format. English-oriented elitist theatre which flourished in the proscenium tended to look down, with a certain amount of snobbish condescension, on Sinhali theatre, which was also coming onto the scene. That spurred us on. We were also aware of the fact that formal Sinhali theatre had its own limitations. We felt that we had to break through all these barriers. This was the original impulse.

There were so many other impulses. The young people were interested in doing something unorthodox, unconventional and adventurous. Of course, it was more oriented towards left ideology and the need to talk about social and political issues. But also the urge to experiment with forms, with the very format of presentation, the whole structuring of a play.

So we went against more formal, literary, academic conventions of dramatic production, where you have the playwright, the director and the actors. We opted for more collaborative, collective efforts in our theatre work. We started building up plays using various resources and a lot of improvisations, which meant that the actors contributed a lot. But improvisation is also a very dangerous art, because you require a certain basic vision, a certain philosophical position, and it requires a lot of training. One should also keep in mind that it is very difficult to be a street-theatre actor. It really requires a lot of training and experience. It may look very easy, but it is not. It is not just going to any open space and doing something, performing something. That is a wrong conception. When people come to join us, we tell them that it's not easy, that it's very harsh and difficult, particularly for the girls. It involves a lot of sacrifice.

BDS: So street theatre emerged on the theatre scene as cultural action, a demand of the time. I would like to know how this particular kind of cultural action formed its own agenda.

GH: A variety of factors—socio-economic-political factors—and a certain decline of formal theatre, were responsible for this. This was countered by the growth of an alternative cultural consciousness. Various radical revolutionary organizations emerged on the scene and there was a genuine dissemination of radical leftist culture—'radical' in the most positive sense of the word. Where traditional political formats and organizations failed, other things went on functioning. Street theatre went on. There had been a time when we were criticized, abused, because we didn't work with political organizations. We do work with political organizations but we have not joined any political party as such. We are not a party-oriented troupe. But there were occasions when we worked with political organizations. Sometimes, ours was

the only voice when others were silent or had declined or gone underground or disintegrated. In 1970, we did a play called World Food Conference which even hit international headlines. The play was shown at an international conference. The organizers invited us, but they didn't know what they were in for. We did something which went against the grain of the conference. It made people, especially those in formal theatre, see that something different was happening—people did take notice of the daring adventurousness in doing something like this, and also the fact that there was an ideological confrontation. Maybe we were romantic, also.

BDS: What happened?

GH: The idea for this particular play came from a news item. This will give you an insight into how we make our plays. We saw a news item about the world food conference. The journalist who reported it commented that so many tons of food were consumed, so many bottles of drinks were consumed. We took this up and created a play. At the same time, another international conference was announced and we timed our play with that. The conference was on population and was organized by the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute. Now, our play was on population. We went to this conference and spoke to the main person and told him that we wanted to do a small play. He said, 'There is no time for a play.' 'But we want to do a play on population.' 'OK. How long is it?' '25 to 30 minutes.' 'OK. We will push it in between the cocktail and the dinner.' That was just ideal for our purpose. So we agreed and left. We did the play and it created a sensation. They were very, very angry. At the end of the play they said, 'Brilliant theatre, bad politics.'

BDS: What exactly had you wanted to achieve?

GH: The play was about an international conference where the so-called developed countries came to discuss the problems of the 'Third World' countries; and we satirized the whole thing. We used modern, stylized dance steps and we also used a popular folk form influenced by Tamil terukoothu. We used its typical tune for the narrator. We stylized steps, used top hats for the western representatives and showed a poor-country gate-crasher—we thought that Bangladesh typified the poor countries of the Third World, so we showed Bangladesh gate-crashing as an unwelcome visitor to the conference. Initially we had a man playing Bangladesh, but later we thought that it would be better if a woman played it. I think, ideologically, sex and gender matter very much when you want to put a message across. There were traditional clowns as sentries, who did not allow anybody but the big powers to enter the conference room. There were two population economists who were the main organizers of the conference. They were dressed like professors and kept counting heads. It was an agit-prop play, but it was very necessary at that time. We ended our play with a slogan, 'Food for them and pills for us.' In the play we used very few words. I usually do plays in Sinhalese. But in this play we used Sinhalese, English and Tamil. I'd just like to mention here that I did the first full-length tri-lingual play in Sri Lanka, for which I was taken to the famous or infamous 'fourth floor' and questioned by the intelligence people.

BDS: What exactly happened after the show was over?

GH: Actually, after the show was over, there was a long silence and then they burst out in applause. Some of these people came up, and I think it was the Australian High Commissioner who made that comment, 'Brilliant theatre, bad politics'. There was a big argument. Then the newspapers took it up. Hong Kong and Singapore newspapers blew it up. The FAO news bulletin also published a detailed report on the play. They

discussed how we blended and mixed methods.

BDS: How did you react to the remark, 'Brilliant theatre, bad politics'?

GH: We thought that it was a very dangerous remark. Because we believe that if you have bad politics you can't have brilliant theatre. If you have a very oversimplified, stereotyped and naive politics, then how can you convey a politically-correct comment? You must project the realities properly, and for that you require very strong artistic methods, very strong theatre techniques. In our formal theatre there is a lot of politics, but not enough analysis, not enough critical projection of politics. What is the use of mere depiction of, say, politicians, in an obvious, exaggerated, puppet-like manner? I think this leads to a misrepresentation of politics.

It is very important to remember not to underestimate your audiences. When middle-class theatre-goers see our plays, they say, 'This might be difficult for the people to understand.' Now, they have not seen street theatre, they haven't studied street theatre, they have not come to the street to see how audiences respond to such plays, but they feel, 'It is good for us, but not for ordinary people.' This is a snobbish idea. The middle class feels that they are on a higher plane of understanding. One should not think that people who are not formally educated don't understand ambiguity, subtlety, complexity.

BDS: Do you think that Wayside and Open Theatre survived because you were able to overcome such problems?

GH: It is very important to remember that street theatre survived because there was a youth culture, an alternative culture. People were prepared to see our work even when we found it very difficult to travel and perform. When we were unable to pay our bus or train fare—the troupe was not very small in the beginning, only a few of us were employed and none of us were rich—we found people getting interested and inviting us. They were interested in the very idea of street theatre, in the kind of social-political projection we were attempting, and all over the country people were prepared to invite us. They were responsible for keeping the street theatre going. In the early 80s, we had this phenomenon of commercial organizations putting money into formal theatre. Formal theatre was able to survive because of this support. They were also dependent on foreign embassies, cultural organizations and businessmen. But street theatre found people helping them to take the street theatre around the country. Those who supported street theatre did not make anything out of it. We did not sell tickets. People put in money. Ultimately, it is the collective desire of the people that keeps it alive. There were always people who would organize shows, help us to get down theatre troupes.

BDS: How did street theatre influence the theatre scene in general?

GH: It influenced the formal theatre. At first, they tended to be very snobbish in their attitude. They did not even see our work, they said that we would not be able to produce creative and aesthetically good works. But we showed that street theatre could also have subtlety, complexity and aesthetically-pleasing elements. We proved that these can be achieved, and, in fact, that these are also necessary for street theatre. We proved that street theatre can also be 'good' theatre, 'strong' theatre, that artistically it could hold its own without having all the paraphernalia available to formal theatre. We could even throw out a challenge to formal theatre if necessary. We were aware of the limitations of formal theatre—we noticed the way formal theatre started sloganizing in the name of political theatre and making it simplistic. We were aware of

the dangers early enough. We have tried to do something different, tried to make politics more analytical, more subtle, more suggestive.

BDS: But this would definitely demand a very good script and a group of trained actors.

GH: Street theatre actors require something more than mere skill. I don't think anyone in Sri Lanka has more experience in conducting workshops than I have. The special focus of my workshop is on street theatre. Interestingly, many actors from formal theatre also come for the training. I believe that 80 per cent of the training is also good for formal theatre actors. A fair number of people who come to the workshops want to join. I discourage them by saying that it is very tough. It is not easy going. You have to face sun and rain, and you have to take a lot of risks. You might even be picked up by the police. These things do happen.

But basically, I don't see vast differences in terms of ideology and basic skills between formal and non-formal theatre. A street theatre actor is basically trained to do several roles. Sometimes we do not have all our actor-resources available. We may have to go with five-six people, sometimes fifteen or twenty. We have to make lots of strategic adjustments so that we are not stuck. Flexibility is absolutely important here. Street theatre demands flexibility, an actor should be ready to take on any role, any time.

But that is an ideal condition. Not all actors do fit in to each and every role because their individual resources may not be equal. But one can work with unequal inputs from different actors. Though we do not have star performers, people do outstandingly well in certain roles. However, one develops while doing these roles.

BDS: Did street theatre develop into a movement at any point?

GH: I would not claim that. But it is a fact that because of our work and the workshops, other street theatre groups came onto the scene in the 70s. Some of them survived for quite long. We formed our group in 1974. In the early 70s, we had a workshop in Kurunagal where a peasant organization was inspired by our work; they formed their own group, but did not survive long. A member of our group left and formed Open Arts Circle, doing both formal as well as non-formal theatre. Many also did workshops. They survived till the early 80s. Other groups came along in the late 80s and the 90s. So there is something like a movement, we also took the leadership and formed a street theatre collective. This, I think, is an advancement of the cause. Now you will find people using street theatre to fight against the drug menace, there are also women's groups and specific issue-oriented groups.

Compared to the others we have a very diffused, very open format, and we take in all the forms and approaches we have. We can be issue-oriented, we can have other formats, we are very open in that way. Maybe that is a reason why we have survived.

BDS: For quite some time now Sri Lanka has been a site of unrest and political violence. How does street theatre cope with this?

GH: For me, violence is not just guns and bombs and fights. There are so many forms of violence—for example, the violence of conspicuous commercialism. Also, we are assaulted by the violence of the media. These are expressed through our plays. We try to analyse these issues first, before we do a play on a particular theme. We have plays on the issue of peace, of ethnic tensions, issues affecting women, peasants etc. We did a play called Peace . . . Long Time No See, where some of these questions were

discussed. In terms of structuring the form and of characterization, the play was really a challenge. We showed that there could be individual characterization, relationships, conflict, in street theatre—something we were accused of not being able to do.

When you analyse and project complicated experiences and thought-provoking issues in street theatre, you need to have all these. You can't just have simplistic caricatures; different forms of characterization, complexities of life, should be reflected in street theatre. We grappled with this problem fairly early.

Formal political theatre has been criticized and hounded for this reason. But street theatre confronted these problems early enough. I am not saying that formal theatre was not aware of this critique, but they are still grappling with the problem and are yet to come to terms with it. It is generally thought that one can excuse street theatre for being simplistic, propagandistic. But we feel that there is no need to excuse the street theatre, for the simple reason that street theatre, too, can overcome such limitations.

BDS: Who is your audience? Do you have a target audience?

GH: We are the only theatre troupe which performs for both a rural and an urban audience, for all kinds of audiences, beyond the class barrier. This is very important for us. We play everywhere—market places, playing fields, temple grounds, railway platforms, streets. So 'street' is very widely interpreted by us. We even perform inside a hall if the circumstances dictate it. We are very open that way. Anyone who wants to see the play must be allowed to see it. There are no tickets. This is very important.

We also do certain amount of bi-lingual work. We perform in Sinhalese, but we also go to the Tamil-speaking areas. I have conducted workshops in Tamil-speaking areas, though I don't speak the language. In 1978, I went to Jafna and performed at the university. But I ran into trouble. The play was banned when we tried to show it in Colombo. I was interrogated by the CID—the famous 'fourth floor' which is synonymous with torture, oppression and even death. But I was not really treated badly.

BDS: What about censorship?

GH: We have been interfered with, questioned by the police, subjected to violence, and actors who have attended our workshops were killed during the terrible time of terrorism in 1988-89—state terrorism also—when lots of youths got bumped off.

We were the only troupe having workshops in Colombo at that time. It was difficult even for me to come to Colombo, I had to travel 20-22 miles and I was not sure whether I would be able to conduct the workshop or not. Every Sunday, we had workshops. But young people came from various parts of the country. There was this young man who came from about 60 miles outside Colombo. He was killed—a tyre was put around his neck and he was burnt to death. That was the news I got from his brother, who later wrote to me from England.

There were many instances when our performances were interrupted, stoned. Once, in the late 70s, we went to a market which was named World Market, a place where you could find all sorts of imported things. We did a play satirizing the selling of utterly useless goods. For example, things like an electronic back scratcher, snow boots—all imported. People are mad about imported things, as if anything imported is good. People started laughing as we proceeded with the performance. When we mentioned the imported snow boots in the play, a person from the audience shouted, 'How can one find snow here?' One of the actors replied, 'We will import snow also.'

Then a handful of people started interrupting and abusing us. They were all CID men in civilian dress, and they did disrupt the performance. We have also seen lumpen elements and thugs being used to disrupt performances. Sometimes, also due to the carelessness of the organizers, hostility might be created and this could be directed against street theatre activists.

BDS: How would you start a performance? What would a particular day's performance be like?

GH: We usually start with puppets. This is very attractive, very lively. The puppeteers are also our actors. They announce that they are going to show a new play. But they realize that they have brought the wrong costumes. One says, 'Shall we run away?' The old man says, 'No, no. According to our tradition we never run away. We will improvise.' The young man himself becomes a puppet and begins to dance. People laugh. It is very catchy, and with this we gather an audience.

Then we have three or four short plays depending on time, space and the audience. As we perform a series of short plays, the plays themselves become more and more serious. We end with a lament, with something tragic. So a programme is not only satiric or comic, though we use a lot of satire. For us, humour is not necessarily non-serious. But we end on a tragic note, with the lament. In between we have songs. We raise a lot of questions through songs. For example:

Hungry we went to the king's house
And we were given a blow on our back
We wonder whether to take it or not
Even a blow on the back is OK when you are hungry.

We look on and see
Shall we run away and say that there is no problem here?
Shall we just look on and say it is pointless to say anything?
Shall we shout and scream?
Shall we take refuge under the long grass?

This refers to a Buddhist myth, according to which there will be a disaster which will make people so tiny that they can take shelter under grass during rain. The myth also says that swords and knives would shower down on the people.

So those questions were asked right at the beginning. There are other songs also, on tolerance and other themes. We use a lot of satire, symbols, suggestion, lyrics, and we usually end up with a lament. The lament refers to incidents which took place in 1971, 1988-89, and it is definitely relevant to all youth—Tamil, Sinhalese—who have lost their lives. The lament goes on like this:

They were burnt alive
Piled up and burnt alive. . .

This happened in 1971 and also in 1988-89. The lament refers to this. We have enactments also. We show how their bodies were piled up, how they were killed, how mothers were looking for their sons. We show that from that pile of dead bodies, a person rises up—one who is not dead. He feels a kind of repulsion because he is amongst the dead, but at the same time he is sad because of so many deaths. But then he crawls back and hides himself among the dead. This is very symbolic. Another man comes running in—he may be running away from the soldiers. He also wants to hide among the dead, and suddenly discovers the other person. He thinks that he is a ghost

but soon realizes that he is not, and they embrace each other before they both hide.

We sing the lament while the play is going on. This song says that they will rise up one day. At the end of a programme, we have a song of brotherhood. We use ritualistic melody and rhythm. But again, it is very symbolic. The song addresses the mythical golden bird:

You break your chains and make a garland
Shake your limbs and feathers
And get ready for a flight.

Fly away
Embrace the sky
Weave the blue of the sky
And some pattern will emerge
Milk the clouds
Bring the power of thunder.

And on your flight
Try to kiss the sun also.

Bring the secrets of the rain god
Come quickly
Come back here
And take an ear of corn in your month.

So it is a song of liberation. But it is also very creative, not just propagandistic. Another song we sing at the end of our performance is also about birds, about doves:

They group together
They are pitting their wings against the wind and flying
The kingfisher is piercing through the blue sky
And the parrot has made its beak red.

We do not explain what it means. That is how we end a day's programme.

BDS: The success and survival of street theatre depends very much on the audience. What kind of communication do you have with your general audiences?

GH: There are so many fond memories. I will tell you one or two, to answer your question. Once we performed in a rural area, and after the programme a middle-aged woman came and said, 'Your play is about us. You have talked about us.' She was talking particularly about the lament. Her three sons had been killed. Ours is really very intimate theatre, and such intimacy gives us a unique pleasure. Sometimes fear and tension can also grip us, the situation can be very uncertain, often we are not sure about whether we will be able to perform or not. All these feelings of fear and uncertainty are also experienced by them, with the same kind of closeness. We perspire and they perspire. It is lovely to see ripples of laughter on their faces. We do not discriminate—our plays are for everyone and not specifically for the working class, the peasants or middle-class people. Once we used a political platform to show our plays. A politician present said, 'What we are trying so hard to communicate, you people said just like that.' The highest compliment we got was from an old man who met us after seeing one of our plays and said, 'You are god-sent'. It was an exaggerated but honest tribute to the kind of work we do. It was a tribute to the sacrifice and commitment that street theatre demands. Formal theatre also needs a lot of sacrifice. But in certain difficult and crisis situations, street theatre demands greater sacrifice.

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'The here and now are important:' An interview with Premanand Gajvi, Playwright

This interview by Shanta Gokhale and the play extract that follows, are excerpted from her book on contemporary Marathi drama, shortly to be published by Seagull Books.

With this interview looming before me, I have been looking at my work to find out what I have done, and why and how I have done it. And I think I have come to some conclusions about how my concerns have evolved out of the context of our literature in general.

I would say that our literature as a whole is individual-oriented. You don't find it going beyond the joys and sorrows of individuals. My question was (that is, it must have been when I started writing), isn't there something beyond individual states of mind and relationships that affects the individual's life? And if there is, why doesn't our literature seem to pay attention to it?

Though individuals form societies, societies are more than the sum of those individuals. The problems of societies are different from the problems of individuals. And these problems naturally differ from society to society. Our own society is more complex perhaps than any other, with its castes, cults and religions. The divisions are so rigid that I think of every caste group as an island unto itself. As an artist, I find it is important for me to look at these islands and try to understand their separate problems. All these islands seem to belong to me. That is why I wrote plays like Devnavari and Keerwant.

If I were to divide my plays into categories, I'd say that they fall into three groups: those that deal with relationships between individuals, between the individual and society and between societies. In the first category of plays, the question in my mind was, how to get to the very bottom of an individual's mind? One way was to pit against each other individuals who seem to have most in common with each other. This would reveal the innermost layers of their minds, where the differences would be.

A society, too, reveals itself in one sense when an individual questions it, stands up against it or is crushed by it. And two different societies reveal themselves best when they are pitted against each other. In the process of this conflict, we discover what our nation is all about.

The whole formulation sounds very neat because I have constructed it now as I look back on my work. I wasn't equippped with such ideas at the time of writing my plays. Certainly not when I wrote Ghotbhar Pani (A Sip of Water), for instance. That was the first of my plays to achieve recognition.

I started writing at the time when the amateur stage was awash with the Ghashiram Kotwal wave. The human curtain of Ghashiram flapped one way or another over every one-act play that was ever entered for a competition in those days. I guess my peers and I form the third generation of one-act playwrights after Vijay Tendulkar, Ratnakar Matkari and their contemporaries and Satish Alekar, Mahesh Elkunchwar and theirs. Though each of these playwrights had their own individual styles of writing, all of them were concerned with the middle class and its cultural and moral values. The

same can be said about Marathi literature as a whole. Give or take a couple of exceptions, it had never taken note of the changing struggles of our changing times.

It seems likely that these thoughts were at the back of my mind in those days, and I was wondering whether I could write from a hitherto unexplored viewpoint and produce something that was fresh, related to contemporary social issues. In the process, I found I had written Ghotbhar Pani, a one-acter that took for its subject something that was basic to human life and a burning issue in our society: drinking water.

I had conceived the play for performance by two actors who would take on all the roles there were. My set instructions included something suggestive of cacti, khaki paper for the wings and totally bleached-out light to underline the aridity of the environment I wanted evoked. Ghotbhar Pani was performed in villages all over the State and had its 1000th show in Bombay in early 1993. It underwent many transformations in these productions, including (did I deserve it?) one with the ubiquitous human curtain! It spawned copies, too, one which came almost on the heels of mine, entitled Chatkor Bhakar (One Piece of Bread).

Despite the fact that this one-acter and the ones that followed have concerned themselves with the problems of people in the lowest stratum of our society, I had never thought of myself as a 'Dalit' writer. I don't belong to the group of playwrights who see themselves as contributing to the Dalit movement by writing about the lives of the scheduled castes. Babasaheb Ambedkar said society must be in a constant state of progression. If people converted to a new religion, as our people did in 1956, why should they continue to write about their lives before they converted? If they do, where is the constant progression that Dr Ambedkar demanded of his followers? Who was going to record the present?

It is this constant looking back that explains, at least partly, the absence of 'modern' plays in Dalit literature. The other reason is that the financial investment required to mount what we call a 'modern play'—that is one performed on a proscenium stage with all the trimmings—is not available to Dalit writers. So what we get are tamasha-type plays presented raw, so to say—under trees in villages.

With all that, a couple of plays have still managed to make a mark—Texas Gaekwad's Thamba Ramrajya Yet Ahe (Wait, Rama's Reign is on Its Way) or Wata Palwata (Ways And Ways Out) by Datta Bhagat. They have made a mark precisely because they are rooted in the culture of the middle-class Marathi play. That is the only modern tradition we have. The jalsas of Jotiba Phule and Ambedkar were created as an alternative theatre form; but they are too crude to be attractive as models today. Therefore, a playwright like Bhagat is as obliged to Tendulkar as anybody else. And so, though the stories Dalits tell are of the underprivileged, the form they use is that of the privileged.

As for folk theatre forms, Dalits have naturally wanted to distance themselves from those. Dr Ambedkar had called upon his followers to shed all their old practices; and this included the tamasha. The women who danced and sang in tamashas and the men who played the musical instruments were, as often as not, from Dr Ambedkar's caste. In their eyes now, the tamasha was not so much an outlet for their artistic talents as a means of exploitation which they were only too happy to leave behind. If a form is dying a natural death, must we strive to keep it alive? And if we strive to do so, then why condemn other forms of fundamentalism?

Till 1988, I was known as a playwright of the parallel theatre. It was only when I wrote Ghotbhar Pani that people began wondering as to which side of the line I belonged. The general consensus on this question was that I was essentially an experimental playwright, whatever the subject of this particular play might be. But then I agreed to chair the Dalit Rangabhoomi Conference. That threw people off once more. My urban middle-class colleagues in theatre wondered what I was doing on the other side. Wasn't I one of them? As if in affirmation of their question, I wrote Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth, a study of Sant Ramdas Swami, who wielded a powerful influence over Shivaji Maharaj. Now it was time for my Dalit brothers to jump. If he is one of us, what is he doing writing plays about upper-caste saints like Ramdas Swami?

Then I wrote Keerwant. That's the name by which a sub-sect of Brahmins, treated like untouchables within the caste, is known. Dr Lagoo directed the play for the mainstream stage and played the main role. This reinforced the Dalit charge that I had defected to the other side. They called upon the late Babasaheb Ambedkar himself to take note of what was happening to his people.

All this has raised a fundamental question in my mind. Who am I? How do I define myself as an artist? Can I be an artist at all or must I always be a man who was born into a particular caste? And, as an artist, do I have the freedom to write about any issue or subject that touches my mind or conscience, or must I write according to a pre-set agenda?

I must tell you about my experience with Devnavari. This play deals with the problem of Devdasis and their sexual exploitation by the priest as well as the landlord class. The protagonist of the play is called Draupadi. She is in love with Pandhari, who has also been offered up as a child into the service of the goddess Yellamma. While the powerful men of the village abuse Draupadi sexually, she and Pandhari cherish the dream of escaping together one day. Before that can happen, Pandhari is stabbed to death by an angry exploiter of Draupadi, whom she has spurned. Enraged, she rushes to attack the murderer and then the priest, with the knife that has killed her beloved. They run away. Her fury unassuaged, she runs into the temple, whips off Yellamma's crown and crushes it. That's the image of Draupadi that the villagers gathered outside the temple see—the knife in one hand, the crushed crown in the other.

All India Radio, Delhi, wrote to me for permission to broadcast this play in 14 languages. I was only too happy that it should receive such an acknowledgement. However, there was a condition. They asked me to drop the last scene of the cursing of the goddess and destruction of the crown. But that was the whole point of the play. Draupadi declares in her last speech that, for as long as Yellamma continued to be worshipped as a goddess, Draupadis would continue to be exploited. Since I refused to accede to their request, All India Radio dropped the idea of broadcasting the play.

There's another question that has bothered me as an artist. Take the work of our most acclaimed short-story writers, like G. A. Kulkarni, Gangadhar Gadgil or P. B. Bhave. You find that a majority of their stories are about conflicts arising out of interpersonal relations. Does nothing outside the world of the individual exist for them? In my work, the focus is not simply on relations between people but between them and the outside world. This hasn't happened in the deliberate way in which it seems to sound as I speak about my work. Actually, I shouldn't be analysing my own work at all. Somebody else should have done it by now. But we don't have critics, so the writer is left to talk about his own work!

We were talking about choice of subject. Though there is an unspoken pressure from outside to choose subjects which have not been written about, a writer doesn't actually say to himself, now let me think up a new subject for my next play. Chance encounters, events, lead to issues and questions being thrown up in his mind which he then follows up out of his own personal interest. That's how the subjects of my plays chose themselves. Ghotbhar Pani was a throwback to childhood memories. I remembered how the untouchables had to beg for water because they didn't have the right to draw it from the water sources used by upper-caste villagers.

When I wrote Keerwant, everybody wanted to know where I had 'found' this subject. Nobody in the 700-year history of Marathi literature had written about it, they said, so how did you light upon the subject? My answer was that I was a member of this society, the keerwants were also members of my society. They had been there in this same society waiting to be written about! But I must narrate here how it happened.

A young boy of about 18 or so, Suhas Vyavaharay, was doing a one-act play of mine for a competition. At one point, I noticed that the pace of rehearsals had slackened. I asked him why. He said he was strapped for time. Again, I asked him why. He said he had to work all hours in the crematorium. That intrigued me. The crematorium? I asked. What for? He told me he was too tired to talk just then, but if I went over to his place in a couple of days, he would tell me.

I went to his place two days later, accompanied by a friend called Kanaday. I told Vyavaharay that I was there for the information he had promised me. I was very curious to know what kind of work he did in the crematorium. He looked utterly blank. Work in a crematorium? Me? Why should I work in a crematorium? he said. I was stumped. Here was a man who had himself told me only two days ago about this work that he did, and now he was flatly denying it. He continued to deny having anything to do with the crematorium and there was nothing I could do but accept his answer. But the whole thing had made me really curious.

My enquiries led me to the Malad crematorium, where a man called Ashok Joshi was the officiating priest. He kept asking me why I should want to know about crematorium work and I kept saying it was just an academic interest, because my curiosity had been aroused by this young man's sudden denial of the work he did. Joshi gave me some information. He told me that the sect of Brahmins who traditionally conducted funeral rites were called keerwantas in the Konkan region from where they all hailed. The name was a corruption of kriyawant—the one who conducts the kriyas or last rites. He described some of these rites to me. Then he told me that he had been thrown out of the local Brahmin Sabha because he did cremation work. So these Brahmins were on par in a way with the Devdasis!

After he gave me this information, he demanded to know once more what I was going to do with it. I found myself telling him that I was planning to write a play. Once the idea of the play took root in my mind, I had to double-check the information Joshi had given me. I needed to meet a few more keerwants to feel confident enough to write about them. So I decided to go to Sawantwadi in the Konkan to investigate the subject further.

We wandered all over Sawantwadi making tactful enquiries, but without success. We didn't hear of a single person who did cremation work. Finally, near despair, we asked a casual passerby the same question. He told us of a Gokarn Shastri who did this

work. This was 11 May 1981. I remember the date very well for all the trouble I got myself and others into on that day. Slowly, this man began to let information out little by little, unaware that I was pumping him. But at the end of it all, he said the whole practice, and, with it, the sub-caste, were things of the past. Today there were no special keerwants and there was no ostracism or anything. He also denied doing cremation work himself.

We left. Outside, night had fallen. As we walked along, we met an acquaintance who asked us what we were doing there. We told him we'd been to see Gokarn Shastri. He said, casually, oh! The keerwant?

I knew now I had to write this play. I decided to locate it in pre-Independence times in a village. In those times keerwants practised their profession without the need to deny it. This would take care of the feelings of present-day practitioners and safeguard me from the charge of being inauthentic.

After this, I went on a virtual binge of information-hunting. I got hold of the Garuda Purana, in which the last rites are described. I had to search all over Bombay for it. In those days, the Puranas were not as easily available as they are today when they have become such a fashion! After that I grabbed and gobbled up any other literature I could lay hands on, which contained information of however trivial a nature, on Hindu funeral rites. The sequence in which the rites are performed gave me a logical chronology for my play.

In the course of my hunt, I came across a fascinating story which explained why, according to Hindu rites, a dead person's soul is finally released from limbo only when a crow pecks at the rice cake prepared in that person's name on the 10th day after his/her death. The story goes that when Rama and Sita were living in Panchawati during their exile, Sita had gone for a bath in the Godavari. When she came out of the river, a gandharva who was flying by, caught sight of her and desired her. So he transformed himself into a crow, swooped down and pecked at her breast.

Rama was doing his puja at the time. He immediately knew what had happened. He had to kill the crow. But according to the shastras, you cannot kill when you are doing puja. So he cursed the gandharva instead, saying that he would remain a crow for all time. As a crow, people would find him revolting and treat him with contempt. When the gandharva realized that the beautiful woman he had desired was Sita, he regretted his mistake and asked for Rama's forgiveness. He begged some reversal of the curse. Rama relented and told him that though he would be reviled at all other times, he would be sought after and granted a place of honour during the funeral rites of human beings. The release of their souls from the throes of the would depend on him.

I saw the crow's story as a parallel to that of the keerwants themselves. They, too, were spurned socially but sought out when somebody died. I wanted to place the grief of such a human being before the audience. That was my limited purpose. That is what I consider to be the whole purpose of my writing. To look at all human beings as human beings and reveal their lives in the context of the society in which they live. In our society the caste system is so deeply entrenched that not the greatest human beings born in this country, neither Ambedkar nor Phule nor Gandhi, with all their efforts, could destroy its structure and practice. So I don't expect to make any difference to the situation as a playwright. But I can make people see other people's lives as they are.

I was not very happy with the first version of Keerwant. I had been very keen to include in it something of the present, in the form of that young boy with whom this entire exploration had begun. Somewhere along the line, as often happens in the course of writing, that element had got lost. That version was written for a specific competition in 1981. But I rewrote the play in 1991, including most of the things that had got left out.

For ten years, the play had been at the back of my mind, nagging me to find some way to rewrite it. It is this latter version that I gave Dr Lagoo to read. He liked it, offered to produce it, and even directed it to ensure that he played the main role. Another director might not have necessarily cast him. Only he could have dared touch such a play. Death, funerals, crematoria, are not exactly what our audiences consider wholesome dramatic entertainment. In fact, the play drew those huge audiences only because of Lagoo's presence in it.

Dr Lagoo had offered to do about 25 shows. After that, Sudhir Bhat of Suyog took it over and ran it for another 60 shows or so. Dr Lagoo is not held in very high esteem as a director. I was asked in an open interview what I thought of his direction of my play. I answered that he had given life to my play. He did not pull rank over me, a new playwright. He strove to put before the audience the play as I had written it without trying to put his own stamp on it. For me, this was a great thing. Up until now, my one-acts had been directed by young people like me with no reputation to back them, experimenting with the medium, like me. To have Dr Lagoo direct my play was itself an acknowledgement of my having arrived. And I am very grateful for that.

My writing has often taken off from something I have read. For instance, the idea for my one-acter Vethbigar (Bonded) started with a report in a magazine about a family living near Bombay who actually had a bonded labourer working in the house. Later, I read another report about the lives of bonded labourers. For me, the most shocking thing was the source of some of the food they ate. Apparently they stole dung from a cowshed, washed it and recovered the whole grain that had remained undigested. This grain was then dried and pounded to make four bhakris. Food. That's basic. And this is how these human beings were forced to find it.

The one-act turned out well. I later expanded it into a full-length play, Tanmajori, which also worked. This raises the issue of whether it is right for a writer to expand short plays into long plays. I feel if the writer is stretching the original in order to make it long enough, he is clearly thinning the content in the process. That is a wrong thing to do. But often, you have dealt with just one aspect of a theme in a one-acter, which is unable to accommodate all the issues raised around it in its short scope. In that case, there is nothing wrong at all in expanding the one-acter into a full-length play. Tanmajori was hugely successful. It was even staged in England. Nana Patekar's performance was very powerful and accounted greatly for its success.

I was questioned about choosing to write about subjects like this. Did I think my play would bring about a revolution? The implication was that bringing about a revolution was the only justification for writing about subjects like bonded labour. If revolution wasn't the aim, then it had to be sensationalism! How could I claim that my play would result in a revolution when I knew it was incapable of making a difference to even one life? But I don't grant the implication of the question. What is the purpose of theatre? I will answer that for myself. If a house is burning and some people are shouting, douse the fire, douse the fire, and some are asking, but how, but how, it is up

to me to say, with water. It is not for me to say who is to get the water, how it is to be carried and who is to douse the flames.

My main concern is not even how important my writing is to society at large, but how important it is to me, and why. Critics tend to label people who write on social problems as propagandists. They don't find artistic value in what we write. If that is so, it is just too bad. Even in a metropolis like ours, there are millions of children who don't go to school, millions of adults who are illiterate and can't even sign their name. These are shameful things. For me, the more important question is not whether my plays are aesthetic or not, but how the lives of our people may be made more aesthetic. But critics want artistic values in drama whether or not the message gets across. In fact, the less accessible the message, the better the play!

It is not as if I don't understand the aesthetic values that they are talking about. I recognize a work of art when I see it. But I am more concerned about the problems around me. The present, the here and the now, are important. It is my duty to make people aware of the problems of our present. I am not aiming at being enthroned as a great artist in some distant future when I am gone.

One of the phenomena of our times that many of us find disturbing but can't do anything about is the politicized revival of religion. None of us dared say a word when the Ganapati idols of the world were supposed to be drinking milk! Where do these attitudes to religion begin? One day I overheard what my five-year-old son was reciting. This was part of his school work. It was the first sloka from Ramdas Swami's Manache Sloka (Slokas for the Mind). 'Mana sajjana bhakti panthechi jaave' (The good mind must seek the path of bhakti). It struck me that a very young child was receiving his first injunctions about religion whatever I, his father, believed or wanted him to believe.

Instantly, I began to think about this part of our lives, making Ramdas Swami the focus of my questioning. During this time I happened to be visiting somebody who casually asked me what new play I was working on. I told him I had got interested in Ramdas Swami. Immediately, he led me into his prayer-room where there was a copy of Ramdas Swami's Dasbodh ensconced alongside the usual images of gods. He told me he was an ardent devotee of the saint. He had read the Dasbodh something like 65 times, during the course of which he said he'd discovered that Ramdas Swami was a communist!

Who was I to challenge a devotee's statement? I had read so little of the saint's writings that I had no authority to do so. But, without being asked for proof of his statement, he opened his copy of Dasbodh and pointed out to me several underlined slokas. These, he said, carried his communist thought. The gentleman was honest and generous. He lent the copy to me. I took it home and kept it for over a year and he didn't once ask me to return it.

Soon after this, the Theatre Academy launched its scheme for new playwrights. I was one of the twelve playwrights selected for the scheme. We were expected to start work on a new play. I had already started reading up on Ramdas Swami. So I finalized that as my subject. I made a visit to Sajjan Gadh, wandered around, soaked in the atmosphere, talked to the local people to pick up stories and legends. I read every book on the saint that I could lay hands on. At the end of my research, I was faced with the usual problem. How was I to convert all the information I had gathered into a play? The second problem was whether I dared make it a play about Ramdas Swami at all

and lay myself open to the vulnerable sensibilities of his devotees, or should I create a fictitious character to carry the ideas I had in mind?

I created a fictitious character, Acharya. But in my mind, he was Ramdas Swami. The sect of which he was leader was representative of all such religious sects. When I had visited Sajjan Gadh, I had discovered the hollowness of the lives of the saint's followers. They did nothing but read the Dasbodh, eat and sleep. This wasn't going to change our world for the better. That is the problem with all religious sects. They become simply a matter of following certain empty rituals, no more. The young and innocent boy in my play who sees through the meaninglessness of life in the Acharya's ashram, is not fictitious. This young boy existed when I visited Sajjan Gadh. In the course of my conversation with him, I discovered that he had lost all his kin in the Panshet dam burst which flooded Pune city, and had been brought up in the ashram. He said to me, I don't agree with the way things are here, but I have to continue in this place.

I created three disciples in all to reflect the different attitudes young people might have to an ashram situation—one who always thought things out for himself, one who never did, but followed every rule unquestioningly, and a third who was confused.

One of the responses to the play when I read it out at the Theatre Academy playwrights' workshop was unexpected. I was asked, since I had written about the process of 'samadhi' in the play, whether I had had some personal experience of it. How else could I vouch for its authenticity? There was no question of a personal experience of samadhi, but all writers have had a parallel experience, I replied. When I write, I become so one with my subject and my characters that it is very much like going into a trance. Samadhi, if such a thing was ever experienced by anybody who lived to tell the tale, would be merely an intensification of the writer's experience, no more.

Another subject has taken a hold of my mind in the last couple of years. It's a big one. Gandhi and Ambedkar. I've been reading up on them in my usual way, and, again in my usual way, I'm not at all sure how I am going to dramatize the material I am collecting. But at the moment there's no place for anything else in my mind except Ambedkar and Gandhi. Let us see what happens.

[The play Gandhi Ani Ambedkar has since been written. It calls for an economy of theatrical means. The major differences in the two leaders' thinking is the dramatic focus of the play. A vidushak has been created as a multi-functional device to connect scenes, to question, prod, goad, to play the inner voice.]

A Sip of Water

Premanand Gajvi

(Written in 1977)

[The curtain rises. Two youths appear. The noonday sun burns overhead. The exhausted young men are panting for shade but everything around is barren, desolate, stunted. The grass, dried yellow, glints in the sun.]

One: Roast. Roast us, you son-of-a-bitch.

Two: It's bloody roasting. Not a tree. Not one.

One: Sit. (Finds a slightly grassy patch and sits down.) Sit down. (Two sits beside him.) People sit in the shade of trees. We'll sit in the shade of the sun. You sit in my shade. You're tired crazy, aren't you?

Two: Hand me the waterbag. I'm parched.

One (unscrews the cap of the waterbag and turns it over Two's cupped palms; the latter puts his mouth down to drink but his palms are dry): Drink, drink.

Two: Drink? What? You're not pouring anything.

One: Pour what? (Jerks the waterbag to show there's nothing in it.)

Two: You're joking.

One: Never. There may not be an alternative to a life insurance policy. But there is to water. On this difficult day.

Two: What's that?

One: The final holy water!

Two: Don't joke!

One: You were drinking away merrily even when you weren't thirsty. You'll have to wait now till we get to a river or a village.

Two: This rustic life is pure death.

One: Is that going to be your definitive statement on rural life in your paper? Wait. There's an old man coming this way. Let's ask him if there's . . .

Two: I'll ask. (One plays the role of the old man.) How far's the village from here, grandpop?

One: Is it me ye're asking?

Two: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

One: Which village ye comin' from, sir?

Two: I come from very far.

One: From the city mebbe?

Two: Right. That's right.

One: I guessed so. Now ye go straight on by four fields and over to them bushes and

trees you see there, and go 'cross the river and ye're there.

Two: Thank you.

One: Wha's that?

Two: It's to thankee for the help.

One: Oh, yeah. (The old man disappears. One appears.) Come on mate, step smart. Meanwhile, hear me create a whole ocean for you to quench your thirst with. (Sings)

> My eyes rest in your eyes
> Arabian Sea of deep dark blue
> Waves crash shorewards
> But that's not the truth
> The sea-bed is vast
> And calm, calm.

Two: A sip of water . . . Beautiful. Truly beautiful! They say this land runs with sweet water streams. Here's another picture—

> Ganga, Yamuna, Goda, Kaveri
> All rivers of female sex
> And the water, how flows it,
> Of neuter gender though it be?
> Barren without male seed
> This civilization
> Famined by tradition
> Earth cracked, mouth gaping
> Soil won't let soil have
> A sip of water.

> (Lifts his cupped palms to his mouth)

One: Get away, bastard! You've polluted the river, you low-born body-burner.

Two: Just a sip of water, my father-mother. My mouth is dry, my life's in my throat.

One: I'll slit your throat then, bastard.

Two: Pity, my lord. Not a drop since mornin'. Waited long at the well so's some kind soul might help me with water. But nobody has pity for us. Wouldn't've come out here otherwise. I thought to meself, cats and dogs drink this water . . .

One: Grown too smart, eh? Thrash him, all of you. Let his water out.

Two: I fall at your feet, my lord.

One: Don't touch me! Thrash the bastard!

Two: No, no, my lord. I sinned. Please. Won't do it again—oh God, save me . . . I'm dying . . . save me, save me—

One: Let me see which man and his father come to save you!

Two (writhing in unbearable agony):

> Barren without male seed
> This civilization
> Famined by tradition
> Earth cracked, mouth gaping

Soil won't let soil have
A sip of water!

Two: One village.

One: Yes. Yes.

Two: One water.

One: Yes, yes!

Two: One village, one water!

Two: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

One: What's all this 'yes, yes, no, no' in our village.

Two: Don't you know yet? Say, who's the village chief here?

One: Me meself.

Two: Is that right? Namaskar.

One: Ram Ram!

Two: Well, Mr Chief, planning not to let the Dalits live?

One: What's that?

Two: There's news of beating up because the river was polluted by the Dalit touch.

One: Really? Hasn't reached my ears.

Two: It's in the papers. It's everywhere, and you say you don't know?

One: Who the hell reads them papers of yourn? And they don't git this far anyways, so how's we to know?

Two: So who beat up Chokha Kamble?

One: When?

Two: Six months ago.

One: So why bother now?

Two: What did you think? Nobody would take notice?

One: Look here. I know nothin' 'bout this.

Two: You incited the people and you don't know?

One: Should have complained to the police.

Two: Who threatened Kamble that if he complained, he'd have his leg broken in two and his wife dishonoured?

One: Look here, this is all lies. He told you all this but dint tell how I help with money and grain when he's in need, eh?

Two: And beat him up in return.

One: I've beaten up no one and I don't know nothin'. What you think, we are his enemies? We put a dam on the river because summers it goes dry. Now do you expect humans to drink where cattle drink? All the villagers can't be the same colour, can they? One of them may be crazy.

Two: But you shouldn't be the one. You're the chief. A member of the ruling party.

You've given your own Party a bad name. The opposition has, of course, started a whole campaign to malign you. Our government is getting a bad name. Don't let that happen again. Hush it all up today itself.

One: He bad-mouthed the village. He insulted me. He must apologize first.

Two: Are you in your right mind? Chief, I'm advising you because you're one of us. Do as I say and let them live.

One: Are we stopping them from living? But they've got to keep to their station.

Two: Their own well . . . you've even—

One: Who's eaten that up? It's there.

Two: But you've stopped them drawing water from it.

One: Who says? But we can't force them to draw if they don't want to, can we?

Two: OK. Let's set up a communal water-drawing programme today.

One: Done. But see it gets good reports. With big pictures an' all.

Two: One village, one water—

One: Yes, yes.

Two: One village—

One: Yes, yes. One water.

Two: Yes, yes!

One: Minister!

Two: Yes, sir!

One: Are last week's newspaper cuttings ready?

Two: Ready, sir!

One: Read them and tell us if there's something special we need to take note of.

Two: Can I start, sir?

One: Stop wasting time with your chatter. My ears and eyes are already impatient.

Two: Yes, sir! Listen. The Honourable Chief Minister 'Mister X' inaugurates impressive dam project at Y . . . picture . . . picture . . .

One: Why are you yelling?

Two: Your picture, sir. In the papers, on the occasion of the inauguration. (Holds paper out to him.)

One: That's something to yell about? Have I got a pair of scissors in my hand to cut the tape, that the photographer should take a picture?

Two: Habit, habit. Slaves of habit. Pardon my error, sir!

One: Pardoned!

Two: The building of the dam will irrigate dot-dot-dot acres of land, produce dot-dot-dot thousand kilowatts of power, and turn night into dazzling day. Water will be supplied to dot-dot-dot thousand villages and many dot-dot-dots will be achieved on the road to progress.

One: Minister, what's the meaning of all those dots?

Two: Meaning? This is a riddle about India's welfare. Like there's a riddle about the Indian Penal Code.

One: I don't get it.

Two: Like the entire existence of the project is contained in these pots, I mean dots.

One: You mean that's how the newspapers have printed their reports? That's gross abuse of Press freedom. What is the public going to understand from it—balls?

Two: You shouldn't think of the public. Balls is right. That's what the public says when it reads newspaper figures. Then it forgets them and so do we. So that's what it amounts to. Dots.

One: Dot-dot Minister.

Two: A Dalit belonging to dot-dot village in dot-dot circle in dot-dot taluka in dot-dot district was beaten within an inch of his life for polluting the river.

One: Read that last.

Two: How can I break the order, sir?

One: Then don't. Make a full statement.

Two: Yes, sir. The story of this incident which occurred six months ago was broken by a daily newspaper called Revolution. This was followed as usual by memoranda of protest and morchas. Finally peace was made with a communal water-filling programme.

One: Peace? Who brought that about?

Two: A special representative was sent.

One: And yet the credit goes to the 'one village one water' people.

Two: But you adopted them, didn't you?

One: Well . . . So now it's peace everywhere in our kingdom! What's that noise outside?

Two: I'll find out, sir! (Goes up to the wing and returns.) My lord, give me justice. Give me justice.

One: Who are you? Why are you here? There is an organization in our kingdom which deals in justice.

Two: Nobody cares for the poor and oppressed, my lord.

One: Oh! The poor and the oppressed! What's your complaint?

Two: Where does water come from, my lord?

One: Are you mad? It comes out of taps! We've spent lakhs building dams, laid miles and miles of pipes so water gushes forth in every household. And you ask where water comes from?

Two: I'm not talking of the city. I'm talking of the village.

One: Yes, talk. Talk on. That's what the people have voted us in for—to listen to the people.

Two: Water comes out of clouds. It flows in rivers n' streams. They flow into the sea. Then that goes up again as steam, then there's clouds, and water from the clouds, and then who owns that water?

One: You're talking too much just because I said talk. Now just state your complaint.

Two: We don't hev water to drink. The city folk comes, takes our pichures, then the village folk comes and breaks our pots n' pans and throws them out. How are we to live then, my lord?

One: Your sorrow is our sorrow too. I understand. You are from dot-dot village. Our kingdom is a just kingdom. Not a place for cheats and charlatans. Now, you are not to worry. We've made a note of your complaint. Look, submit a written statement, that's all. We've taken note.

Two (handing over a statement): Please, my lord.

One (glancing over it): It's a written one, I hope. Right. Now go. We've taken note. (The other goes as far as the wings.) Anyone there?

Two: Yes sir!

One: What's the punishment for those who break the law against untouchability?

Two: Shall I give you the amended one?

One: Something that will put the fear of God into them. It brought tears to my eyes to hear that poor brother's tale. Is that how human beings treat other human beings? Even animals drink from the same water-hole.

Two: Sir, politicians should not get carried away in a gush like water in an irrigation canal. That would be held as a black mark against you and then even a dog won't look at you.

One: What should we do, then?

Two: Dig a well for the untouchables and solve the whole problem.

One: Will that solve the problem of untouchability?

Two: Don't entangle yourself in the question. Just assume it's a religious problem and wash your hands off it.

One: We've heard that a separate well had been dug for the Dalits.

Two: It was. But after last year's drought, the unscheduleds have grabbed it. The Dalits must be assured of the government's sympathy. And this is the only way to do it.

One: I see. Well, we've taken note of it. Send this statement of that poor brother's to the Press and ours along with it. Make sure the report about the well goes in bold.

Two: This is how real politics triumphs. (Tears up the statement.)

Two: Bharat is my land
All my countrymen are my brothers
Says every page of our school books
From Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

One: Oh Bharat, festering with bloodsucking casteism
The truth is
Your culture's rotten from the roots
Your history—
Go ahead and call me traitor, if you wish—

Two: Is a cowshed for the breeding of eunuchs.
Oh eunuchs . . . throw away those yokes

That centuries have laid upon you
And live like sky-soaring birds.
Why must we tread the same path
The litter of sterile brains?

One: Why must we tread that path, we?
Why is our life a stagnant puddle?
Why don't we move on?
Who decided our status?
How come our very shadows pollute?
Is it true that there is one Almighty?

Two: Colourless
Odourless
Tasteless
Without character or form
That soul is free
Then who put ours in chains?
How did it get entangled in chains?
How is it a soul that doesn't challenge enslavement?

One: Kill the soul that has killed humanity
And set yourselves free
Strength of will is the way to freedom.
Strength of wrist is the way to freedom
The will is strong
Don't let its standard fall
Don't be the killers of your freedom
Give up your lives but don't trample on the history of free man.

Two: The spirit crushed under the yoke will be set free
And death will salute the spirit of millions of people.

One: Victory to revolution!

Two: Victory to revolution!

One: The slogans of revolution have made revolution barren, a hollow bamboo.

Two: Nowhere else on the face of this earth does revolution mean such a gross and ugly thing.

One: Revolution is picking up the child of a Mahar. Let people die thirsting for a sip of water. But revolution is giving water to a donkey.

Two: The low-caste Shambook who learned the Vedas had his head chopped off. But the four-legged buffalo whom Dnyaneshwar taught to recite the same holy books creates a revolution.

One: Such meaningless meanings of revolution are pulling the country down.

Two: And therefore—

One and Two: Victory to total revolution! Victory to total revolution!

Two: In dot-dot village

One: Of dot-dot circle

Two: Of dot-dot taluka

One: Of dot-dot district.

One and Two : Atrocities! Atrocities!

One: Murderous assault by upper-caste villagers on satyagrahis drawing water at well—

Two: Among the satyagrahis were several women—

One: Attempt to outrage the modesty of women—

Two: Dalits offered strong resistance to assault—

One: One died, two were hurt.

Two: Bhausaheb hurt—

One: Police numbers inadequate.

Two: Atmosphere continues to be tense.

One: Long live Bhausaheb!

Two: Who are you?

One: I'm the rural correspondent of the Revolution. We'd like to have an exclusive . . .

Two: I possess nothing exclusive.

One: That's your humility. It is many years since the Dalits have found such powerful leadership. They have suffered great loss through lack of such leadership. I believe they will now gain what they have lost.

Two: What gives you that hope?

One: For all you know, you may be responsible for changing the face of this whole country.

Two: I am a believer in action. There has been too much speech-making till now. I detest masks and I am not about to wear one myself.

One: What do you think the government should do?

Two: They should grasp this problem holistically and act. They must not think of the Dalits as vote-casting dolls. If this attitude continues, the disillusioned Dalits might even turn traitors.

One: Anything more?

Two: For the moment, no.

One: Thank you.

One: Come in; do come in, Bhausaheb. I have been anxiously waiting for this meeting.

Two: You make me feel embarrassed.

One: We are fully aware of your strength. And we acknowledge it. (Holds out a purse.)

Two: What is this?

One: Your hunger and life assurance. Two lakhs.

Two: So I withdraw my agitation.

One: Not exactly. But we hope to ensure that both your leadership and our reign continue. We will be with you in your every problem; on occasion we might even choose to honour you with. . . (Two accepts the purse. One smiles in victory.)

One: Victory to Bhausaheb!

Two: Victory to Mister Minister!

One: How much time more we goin' to drink that stream water?

Two: I don't unnerstand nothin'. It's bin six months now that we start to dig the well, but no sign of Bhausaheb comin' this way, nor sendin' word. Summer look us in the face soon. The well got dug a man-and-a-half deep when we hit stone and work had to be stopped. That's no matter, but he don't even ask after the work, do he?

One: And here we gone made enemies of the village folks. And lost our lives and shed our blood. And now it's soon summer lookin' us in the face. And we be back to our footin' it all over the village beggin' 'Oh master, one sip of water, please. One sip of water please . . . one sip of water please.'

> Voices repeat 'One sip of water, please' while One and Two move towards the wings.
>
> This barren soil that has littered a thousand times
> Caught in the drought of tradition
> This cracked earth with gaping mouth
> This soil will not let its own soil have
> One sip of water!

[Translated from the original Marathi by Shanta Gokhale. Excerpted from her book on contemporary Marathi drama, forthcoming from Seagull Books.]

The Rise of Dalit Literature in Maharashtra

My Personal View of its History

Shashikant Tasgaonkar

Before Dalit Literature

Marathi literature begins, in the real sense of the term, with the emergence of Mahanubhava literature in the late 12th century. Mahanubhava is, of course, one of the creeds within Hinduism which came into being as a reaction to the Vedic religion. Followers of this creed propagated their revolutionary thoughts in coded literature which is known as the 'Mahanubhava'. In addition, their expectations and conditions for participation were so very strict that the creed actually failed to spread as extensively as might have been expected.

Mahanubhava literature was followed by literature composed by saints from different parts of what we now call Maharashtra. Dnyaneshwari was the leading figure among these saints and his Dnyaneshwari, a commentary in the common language of the day on the Bhagwad Geeta (1212 A.D.), is the culmination of his work. The work of other saints who wrote after him is characterized by devotion to God, to the Guru and a strong strain of humanitarianism. This trend of saintly literature carried on into the 16th century.

The 17th century saw what we might call 'scholarly' poets (pandit kavis), for instance, Moropant, Raghunath Pandit, etc. Mainly, these writers rendered mythological stories in verse as a display of their erudition and familiarity with Sanskrit literature.

The 18th and late-19th centuries are well known for the Shahiri literature. Shahirs were folk-song composers and singer-performers in itinerant troupes that travelled about the countryside. They wrote heroic poems about heroic figures from history, and also romantic songs in which sexual feeling was strongly highlighted. These songs are known as 'powadas' and 'lavanis' respectively.

Modern Marathi literature began, in the middle of the 19th century, with Chiplunkar, the essayist, and Keshavsut, the poet. Haribhau Apte is generally considered to be the pioneer of the Marathi novel. Others, like N. S. Phadke and V. S. Khandekar, followed him. Marathi drama and autobiography appeared respectively in 1893 with Vishnudas Bhave and in 1935 with Laxmibai Tilak, who gave a different turn to Marathi autobiography.

The beginnings of the 20th century saw the rise of Romanticism in Marathi poetry. After some time, however, during the 1930s, Realism took the place of Romanticism. What may be considered 'New' Marathi literature came into being after 1945 or so. B. S. Mardhekar was the leading poet of this new trend.

What might be designated the 'postmodern' period in Marathi literature, the decadence after 1960 or so, distinguishes itself by the quantity of writing which appeared with a focus on rural life. Two vigorous trends can be seen in this period, rural literature witten by Dalits, and rural literature written by non-Dalits. Minute detail of description and expression of the pathetic side of rural and Dalit life in the countryside mark this new writing.

And yet the 'untouchable' still remained untouched in the literature of this time also, unless he appeared as the butt of a touch of humour in some narrative. Unfortunately, the untouchable had till this time never become a hero or

heroine in literature, and, in real life, continued to be the lowly servant who did the bidding of all others.

The Rise of Dalit Literature

Even before the independence of India, before the Ambedkar movement began, some Dalits had voiced complaints to the British government against the poverty which was their lot and their suffering. Gopal Baba Valangkar, Pandit Kondiram and Kisan Fagu Bansode, for instance, have some Dalit compositions to their credit.

Those artistes who joined the Ambedkar movement composed songs and ballads, which they presented in the tamashas and jalasas. Their intention was to bring about reform. They believed that they could thus spread the message of Ambedkar to every untouchable home. Therefore, their primary purpose was reform. Entertainment was merely the vehicle. Then Anna Bhau Sathe and Baburao Bagul appeared on the scene. They were novelists as well as short-story writers. Shankarrao Kharat, a direct follower of Ambedkar, also soon made his various contributions to Dalit literature. This literature was next enriched by the short story and poetry, especially the poetry of Namdev Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangale, Waman Nimbalkar, Keshav Meshram, etc. Even as they were attempting to form their agony into words, others like Bandhu Madhav, Yogiraj Waghmare, Avinash Dolas, and Waman Howal had begun to contribute to the Dalit short story.

The rise of Dalit literature as such can be seen happening first with poetry in 1967. This poetry was overflowing with the revolutionary thoughts of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. It spoke in an abusive tone as a form of protest against social discrimination in all spheres of life, as in all forms of literature. Its appearance created a great sensation in Marathi literature.

Since 1978, a new trend has developed and prevailed over Dalit writing—the composition of autobiography. Beginning with Sonkambale to the latest work by Kishore Kale, some fifty autobiographies have come out. In comparison, drama and the novel have remained unexploited by Dalit writers. The novels of Madhav Kondvilkar, Vaijnath Kalase and Uttam Tupe are, however, noteworthy. Similarly, T. Gaekwad and Rustum Achalkhamb have made some contribution to the theatre.

At times Dalit literature has been the butt of adverse criticism, sometimes at the national level also. And yet, in time, like the literature of black people in America, Dalit literature also began to be discussed at the international level. Daya Pawar's Baluta and Laxman Mane's Upra received awards from the Ford Foundation and were translated into different foreign languages.

Before considering what might be characteristic of Dalit literature, we need to take into account the exact identity of the Dalits. According to Professor Arun Kamble, for instance, 'Dalits are those who have been oppressed religiously, culturally, economically, socially and politically by the unjust, established social organism.' This definition includes the untouchables, nomads, tribals and other backward classes of our society. That is to say, this definition is inclusive enough for our genuine purposes.

Characteristics of Dalit Literature

Now, the pathetic (feeling) tone of the agony of Dalit life had never really reflected itself in Marathi literature over the centuries. That explains the effort of Dalit literature itself to fill this lacuna. This feature is reflected in what we might consider the characteristics of Dalit literature during the last three decades or

so. These characteristics are—

1. Dalit awareness
2. Protest and rebelliousness
3. Atheism
4. Reflection of Marxism and Ambedkarism.

Dalit literature was, and is, being written with a certain awareness which must be characterized as 'Dalit'. In the words of Baburao Bagul, 'Dalit awareness is the awareness of (true) democracy.' What it means is that this literature has the task of establishing democratic values like freedom, equality and fraternity. But it also expects a reformation—in religion, culture, politics and economics—which will be congenial to Dalits in every sense. Thus Dalit awareness is tantamount to awareness of the essential freedom of mankind

Dalit literature is considered 'rebellious' because it protests against the practice of the caste-system in India, other unjust traditions, and religious, economic, as well as cultural, exploitation of the Dalits. This rebellious tendency was evoked by the thought and literature of Dr Ambedkar. He would say, naturally, that once the slave has become aware of them, he will throw off the chains of slavery.

This rebellious tendency found an outlet sometimes at the political and sometimes at the social level. A poem by Namdev Dhasal gives a clear hint that there is no freedom in the true sense in our society when it says, 'I know not whether freedom is the name of some she-ass.'

Dalit literature has its own atheistic aspect. All Dalits share the worship of God in some form, unlike some members of other communities. But they also know that God saw with his eyes wide open the injustice being heaped upon the Dalit. Apparently he could do nothing for them. So Dalit literature eventually challenged the very existence of God. In a poem, Keshav Meshram says, 'Once I called God by his mother's name/ And he just laughed.'

Dalit literature has refused to accept the existence of God and the fatalism which flows from the assumption of his existence. Therefore, it maintains that social hierarchy is not the creation of God but a man-made arrangement. The present poverty and suffering of the Dalits is not a punishment for wrongs done in previous births. It is, instead, the result of a discriminating and unjust social system. Dalits knew that only through education could they enforce the ideas that challenged the existence of God, and the consequent fatalism. Some of them adopted the preaching of Lord Buddha, of a reformation for equality. Some even propose, without common agreement, however, that Dalit literature should be considered a form of Buddhist literature.

To find appropriate means for expressing all this, Dalit literature has had to adopt literary methods which need to be recognized in their own rights as legitimate. An aesthetic of the Dalit movement exists and must be identified and acknowledged.

Dalit literature, by and large, exhibits a reflection of Marxism and the influence of Ambedkar's thinking. There are, clearly, two groups among Dalit writers and critics, each staunchly acknowledging the basis of their movement in Marx or Ambedkar. For instance, Namdev Dhasal advocates Marxism, whereas Raja Dhale adheres to Ambedkarism. Marx takes up the philosophy of class-struggle and Ambedkar of caste-struggle. Once upon a time Ambedkar said that he would necessarily accept Marx, along with Buddha and Phule, for his struggle for social reform. But he himself discarded Marxism later since according to him, it was not applicable to Indian society with its many caste divisions. He was of the

opinion that unless and until this caste system is eradicated, the class struggle expected by Marx could not occur.

Ambedkar's later position has baffled some of his followers. They have not understood him properly. Baburao Bagul, Arjun Dangale, Raosaheb Kasbe and some others try to combine Marxism with Ambedkarism. According to them, while there are differences between Ambedkar's philosophy and Marx's thought, at heart Ambedkar was a Marxist. Some cannot justify this view.

Charges against Dalit Literature

From its beginning there has been controversy about this literature. Therefore, I believe it is necessary here to address some of the charges levelled against Dalit literature. Firstly, it has been considered a stagnant body of writing by some. One reason for this charge was that initially, much of the writing came from the Mahar community, inspired by Ambedkar. Their world of experience seemed to be restricted to their own caste-life. Naturally, some patterns of experience were repeated again and again. However, now, Dalits from many other communities have also started writing, and this charge is no longer valid.

Secondly, Dalit literature has been charged with singing 'one' tune. The writers wrote of their own lives under oppression, as of the lives of their oppressed communities. This state had existed for untold ages. So why would not these writers sing the single tune of this experience? As a complaint against the manner in which they had been treated from time immemorial, the dominant note was surely inevitable.

The third charge is that Dalit literature is a propaganda machine for the thought of Phule and Ambedkar. On the one hand, the best works of art in the world have always advocated something. And, in any case, what is wrong with propagating ideas that are essentially humanitarian?

The fourth charge is that this literature is wrathful, abusive, and negative in character. It is but natural that when man is outraged at the injustice done to him, he will become angry and abusive. We might do well to remember that grieving gives birth to gospels and wrath to revolution. Indeed, in the apparent negation of certain matters, there is an affirmation. When it denies the right of discrimination to exist, obviously it demands equality for all in all spheres of life.

Dalit literature is a vigorous and powerful trend in Marathi literature. Despite the charges levelled against its content and aesthetic, it must emerge, eventually, in the form of a literary movement in all other regions of India as well. No one can prevent this.

'I Really Have to Meet God'

Shashikant Tasgaonkar

[A spacious drawing room. Three couches with cushions. On the right, a door opening on to the street. On the left, a door opening into the inner rooms. All the expected furniture. Decorative objects in their expected places. (If possible, show on the street-side of the front door, a name plate with 'Shree Bhagwanrao Dev' printed in bold letters on it.) In the right-hand corner, towards the inside of the door, is sitting a young servant on a stool. Attire: dhoti, Nehru shirt, a shoulder cloth wound about his middle, a Gandhi cap on his head. Sandal-paste marks on his forehead and ears, so he ought to appear a believer. Sitting on his stool, he is yawning ceaselessly. Because he has no chores to do, there's righteous indignation writ on his face.

When the play begins, he continues to yawn for a while and then, having no real work, he drifts to the centre of the drawing room and, facing the audience, gestures vigorously and starts nattering. 'Das' is his name.]

DAS (lifting both hands towards his neck, stretching lazily). Deva! Deva! O Deva! I've had enough. I came to this house to work as a servant, but there's no work to do here! Awf'ly queer, this situation. (Shuffling some object about.) Tell me, if life makes a working man lazy like this, he's born for nothing then, is he? (Carries on talking as he moves objects about.) When I learnt a servant was 'wanted', I came looking for work. Even gave an interview. (Puts down what he had in his hand.) And what an interview! Ha, ha, ha . . . (Very loudly.) Saw the like of it for the first time in my life! Heh, heh, heh . . . (Leaves.)

Flashback. The same drawing room. On the couch sits a young woman, dozing. All dressed up. Her name is 'Dasi'. As the door bell rings, her slumber is disturbed.)

DASI (loudly, without rising from the couch). Who's there . . .? Door's open, isn't it! Come in. (Das comes in from the street. Dressed as before.)

DAS (folding his hands before her). Namaskar, Baisaheb!

DASI (still seated, looking him over carefully). Who're you? What d'you want? Who d'you want to meet, then?

DAS (confused). I . . . I want to meet Dev saheb.

DASI (briskly). He's not home. What d'you want?

DAS. You need a house servant, don't you?

DASI (sitting up and smoothing out her hair and clothes, and so on). Yeah, yeah, so you've come for that?

DAS (eagerly, impatiently). Now you're talking . . .

DASI (uncomprehending). What d'you say?

DAS. Now this work is worked out, isn't it? (She becomes thoughtful.) That way I'm a very good bloke, really. I'll do whatever you tell me to do. I'll accept any wages you give. My old master was awf'ly pleased with me, y'know. What can one do, though . . . got transferred, didn't he . . .

DASI (recovering). Shut up, you! I didn't ask you anything, did I?

DAS. People always ask this sort of thing before they give you work, don't they? So I thought, might as well say all this beforehand.

DASI. Just give proper answers to whatever I ask. Sit down on that couch. (He sits, setting his bottom down gingerly.)

DAS. My name is Pandu.

DASI (sternly). Look here—name, place, address—we need no such things here!

DAS (surprised). No? Then . . .?

DASI. Now pay attention to the questions I ask. Don't get so skittish.

DAS. Alright, then. Ask what you want to.

DASI. Can you talk? (Das begins to laugh loudly.) Hey, you, don't you laugh!

DAS (ceasing to laugh). What else can I do, then? What a question you've asked! Heh, heh, heh . . . Can you speak, she asks!

DASI. I want an answer.

DAS. Now, Baisaheb, can't you see I'm talking to you . . .

DASI. If you give such answers, you can't work here.

DAS (confused). Wh . . . what d'you say?

DASI. If you really want this job, say—I can't talk. I can't hear. I can't see a thing! And if you can't manage this, go the way you came.

DAS (even now somewhat confused). Baisaheb, everything is odd here, isn't it?

DASI. If it suits you, say 'Yes'. If not, get lost!

DAS (having given thorough thought to this). Where can I go, Baisaheb? Wherever I go, I'll be in service, won't I? Might as well do it here, then.

DASI. Now you're talking like a sensible chap. So you're agreeable to all this?

DAS. Yes, Baisaheb.

DASI. Look here, don't keep calling me Baisaheb.

DAS. Why . . .?

DASI. Hey, I am a servant too, like you, aren't I?

DAS. Y'mean . . .?

DASI. You're Das. I'm Dasi. And we must call each other by these names.

Dasi leaves, goes inside. Das, as before, starts moving objects about.

DAS. It's true, I've become Das from Pandu. But who'm I to serve, then? All this while I haven't even got to see my master's face! And in this house—there's just that Dasi and me, the two of us. No one else. Now Dev saheb's Agent, he does come once in a way.

Hearing his nattering, Dasi comes out yelling.

DASI. Hey, Dasha! How you natter! What'd I tell you? Forgotten, have you?

DAS (holding both his ears, 'guilty'). I'm sorry. I won't natter again.

DASI. Hey, I don't mind your nattering. But you'd better look out for the Agent, you. If he

hears you yakking, then you're done for. I'm more scared of him than of Dev saheb, y'know.

DAS. Why d'you fear him?

DASI. Look here, you—he has more authority here than Dev saheb. Once he even horsewhipped a servant!

DAS (*shivering in fright*). Dasi, I won't ever natter again.

DASI. Afraid, are you?

DAS. You mentioned a horsewhip . . . so . . .

DASI. Don't you worry. He won't come today.

DAS. Who?

DASI. The Agent, who else?

DAS. And when's Dev saheb going to come?

DASI. I don't know, do I?

DAS. You must've seen him! Hey, what's he look like, huh?

DASI. Dasha, what can I say? I haven't seen him, either. Dev knows when I'll meet him.

DAS. What? Even you haven't seen him? Then how d'you get here?

DASI. The Agent brought me.

DAS. D'you have any . . . family?

DASI. I did, once. No longer. And you?

DAS. Likewise. (*After a silence*) You'll stay on here, till the end?

DASI. Where can I go? You said it yourself, didn't you—Go where you will, you'll still be in service.

DAS. That's true, of course.

She stands before a mirror, running her hands over her hair.

DASI (*turning towards him*). Dasha, how do I look?

DAS. Just like the mistress of this house!

DASI. Shush! Don't talk nonsense.

DAS. I'm telling you the truth. When I first saw you, I thought, this has to be the mistress.

DASI. So when did you make out I was Dasi?

DAS. When I heard you talk.

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Theatrescapes

Heggodu 1998

Samik Bandyopadhyay

Ninasam in Heggodu has been for me, like several of our generation, a piece of utopia realized—a 'rural commune', made up of the little hamlet of Heggodu, with a population of barely five hundred, and 'ten or twelve still smaller hamlets around it together', with the Ninasam institutions 'symbolizing' 'this rural commune's tireless endeavours to realize its dreams of a new India in its immediate surroundings', as K. V. Subbanna described the project in his acceptance speech delivered on receipt of the Magsaysay Award, which he acknowledged as a tribute to 'the institutions and movements of which I am just a representative figure.' What Subbanna calls 'the Ninasam institutions' include the original Sree Nilakantheswar Natyaseva Sangh, started in 1949; the Akshara Publications, with its formidable range of original works in Kannada and translations from other languages; the intensive year-long theatre course; the Ninasam Tirugata, the touring repertory company, that started in 1985 and takes at least three major productions every year to about sixty cities, small towns, and villages in Karnataka, performing about a hundred and sixty times; and the ten year old, weeklong annual culture course conducted by U. R. Ananthamurthy.

The first time many of us came to know of Ninasam was from a report by K. S. Raghavendra in 1978 on a film festival organized by the Ninasam Chitrasamaj on 19-24 December 1977, and a survey of viewers' responses conducted on the occasion. The twelve films screened in 16 mm prints on the occasion at the Sivarama Karanth Rangamandir (the Ninasam theatre building) were Pather Panchali, Bicycle Thieves, Wild Strawberries, The Gold Rush, The Battleship Potemkin, Wages of Fear, Rashomon, The Incident at Owl Creek, Wedding, Happy Anniversary, Nanook of the North, and the B D Garga documentary on Satyajit Ray.

Raghavendra's report was an inspiring document that was widely circulated in film society circles all over India, and a translation in Bengali appeared in an anthology, Samaj O Chalachchitra('Society and Cinema'), edited by Rajat Roy and Someswar Bhowmik (Calcutta: G. A. E. Publishers, 1980); along with a report of a sample survey of viewers' responses to cinema in Calcutta that I had conducted in 1978. Ninasam had not stopped at merely making the films available, but undertaken a close study of the reactions of a rural community being exposed to such an experience for the very first time. There were considerable variations in the reactions, ranging from those of the twenty-one year old illiterate agricultural labourer who was quite outspoken in his avowed preference for the popular cinema that he could 'understand' immediately and his categorical statement that he did not want such films to be shown again, and would yet admit: 'Whenever I see a film, I feel an urge to get educated, a craving never to be fulfilled;' to those of the eighteen year old hostel maidservant, the fifty-five year old, privately educated widow, and the twenty-five year old graduate secretary of the local cooperative, who find satisfaction in 'having had the opportunity' 'of coming to know different kinds of people, their cultures and their languages for the first time;' the widow adding, 'Cinema affects our social life in the way in which it helps us—from individual to individual, separately—to find the meaning of existence.'

The culture course in early October this year, that drew about a hundred people from all over Karnataka from all ages and walks of life and professions and commitments—lawyers, teachers, artists, students, activists, bank employees—had

the same desire and vision; to take a critical look at the history and contemporary reality of Karnataka, in their connections and interactions with other cultures, even while looking for possible points of reference and sources of inspiration or ideas in those other cultures. The inputs included critical overviews of and informative introductions to the Western and north and western Indian musical traditions, the first world war and women artists in Germany reacting to the war, attitudes to women in four representative Kannada poets, images of women in Indian art from the classical traditions down to calendar and publicity art and contemporary experimental art, contemporary women filmmakers in the documentary mode, women novelists in Bengali(Mahasweta Devi and Jaya Mitra) representing the convergence and dichotomies of individual creativity and activism. While most of the sessions were conducted in Kannada, with lively dialogues and debates between the speakers and the listening participants, there were outsiders like Bhaskar Chandavarkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Shanta Gokhale, Mark Lindley, and me, who had to speak in English. But there was enough hospitable warmth and curiosity in the atmosphere to make us insiders in no time—particularly with an indefatigably involved Ananthamurthy and others too ' interpreting' for us, translating what the Kannada speakers were saying into English for our benefit, and offering renderings of our statements into Kannada for the audience; to ensure total and effective participation. By the end of our stint, we could follow quite a few Kannada terms and there was no strain or boredom at all in sitting through the sessions in Kannada. All that we had to do was to bend over to the one sitting next to us from time to time, to get a drift of what we seemed to be missing at a point!

Subbanna and his lieutenants, particularly Akshara, his son, and Jambe, have a genius for bringing people and things and ideas and experiences together into a common discourse, the natural direction of any authentic cultural project. The theatre school, the touring repertory company, and the culture course find a meeting point in the first four days of the course, with the evening performances of the three new plays for the year's tirugata tour, followed by vigorous discussion of the respective productions in the first session on the following morning. The three plays on the repertoire this year are Ahilye, Pu.Ti.Na.'s musical play from 1945, never staged, 'maybe from Victorian prudery or morality, dominant at the time in the Kannada theatrical tradition' (as B. V. Karanth suggested in private conversation), in a production directed by B. V. Karanth, the Jean Anouilh Antigone directed by N. Premchand, the young Manipuri director, and Mahesh Elkunchwar's Wada Chirebandi, directed by Ninasam's own resident director, Jambe. The same actors and actresses, all alumni of the Ninasam Theatre Institute, performing in three different productions simultaneously, gain at two levels—from their exposure to different directors, with different directorial styles, often from different cultures (Tirugata directors in the past have included Fritz Bennewitz, Prasanna, Atul Tiwari, S. Raghunandan, Bhaskar Chandavarkar, and B. V. Karanth on several occasions, and the playwrights have included Bhasa, Shakespeare, Shaw, Duerrenmatt, Moliere, D. L. Roy, Euripedes, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Karnad, Kambar, Gorky, Gogol, Brecht, Rakesh, Vaidehi, and Shivaprakash), and from the feedback from the culture course participants (with scope for improvements and amendments, if necessary, before the tour, which starts only after the end of the course).

While the two major traditions that have substantially defined the course of Kannada theatre—the Yakshagana and the Company Natakas—have been associated with a larger-than-life, non-realistic (often predominantly musical) style of acting, Jambe, in the last few years at least, has stuck to the realistic—even naturalistic—

culminating in his production of Mahesh's Wada, which opened with a scene almost totally covered with the bric-a-brac of a crumbling feudal establishment. For a while I even felt that there would be no space at all for the actors and actresses to move (I voiced my scepticism to Shanta Gokhale sitting next to me)! But within minutes of the exposition I was left wondering at and admiring the skill with which Jambe disclosed spaces within the clutter and managed entrances and exits and encounters. Set against the other two productions, Wada was blatantly different. In private conversation, Jambe explained his commitment to naturalism in terms of the need to teach and train the actors in the institute in the Stanislavsky Method. He acknowledged the problem of offering a style that went against the grain of the regional traditions. The problem was further complicated, he said, by the fact that 'education for understanding and analysis is an imperative for the modern realistic theatre,' and the difficulties faced particularly by the actresses, several of whom had given up studies before appearing for the School Leaving Certificate examinations. While the rural audiences had 'received' his production of the Lower Depths with understanding and appreciation, there remained the danger of degeneration on tour, while performing in open air theatres that demanded a raising of the voice, which in its turn tended to spark off a process of disintegration of the rigour of naturalism.

In his treatment of the Wada Chirebandi text, Jambe makes a significant departure, when Parag, who, in the original, dreams of going to Bombay, reforms himself on a promise from his uncle, and is thoroughly frustrated when his uncle makes light of his promise, and leaves him behind when he departs for Bombay, is, in Jambe's version, given a more positive position, choosing to stay back, with pride and dignity. In the discussions on the morning following the performance, Jambe defended the departure by identifying with Parag's choice—his own choice to stay rooted at Heggodu, where Akshara and Jambe are two rare specimens, NSD products who have chosen to return to their own theatres rather than play safe and chase careers in Delhi or Bombay!

Their choice has a lot to do with Subbanna's choice, a choice in its turn churned up by the state of depression that followed the corruption and collapse of the Nehruvian project. As Subbanna explained to Prasanna and Geeti Sen in an interview, 'After a decade of independence, we had become disillusioned ; and what we thought was the driving thrust of our lives was not there. We had to find something else beyond Gandhism.' For Subbanna, the 'something else' defined itself as a humanist culture with its locus in the ideal village—only in his imagination—that Gandhi conjured up for Nehru in a 1945 letter that Subbanna loves to quote. As Subbanna tells his interviewers, 'I would like to identify myself as a Malnad supari (areca nut) grower, living . . . in democratic India—in a world where we have nuclear weapons and cold war. . . but essentially as a supari grower in a small village in the Sagar taluka, as just a human being . . . Actually, I live in my own village growing supari, but I am interested in the man who grows paddy. My interest is in all kinds of things from all over the world; but I cannot go out and stay there. So I have to fix my physical frame to this space and allow my imagination to be exposed to the whole world.'

The Ninasam complex, with its hostels, lecture halls, guest houses, dining hall, offices, a library, with lively wall paintings in the regional style, and enough open spaces and ledges and seating facilities for people to gather in groups and just talk, grows around the theatre—named after Sivarama Karanth—with nine hundred seats, excellent acoustics provided by gunny sacks—built of mud. Subbanna explains, 'Whatever resources we have, we have to use sparingly. I come from here. So I have to

build my theatre as I build my house or my father built his.' Literally, theatre in Heggodu—Ninasam style—is located in an actual community open to ideas from all over, but with total commitment to itself, making of theatre 'a multi-confrontational experience, culminating in theatre in confrontation with the community, mirroring the internal doubts, tensions, and quarrels of the community to build up to a new synthesis'—as Subbanna explained at the Actor at Work workshop at NCPA, Bombay in 1991.

One has to be at Heggodu, maybe during the culture course leading on to the tirugata, to feel the energy that runs through the theatre here, an energy drawn from the people and the place alike, to sustain a theatre of enlightenment in unbroken continuity for so many years. The energy percolates to other initiatives too—like that initiated by Prasanna, who has organized a group of dalit women into a cooperative of weavers who sell their wares in a showroom overlooking the Ninasam complex, and Prasanna is around to say hello to his theatre friends and invite them to his home—a lovingly designed piece of regional architecture, with traditional wooden pillars and arches, and the familiar ledges to sit and talk.

The charm and wonder of the Ninasam project lies in the way culture in all its richness and complexity alike sustains it—manifest in the exquisite floral and string and paper and streamers designs that the young dalit girl designed afresh and so differently for both the sites every day, viz. the lecture theatre and the stage for the evening performances; and the flawless efficiency in gentleness with which the schedules were maintained for sessions and breaks, and the sound and recording and projection systems worked, in spite of frequent power cuts; and of course the warmth and intensity with which Subbanna, Ananthamurthy, Kurtkoti, Akshara, Jambe, Nagaraj, and the Ninasam actors and actresses responded and communicated.

In an earlier interview in 1991, when I visited Heggodu first, Akshara had told me that Panjarshale, Karanth's adaptation and production of Tagore's Totakahini (The Parrot's Tale), with a cast of a hundred children, in an open air theatre near the local high school in 1971, was 'the virtual beginning of Ninasam's present phase.' That little prose poem was part of Tagore's visionary literature for a new humanist enlightenment, a critique of the dead weight of institutionalized education, a plea for the freedom of culture, looking forward to the dream of a Santiniketan, now blasted in the monumental joke of a Visva-Bharati, institutionalized to the hilt!—while the birds can flutter in freedom at Heggodu.