



Theatre for Change

Editorial

'The very process of the workshop does so much for women. The process is an end in itself. For women who are not given to articulating their views, women who are not given to exploring their bodies in a creative way, for feeling good, for feeling fresh. Just doing physical and breathing exercises is a liberating experience for them. Then sharing experiences with each other and discovering that they are not insane, you know, discovering that every woman has dissatisfaction and negative feelings, touching other lives . . . When you come together in a space, you develop a trust, sharing with each other, enjoying just being in this space, enjoying singing and creating, out of your own experiences, your own plays'—Tripurari Sharma

Theatre as *process*—workshopping—is an empowering activity. It encourages self-expression, develops self-confidence and communication skills, and promotes teamwork, cooperation, sharing. It is also therapeutic, helping individuals to probe within and express—share—deeply emotional experiences. Role-playing enables one to 'enact' something deeply personal that one is not otherwise able to express, displacing it and rendering it 'safe', supposedly 'fictionalized'. In short, workshopping can be a liberatory experience. For women who, in our society especially, are not encouraged to develop an intimacy with their bodies, who are conditioned to be ashamed or uncomfortable about their physicality, the process of focusing on the body, on exercises which change one's awareness of and relationship with and deployment of one's body, offers an additional benefit, opening up a dimension of physicality which is normally out of bounds.

For children, the workshop experience is invaluable. It is an activity that involves them from head to toe, a learning-by-doing process. They develop learning skills (concentration, memorization, vocabulary expansion, creative and imaginative development, language), communication skills (public speaking, effective and expressive delivery), social skills (cooperation, teamwork, functioning as part of a group, discipline, time management), and character development through values such as responsibility, sensitivity to others and sharing.

Theatre as a *medium* of communication has proved its impact, especially in this country today. Immediate, direct, bypassing the barrier of illiteracy because of its oral and visual qualities, with the scope for being interactive, it is an effective method of spreading a message, provoking thought and triggering discussion.

Recognizing the power of theatre both as process and medium, we at *STQ* have always valued the effectiveness of theatre in any movement for change, be it social, political or personal. During the course of our documentation of different activist theatre initiatives, especially the Kalighat sex workers' theatre project (see *STQ* 9) the conviction began to grow that *STQ* should involve itself more directly in theatre activism. We realized that we were strategically positioned to develop linkages and programmes which fused arts resources and social activism.

As we saw it, the situation usually is that groups involved in social activism of different kinds are often interested in exploring theatre as a tool or medium of communication, integrating it into their work. However, they have neither the funds, the time nor the expertise to introduce it in any systematic way into their already overcrowded and pressured work schedules. So they end up using it in an ad hoc or occasional way, which gives them an intriguing taste of its values and benefits without their being able to take advantage of a sustained and systematic

methodology which they could incorporate into the structure of their programme.

On the other hand, theatre persons and theatre groups who have the necessary training, technique and skill which these activist groups could learn from, are also busy with their own priorities and lack the organizational resources, the knowledge, the contacts, or the finances to coordinate on their own with such groups and work out a mutual collaboration.

This is where we saw *STQ* as having a role to play. Our strong interest in theatre as a social function and community communication form was the motivation; we wished to encourage, indeed promote, the use of theatre as both *process* and *medium* for development and activist work. Our links with the theatre world had, over the years, developed so that we were familiar with the different kinds of theatre people were doing. We could bring these two areas together, coordinate the collaboration, and document the entire process for further dissemination through the journal to be of use to others who might wish to undertake a similar project.

Our observations during the documentation of the Kalighat sex workers' workshop project underscored certain principles to keep in mind while planning this initiative. Sanlaap, the NGO holding the workshop, had built up a strong relationship with the sex workers of the Kalighat area through their fieldwork and support activities. They had won their trust and confidence; it was because of this relationship that the theatre resource persons were at all able to work in that environment, with the cooperation of the sex workers themselves. We felt that the theatre work had to go hand in hand with the goals and objectives of the activist work being undertaken already, it could and should not be either at cross purposes or just an 'add on' or one-off exercise designed to suit someone else's agenda. It also needed to be reasonably sustained, with the capacity for follow up built in, because it was only then that the true benefits could be felt by the participants; there was a mental component, a shaping of values and attitudes, that could not be done adequately in a few short weeks. We also felt that the resource persons had to be carefully selected to suit the goals of the particular activist group, and to suit the composition of the participants, who could either be members of the group who would then develop into facilitators and conduct future workshops themselves; or members of the target group, the actual people the activists worked with. Very importantly, we felt that the goals of the workshop, which would necessarily inflect the workings of it, must be developed in conjunction with the collaborating NGO or activist group. They were the ones who had the experience, who had done the fieldwork, who had built links and relationships with the workshop participants. They had to decide what the goals of this workshop were to be. Did they want to build a strong team, do a production, concentrate on therapy, self-confidence, instil certain values? Each workshop had to be very carefully tailored to suit the specific needs and goals of the particular activist group. We had to keep in mind, also, that flexibility and interaction must be part of the whole process: no rigid rules and regulations that could or did not respond to the immediate situation. This was very much an experimental process, and thus the ability to adapt wherever necessary to the changing needs of the situation was essential.

STQ applied for project funding to a UK based organization, the Network Foundation (or Network for Social Change), who support the use of the arts for social development. They found the project worthwhile, and we received funding for a year to pursue our Theatre for Change Initiative. Briefly, the project was as

follows:

1. *STQ* locates NGOs and developmental organizations who are keen on using theatre or performance of different kinds in their work.

2. We build, in conjunction with the collaborating NGO, a programme for a year-long workshop with goals identified through discussion. Resource persons who are specifically identified to suit the needs of the group, the goals they are working toward, and the profile of the participants, are brought in to work with them for a year, through workshops which include both actual physical training as well as education through the medium of lecture/demonstrations etc. *STQ* coordinates and supervises this year-long programme, working in tandem with the collaborating NGO and the resource persons.

3. This entire process is documented as completely as possible, including ongoing assessment and records by the participants, the resource persons and the *STQ* team. The documentation gets published and disseminated via *STQ*, so that other groups in different parts of the country can learn from the project and apply the same principles if they find them useful. Visual documentation in the form of photographs is undertaken. One set of photographs is gifted to the collaborating NGO for their files.

We began the Theatre for Change Initiative by identifying two NGOs to collaborate with. We were looking for small groups which did not already have sufficient funds to undertake such a workshop on their own, but were keen on using theatre, and who would benefit from the kind of project we were visualizing. Almost immediately, two organizations came to our notice.

The first was Swayam, a small Calcutta-based organization for women victims of violence. Swayam is a crisis centre; and their support group, consisting of women using Swayam's services for one reason or another, mostly because they were in situations of violence and needed help, was ready to start working with theatre in a sustained and serious way. They used to meet once a week, and their sessions included different kinds of self-expression and self-development exercises; they had already done a play, performed at the International Women's Day celebrations, 1997, which had evolved in a fairly impromptu manner out of an exercise done at one of these sessions. Even this brief exposure to theatre had convinced them that it was a path they wished to take. They were open to the idea of participating in the Theatre for Change initiative.

The second NGO, Jabala, is also a small Calcutta-based organization. Jabala works with disadvantaged children: the children of sex workers, slum dwellers, domestic servants, pavement dwellers. Their aim is to bring some cultural enhancement into their deprived and violence-prone lives, keeping them off the streets and gainfully occupied in some creative activity which will channelize their energies and intelligence in some productive and positive direction. The children they work with love theatre; they were already receiving some theatre inputs and doing an annual cultural show. Jabala decided that their relatively new centre at Tollygunge would be the right place to introduce Seagull's Theatre for Change project.

Now that we had identified the two NGOs, and they had both expressed their willingness to collaborate on this project, the next step was to sit together and identify the aims and objectives of the workshop. What were they looking for? What did they hope to have achieved at the end of the process? What were their priorities

in terms of values, skills, changes that they wanted to see? How could these be developed or achieved through the workshop?

Swayam felt that the *process* of workshoping was particularly valuable for this group of women. Coming as they did from abusive, highly stressful situations, suffering from low self-esteem and lack of confidence in themselves, a group activity like the workshop, with its scope for exercises in self-development, confidence building, self-expression, creative expression, would help them tremendously. Moreover, theatre exercises like improvisation and role playing could help in discussing issues that pertained to them: women's rights, violence and discrimination against women, and so on. Finally, they felt that this group could develop into a performance team, evolving and performing plays on their own, functioning as part of Swayam's awareness and consciousness-raising programme. They recognized that theatre was a powerful medium and that a performance team could achieve with one play what posters, leaflets, speeches and campaigns could not.

Jabala discussed their aims and objectives in working with the children, and we talked of how the theatre workshop could enhance those aims. They wanted, primarily, for the children to have a fulfilling creative experience, to enjoy themselves doing an activity they would never have access to in their daily lives. These are children who are expected to work hard, labour, contribute to the family survival, work in the house. Relaxation and leisure are luxuries for them. Secondly, they had noticed that the children had, inevitably, personality and behaviour traits that had developed out of the stressful, overcrowded, violence-prone environments they lived in, with no privacy or quiet. The children were restless, they had short attention spans, they formed cliques and were unwilling to share with each other, each one would grab what he or she could, their memories were not well developed, they were not given to discipline, following instructions and so on. Jabala felt that they wished to develop more of a community feeling, a sense of group loyalty, values of teamwork and cooperation, along with, of course, concentration and focusing. It was also important to Jabala that they evolve some sort of a performance piece to present at Jabala's annual cultural function, or on some similar occasion. Jabala's experience had shown them that the children and their guardians valued and looked forward to the annual cultural show as it gave them a tremendous sense of achievement and fulfillment. So this was an important aspect of the workshop goal—to prepare a performance piece.

Once we had worked out what the workshops should ideally achieve, prioritize and focus on; and once we had been filled in on the profile of the participants, the next step was to identify suitable resource persons and approach them with the proposed plan.

For Swayam, we decided to approach the theatre group Jana Sanskriti, headed by Sanjoy Ganguly. Jana Sanskriti is based just outside Calcutta. Their group has been working largely in the rural areas with agricultural labourers. They are followers of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, believing that the oppressed should be active spect-actors rather than spectators in any theatre being done for their benefit. Like Boal, they recognize that each of us is made up of many identities, of many strands: the worker who is bullied by his boss or employer in the workplace may in turn well be an oppressor of his women folk at home; the woman who is repressed by her husband may in turn ill-treat her daughter-in-law. Theatre can help people understand themselves better, and, through dialogue, an improvement can take place in people's lives. Solutions have to come from the oppressed themselves, since no one understands their situation better than they themselves do; moreover, only they

can decide on the best possible solution in the circumstances. Although Jana Sanskriti employs several of Boal's techniques during the workshop process—such as image theatre and the Rainbow of Desire—they concentrate on the Forum technique when it comes to performance and presentation.

Forum is a highly effective technique in which the action or story is frozen at a climactic point encapsulating a particular problem situation: for example, violence against a woman. The actors freeze in a graphic tableau. At this point the Joker or facilitator comes forward and questions the audience: do they accept this situation, are they going to let it continue in this way? Can they step into the acting area and make changes, replace, reorder, so that some solution is found to the problem? Members of the audience are encouraged to enter the performance area and replace various actors, play the characters with their own dialogues (which are essentially their own suggestions of an alternate way of handling the situation). The remaining actors have to resist, argue back, make it as difficult as possible for unrealistic, romantic or 'magical' solutions to be accepted. The general effect is to involve the audience in a problem-solving exercise; and if the 'problem' taken up in the first place is relevant and topical (wife-beating for example, or discrimination against the girl child), the audience is bound to feel implicated and involved. We had seen Forum work effectively elsewhere, and felt that this would be a particularly powerful form for the kind of issues Swayam would be dealing with, very well suited to the performance circumstances and forums where they would be performing.

Jana Sanskriti had already built a reputation for solid work undertaken with commitment and sincerity. In addition, there was another reason why we felt that they would be ideally suited as resource persons for this workshop. Jana Sanskriti had been working with women, building women's performance teams, in the rural areas. We had seen the results of their longterm cultural activism in the self-assured, articulate women members of their performance teams, who spoke of the personally difficult situations they had emerged from, to find a new sense of purpose and fulfillment through theatre. We felt that this was testimony enough to their suitability to forging a performance unit out of a group of women who were struggling with difficult personal situations and desperately seeking a channel for self-fulfillment.

Jana Sanskriti was contacted, and the whole project explained to them. They were enthusiastic about taking up this year-long workshop because they saw it as a way of expanding the Theatre of the Oppressed network they were committed to building. So far, they did not have an urban performance unit, nor were they linked to any such unit. They felt that if this group could cohere, could fuse into a unit, a team, rather than a conglomeration of individuals (they emphasize group building and teamwork exercises), it would be a valuable addition to their network of teams.

For this project, we were looking for mutual benefit rather than a one-way relationship between resource person and workshop participants. The usual attitude is that the 'expert' imparts knowledge and skills to the unschooled, whose position then becomes that of a passive receiver. We were looking at a more equal relationship, a give-and-take during which the resource person valued the opportunity to learn and gain experience as much as the participants did.

While identifying a suitable resource person for the Jabala workshop we looked for someone whose approach would not be a classroom one, emphasizing discipline and order, but someone young who would be more open and sympathetic to the children, highlighting the fun element in the workshopping process, someone flexible enough in approach to evolve with the children rather than impose a rigid concept of theatre upon them. We wanted someone with experience in children's

theatre, particularly the kind that concentrated on values rather than entertainment alone.

Jayoti Bose, the young theatre person we decided to approach, is a director whose group, Sutrapat, is active on the Bengali experimental theatre scene in Calcutta. She herself has acted, workshopped and worked with quite a wide range of theatre groups and styles, so her exposure and experience in theatre is fairly widespread. Although Jayoti had not worked with children before this, she had worked intensively in a special kind of theatre for children: Grips Theatre of Germany. Grips Theatre is both a movement and a theatre group based in Germany, which consciously rejects the usual frivolous 'pantomime and fairytale' brand of theatre for children, and chooses instead to take up serious issues and themes important to children from a child's point of view, treating the subject seriously but with humour, music and laughter: sibling rivalry, for example, or parental authority, coping with a handicapped sibling, with school, with being hospitalized, and so on. Grips Theatre has become quite an institution in Germany, and in India there is an active programme which works with various Indian theatre groups to promote and facilitate Indian translations and adaptations of Grips plays for Indian audiences. The distinctive features of Grips plays are the sympathetic understanding they display of a child's psychology, seeming to enter their minds in a way most adults have forgotten; and the combination of lighthearted comedy and songs with which they leaven the serious content of their plays. A Grips play typically aims to help children understand, recognize, think about, come to terms with and find solutions to things that worry or bother them in their daily lives. In that sense, it is child-centric theatre even though the actors are invariably adults.

Jayoti Bose has adapted Grips plays into Bengali, studying the Grips methodology in considerable depth to create unforgettable productions. Empathy with the child mind, with a child's value systems, which may be different from an adult's, were essential in creating the kind of work she has done. This made her a desirable resource person for our purpose. It is not easy to discern in advance the will to power, to control, which most adults wield in their relationship with children, particularly in situations which seem to demand discipline of a certain orderly kind. Many theatre persons working with children have not adequately shaken off adult attitudes and approaches, lack the patience and understanding of a good junior school teacher, which is essential to a workshop where the primary aim is that the children enjoy themselves, evolving a performance through fun rather than drill and discipline. In anyone workshopping with young children, particularly difficult ones from disturbed and disadvantaged home environments, theatre experience in itself is not enough.

When contacted, Jayoti reacted positively to the prospect of working with these children. As in the case of Jana Sanskriti, she felt that she had something to gain from the experiment; she saw it as an opportunity for learning, an experience new and potentially exciting. Although not used to working with children, she was stimulated by the idea of perhaps coming up with new forms, new approaches, growing out of the children's very different life experiences and exposure, so removed from the middle-class cultural environment most children's theatre dwelt in. She entered the workshop process motivated to do her own learning, recognizing that the children, fresh, intelligent and talented, could gift her insights her previous exposure had so far denied her. This seemed like a promising basis on which to proceed.

Stage three of the project consisted of the workshops themselves, held once a week for a year. The detailed documentation that follows covers the process in

depth. Resource persons were asked to keep notes or diaries, so that they could submit a detailed report. The *STQ* team monitored the workshops every other week or so. There were problems, inevitably: problems of regularity of attendance, of adequate space, of insufficient time. Significantly, both workshops saw a continuous reworking of plans, a fluid process of learning and adaptation, as resource persons and participants began to understand each others' needs and limitations. This, to me, is the hallmark of a good workshop. I am sceptical about experimental learning processes which proceed perfectly to plan, because the very nature of experimentation and learning is by trial and error. Any project like this, in which one begins with plans and strategies but is essentially working with and for other people, necessarily undergoes changes in response to the needs and problems of the people one works with. Pre-decided goals should be kept as internal motivations rather than imposed on the project.

The Swayam workshop concentrated on the longterm goal of building a group, a performance unit that would work together on a continuous basis. This meant developing inner motivation and discipline as opposed to following externally imposed regulations, prioritizing a sense of belonging and intimacy, a nonjudgemental atmosphere where each member could feel at home, promoting debate and discussion so that they all could take a unanimous position on issues rather than remain a loose collection of ideologically disparate individuals (which, Jana Sanskriti feels, does not lend itself to a healthy group feeling), and actor-training. Along the way, the participants decided to evolve a play to present at the International Women's Day Celebrations, 1998. The workshop accordingly shifted focus to performance, presentation, the evolution of a play. The performance itself became a valuable component of the workshop process, lending added impetus to the desire to form a performance group. In fact, so satisfactory was the interaction that Swayam continues to workshop with Jana Sanskriti even after the project is over. This continuity, we feel, is testimony to the efficacy of the project.

The Jabala project faced its own adjustments, of schedules and expectations. The wide range of age groups and high energy levels of the children made it difficult to do focused work without dividing them into two sub-groups, one consisting of the younger children, and one of the older ones. Jayoti requested that a young member of her group, who is familiar with her working methodology, also join her as an assistant. In addition, we retained Gopa Das, a veteran actress from the Bengali theatre and Swayam support group member, who needed some means of support which also fitted in with her area of expertise, which was performance. Used to reciting, singing, dancing, as well as acting, Gopa-di, as she is affectionately known, had a stock of songs, stories and poems that made her an instant hit with the littler ones. Soon Jayoti and Gopa-di divided the children into two groups: Jayoti working with the older ones, and Gopa-di with the babies.

Jayoti found that she had to readjust her expected rate of progress, as it was taking much longer to establish and consolidate one phase of work than she had anticipated. Irregularity of attendance is an unavoidable problem with children from families with such unstable home environments. Very often they are needed to work elsewhere or at home, and are not allowed to attend. Moreover, seeing them just once a week, she found that in the intervening period, any focus or concentration she had managed to achieve had dissipated, and they had to start from scratch all over again. Once again, this is an unavoidable situation when working with young children, and she had to adapt her working methods accordingly.

We found the children heartwarmingly bright, friendly, eager, responsive. Many of them were bursting with a natural talent for mimicry and their impromptu

depictions of typical street life (children playing and quarrelling, the vendor of spicy snacks, the manner in which he mixed and prepared his wares, and so on) were perceptively observed and impeccably rendered, with an accuracy and nuance a seasoned actor would have envied. We were witness to an extended improvisation, roughly halfway through the workshop process, where a simple little rhyming ditty of a few lines was spun out by them into a little skit. Jayoti probed and questioned, leading them in the direction of adding a pre-text, additional detail, characters, and so on; the content reflected their own reality, little daily scenes and vignettes they are all too familiar with.

This question of evolving a script out of their reality was something we discussed in great detail. It was felt that as their world was limited, circumscribed, throwing them back into the only environment they knew, using that as the base from which to build a play, may turn out to be a limiting exercise. For them, exposure to wider, more varied cultural stimuli to which they could respond, should be an option. Moreover, taking a problem or issue which was part of their lives—queuing up for water, for example—and getting them to depict it for others, may not be as interesting for them as a story which drew on their sense of fun, imagination and creativity. The more ‘close to home’ scenarios might be more suited for workshop exercises, as part of the process; for the performance to be presented to an audience, they were keen on moving more far afield for material.

As Jabala works through Jai Hind club, there are strict rules about seeking prior permission before the children can be transported to another venue or taken on an outing. The club committee has to vet each request. It was, therefore, not found possible for an alternate space to be used for the workshop, nor for the children to be taken on an outing or visit, as the logistics did not work out.

It was decided that Gopa would prepare the younger ones in a short performance piece independently from Jayoti, who gradually, once she had worked on extended improvisation with them, introduced a script she felt might make a play. They had just begun to discuss the story prior to beginning work on it, when the sessions were abruptly suspended due to a disagreement between Jai Hind Club and Jabala. The sessions have still not been resumed. However, despite being unable to conclude with a production, Jayoti’s assessment pinpoints some significant progress in terms of the learning process.

This double issue on theatre for change features the detailed documentation of this year-long project, which we hope will be of use to anyone planning to undertake similar theatre activism. Complementing this material are interviews, articles and reports looking at other initiatives and approaches to the application of theatre in the field of change and development. The indepth interview with Tripurari Sharma opens up fresh perspectives as she discusses her long involvement in workshops, especially with women, and her current project in which she tries to effect change through the medium of traditional performance forms.

Anjum Katyal



Theatre as a Magnifying Lens

Sameera Iyengar

The author, who has been on assignment for *STQ*, is studying contemporary theatre in India, with a focus on effecting change for women.

The Swayam-Jana Sanskriti workshop, part of Seagull's Theatre for Change project, was begun on 17 September 1997 and remained under the auspices of the project till June 1998. Swayam is a crisis centre for abused women. The women who formed the support group felt that they wished to explore theatre as a means for effecting change, both within themselves, and for others in similar situations.

I was involved in the workshop and the resultant production both as participant and as observer, on behalf of *STQ*. I tend to approach such projects with a mixture of trepidation and excitement. While I stand firmly behind the political intent of such theatre, I am always concerned that these will relegate the theatre element to the background. It is not that I believe in any dichotomy between theatre and politics/activism. Rather, I would say that for activist theatre to be truly efficacious, it must excel in its art. Unfortunately, the reality is that too much activist theatre ends up being only political with little claim to being good theatre.

Jana Sanskriti is an accredited theatre group, not easily dismissed as merely political. At the same time, there is no doubt that the group is ideologically motivated, with theatre being their means of making a difference. Sanjoy Ganguly, Jana Sanskriti's director, stresses that they practice theatre *of* the oppressed, rather than theatre *for* the oppressed. Roughly, theatre *for* the oppressed deals with the problems of the oppressed, but has not focused on encouraging the oppressed to be agents of change in their own situations. Theatre *of* the oppressed seeks to actively involve the spectator in working towards solutions to problems that s/he faces. Augusto Boal, the developer of the concept of theatre of the oppressed, and a major influence in Sanjoy's work,¹ states that '[t]he *poetics of the oppressed* is essentially the poetics of liberation:



the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action!² Boal then goes on to say, 'Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!'³ This rehearsal of revolution is what Jana Sanskriti attempts to undertake. This rehearsal of revolution is what Swayam wanted.

Previous to the Swayam workshop, Jana Sanskriti's work has taken place in the rural areas of West Bengal. The organization is made up of several teams, each of which comprise people from the area in which the team is based. Most teams are all-male, but at the time of the workshop, there were some all-women teams too. Jana Sanskriti has made a conscious choice to include and work with women who, they feel, continue to be more oppressed even within the oppressed strata. No change is possible without also envisioning change in the general condition of women. This conscious, ideologically-motivated emphasis on working with women and the problems facing women made Jana Sanskriti an ideal choice for the Swayam workshop. Jana Sanskriti, too, welcomed the opportunity to take this workshop. They had no teams in Calcutta, and they hoped that this workshop would lead to the formation of an all-women team in the city. (This remains a possibility, since Jana Sanskriti continues to work with Swayam women after the Theatre for Change sponsorship is over.)

I attended the workshop from September 1997 till March 1998. Eight Swayam members and two volunteers from Seagull took part. The workshops were led, in various combinations, by Sanjoy Ganguly and two veteran members of Jana Sanskriti, Sima Ganguly and Satyaranjan Pal.

17 September 1997 was the first day of the workshop. Those present included Sanjoy and Sima Ganguly of Jana Sanskriti, four Swayam support group members, theatre director Jayoti Bose, who was involved with the parallel children's workshop of the Theatre for Change project, Paramita Banerjee of *STQ* and myself. Sanjoy explained Jana Sanskriti's theatre project—getting to know oneself, one's strengths and weaknesses, through theatre, and then working on that to effect social change. This logic stems from a belief that each person has within themselves the ability and the strength to effect change. Continual improvement of oneself through seeing—really seeing—one's relationship to others, to things, to practices; learning to see the good in oneself that one may

not know exists; learning to face wrong and working towards overcoming it—all these are goals of Jana Sanskriti's theatre practice. Theatre was to act as a magnifying lens, as a mirror to the self.

This ideology spoke to Jana Sanskriti's process of creating theatre. The practitioners were the ones who were to enhance their self-reflexivity. The idea was not the placing of blame, but the search for solutions within oneself and one's relationship to others. The way Jana Sanskriti ran their workshops was indicative of their approach. Much of my own theatre training has been formal and has taken place in college in the USA. I am used to set times for rehearsal, precise goals to meet at each rehearsal, a script to work from—when we came to rehearsal, we left the rest of our lives outside and focused on working on the theatre piece we were creating. I had never before been in a circumstance where we brought our lives into the theatre space, not only because that was required in theory by Jana Sanskriti ideology, but also because the theatre that we were going to create was going to be directly from our lives (I will come to this later).

Workshop sessions, by and large, consisted of theatre exercises, often based on body work and creating focus (some exercises are described below); learning of songs; and a lot of casual interaction amongst the people involved in the process. The sessions would begin with people trickling in, cups of tea, a lot of random chit-chat, people sharing their day, their immediate concerns. We often did not move into concrete theatre exercises or singing, or anything which could be pinpointed as a facet of theatre, till a good 15-20 minutes after the participants had arrived. Since the sessions were supposed to be of two hours each, I sometimes felt impatient for the theatre work to begin. I once suggested to Sima that we start working immediately instead of indulging in chit-chat. She disagreed with me—casual conversation was important because it helped us to get to know each other as individuals. Caring about what happened in each other's lives was an important part of the process, and also a value that we are rapidly losing.



We did not settle into any obvious direction in our work till quite some time later, in January, when we actually began composing the play to be performed on International Women's Day, 1998. Performing on this day was a short-term goal of the workshop, set by the Swayam members. They had expressed at the very outset that they wanted to be able to create theatre that they could take to others in need, like themselves, so that they, too, may know solidarity and realize that they could be helped by organizations like Swayam. This theatre was also to be educative to society as a whole and was to provide a stimulus to both men and women to work towards changing the status quo. However, for most of us, how this goal was going to be achieved was not clear till much later.

Most of us had come to the workshop with preconceived ideas about what theatre was. We knew that work with Jana Sanskriti was going to be different, but not in what way. Some participants expected to be given a script with lines to memorize, others thought that they would be getting an exposure to Third Theatre (à la Badal Sircar). As session went into session, and we enjoyed meeting, singing, doing our theatre exercises, we also threw about ideas of what 'our play' would be. But we were merely grasping in thin air—we did not really know what to imagine. Jana Sanskriti had tried to give us an introduction to their kind of theatre; early on in the process, participants were taken to their base in Madhyamgram on the outskirts of Calcutta, where they were introduced to the Jana Sanskriti system and where they participated as an audience. The experience definitely fired the imagination of the Swayam women. Here they saw non-professionals like themselves, ordinary women like themselves, who, in addition to the hard daily grind (and these were all agricultural labourers) had taken time out to train themselves into a theatre unit, performing in different villages. Not only did this create a surge of motivation, but each of the women felt challenged, saying, over and over again, if they can do it, overcome the same obstacles as us, then so can we. This exposure was valuable also because it gave them a firsthand glimpse of women from a very different socio-economic background who faced





the same kinds of discrimination and oppression they themselves were suffering from. It developed a further sense of awareness and solidarity, and definitely acted as a direct source of inspiration.

But once again, I question whether we really had any sense of the kind and amount of work we should put in to create something similar. We had had a glimpse of what the end product could look like, but did we have some idea of how we were going to get there?

I harp on this matter, because I think it created some unforeseen problems for the workshop. One of the major problems the workshop process faced was lack of time. The Swayam women were often pressed for time due to the daily pressures they lived under. Those within families often carried the entire burden of house work, having to provide for all other family members before they could consider themselves. Most of the women had to cook dinner after returning from the workshop, a number of them had to shop for daily groceries, too. For many of the women, all this was in addition to their jobs, which gave them a much valued economic independence. It must also be remembered that these women were victims of violence, in one form or another, and some of them were still living within the abusive structure. Thus, jobs or other responsibilities and pressures often caused delays in getting to the workshop session. The necessity of returning home to cook dinner made it very difficult for participants to extend the session, even where that would have proved extremely helpful for our process. The workshop sessions were only supposed to be two hours long. Allowing for all these problems, the



sessions often only ran for an hour, making it very difficult to get any concerted work done.

This is where I have questions regarding the casual nature and the loose structure of the workshop sessions. It is one thing to provide a welcome environment, quite another thing to allow people to take one for granted. The Jana Sanskriti workers travelled into the heart of Calcutta all the way from Madhyamgram—quite a distance to cover. They, too, had many other demands on their time, but they were invariably punctual. Few of the workshop participants had to cover comparable distances. Furthermore, Jana Sanskriti has experience working with women who are equally burdened, if not more so. In the rural areas where they work, those women also finish their day's work, cater to all the needs of their families, and still make it to the theatre sessions on time. Sensitive to the pressures faced by the people they work with, Jana Sanskriti consciously tries to make the theatre experience a low-pressure one. To them, the theatre is a place for searching and questioning, but it is also a place where participants can relax, enjoy themselves, unwind—a place where they can be, in so many senses, free. And in Jana Sanskriti's previous experience, this combination of factors had served to generate and sustain enthusiasm for doing their theatre.

However, in my experience of the Swayam project, there was a distinct lack of commitment from the participants to the process of creating theatre. Theoretically, everyone wanted the workshop to continue and to achieve its goals. In practice, the workshop was the first thing that was discarded when things got a little inconvenient. While there were factors that delayed participants, there was also, in general, a careless attitude towards punctuality. Attendance at the workshop also varied, though this was not as pervasive as the complete lack of punctuality. Even within the workshop setting, focus was not always easily sustained—a typical scenario was finally getting everyone to pay attention to the theatre exercise at hand, carrying it through well, and then almost immediately getting distracted once the exercise was over so that focus and energy for the next exercise had to be built up from scratch all over again. The workshop, it seemed to me, was a place of play, a place of relaxation, but also a place that could be easily omitted or dismissed should other demands be made upon our lives. The casual atmosphere of the workshop sessions seemed to override, and even hide from the participants, the seriousness underlying the entire project. Furthermore, I believe that the fact that we could not discern the path that we were to be



moving along, the fact that sessions appeared more than a little random, further underlined the play aspect and hid the serious aspect of the work that we were undertaking.

It must be remembered, however, that all the women who participated in the workshop are victims of abuse. Furthermore, they were all in the very sensitive and vulnerable position of having actually decided to rebel and act, of having finally solicited professional help. Psychologically, they were moving from situations of domination and repression, from oppressive and hierarchical relationships of power, to a very tentative liberation. In keeping with the primary goal of the workshop—self-exploration and development of the participants as freer individuals—it made complete sense that Jana Sanskriti did not impose a structure and once again submit the women to rules and regulations set by others. However, while I agree with Jana Sanskriti that there need not be a dichotomy between play and work, that work itself can be playful and enjoyable, I would venture that a majority of the workshop participants understood work and play to belong to distinct separable realms. Given this, I wonder if some sort of structure or framework—arrived at with the active participation of the Swayam women—may not have been conducive to the workshop. For instance, this framework could have been a set of goals that were decided on by the entire group, and then a short evaluation at the end of each session of the goals reached and a discussion of the next goals to be set. In this way, a structure would not be *imposed* on anyone. Instead, participants would be actively creating their own work, and setting their own rules, thus practising commitment and responsibility to themselves, which was, after all, an integral goal of the workshop.

We finally did get structure, from 23-26 January 1998 and for the days thereafter, till the performance on International Women's Day. It was decided that we would hold four, full-day, intensive sessions over Republic Day weekend, when we would create the play to be performed on 7 March.⁴ These four days were a wonderful experience. Firstly, the casual attitude that had bothered me earlier diminished considerably and participants came to these sessions with a wonderful energy and enthusiasm. Furthermore, the earlier sessions had been quite successful in building up a sense of a community. While the Swayam women must have known each other, at least somewhat, before this entire process began, we had all definitely become much closer, much more comfortable, with each other. I am sure that this had a lot to do with the chatting and the sharing that Jana Sanskriti saw as an integral part of their process.



We began on 23rd with a number of exercises: creating images, working with ideas of power, telling a story in images, exploring the wishes/desires of the wife who is abused (these exercises are explained below). The last exercise, especially, had a tremendous impact on the Swayam participants. It seemed to open up some valve that had blocked their feelings. People spoke freely, openly, about their own experiences. Those who had tended to take recourse to rational expression as a protective device, let their pent-up feelings flow. This open expression of one's own experience was followed by a quieter period where we turned to how Forum theatre could help us. Forum theatre, the theatre practice created by Augusto Boal, is the main form of theatre that Jana Sanskriti practises.

In Forum theatre, the situation/story being presented is brought to a climax and then frozen. The character known as the Joker⁵ invites the audience to intervene, to replace characters on stage and enact other possible actions to suggest possible solutions. The actors on stage, staying in character, are to resist these solutions as strongly as possible. The point is to not allow rhetoric or simplistic solutions which would be impossible to put into practice. Rather, as Sanjoy had said, the forum was to help us know other possibilities, taking into account all realistic and conceivable obstacles. The aim is to restrain ourselves from acting on impulse, thereby making a bad situation worse. Instead, the forum encourages discussion and dialogue amongst actors and audience. It enables the problem at hand to be carefully analyzed and re-analyzed by a group of people, till that group feels it has finally come up with a practicable solution, the best *that can be carried out in practice*. Perhaps not a final solution, but a step in the right direction.

In four days of exciting theatre work, we came up with the skeleton of a play, which we finally called *Eije, Ami Ekhan* (Look, Here I am). Though Sanjoy, Sima and Satya had the task of teaching us about Forum theatre, they never once imposed their ideas or decisions on us. Rather, they acted as guides, suggesting exercises, games and so on that were to be actively created by the participants. Once certain scenarios from the participants' lives had been enacted, Sanjoy chose one. Then the entire group, under his guidance, set about polishing the scenario, refining the images and dialogue that had been improvised, so that the skit began to move from role-playing to an actual theatrical production. By the time the four-day session was over, there was a perceptible change in the workshop. The success of this endeavour, the excitement of watching something take shape under our eyes, had injected a higher level of energy and enthusiasm into the group dynamic. It had brought home to us both the wonder of theatrical work as well as the seriousness and the value of the work we were undertaking. The experience was heady and extremely gratifying.

The remainder of the workshop sessions—we were now meeting twice a week—were dedicated to working on the play and rehearsing it. Having been directly involved in the actual creation of the play, the participants' confidence in their theatre ability had grown. Initially people, though vocal about the issues involved, were far more willing to accept a theatrical form which was given to them. As the session progressed, everyone became enthusiastically involved in the actual creative process, suggesting scenes, dialogue, stage directions, movements and so on. Workshop sessions were expanded to four hours, and participants made huge efforts to give the maximum time possible. This, to me, is what the workshop should have been like all along.

Though the process had now picked up and I felt the workshop was finally progressing towards its goals, I could not get rid of one niggling worry. We had

done a tremendous amount of work, but did we really have any sort of quality theatre at hand? Most of the participants had no real theatre training or experience. This showed in their voice quality, in their stage presence, in their lack of a sense of timing or stage space. Of course, there were some who were naturally more talented than others, but even with these individuals, I felt, it was apparent that they were theatrically unformed. While the workshop process, and what we seemed to be achieving, was commendable, I wondered how an audience would receive us. Were we doing good theatre? I didn't think so. Could quality be excused on grounds of dedication to ideology, the good intentions, informing the work? I didn't think so. Furthermore, for me, because women are so often condescended to, I personally want to make sure that whatever work I am involved in, or I present, is of the highest quality, so that no one can say 'Pretty good for women.' This was the baggage I carried.

Our play was based on Rekha's own story and was enacted in a number of scenes. A young girl, fond of playing 'boys' games', sneaks out with her brother to play cricket. Her mother knows and covers up for her (unwillingly) but when her father finds out, he wants her back in the house. Once in the house, she is sent to help her mother in the kitchen (her place), while the brother studies under the father's supervision. In the next scene, the parents discuss getting the girl married—she is of age now. The boy's family comes to look at the girl. The next scene, enacting the marriage, ends with the boy's parents walking out because the entire dowry has not been paid up yet. Next, the girl is shown overburdened with a million tasks, as everyone in her in-laws' house expects to be looked after by her. She has a dream, in which she explores all her options in dealing with her situation: she contemplates adjusting to the situation or accepting it, running away, calling for help, retaliatory violence, suicide, and finally, protest. The dream sequence ends. She wakes up to more demands, and when she says she cannot manage, her in-laws turn on her. The scene freezes into a tableau where her husband has dragged her to the floor and has his hand up to hit her, with both in-laws urging him on. In the margins of the performance area are a social worker and neighbours. The social worker is half-listening to a woman who has brought her concerns to her, while she focuses on typing up something very important on her computer. The neighbours have heard the commotion next door and are arguing as to whether they should interfere. The wife wants to, the husband stops her. All freeze. Three individuals, one after another, walk on to the stage, take in all these scenes and rush away to the front corner (stage right), covering their eyes, ears, and mouth respectively. All the characters are now in a freeze, and the Joker (Sima Ganguly) throws the forum open to the audience, inviting them to change the situation on stage. From here on, everything will be spontaneous and unrehearsed.

7 March, the day of the performance. The celebrations for International Women's Day were being held in Triangular Park, off Hazra Road. We were scheduled to perform last, so that we did not have to adhere to a time limit and could carry on the forum for as long as the audience was interested. As far as I know, this was the first time a Calcutta audience had seen this type of theatre. While I still question the quality of the overall performance, there were some beautifully conceived scenes that caught the eye, such as the wedding scene, which was done in a very stylized manner to the rhythm of a song which decried chaining women through marriage. Every character on stage found her own particular stylized walk or movement, and the marriage ceremony, the welcoming of guests, the serving of food, became a wonderfully choreographed scene which

highlighted how mechanical, how devoid of humanity, such a situation could be. A number of other things worked in our favour, too. The International Women's Day celebration, by and large, was boring. Far too many long speeches and some predictable songs and dances. All of these were conducted from a raised, covered, concrete platform in the park, with the audience sitting at a distance. The first thing our play did was break the audience-stage barrier. We moved the performance onto the ground and had people sit around us in a semi-circle. On stage, we had three sets of three poles, which were tied together in such a way that they were easily set up as tripods or wigwams, large enough for one or two people to squeeze into. These were used to designate different houses, rooms, areas. Every single actor was female. Those playing male characters simply put shirts on over their saris or salwars. The movement, song, and action that comprised the production was definitely a welcome change from the dreary activities that had preceded us. Furthermore, we were charged up, and our energy definitely carried over to the audience who sat so close to us. People put in performances as never before, and with each appreciative response from the audience, the energy level rose higher, the actors became freer, their stage presence became stronger—it was wonderful to watch the dynamic and the changes that it wrought.

The final high came with the introduction of the forum. I do not think anyone (other than the Jana Sanskriti people) expected the kind of response we got. The audience loved the forum. Most of the people present in the park were women, with some children. As the play progressed, a number of men from surrounding areas had gathered on the side, standing, watching, keeping a slight distance—they were not so involved in the proceedings. Sima invited the first audience members to come up and replace characters. Once the audience understood the method of the forum, they were so eager to participate that Sima literally had to make people wait their turn. She also had to regulate the time spent on stage with each solution, so that we could move on to the next one. The men still kept their distance, till Sima, suddenly (and I thought brilliantly) turned to them and said (I paraphrase) 'We have had so many women offering solutions, but we can't possibly effect social change alone. It takes two hands to clap, doesn't it? So why don't you men offer solutions. What would you do?' She then walked into the crowd of men, very sweetly caught one of the men by the arm and encouraged him on to the stage. Once on stage, he had to get involved—and he did, acting as the brother who came to take his sister away, refusing to let her in-laws illtreat her. The men, so long spectators, now became active participants in the forum. That single act of breaking the gender barrier, even if only in theatre, did wonders for the participants (and, I believe, the audience too). This was given voice to in a post-play discussion that we had at Swayam, when someone said that the men joining in was a tremendous moment of possibility. While we all knew that it was only in a play, that it was still a far cry from that 'joining in' becoming a reality, that moment still gave one hope and an even stronger belief that change was possible.

Notwithstanding all the drawbacks that I have pointed to in this report, I do believe that, all in all, the Swayam project was a success. This is borne out by the incredible amount of positive energy that suffused us after International Women's Day, and stayed with us for weeks afterwards, as we met and discussed what had happened and what the future held. It is also borne out by the fact that the Swayam-Jana Sanskriti relationship has persisted. People now involved in the work meet the first and third Sunday of the month, for four hours each day. The

play *Eije, Ami Ekhané* has been worked on even further, scripted better, and has had two further performances, one in November 1998 and one in January 1999. The ball has been set rolling, and one only hopes that the collaboration reaches higher and further, always keeping its goals in sight and creating quality theatre while it effects social awareness and change.

Some Workshop Exercises

1. Participants stand in a circle. One by one they name themselves, using a sign from nature (no words). The game begins with *A* showing her own sign and then someone else's, say *C*'s. Then *C* must act next, showing her own sign and then someone else's, say *E*'s. Then *E* will act, showing her own sign and then someone else's and then so on. As participants get better at this game, it can be played faster and faster. A fun warm-up exercise, good for breaking the ice and encouraging interaction. It teaches you to focus on your team mates, learning and remembering their signs, and identifying the person with the sign.
2. Participant *A* leaves the room, and the rest discuss what they would like to enact. We decide on a storm. *A* then re-enters the room and stands, eyes closed, within a circle which the rest of us create with linked hands. We begin making storm sounds, dropping our tempo as we move further out, enlarging the circle, and raising the tempo as we move in, making the circle smaller. We also move lower and higher, so that the sound comes from all directions—far, near, low, high. When we stop, *A* must tell us what it felt like. This exercise is then repeated with other scenarios. This exercise encourages focus and concentration of the senses. It also creates a strong group energy.
3. This game requires a coordinator, *C*. Participants stand in a circle with backs to the centre. *C* calls out an emotion. Participants turn to face the centre of the circle, physicalizing the emotion, and freeze. This is repeated a number of times. The aim is to experiment with various ways of portraying an emotion, as well as to create/portray it quickly.
4. Participants break up into pairs: *A* and *B*. *A* holds up her hand in front of *B*, her palm facing *B*'s face. *B* is to keep her eyes fixed on *A*'s palm. *A* begins to slowly move her palm, and *B* follows, always keeping her face parallel to *A*'s palm. *A* may move her palm in any direction—up, down, sideways—and *B* is to follow. After some time, the roles switch, and *A* begins to follow *B*'s palm. This exercise is extremely good for creating focus. It can also be good for stretching and quite strenuous if done well.
5. A coordinator *C* is required for this exercise. The participants walk around in a demarcated area. When *C* claps, the participants pair up with the person closest to them and create contact by holding hands, feet etc. The aim is to quickly create some image (which can be abstract), using our bodies imaginatively. This exercise builds group communication and helps participants work with each other imaginatively. The same exercise can be repeated with the participants only being allowed to grab each others' ankles. Again, the participants must try to quickly form images.
6. Participants line up in two rows, facing each other in pairs. During the exercise the members of a pair will walk towards each other, cross each other and then walk to the other's place on the opposite side. During this crossover, they will call the name of the person they are facing. When they are furthest apart, they express anger when calling the other's name. As

they move closer, they start becoming friendlier, till they express only friendliness when they are closest to each other. As they move apart, they start moving in emotion back to anger again, all the time calling each other's name. The expression of these emotions are to take place in the physical attitude of the body, in the voice, and in the facial expressions. This helps develop the skill of moving in and out of expressing an emotion, with subtle nuances and grades of expression.

7. The aim of this exercise is to tell a story in images. The participants are divided into groups, and each group comes up with a story from their experiences that they want to portray. The story then has to be told in a set of five tableaux, no speech or movement allowed.

Sanjoy used this exercise to induct us into the method of Forum theatre. He picked one of the stories and had the group recreate the tableau that expressed the climax situation in the story—in this case, the point when the bride is about to be beaten up. He then asked us if we thought the image was acceptable. Since it obviously was not, we were then asked how we could change it, realistically. One of us replaced a character (still no words allowed) and changed the action shown—for instance, the mother-in-law grabs the son's raised hand to stop him from beating his wife. Many people offered different possibilities. It was interesting that no one tried to change the image into one of ideal happiness. Later, when we added words and movement to the tableaux so that they ran together into a play, we repeated the exercise of replacing characters, offering different actions and words. Then the rest of the actors were asked to resist the solutions offered. In this way we were introduced to the method of Forum theatre.

8. The participants are asked what the desires of the wife who is abused are. Each person comes up and expresses a desire, and shows it in action. Some of the desires we came up with were:
 - a. The wife wants to leave
 - b. She wants to commit suicide
 - c. She wants to call a social worker
 - d. She wants love
 - e. She wants to stand up to her husband
 - f. She wants to hit back, use violence
 - g. She wants to protest

Once each of these desires has been expressed in an image, we are asked to consider which of these desires the husband is most likely to know about, and which of them the least, which of them somewhat. Someone depicts the husband and stands in the middle of the acting space. Depending on the degree to which the husband is likely to know about these desires, the participants place themselves in a circle around 'the husband', to the front (most likely), to the sides (less likely) and towards the back (least likely). A visual diagram of probable knowledge on the husband's part is then set up. Through this exercise, participants get to analyze and consider various desires and options that may be inherent in an abusive situation. It is also an exercise in visually communicating the subtext of desire/hope (or lack thereof) in an abusive situation. (This exercise was converted and used in the final play. In the play, the wife sits in the middle, surrounded by these images. She is asleep; in her dream, she approaches these images in turn as

- she considers all the options that they present.)
9. A participant is asked to form an image depicting power. One by one the others are asked to form images showing more power than the previous image. At each stage, there is a discussion over whether the new image is more or less or equally powerful than the previous one, and according to consensus it is arranged to visually depict a hierarchy of power. This exercise is conceptual—it helps participants think about power relations and depicts them in a graphic manner.

Notes:

1. See *STQ 2*
2. Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Maria Odilia Leal McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. 155.
3. Ibid.
4. 8 March is International Women’s Day. In 1998, it was celebrated by Maitree on 7 March.
5. See Augusto Boal, ‘Structures of the “Joker”’, in *Theater of the Oppressed*, for more information on the role of the Joker. In our production, the Joker was the person who co-ordinated the forum, not really interfering in the action of the play while it was occurring.

Theatre/Performance Text/Cultural Anthropology

Chakravyuha

Ratan Thiyam

Pre-text and performance text by Kavita Nagpal

Ratan Thiyam is one of India’s leading theatre directors. His Chorus Repertory Company has forged a reputation for its grand style of visually spectacular theatre, fusing intense dramatic energy with sheer professional skill to create unforgettable productions. Of these, *Chakravyuha* is a seminal play, which has been performed widely and won critical acclaim, including the Fringe First award at the Commonwealth Arts Festival in 1986.

This volume undertakes a close study by Kavita Nagpal of Ratan Thiyam’s theatre, its history and

development, based on intensive fieldwork and interviews. It includes the complete performance text of *Chakravyuha* along with photographs in colour and black-and-white. There are also detailed notes on the legend from the Mahabharata on which the play is based, for readers unfamiliar with the references to events and personalities.

Ms Kavita Nagpal is a theatre critic and writer who has been widely published. The lengthy introduction by theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay, who has been a keen observer of Ratan Thiyam’s work over the years, contributes valuable insights to the understanding of the play.

Rs 225

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Look, Here I Am (Eije, Ami Ekhane)

At the beginning of the play, the Sutradhar comes into the performance space to speak the introduction, while the others make five little 'houses', constructed of three poles each. These portable triangular structures are used variously to indicate interiors, homes, buildings etc.

SUTRADHAR. Namaskar. I want to thank all those present, many, many thanks. Today on 7 March, we have all gathered here to celebrate International Women's Day. We want to tell you at once that we will not let you go until you have heard a story. Sorry, it is not fiction—but a true tale.

Ratna Dastidar. The name is unfamiliar to you. But if you look around, the person is not unfamiliar. There are many Ratnas wandering around in front of your eyes and elsewhere. Today Ratna has come, in the words of Saratbabu [Sarat Chandra Chatterjee], as a human being, to complain to other human beings.

The sky was much bigger during Ratna's childhood. Today, her address is a dingy room at 17 Akhil Mistry Lane. Ratna's mother's life is similar. Ratna was married a couple of years back. Look, they have started the story.

The Sutradhar finishes the prologue and leaves. In each 'room' can be seen people at work. Amongst them, in one family, there are two children, brother and sister, engaged in conversation. One is Ratna, she is a girl of marriageable age. Her parents are anxious about her because she has to be married off to a suitable boy. The other is Polash, who is somewhat younger than Ratna.

RATNA. Polash, want to go play?

POLASH. What game do you want to play?

RATNA. Why, bat-ball, sorry, cricket.

POLASH. Cricket! (*Laughs*) Girls playing cricket!

RATNA. Polash, what nonsense are you talking! Don't you see in the papers about the Women's Cricket World Cup?

POLASH. Why, don't you hear what Baba says? He said quite angrily to Ma, remember Gopa, women are servants from birth, before marriage of their fathers, and after marriage, of their husbands.



RATNA. Is that so? Was Baba saying that? (*Stops for a moment*) Anyway, stop quibbling. Now tell me, will you go to play?

POLASH. Of course. Let's go.

Both of them go together to their mother, Gopa, who is working in the courtyard in front of a room—sweeping the floor, watering the plants, etc.

RATNA (*in a muted voice*). Ma, I am going to play with Polash.

GOPA. Oh no! If your father hears . . .

RATNA. Oh, nonsense. Baba won't hear of it. You have to manage it somehow.

They leave to play. The mother does not stop them.

GOPA (*looking at the audience*). Oh! You have to manage somehow. (*More seriously.*) If you knew how I have had to 'manage' all my life! How can I blame the girl?

Gopa's husband Malin-babu, enters the performance space. He is vainglorious and arrogant in nature. He thinks himself very knowledgeable and wise. But his weakness is that he loves flattery. Actually, he is a very weak man and tries to conceal this all the time through his manner and behaviour. Seeing Malin, Gopa leaves her work, stands up and comes forward to talk to him. Behind them, the children play on in mime.

MALIN. Tell me, what's the matter? As soon as the day begins, there's a holiday atmosphere in the house. I ask you—where are the children?

GOPA. It's just morning for you. Now read the paper, have your tea, then you can think about such matters.

MALIN. There is one thing I just cannot make you understand—that your daughter is now grown up.

GOPA. Let her be. She loves games. She can find herself under a wide sky. Let her be. You have a son as well. Your raised first finger never creates any obstacles for him.

MALIN. Whatever he does, he is a boy. You cannot think of a son and a daughter in the same way. Look at you and me. You cook, I go to office. There is a difference between you and me. You can't deny that through insistence.

GOPA. I used to play the sitar well.

MALIN. I know.

GOPA. I used to draw well, especially landscapes.



MALIN. Good for you.

GOPA. I have written good poems—before marriage.

MALIN. So what? Time is passing, all this now . . .

GOPA. Time is passing. My life's morning and noon are over, it is now afternoon. Time always passes. What I have received, I have received, but I have also lost a lot.

MALIN. Look, I don't have time to listen to all this whining. Because of your intolerable excesses, the girl is headed towards disaster. This I cannot accept. That she will play like a man! Oh, I had forgotten. Nowadays, you are again doing all your association-schmassociation stuff again. I want to stamp on all this feminine awareness with both feet . . .

He crumples the paper and stamps on angrily. His jaw is stiff with rage.

GOPA. Mind your tongue!

MALIN (*Roars in rage*). Gopa! Don't forget that I am your husband.

GOPA (*Instantly a little frightened, she starts flattering him. She has learnt this strategy through experience*). Oh, lord! What's this on your face? Such a beautiful face . . .

MALIN. You said beautiful? I'm beautiful?

GOPA. This coat of yours suits you.

MALIN. Yes, the other day Mukherjee was also saying that it suits me.

GOPA. Why haven't you put dye in your hair today?

MALIN. Why? Are my gray hairs . . . ?

GOPA. No, no, it's because you are my God-like husband.

As the two laugh and return to normal, the brother and sister arrive, arguing.

RATNA. Ma, look, my brother cheats every time we play. He never listens! Tell me, can you play like that? (*She complains like a little girl to her mother.*)

POLASH. No, Ma, what didi is saying is not correct . . .

Malin-babu interrupts.

MALIN. Shut up! Stop arguing, both of you. What is this? Playing right from the morning? Ratna, why do you have to play so much? Day by day you're becoming more of a little girl! Soon you'll be married and go off to someone else's house. You pay no attention to that! And you're spoiling your little brother, too. Don't you know he has to study?

RATNA. I have my studies, too, Baba, but does that mean I can't play a bit on a holiday?

MALIN. No, you can't, especially you. Don't you understand that you are a girl? All this wilfulness does not suit you.

RATNA. That's not fair. You don't tell my brother anything because he is a boy.

MALIN. Yes, because he is a boy, what is suitable for him is not suitable for you.

RATNA. I won't accept that. See, Ma, how Baba is . . . (*Complains like a child.*)

At this time, Malin-babu, on one side of the performance space, starts explaining to Polash through mime that he is a boy, not a girl.

GOPA. That is the rule in this society, dear. You have to accept it, even if you don't want to. How will you or I change this reality? (*Gently but firmly*) If you keep trying to come to terms with all the things you don't want to accept, one day you

will not have to try any more. Then you'll be able to accept all that bewilders your mind.

At the other end, Malin-babu to Polash.

MALIN. Study hard, son, you are our future. You have to establish yourself. You are my son. People usually say he's his father's son, but I want people to look at you and say, truly his son's father. In our old age, you will be our only support and treasure, my son. Your didi will, day after tomorrow perhaps, be managing the kitchen of her husband's home. How can we compare her with you?

At the other end of the performance space, Gopa to Ratna while Malin-babu describes to Polash his dream of a bright future for him.

RATNA. You see, Ma, I don't understand one thing. I feel that if something is worth accepting, I will accept—that doesn't hurt me. Endurance and sacrifice are not bad in themselves. But why should I accept what should not be accepted?

GOPA. My dear, if there is an obstacle in front of me which cannot be overcome, which cannot be defeated, cannot be penetrated, then to face that with self-respect is a woman's philosophy. (*Controlling herself*) Listen, let such arguments be, get a pitcher of water for me. If the cooking is delayed, there will be trouble.

RATNA. What kind of trouble?

GOPA. Huh! Stop arguing, listen to me.

Ratna takes the pitcher and goes to fetch water.

MALIN. Here, come here—I have something urgent to tell you.

GOPA (*busily*). What can be so urgent?

MALIN. I'm telling you, I'm telling you! (*To Polash*) Dear, go inside the house now. (*Polash leaves*) Listen, I forgot to tell you something important. This evening Hriday babu is bringing his son. Keep Ratna ready.

GOPA. Yes, of course. (*Animatedly*) Who is Hriday-babu? They are coming to see my Ratna today?

MALIN. Yes, yes. That is what I am saying. His son is a fine man: he is tall, well-built and healthy. Not only is he good looking, he's an engineer or something. Understand, Gopa, he'll make a fine son-in-law.

GOPA. Everything is fate. Let's see if our luck will turn.

MALIN. If it doesn't, it doesn't. In today's world, what can't be done with money?

GOPA. But do we have so much money?

MALIN. Why are you so scared? We will have to sell something, I will take a loan from the Provident Fund, and, if need be, we can sell off the land in Bhowanipur.

Gopa goes to summon Ratna—to the audience

GOPA. What a strange world—he is willing to sell the land for his daughter, but he will not get her educated! (*Calls loudly*) Ratna, Ratna, where have you gone?

RATNA. What is it, Ma? Why are you calling me?

Enters hurriedly.

GOPA. Why am I calling you? When will you grow up, may I ask?

RATNA. What is the matter with you? Why are you so annoyed?

GOPA. I am not annoyed, dear. Your father has found a fine boy for you. Absolutely . . .

RATNA. I understand, Ma. I know the meaning of your 'fine'. And I have understood this, too, that a good girl is a girl who takes what she does not want to accept.

GOPA. No, Ratna. There is the question of money, on the one hand, but on the other . . . For example, to your father, on the one hand, women are slaves—they have no personal preferences, no opinions or feelings—yet to give his daughter to a good son-in-law, he is willing to sell his land. I know that land is very dear to him.

RATNA. I know Baba loves me, but he thinks a girl's only future is as a slave to a good son-in-law. What kind of thinking is this?

MALIN. Here . . . Are you aware that today is Monday and . . .

GOPA. You are not the girl's only parent—I am her mother!

MALIN. Of course, of course. Tell Ratna to get ready quickly. It is almost time.

GOPA. Come on, Ratna, no more delaying. Now go dress up a bit.

RATNA. Let's go. Let me dress up like a doll and sit in front of some man from somewhere. One has to accept it, I have to accept it, so I will, what else is there to do?

They sit down at the margins of the circle. Malin paces up and down in an unsettled frame of mind as he waits for the groom's party. In the meanwhile, the groom's father Hriday babu and the bridegroom Chittaranjan enter the performance space.

MALIN. Come in, come in. I hope you had no problems on the way? The state that the roads are in nowadays . . .

HRIDAY. No, no, we had no problems.

CHITTARANJAN. What problems can there possibly be?

HRIDAY. Is this the girl?

MALIN. Yes, this is my only daughter.

HRIDAY. Oh, good. (*Looking at his son.*) Khoka.

CHITTARANJAN. Yes, Baba?

HRIDAY. Look at her closely, in detail. Move her about a bit.

CHITTARANJAN. Yes, Baba. I am looking her over closely. (*Takes out a notebook and pencil from his pocket and keeps writing the different measurements.*)

HRIDAY. So, do you like her?

Khoka nods her head to indicate acquiescence.

HRIDAY. The eyes?

CHITTARANJAN (*inspecting closely*). Yes.

HRIDAY. Can you cook, little mother?

GOPA. Oh yes! What shall I say, her cooking . . .

HRIDAY. Stop. Let her speak. (*Looking at Malin*) Why is the girl's hair so short?

MALIN. That is . . . because, I mean, she is just recovering from an illness, which is why we had to cut off her hair.

HRIDAY. I see. Was it some serious disease?

GOPA. No, nothing like that—it was just . . .



HRIDAY. Let it be. I was talking to him. Listen, we like the girl. Khoka, what about you?

CHITTARANJAN. Ve-e-ery much.

HRIDAY. Anyway, there is the matter of gifts and what is due to us. I do not believe in the modern fad of saying ‘Whatever you like, adorn your daughter as you please’ and laying such a heavy burden on the bride’s father. I will tell you openly. My son is tall, fair, healthy and an engineer. You can understand what a high price such a boy commands in the marriage market.

MALIN. Look, you are not selling your son, after all—

HRIDAY. What are you saying, sir? I brought him up and you are going to be his father-in-law. Listen, a watch, a ring, gold buttons, a bed and bedding, an almirah, dressing table, refrigerator, TV, Rs 15,000 cash and a Bajaj scooter. These are all essentials. Besides that, jewellery for the girl: bangles, bracelets, earrings, a heavy necklace, those are a must, of course.

MALIN. What is this? How can I give so much? You must understand my situation—

HRIDAY. If your means are so limited, then why are you, a dwarf, reaching for the moon?

MALIN. Look, we will try, if you would just—

HRIDAY. There is no ‘try’ about it. Give me my card (*Looking at Khoka.*) Here, keep this (*to Malin*). Let me know within a couple of days. We are leaving, namaskar.

MALIN, GOPA. Namaskar.

Hriday and Chittaranjan leave the performance space and sit along the perimeter of the circle. Other actresses sitting along the perimeter start singing and a drum is played. As soon as the song starts, some of them enter the performance space, their jerky machine-like motions indicating the activities of a wedding. As the song finishes, everybody stops and Hriday babu shouts suddenly. His son and daughter-in-law and others are terrified and some look deeply bewildered.

HRIDAY. Just stop, sir, just stop! What a lot of fuss! To gain a son-in-law like this, if necessary, you have to sell even your cooking utensils. You thought that if only you could get the wedding over with, it would be all right. Just because you have no sense of honour, do you think I have none? How do I show such an empty-handed bride to all our relatives? Let’s go, son, let’s go. (*Looking at the girl’s*

parents.) When you have settled your dues, only then can you come and see your daughter again. Don't come before that.

Hriday-babu leaves the wedding with his newly-married son and daughter-in-law. The other frightened and bewildered actresses stand for some seconds in an image. It can be seen that Malin is pleading to Hriday with folded hands, Gopa is clinging to Hriday's feet and weeping, Hriday babu holds on to his son's hand, Chittaranjan holds on to his newly-married wife's hand. Then the sound of a dhol can be heard and to the accompaniment of that, the formation is broken to form a new scene. We see Ratna in a terrified condition at her in-laws' house, with her father-in-law, husband and mother-in-law as persecutors.

HRIDAY. Here, look here. It's getting late. There's no sign of my tea. This is like the old proverb where the weaver was fine as long as he was a weaver, his downfall came when he bought a cow. Earlier, at least I used to get my morning cup of tea in the morning. Now having brought the new Bou-ma home, I find that I have to give up my habit of a morning cup of tea.

SEBA (*looking at the audience*). Just see what happens! It is late, it is time for my husband to go to work, and my Bou-ma takes sixteen hours to move. (*To Ratna*) Is the cooking done?

RATNA. It is almost done. The fever came back again last night and the servant hasn't come to work again. That's why it's a bit late.

SEBA. Just listen to her! What is she saying? The bride of the family should be smiling as she serves all of us, instead there is always an excuse—today she is ill, tomorrow the servant is not there. The pitcher wants to be able to lie flat, the drying cloth aspires to go to the laundry, and a beggar desires to have an engineer for a son-in-law. (*Goes to her son.*) See what your wife is saying.

CHITTARANJAN. What has happened, Ma?

SEBA. Your wife is saying she cannot manage all the work. After so many years I have brought a bride into the family and now, at my age, after all, I have to go into the kitchen . . .

CHITTARANJAN. Wait, I'll show her. (*To Ratna*) Here you, princess. It's people like you who are called ill-bred. Tell your father that if he doesn't hand over the remaining thousand rupees within a week, his daughter won't be living with her engineer husband anymore, do you understand? What a fraud—she has neither looks nor any other qualities!

RATNA. Why? You selected me yourself.

CHITTARANJAN. Shut up! How was I to know that your father was such a conman? He still hasn't given half the cash. Nor the scooter. Yet, my colleagues are getting so many things when they get married: refrigerators, TVs, and even Maruti cars. And me? I didn't even get a scooter! If I hadn't fallen into the hands of your father, today I would have had not only a beautiful wife but also a four-wheeled car. Instead, I've even stopped going to other people's weddings. If I had had a little patience . . .

RATNA. Yes, another wedding . . . yes, I can understand how overcome you are at not becoming a king or a sultan and having a pretty begum. I have seen you from very close quarters. I, too, feel sorry. I used to feel sorry for myself before. Now I feel sorry for you, too.

Everyone freezes in formation for a few seconds. Then there is the sound of a dhol. Everyone leaves the 'houses' at the back and only Ratna is left in the performance space. Four actresses enter the space and form an image. One stands

as if she wants to hang herself, another as if she is leaving everything behind. A third as if she will not break down but will fight on. A fourth as if she is complaining to other people. All these indicate different desires in Ratna's mind. Ratna talks to all these images.

FIRST IMAGE. I want to die. I don't want to live any more.

RATNA. What is this! What are you saying? Such a beautiful life . . .

FIRST IMAGE. What? Beautiful life? You are mad . . .

RATNA. You are mad.

FIRST IMAGE. No. Life is dark, without any light, there is only selfishness, greed and material possession.

RATNA. But there are non-material things, too. Chitta may not love me, maybe he recognizes only money—but I cannot forget my father, my mother, brother, friends . . . To put an end to myself . . .

FIRST IMAGE. But then you will gradually sink into the depths of darkness.

RATNA. There is light, just see the light within yourself just once, look well—it is enough if you see it.

Ratna goes towards the second image.

SECOND IMAGE. I will leave the house this very minute.

RATNA. But where will you go?

SECOND IMAGE. In which ever direction my eyes fall.

RATNA. To my parents' house? (*She thinks a moment.*) No, I can't go to my parents' house. I want to go, but I cannot think (*in a slightly scared manner*) where shall I go?

SECOND IMAGE. Anywhere in the world that is better than this.

RATNA. It's no use speaking rhetorically . . .

SECOND IMAGE. This is not rhetoric. This is true (*excitedly*).

RATNA. True. But what will people say? There is such a thing as society, you know—how will I . . . ?

Ratna goes towards the third image.

THIRD IMAGE. Let all the people of the world know, let women's organizations know, let the neighbours know.

RATNA. That cannot be. People will look at me, they will laugh. Besides, what can they do but pity me?

THIRD IMAGE. What do you mean, what can they do? There is the law, there are the courts. Others will help me. Never in my life can I forgive this husband. I will let people know.

RATNA. The law? Help?

Ratna goes towards the fourth image.

FOURTH IMAGE. You will not just stay silent and bear it all.

RATNA. But what other way do I have?

FOURTH IMAGE. There is the law. You can complain to other people.

RATNA. What will I achieve from that?

FOURTH IMAGE. What will you achieve by staying silent and bearing it all?

RATNA. That is true. But how? My mind is all confused.

FOURTH IMAGE. There are human beings. There is human feeling—that is what I trust.

RATNA. What you have said is true. I am off, off to tell people—my rebellious instinct is aroused. Of course I will not keep my mouth shut and bear it all—protest?

The sound of the dhol can be heard now, this sound is repeated after specified intervals. The actresses doing the images sit down along the perimeter of the circle. Seba, Hriday and Chittaranjan can be seen talking to Ratna. First Chittaranjan shoves Ratna, the trance of her dream is broken.

CHITTARANJAN. What is it, are you dreaming, oh great and merciful one? I say, Ratna, mind what you say. Great words are not appropriate for lowly people.

RATNA. It is your opinion that I'm a lowly person. Understand this—I have learnt the pains of living as a burden to someone else.

SEBA. This is one of her parents' tricks, Khoka, to try to make you weak . . .

CHITTARANJAN. Stop, Ma. She make me weak! Do you think I don't know that she has the blood of schemers in her body?

HRIDAY. Yes, Khoka, be careful. That girl comes from a clan of crooks, she must have duped quite a few other boys before marriage.

RATNA. Baba, don't say that! Have I ever harmed you? (*To her mother-in-law*) Ma, have some pity. Look (*she starts crying*) my body is burning with fever. Every night, this fever starts . . .

CHITTARANJAN. What! Now a sympathy drive! Damn you, I will throw you out. (*He pulls Ratna by one arm and hits her, she falls down. He tries to hit her on the other arm.*) Let me see who comes to save you. I have endured enough drama. Get out, get out of the house.

SEBA. Well done! You have done the right thing, Khoka. This is what was needed.

HRIDAY. Khoka, I will get you married again. First get this evil thing out of the house . . .

Ratna continues to lie on the ground. Chittaranjan and Hriday beat her. As the argument ends, they freeze into an image. At the other end of the performance space, the voices of the neighbours, husband and wife, can be heard.

THE WIFE. Look, again they have started beating up their daughter-in-law. Barbarians! No, no, we can't let this go on day after day. Impossible—I am going to their house.



THE HUSBAND. Are you mad? Why are you poking your nose into other people's family troubles? Besides, I have known that boy, Chitta, for a long time. He is not a bad boy. He is well qualified, he has a good job. It must be the girl's fault.

THE WIFE. Whatever you say, I shall go there today. I will see what your Chitta is up to.

THE HUSBAND. You cannot go! (*He pulls her back and they freeze into an image.*)

At the other end of the performance space, a social worker is engaged in conversation with another person.

SOCIAL WORKER. Romola, how are you? Your problems with your husband were resolved in such a manner, with so much trouble . . .

ROMOLA. Because of the trouble you took, I have learnt what is good for me. My belief in myself has come back.

SOCIAL WORKER. But is your husband well? That is one thing we were worried about.

ROMOLA. He is very well. He sends you his thanks.

SOCIAL WORKER. That is very good. Let him know that we are very happy, too.

They too, freeze. A tune comes wafting in from beyond the performance space. Three people come in one by one. They all look closely at the images formed by those in the performance space: the neighbours, Ratna, her husband and in-laws, the social worker. The music continues until all three have finished looking. At the end, all three of them form an image on one side of the performance space. One person covers her eyes with both hands, the second her mouth and the third, her ears. They freeze into an image and the play ends.

This is where the play stops and the forum begins: Members of the audience are invited to come, take the role of whichever character they want, and try and effect a change in the situation. The remaining actors, meanwhile, argue with them, staying in character and trying to force the debate onto as realistic a ground as possible, to explore the feasibility of the proffered changes and solutions. No fairytale endings are allowed, since that is not what happens in real life.

The forum (on 7 March 1998) was a tremendous success; initially women stepped up, but then even a few men from the audience entered the performance area and enacted various solutions. These included the following:



- a. A woman replaced the daughter-in-law's stance with a more militant attitude which refused to take oppression lying down.
- b. A woman replaced the woman neighbour and persuaded her 'husband' to intervene. Their show of interest was enough to act as a warning, impelling the in-laws to restrain their abuse of the daughter-in-law in order not to draw the disapprobation of the neighbours.
- c. Someone replaced the female neighbour and showed her talking to the neighbourhood community, alerting them, building community opinion against the situation, and calling in a social worker.
- d. Someone suggested informing the police to act as a deterrent against the in-laws.
- e. Someone enacted greater support from the bride's family by way of standing up for the daughter.
- f. A man took the part of the girl's brother, removing his sister from her in-laws'.

The forum had to be halted as we ran out of time, but it succeeded in stirring up the atmosphere, involving the audience, and creating a buzz of talk, opinion, discussion and excitement. It was interesting to see that every single suggestion offered was rooted in the realm of possibility—there was no naive wishful thinking. It was also remarkable that the actors, on stage for the first time, complete novices, handled the interventions with natural self-confidence, arguing back, defending their positions in character, improvising dialogue with elan. As they said later, this was possible only because the entire situation was one from their own lives, seen, lived through, heard over and over again. They were experts: they knew what the in-laws' would say, how the husband would react to neighbours' interventions, and so on. Although a brief exposure to this method, it was ample proof of the power of the forum.

Script translated from the original Bengali by Sayoni Basu

Playscript

The Death of Abbie Hoffman and Other Plays

Rana Bose

A Montreal-based playwright, Rana Bose is part of Serai, an alternative cultural group which produces plays and publishes a literary journal. Born and brought up in Calcutta, his links with the culture of his native country remain strong. All three of the plays in this volume have an Indian link; in fact, *The Death of Abbie Hoffman* was adapted from *Michhil (Procession)*, the milestone play by Badal Sircar, the father figure of avant-garde street theatre in India. *On the Double* shows how, for Asian immigrant women, the reality of their lives in Canada is no different from what it might have been in Baroda, Ghat Kopar or Beliaghata; and in *The Sulpician Escarpment*, the roots of the intricate plot lie buried in Calcutta of two decades ago.

Hard-hitting, quick-moving, visually striking and very contemporary, these plays show Bose at his best. As he says, his aim is to 'give the audience a blast . . . plus serve thoughts to go home with. Political content has to be subtextual.'

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'It was like we were here to play, relax, discuss . . .'

After the performance on 7 March 1998, *STQ* coordinated a series of evaluatory feedback sessions, reproduced below. Participants in the first feedback session, held on 11 March, included Swayam support group members and workshop participants Gopa Das, Mallika Mukherjee, Ratna Mukherjee, Rekha Roy, Shikha Roy, Mousumi Das, Rina (name changed on request), Soma Mukherjee; Anuradha Kapoor from Swayam; and Sameera Iyengar, and Paramita Banerjee—both of whom participated in the workshop and performance—as well as Anjum Katyal from *STQ*. A second session on 18 March further explored the experience of the entire process. Although the content has been retained in full, the material has been reorganized, starting with discussion of the workshop process, moving on to the actual production, and then on to future plans.

The Workshop

REKHA. We had chosen the medium of theatre so that we could reach our message to literate and illiterate people alike, which something like a magazine could never achieve. Also, theatre is a very direct medium that can get people to react better. So we wanted to use this medium to get people to think about and react to problems like the one we've projected in this play, to look for solutions. One major problem is that women feel inhibited, even afraid to speak up about torture—the general tendency is not to say anything at all. We had done a play last year, on 8 March 1997, highlighting the need to change that situation, stressing the need to speak up, the need to intervene in such a situation etc. There certainly can be no solution if one doesn't voice the reality of torture at all. But it is possible to redress such a situation; there are organizations to help women in such situations, and that is the message that we'd tried to spread through last year's performance.

Now, there were quite a few among us who were on stage for the first time—I certainly was. Even as I stood on stage, I could actually feel myself trembling. But we could do it fairly well, and I, for one, felt rather reassured to find out that even I could act. I think that experience motivated all of us to take up theatre more seriously and use it as a medium for raising awareness about abuse of women and other related issues.

Jana Sanskriti taught us what theatre is really all about. We learnt how not to take theatre or acting as something that you just rehearse and then perform on stage; we learnt how to get into character even while just moving around casually, and many other relevant techniques that helped us improve the effectiveness of our theatre.

What I've found very interesting in this process is that we came for these Wednesday rehearsals without really thinking that we were rehearsing. It was like we were here to play, relax, discuss . . .

ANJUM. All these discussions that happened during the workshops, were they useful?

REKHA. Of course they were useful. For example, the need and importance of certain gestures and postures and the significance of throwing certain dialogues in a particular way were not things that we had much idea about. It was in the course of all these discussions that these things gradually dawned on us.

However, there was never a feeling that we were doing all this because we wanted to do a play. We really felt very relaxed and we enjoyed ourselves, and that's why I guess all of us were rather keen to be there for our Wednesday classes every week.

SAMEERA. Could you please tell us about what you feel you have gained from this experience, if the workshop process gave you anything in the completely personal sense? How have we ourselves been affected?

GOPA. This opportunity to learn what is known as Third Theatre (sic) has been a tremendous experience for me even at this advanced age. My theatre experience had been restricted to proscenium theatre, and I knew nothing about Third Theatre. But I got to learn it—not just in theory, but in practice, and I can't tell you how much I've benefited from that. Before we began, as I knew nothing about Third Theatre, I tried to form some kind of an idea through reading Badal Sircar's writings. Anyway, the physical exercises that we needed to do for this form of theatre . . . Sanjoy and Sima—the people who were training us in this form—always insisted that we were never to feel that we were learning anything, we were just to enjoy ourselves—and I must say that's what we have done.

Initially, we had learnt some songs and done some exercises, but we were not quite into the whole thing. When we went to Madhyamgram, that's when we came very close to each other. The Jana Sanskriti people had a chance to observe and interact with us from close quarters, and so did we. A time constraint was certainly there—just a single day—but within that single day we experienced a lot. Seeing those village women actually do Forum theatre, the games we played there—some of them were so enjoyable . . . One of my biggest gains from Third Theatre has been this ability to enjoy myself, forgetting my age totally. I never knew that people could actually learn together like this, and with so much enjoyment. That's been my most rewarding experience so far.

What we learn in proscenium theatre is expressions and dialogue—matching them together. Here it's been a completely different process. We learnt everything necessary, but part by part—as if a machine is being assembled part by part. The process of learning each skill separately like that has been a very interesting experience as well. There was one exercise where all we had to do was to be as angry as possible, another one where we had to express the feeling of being powerful . . . these were fun things for us, but honed our expressive skills nevertheless. Then there were the imaginative games of one being clay and another being a sculptor . . . there have been many, many games, all of which I can't remember right now, but they have all been fun as well as instructive. I don't think I'm speaking just for myself; I think that each one of us has felt this way—experienced this fun of learning without realizing that we're being trained.

RATNA. I hadn't had much experience with acting prior to this; I used to be more into singing. But when I became part of Swayam and we all felt like using theatre as a means of communicating certain problems, for spreading awareness about certain issues—the entire idea behind using theatre was that it would reach a much wider audience than a magazine. It was this decision that got us involved with Jana Sanskriti and this entire process. Initially I was quite apprehensive because I'd always had the impression that you needed to have special skills, know a lot of techniques, to be able to act. But the way Sanjoy-da and Sima-di got us to learn everything—in so easy and non-taxing a manner, through enjoyable games—things like moving around casually, but making a statue as soon as some sound is made, or how to burst out laughing suddenly . . . all skills that one needs to be an actor, but they were imparted without any strain whatsoever. We hardly realized how we gradually learnt to express different

moods, how we could control our bodies better, how mutual understanding developed among all of us.

Initially we could hardly comprehend what it was all about, for we had no idea about Third Theatre or Forum theatre. But when we went to Madhyamgram and saw the village women, illiterate women, handle Forum theatre with such ease and confidence—I think that gave all of us a boost. We felt that if they could do it, why can't we? We really enjoyed that experience of Forum theatre.

In none of our Wednesday workshops did we ever feel that we were doing a class. The training was imparted so casually, through so much enjoyment, that it was unbelievable even to us. Not just that, the entire play was created on the basis of our own life experiences; the dialogues were actual ones from our own lives. That is why we never had to worry about learning our lines, no tension about forgetting them—it was really like we were saying things that we say in our daily life.

ANJUM. Of all the various exercises you did, which was the one you liked most and why? I'd like each one of you to respond to this, please.

GOPA. The exercise where one person keeps moving one hand and another person has to keep moving her body so as to never take her eyes off the hand—that's what I liked most. The reason is that it's extremely good for both mental and physical concentration. I remember that doing it was quite tough and strenuous, but despite that it's been my favourite.

MALLIKA. I liked the one where we had to create an image in a group to tell a story. We just had to portray the story through an image, without any dialogue. The reason I like that is because it really taught us how to use our bodies and expressions to tell a story.

RATNA. What I liked most was the exercise where we did different things: cry as much as you can, or laugh in as many different ways as you can. The playful way we were made to do this is unbelievable, but I also think that's the one that helped us most in terms of acting. Initially, when we were doing this, we couldn't make much sense of it—it was not compatible with what we knew of actor training. But later, when the whole thing sank in, it was really incredible how well that exercise had equipped us to assume different gestures and expressions at the drop of a hat.

The other point of fun for me was this process of discovering that we could actually do so many different things . . . I don't think I ever knew that I could.

Another exercise that I liked very much was the one that Mallika was talking about. We were divided into two groups of three or four people, discussed a storyline amongst ourselves and then portrayed that simply through a series of images. This helped us in acting without words.

SHIKHA. I liked the one that was like playing Blind Man's Buff. I can't express how much I liked it, neither can I explain why I liked it so much. Each one of us had to feel our partner thoroughly by touch and then spot her with our eyes blindfolded, through touch. I loved it. It was like going all the way back to childhood—which was in itself a fabulous feeling—but the same old game was now being used to develop a skill.

REKHA. I liked the one where each one of us was given different objects and had to use them as something other than what they were. For example, we were given a bottle and I'd used it as a flower. This ability to think instantly and transform an object through imagination was what I liked very much. And I also

liked the one that Shikha has just talked about, and that's because I'd never actually known that I had such a strong sense of touch, that I could actually identify someone through touch if I concentrated hard enough.

MOUSUMI. We had one exercise where we had to think of something and then instantly convey that through an image. Like I might have thought of reading and then had to form an image to communicate that to the rest. I liked that the most because it challenged us to do two things simultaneously—think and instantly translate that into an image.

SOMA. What the village women showed us with the use of very few words, primarily through expressions, gestures and images, is what I liked. Because I felt that if rural women could do something like that, surely we urban women should be able to do it, too. I felt inspired enough to get involved in the process. Once I started participating in the Wednesday workshops, I liked that game with the bottle—the way we had to ignore the actual object and imagine it to be something else then and there. I'd also liked the game where one of us would be clay and the other the sculptor: the way it made me realize my own creativity was what I enjoyed most. Also the one where we thought something and then depicted it through an image.

RINA. I liked the image-building thing most, because you had to fit yourself in with whatever the others were doing, without any prior plan, and also because it made my body much more flexible than I'd ever imagined it could be.

On evolving the play

RINA. The main aim of our play was to raise our voice against the oppression and exploitation of women. Changing what is prevalent is always a problem, but that shouldn't stop the urge to, or the process of, change. People like Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar had stopped the practice of child marriage and sati, introduced widow remarriage. Those times were even more difficult for women. But now what happens is that once a woman gets married, if her husband turns out to be good and supportive, then all is fine. But if that doesn't happen . . . Marriage is like a gamble. What happens to a woman in a bad marriage is that through her constant struggle to accommodate her husband and in-laws, she loses her own personality, her spirit dies slowly and she is sometimes driven to even taking her own life. Having children doesn't always change anything for her, for very often the children also learn to treat her the same way as their father does.

What we have tried to show is that this should not continue. When it is no fault of the woman, it's just that through sheer bad luck she has a tyrannical husband . . . But the problem is that divorce is still not socially recognized: her parents refuse to keep her, society accuses her—but what has the woman done? What's her fault, anyway? It's our prevalent belief system that makes even her own parents and relatives turn their faces away from a woman with a failed marriage.

ANJUM. These thoughts—were they in your mind before this entire rehearsal process began or did they come to you during the course of this process?

RINA. No, the thoughts were there, but the process gave us scope to manifest these thoughts in a strongly communicative manner. As it happened, Sanjoy-da and Sima-di, the people we got training from, evolved the whole thing from our own life experiences and thoughts only. That theme of competition between a brother and a sister was something I'd written as a playlet and read here in Swayam—it was later developed into the play we did. My theme was discrimination between a daughter and a son.

MOUSUMI. I liked all the characters and the situation portrayed in the play that we did, and that's because situations like that are an open secret—I'm sure that even within the audience, there must have been people who behave in a similar fashion towards their daughters-in-law. But there has hardly ever been any attempt to bring these problems out in the open, telling people that we are not really lying low in a helpless fashion any more. Attempts to redress the situation are on and that should make the foul players somewhat wary, at least.

SAMEERA. I have a question to address to Rekha initially, but then I want all of you to respond to it. The play that we performed was one that evolved out of a tableau we'd done earlier. That tableau was based on a story Rekha had told us. My question is: the story of your life that you told us, and the play that we finally performed—what were the differences between the two, if any? Do you think that any element of your experience got lost in that process of evolution? If so, what are they? What do you think could be different to make it a more faithful development of the story you'd told us? Or do you think that we gained something in the process of transforming your experience into a play?

REKHA. There have been changes, of course. Firstly, in the play that we did, the mother was shown to be supporting the young woman's desire to play cricket while the father objected to it. But in real life, both my parents had been equally disapproving. The other change is that, the way the discrimination between the young woman and her brother has been depicted in the play—I won't say that there has been no discrimination between me and my brother, but it hasn't been so glaring. Also, in the play we portrayed the terrible physical torture the woman endured once she's married. But what I've faced in real life is not so much physical torture as mental torture. Also, the way this woman could actually talk to her neighbours, I certainly couldn't do that. I couldn't bring myself to do that as a new bride. I hadn't even dared to tell my parents, initially. In fact, much before I could tell my own relatives—that was after the accident had happened and I would possibly be dead if I hadn't yet spoken up—I'd actually told relatives of my in-laws, and also some neighbours. No help came from the former quarter whatsoever, and the neighbours all sympathized with me, but none of them volunteered to offer any concrete help—like talking about my case to a local club, etc. It's only been my father who stood very firmly behind me, I really don't know what I would have done without his support.

SAMEERA. Well, as you have said, your torture was more mental, though in the play it was more physical. This difference that occurred . . .

PARAMITA. Was this difference necessary? Why did it happen? Has it been an effective change? What can we do to incorporate mental torture as well?

GOPA. The day the rudiments of what was to become the play were formulated, we were divided into two groups and asked to tell a story each through four or five images only. We did a story based on Rekha's life—which is why we showed that bit about liking to play. In the other group's story the customary discrimination between sons and daughters was shown. Sanjoy-da chose elements from both and the play gradually evolved. This aspect of physical torture came in later.

RATNA. It's true that the element of a girl liking to play and being prevented was taken straight from Rekha's life, and we couldn't focus on the mental torture bit because we felt that it was too abstract to be portrayed. But it's not that none of us has faced physical torture—I have, and I think the play took elements of all our experiences. It was a synthesis of many different experiences.

ANJUM. The dream sequence—where did that idea come from?

REKHA. Sanjoy-da had asked each one of us to depict through images what we would like to do in a situation of torture. We did that, and then he told us to arrange them sequentially. We did that—which step should come after which—like maybe try to change through loving first, then maybe feel like committing suicide . . .

RATNA. Yes, the dream sequence was formulated from that—our own thoughts about what we would like to do. He made us also reveal our thoughts about each of these steps—like why couldn't the one who wanted to solve everything through love manage to do that? Why didn't one commit suicide? He dragged all the thoughts out from our own minds, and, using them, the dream sequence was formulated.

GOPA. I must say something simply because I desperately want to share it with all of you: the mother-in-law that I portrayed was directly based on my own experiences. My mother-in-law was like that, you know—she'd say one thing in the kitchen, come out into the verandah and say something completely different without batting an eyelid, and then another thing in the dining room . . . I used to wonder how brilliant a performer she would be on stage! What I depicted was completely real. Sanjoy-da had told us to do what we thought right. I said, tell us what to do. He said, no, do what feels right to you. If anything seems wrong to me, I will tell you. Which is why the acting seemed completely natural.

RINA. When they are torturing the daughter-in-law, their anger is because she has not brought the dowry they demanded, because their son is an engineer and they wanted a car for him. The bride has not done anything wrong. But indirectly, all her actions are criticized because of this and therefore she is beaten. That is their only weapon against the girl and her parents. If the girl goes home, her parents can't get her married off again. But for the boy, it is different. He will get married again. It's all money. They have educated the boy, made him a doctor or an engineer, so they want more money for him.

MALLIKA. Many women still fall victim to barbaric systems like dowry, and that we were able to take steps towards touching people's consciences through this play of ours makes it important.

On changes within

ANJUM. Has this process made any difference to you internally, have you felt certain changes within?

SAMEERA. Through your own experiences and through your contact with Swayam, you had quite a few relevant thoughts with which you started. But has this experience helped you in any way to change those thoughts, or added anything new to them? Have you thought or felt something that you hadn't done before? Can we talk about that too?

RINA. One definite change has been that though we had these experiences and thoughts, we didn't have the courage to voice them. Though we were not to blame for our situations, we still felt this strange guilt which robbed us of the courage to speak out. Going through this process has helped us gain the confidence to voice these things.

RATNA. That has definitely happened, but the other change that's come over us is that whatever idea we had about voicing problems through theatre—if our conception was about 10% before, today it's increased by another 70% at least. Since doing the play, we've been thinking in a much more innovative manner

about addressing many different problems through theatre. That's a definite change. The possibility of actually dragging out problems from inside a person is now real to us and distinctly achievable.

RINA. I face major problems getting out of home—I always have and still do—but a change that this process has brought in me is that I know that I need not always feel afraid, as long as I know within myself that I'm not doing something wrong.

MALLIKA. I had acted a lot when I was a kid, but I'd got totally cut off since I got married. The very fact that this process brought me back into performing again has given me so much joy that I can hardly express it. I never knew that I had all these thoughts inside me, that I could actually articulate and express problems that burden women in real life, that I could take a definitive step towards addressing it . . . For me, it's been a process of self-discovery and I think that's been my greatest gain from this entire experience. Now I know for sure that I want to be, need to be, involved in a creative process to grow.

MOUSUMI. I'd only been involved in singing and reciting before, and I never knew that I could actually act. The fact that I could portray the outrage and the disdain of the character I played [the father-in-law] was a revelation to me and I'm very happy to have been able to do that.

RATNA. Yes, there's a very significant difference. Whatever small roles I'd done before, it would be a case of getting a role from the director and then enacting that as per his directives. But in this play, there was no role or acting as such. We evolved the play ourselves from our own life-experiences—with the help of people from Jana Sanskriti, of course. This was very different in that sense. The dialogues are from real incidents in our own lives. We have tried to show a woman being tortured—as a young girl, there is the torture by her father, by social norms; then by her husband and in-laws—torture that she cannot even speak out about. This is something very real for all of us, something we have directly experienced in our lives, one way or the other. The sequence where she goes and speaks to different aspects of her own self—one wanting to die, one thinking of letting go, one thinking of revenge . . . all these thoughts actually come to our minds in similar situations, and the way we really get confused, not knowing what to do, vacillating between different options or the lack of them . . . that is something that's touched me very much. That is so real, that confusion and that need to confront oneself. We really suffer so badly from such contradictions . . .

MALLIKA AND REKHA. We have to pass through all those stages before we can actually begin to protest and resist. We have all chosen the protest route finally, but we've had to pass through all those conflicts before. Because we are always being taught—right since childhood—that as women we must learn to adjust, to endure.

RATNA. It is important to arrive at the stage where one can resist and protest, but that does not always happen. For many women, it all ends in suicide. Or maybe they are just thrown out. But what is needed is resistance and protest, and that is what we have tried to depict here.

I also must put on record that we are all infinitely grateful to Sanjoy-da and Sima-di for the way they got us into performing something that was actually our own lives, our own experience, our own thoughts and images. We never felt pressured, no tension, nothing. And it really was a very rewarding feeling to have people listen to that, watch that, and then participate through the forum. That

gives me the confidence that if we can carry on this process and portray many more subtle forms of torture and discrimination that exist vis-à-vis women, the situation will surely begin to change—never mind how slowly and on how miniscule a scale. Because it is done from the heart, it will also touch the audience's hearts.

MALLIKA. The role I did, the husband who is mockingly telling the wife that all this committee stuff you are doing now, all this feminine awareness—it reflects this desire that men have to keep their wives subservient, saying, you are so negligible, what can you do? Men—our husbands—are so full of disdain for us, they look down on us . . . I think that there is nothing that a woman cannot do. And I am happy that I could portray that through the character I played and I hope that I've done it successfully enough to set people reflecting on this attitude. The other role I did—that of the neighbour—there also I think it's important to convey the message that neighbours as social beings have both the responsibility and the right to intervene in such situations. The usual attitude is that I am disciplining my wife in my house, what right do you have to say anything about that? We have social responsibilities, we have to remember that.

RINA. In our society, from the day the child is born, she is given so much love. What we want is that the parents teach her to live with self-respect and a sense of honour. Make her self-dependent. Then she is equal to not just one, but ten boys, she will be a wonder. The woman who is earning, nobody will be able to torture her. If the husband is torturing her, then she has another way to live. But . . . this can only happen when women become economically self-dependent, because nobody attaches any productive value to the 24-hour service that women render to their families.

But if you make your daughter self-dependent, then there will be no question of dowry. Then if anyone wants dowry, if they seem at all greedy, then there will be no question of marriage. She is earning her own money every month. She will have confidence in herself and she will have the power to make decisions. Nobody will bother her.

It will be the same with her parents, too. If your husband treats you badly and you go to your parents, they will treat you well for a couple of months, but after that! They will begin torturing you too, they give you no relief. Then the woman's position becomes very vulnerable, very uncertain. The husband is bad, and the parents-in-law, and your own parents, brothers, sisters, they too are blaming you. You feel an outcast.

MALLIKA. In today's society, it is not always the [boy's] parents—many girls, too, say that I want this, I want that. My own TV, my own washing machine.

RINA. Yes, the girl may want it, but if they are torturing her, persecuting her, then she has to go to her parents . . .

MALLIKA. But because there is this desire, the system of dowry will not end easily.

RINA. It will be ended when women become self-dependent. After that, they can take care of themselves. How much money do you want? The girl earns more than that. The non-working woman, too, she is working all day for her husband, her in-laws, the children. If someone works 8 hours, they earn Rs 5000. But hers is a 24-hour job, and she receives nothing for it. She is working so hard, but she has no value, no recognition, because it is very humdrum work. She is working much harder than someone who is working for 8 hours and she is taking on every kind of responsibility. But she is considered useless, unemployed, of no importance. So the key is: you have to earn.

The Performance

REKHA. Performing the play was a very rewarding experience. What I liked most in the play is the way it addressed different aspects of the problem of torture of women: the husband's role, the in-laws' role, the non-interference of neighbours even when they know what's happening . . . all these aspects are very real. . . . And most important was the emphasis on all the contradictions and fears that a tortured woman actually faces, and the gradual resolution of these to arrive at the decision to protest.

The tendency of neighbours is always to avoid addressing or getting involved in such issues. So it was rather pleasantly surprising to see people from the audience actually step into the performance area and assume different roles to voice their disapproval and protest against a situation of torture.

What was of particular interest to me, however, was the participation of men from the audience in the forum. Since it's men who are at the root of abusing women, I've seldom—if ever—seen them take a definitive stand against the abuser; but here that happened, though I'm not sure if the same will be true in real life. But the very fact that they came forward was still good to experience.

RATNA. If the forum could have continued till it naturally ended, then I'm sure many more intense reactions would come out. Women in the audience would probably have come out with their own life-stories—bursting out, unable to contain themselves any more. That is what happens in the villages—we've heard this from Jana Sanskriti members who practise such theatre regularly in villages. Even here, after we finished, one elderly woman came over to talk about her own experiences. I am sure there would have been a stronger impact if we could have continued for longer.

REKHA. The general trend is that neighbours and local organizations turn a deaf ear when a woman finds herself in a situation similar to the one depicted in the play. They know everything, but they choose not to interfere. It's often the same with parents—they really don't like to take the woman back, or support her in case of marital troubles. What is of significance to me is that, in our play we've challenged that very tendency, and I think that the forum part has been able at least to point to the need for challenging such situations.

I feel that it would be worthwhile to carry on doing this kind of play in this forum format—maybe it will slowly bring about some level of change in awareness and attitudes.

RINA. Yes. I was playing the husband, if you remember. When the forum started and people were coming with questions and accusations, I improvised my dialogues purely from my own experience of how my husband behaves in that kind of a situation. He's forever torturing me in various different ways, but in front of people he addresses me as 'darling', says very good things about me, so that people get the exact opposite impression. That is what I was doing there also. None of those dialogues were rehearsed; we were all creating them there and then.

MALLIKA. This form of theatre is a very intimate one—the proximity with the audience is very different from whatever little earlier experience I had of doing theatre on stage. Also, it is no less significant that we were actually dramatizing our own life-experiences, uttering dialogues straight from our own lives. What I think I have personally gained is an understanding of how crucial is the need to protest, to raise one's voice against oppression. We women put up with far too much injustice, we've done that for too long—it is high time that we started raising our voices against such torture and injustice.

The other thing that's emerged as very important to me is the fact that neighbours actually do not interfere when something like that happens next door. But it is important to do so. If we do not learn to protest injustice and oppression when it is happening in front of us, then what is the point of being educated, civilized? What happened at the forum—the coming together of so many people on stage to change the situation—is what we need in real life. So, I liked that very much.

PARAMITA. I have one small question, something that's been in my mind since the performance. As we all know, the play was shaped out of the images the two groups had created on 23 January. And on that day, one of the exercises we did was when Sanjoy had asked us to effect whatever changes we liked to the situation of torture that was depicted. The very first change made—I don't remember who did it—but the change was that the mother-in-law's position was shifted. Her position was altered to one opposing her son instead of supporting him. I found that very interesting on two grounds: firstly, because it challenges the cliché that women are women's worst enemies, and secondly, because it also points to the need for women to support one another. But in that day's forum, I found it rather strange that so many people came up to take so many different roles—but no one took that of the mother-in-law, or the husband or the father-in-law. Have you thought about that at all? Can you share with me why you think it was like that?

GOPA. I'd also thought that somebody would come to take the role of the mother-in-law. Maybe someone would have if we had more time.

MOUSUMI. I thought that someone would come to take the father-in-law's position and show him to be understanding and supportive towards the daughter-in-law, asking the mother-in-law to try and adjust to a young girl who's come from a different family and has to adapt to a totally new setup.

REKHA. I'd really hoped that somebody would come forward to portray a supportive and sympathetic husband. Nobody came forward to do that, either. Sometimes the father-in-law comes forward for the daughter-in-law, but here he had already demarcated her a criminal. And right from the beginning he is more enraged with her than the mother-in-law. I felt quite deflated that nobody actually changed that. That's what makes me even more doubtful about men actually being supportive in real life.

PARAMITA. There's another point that I would like to raise—I was waiting to see if anyone else did so—but no one has. Taking dowry is a legal offence, but no one in the forum once raised that issue and neither have any one of us done so today. This is something I'd found strange on the day of the performance, and I also find it odd that it hasn't been pointed out in our discussion. What do you feel could be the reason behind it?

ALL. It's probably because it's such a widely practised thing that we don't even think of it as a legal offence.

PARAMITA. When you were doing the forum—when it wasn't prepared dialogue any more—and you had to respond instantly to what people were saying, with no time to think. What were your sensations then?

RATNA. Before the performance, we were tense about the forum part—because we'd only seen it done once and never really done it ourselves. But as it turned out, even the forum part went extremely well, and it was really great to see people from the audience come out and participate. It was especially elating to see a couple of male bystanders participate in a play that was so decidedly about

women's oppression by men. I don't think any other form of theatre would have been able to forge such an effective link with the audience.

MALLIKA. We were feeling that what we had been doing for so long was not acting any more, that we had become as one with it. And there was a different kind of strength, of confidence, that we would be able to do it. And we wanted to make other people understand, let people know openly about certain things, that is where the confidence was coming from.

MOUSUMI. I felt, as it was not scripted and the improvised dialogue was coming out very spontaneously during the forum when outsiders came and talked to us, we were able to say a lot in our own way, and that is why they, too, came in to say what they had to say. I felt very strong now that I was able to do what I was not able to do before, that I was improvising freely, that people were trying to solve the problems. I could draw a picture of reality by myself.

PARAMITA. The dialogues you were speaking then, where were they coming from?

MOUSUMI. From within us, on its own. Directly from our own experiences.

MALLIKA. And if such a thing happens in future, say, in my family, I will be able to go forward like this. We now have that courage within us. Sitting quietly—what will the neighbours say, what will my family say—that mentality is gone now.

RINA. I think the forum awakened people who did not know that such problems existed. After we performed the play, they knew about it. And now some of the people in the audience might go to their sister's house when she says that she is being treated like that and say, I am taking my sister back because you are treating her like an animal; and I will also fight against dowry. I am very happy that such an awareness is being born and people will not tolerate such injustices. I liked that.

RATNA. To tell you the truth, when I was doing the play, I was not aware of who was watching and such things. I was completely involved in it, because we ourselves have wandered in this world. I had entered into myself.

When Sima-di started the forum, and people were coming up with one question after another, I never felt that I don't know this, or how shall I answer this question?

I feel we need some practice for the forum, what Sima-di and Sanjoy-da have taught us—how the forum comes into being—I think that we do need to learn. But while it was going on, we were totally involved with it. They were questioning us, raising problems, but there was no sense that we were stuck anywhere.

In the play, we discuss certain problems. But what the questions will be and what the answers should be, that many of us do not know. The answers which were coming out of different people's heads, the solutions which were coming . . . When we were doing it, someone was saying, I will take my sister away, some were saying something else. Different kinds of solutions. The sensation that there is such a thing as a solution gave us strength within ourselves. There was a sense of power awakening. The sense of I have nothing, that we feel or others feel, that had gone away. We felt, yes, there is a solution somewhere. Just as there are problems, so, too, there are solutions. I was feeling strong, that, yes, in the future, I, too, will be able to tackle problems. This was not there before.

PARAMITA. You drew people into the play and made them see the problems. Do you think that if this now happens around them, then thinking of this might compel them to do something? Maybe if it happens to his own sister, he will say

something. Maybe he will say, do not pay dowry for her. Or maybe when he is getting married, he will not ask for dowry. What do you feel about this?

RINA. Maybe there will be pity in his heart and he will try to remedy the situation. So that if it happens to someone else, too, he will try to resolve the problem and save the person to whom injustice is being done.

MOUSUMI. I felt those who came to see, when they go back to their real lives, might still do something. That is what I felt. I did not feel that all of them will do nothing at all. Those who came forward at the beginning, were mostly people from Maitree. But the people who were called later, passers-by who just stopped to watch, who have no connection with the women's movement, when they were coming up and saying something, did that not have a separate dimension? I am not saying that these people will be totally transformed. But if all this is shown in front of their eyes, won't it make a mark? There must be some effect, because they, too, have families, brothers, sisters, they have women in their own homes who have faced such difficulties in their own marriages. Perhaps they will protest, not take dowry. Why are you torturing her like this? They will come forward somewhat. But the brute force within men, that will not go completely.

Future plans

PARAMITA. All this learning through the workshop, what are you going to do with that? Where do you want to go with that? Not whether you want to carry on in theatre—that is a separate issue—but all this learning. Sima was conducting the forum that day. If Swayam decided they would go around from place to place and do this play, you would have to do it on your own. So is there anything we need to learn? What are these things?

MALLIKA. We should do something. Because if we could go into certain areas . . . girls' schools, colleges, in all such places, if we could go and show people, then some people will understand.

We have to learn more ourselves. The other day, we reached a reasonable standard, but if we want to do something better, we need more discipline, more practice. Not deal with just this one topic—women have many problems and we have to think about them, we have to write, and we have to prepare ourselves to portray the problem in the form of a story, a play. And we have to rehearse that and make another production, through song, through acting.

MOUSUMI. For example, we will not be able to handle the forum on our own. Before we go out to do the work totally on our own, there are two or three things it would be better if we were taught.

RINA. What you were saying about doing the play in different places, we need to do that urgently. We have to go to places and bring awareness. Sometimes, when the wife is being harassed, the problem is such that there is no one around her to whom she can tell these problems. But if she sees the play, she will say, that is what happened to me. She will realize that what is being done to me is unjust and I can seek a remedy for this, I should not put up with it. I must not kill myself. She will be awakened and she will want change. She will tell people her problems. It is very urgent, to bring about such awareness, that we go to housing colonies, to new people—we should show such plays. And if there are such problems, then we can help her and there are 10 women who can support her. I am not saying that every woman is being tortured, if it is 20 or 30 in every hundred, that is a lot.

The experience with the people whom Sima summoned to the forum gave us some confidence. We did not have any experience. To have more confidence, we

need more such classes.

MOUSUMI. There is a lot to learn. We are yet to learn many of the fundamental things about drama, expression, dialogue, how to move, position, there is lots to learn.

RATNA. What one has to do in Forum theatre, we have learnt nothing of that yet from Sima-di and Sanjoy-da. What we need to learn to do a forum completely—the method of taking a problem and drawing it out—different kinds of problems—any type of problem you are having a forum on, not just related to women, sexual torture, others—the particular way they develop it—learning how to do that. Another thing we need to learn through practice is how to express the different aspects. To emphasize the main intent. Also, we used Bengali, but sometimes, in a forum, no language is used at all. We have to express everything through actions. I know Sima-di and Sanjoy-da work in different states. What happens then is that music and expressions are used to bring out the ideas. Tackling it without words—we need to learn this whole art. And most importantly, you need the Joker who knows where to start the forum, what to say, calling all the people—that requires enormous skill. I think that is a very vital matter. Starting, running and stopping the forum, that is what we need to learn. In my opinion, these are the three important things that we need to learn.

MALLIKA. Our main problem is time, when each of us can give time and which day it will be. All of us who are doing it have to rehearse together because we need to develop an understanding.

RATNA. Another problem we have in our group is that some people have more of one quality than others do, some people can act much better. So, instead of learning from her, we try to push her down. This happens.

But, say, Rina writes well, we will learn how to write from her. Mousumi dances well, sings well, she acts well—[there is scope for] learning. But what happens is we get jealous and we do not learn.

PARAMITA. Do you think if we continue working with the group, it will help us to overcome the petty jealousies? Through the process itself?

RATNA. I think that will happen if we keep working together.

RINA. Whatever admirable quality a person has, you should absorb it and try to learn from it.

MALLIKA. Yes, what I have less of, I can learn from the others.

RINA. One thing I want to raise is that all of us have many problems. We all thought, we have our own problems, so how shall we be as one? What we wanted to show people was that we had put all our problems away and had come out to perform as one. We have to show this to the public, to our families and our children, our husbands. It is very important that we show such unity in the group. We should feel, on Wednesdays, I am going to my club. It will be peaceful, I can enjoy myself. Coming here, the joy I get, I cannot describe it. I tell everyone, I have to go on Wednesdays. Other people have their clubs, their meetings, I feel happy that there is a place where I can put forward my opinions, my problems. In today's society there is no one to listen to your problems.

After coming here, I have accepted myself. And I have gone forward, I have no fear—the thing called fear is finished for me. Today, if my father comes, I can talk to him, because I am not doing wrong; my father, my in-laws, they were the ones doing wrong. My children know that. And I have received this confidence after coming to Swayam. Doing this play—I had been so intimidated in these

twenty years that I could not come forward in front of anyone. I had many problems I could not tell anyone. People are now being given a chance to solve such problems. What greater thing could I want?

RATNA. The forum, in urban areas—I don't know very much about it—

PARAMITA. It has not been used very much in our cities at all.

RATNA. Yes, that is what I have heard from Sima-di. That in the villages, it is used a bit more.

MOUSUMI. You know, when we did it in Howrah, people were applauding. They were told, please do not applaud, we have not come to collect applause. Come up here and mingle your voices with ours, sign our petitions. People did come—maybe out of the hundred watching, a dozen came, but they did come.

Translated from the original Bengali by Sayoni Basu

Playscript/Theatre Studies

**Mareech, the Legend
and
Jagannath**

Arun Mukherjee

*Translators: Himani Banerji and
Utkal Mohanty*

Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech Sambah* and *Jagannath* are highly popular plays in the theatre world of West Bengal. There are probably very few theatre goers in Calcutta, and in the district towns, who have not seen these plays, which have been performed through hundreds of well-attended nights. They have also been presented with success in Canada and the United States.

Described as complex and intelligent theatre, these plays are political in the best sense of the word. As Himani Banerji says in her introduction, 'Never more than now did we need the stories of class and class struggle—but told in a way that is worthy of the social and formative complexity, the elusiveness, the many-facedness of the concept of class. And it is here that Arun Mukherjee comes in with his two plays,

which speak of class intelligently, with humour.'

Mareech Sambah, in particular, could be called a cult hit in the group theatre world of Bengal. It is a cleverly structured, intelligent, humorous look at the changing forms of exploitation through space and time, starting with the story of Mareech the demon from the Ramayana, taking in USA's Vietnam intervention, and coming down to the contemporary period. *Jagannath*, adapted from Lu Xun's Chinese tale 'The Story of Ah Q', ostensibly tells the tale of a simple peasant, but in the process examines and exposes the subtle ways in which centuries of hierarchical oppression mould the psyche of the oppressed.

Arun Mukherjee is a playwright, director and actor who, with his group Chetana, has been an integral part of the group theatre scene in Calcutta for decades.

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More about Forum: A Question and Answer Session

STQ organized a discussion session with Jana Sanskriti and the workshop participants, with the purpose of questioning, learning and evaluating the experience of the workshop and the performance. Discussion included such issues as the form of presentation, use of proscenium, and the target audience. Participants included Ratna Mukherjee, Rekha Roy, Rina (name changed on request) and Mallika Mukherjee from the Swayam Support Group; and Sanjoy Ganguly, Satyaranjan Pal and Sima Ganguly from Jana Sanskriti. Anjum Katyal and Paramita Banerjee were present from *STQ*.

RATNA. I would like to ask Sanjoy-da something about this Forum theatre. The programme we did was based on the little that we could learn from you. What I want to know is: what are the things we need to do to improve further, to reach the stage of being able to do our own Forum theatre based on our own ideas? How do we proceed?

SANJOY. If you ask how much more effort you need to put in, then even those who have been acting for 50 years need to put in the same amount as you. So that is not the question. Everybody has the capacity to improve. If we really want to, we can reach great heights. That is there in everyone.

Now, how much you need to do . . . The very fact that you are asking such a question means we have achieved what we were aiming for—that you should have the urge to improve. As soon as this urge comes about, nothing can stop you.

RATNA. What you mean to say is that if we genuinely wish to improve, it will happen very quickly?

SANJOY. Yes.

RATNA. The theatre you do is based on various social problems. When you do performances in villages about the problems faced by the people there, they themselves come up and contribute to the programme. So would you say that Forum theatre is more accepted and known in the villages than the cities?

SANJOY. Forum theatre does not offer an escape from your daily life, it's not like taking time off to go and see a Shah Rukh Khan film. The forum puts before you your own reality and asks what steps you would like to take to deal with it. Now, ordinarily, people are all too willing to escape from their realities. But if this is presented before them, they are equally ready to give it serious thought, fight for their rights, and try and find solutions to their problems.

We have done forum in the villages, where the village women are far less educated than the women in cities—they do not have as much exposure, they do not have access to so much TV, they don't have the means to roam around much, they don't meet as many different kinds of people. And even they have found a way to express themselves through this kind of theatre, through this theatre they find a voice. But since you are much better off than them when it comes to exposure, the theatre should work better here. Because the courage and confidence to express yourselves is already there.

RATNA. Has Forum theatre made its presence felt in the city? Has anyone ever

done it before, or are we the first?

SANJOY. No, I don't think that it has been done before in the city. The concept of Forum theatre, where the spectator may change a character or scene according to his own ideas and feelings about the issue, wasn't present in the theatre of Calcutta, at least. In the villages, the folk performances do have a strong relationship between the actors and the audience, but even so, the spectator does not have the right to change anything in the performance. In that sense, I think we are the first people who are doing it. In fact, I'm quite sure we are the first.

RATNA. The Forum theatre that you do—on principle, it is done on open ground, without a stage of any sort. Our problem is that in cities, it is very difficult to find such open space to perform in. Not that it is impossible to find places to perform. There are many bustee areas in the city where it is necessary to perform, but besides that . . . in cities, performances are usually held in halls. Why is it that you do not use a stage space? Is there any particular reason? Or, if it becomes necessary to perform on a stage, since open spaces are not so readily available here, how, according to you, would the performance get affected? Suppose we have to perform on a small stage—a spectator may still get up from his seat and participate forum-style.

SANJOY. Jana Sanskriti's origins are in village theatre, and all performances in the villages are done in the round. Now, the advantage of having the audience close to us is that it becomes easier to build up a relationship with them. That is putting it in a simple way—there are several other aspects.

If we go to Brazil, where Forum theatre originated, we will see that there are small arenas built for such performances—a sort of round area where they perform during carnivals. But Forum theatre can be performed on stage as well. There are several places in Europe, especially East Europe, where many groups like us use the stage, using the Augusto Boal technique. But when we had gone there to perform, we did not use the stage. Because in a stage space, the whole concept changes. In the proscenium, three sides are blocked and, in front, an imaginary wall gets automatically built up because the structure of the proscenium is such. You are under lights while the audience is in darkness. You cannot see the audience, but they can see you. They are quite a distance away. So an imaginary wall gets created. Now in this sort of stagecraft, there are some who say that it is necessary to keep the fourth wall while others want to break it down. That depends on the mindset of the performers. If you can get on stage and successfully break that fourth wall, then there is no difference between an outdoor space and the stage. But since we have never performed on stage, the wall forms between us and the audience. Because we are used to performing in the round.

Abroad, where it is done on stage, people from the audience do go up. That is because they do not know of theatre in the round. Their culture has been the proscenium, that is what they are used to. But, even so, we have felt a difference when the same group performs on stage and when they come down and perform. A lot of people say that the distance between the actors and the audience in the proscenium does not make any difference, but we say that it does. So we prefer theatre in the round because the audience is much closer to us, the form is very mobile—you can take it wherever you please. Suppose you need to perform in a small community, you won't find a stage, but you will be able to find an open space of some sort that you can organize a bit and create an aesthetic space. So that is an advantage.

RATNA. We want to take the forum to all levels of society. Of course it is very

good that there is no special space or costume required—that's very convenient, I can perform wherever and whenever I feel like. But in cities space is at a premium. I'm not saying that it is completely impossible to find space, there will always be some places available. But take places where we think it is necessary to perform and yet there is no such open space there—if we use a stage though the rest of the performance remains the same, then will it become a handicap?

SANJOY. No, no, there is nothing like that. It's not that we are completely against performing on stage under any circumstances, but the point is that you must convince yourself that the audience is still very close to you. You have to approach it with that mindset. Then there will be no difference between a stage performance and a performance in the round.

Another thing is that, when I am preparing the play for the stage, I must do the choreography accordingly, the composition has to be different because of the structure—when there are people on three sides, then the choreography changes a lot. So if a performance is designed in the round, and I have to present it on stage, naturally I will have a problem, because my entire composition has been done for the round. If I do the same thing in a square space with three sides closed, the composition will get ruined. Half the people will not be able to see it. Therefore we do not get on to stage. We aren't saying that it is not possible on stage. It is possible, if you can take the stage closer to the audience. If you can school your mind in such a way, then the audience will come up to the stage and participate just as usual. We have seen many such instances.

PARAMITA. I saw a performance at the Nandikar Festival. This group had come from Bangladesh and they performed what is traditionally known as lokgaan. They said that it was a totally authentic production. Since they could not get an open space with the audience all around, as one side was blocked, they did not allow the house lights to go off and they used a working light on stage. The whole hall was lit the same way. So that is also a style which can be used. If there is no choice but to use a stage, this method can be used to reduce the effect of a proscenium.

SANJOY. Yes, these adjustments are possible. But what I am talking about is the composition of the play. When you are presenting something, when you are creating it, it is an artistic expression created under certain conditions. Now I have seen Chhau in the open fields of Purulia where it originated and also in auditoriums in Calcutta. There is a great difference between the two. Because Chhau has been created to be performed in a large open space. When you constrain it to a small square space, it loses . . .

MALLIKA. In a place like Calcutta, there are several other problems which can be taken up through Forum theatre. Maybe on some matter of literacy, we perform in front of a school. Or maybe when we take up an administrative matter, we can present it in front of Lal Bazar. So we choose the area according to the theme.

RATNA. Yes. There are so many problems that we can take up. For example, all levels of society have hidden problems—like children's loneliness when both parents are working. And many other topics. Now, in villages people are used to sitting in the open and watching something, but in the cities it's not common and people tend to get confused. That is why I am repeatedly bringing up the point of stage performance. Not because I want to perform on stage but because there, I feel, we will get more of an audience. If we always put an open space as a precondition to a performance, if we really want to popularize this kind of theatre, then we have to use the stage. If I want to take it to all levels. So when you are saying that the composition gets spoilt, do we then need to prepare two

sets of choreography—one for an open space and the other for the stage? If we are trained in both methods, will there be a problem?

SANJOY. No, there is no problem in training in both methods. What you have said just now is very inspiring for us as well, because we have also wanted to address problems at all levels.

MALLIKA. But if I present it on stage, only the people we invite or those who are really interested will be able to see it. But if I perform in an open space, then anyone who may be passing by can join in.

RATNA. Yes, but Forum theatre was not created just to be performed in an open space. Suppose there is a problem that I want to address in an area where I have to perform on stage if I want the maximum result. Then will I refuse the opportunity just because I have to get on stage?

RINA. In my opinion, Forum theatre done in an open space is a kind of nukkad natak. It brings about an awareness, a sort of awakening. It's not for entertainment. It's to put before an audience realistic problems faced by us and to arrive at probable solutions to those problems. So I don't think that we should go into the hassle of getting hold of a stage and all that. We should keep it as simple as possible. I feel that Forum theatre is a very good method because it can be presented in each and every colony and community. There is no need for great preparation for such a performance. The first time we perform in a place, there may not be any effect. But when we perform for the second or third time, there will be an effect.

We have to present the problems faced by us, and we must try and find ways to solve them. It's not enough just to present the problem. We must come up with solutions to them. And I like this idea very much, of going to every colony and bringing about an awakening, a change. Our responsibility is to build a good society, to try and throw out the negative aspects of our society. We must not only offer education, but instil proper values in the society as well. And these evil things that are so prevalent in our society, like bride burning, have to be thrown out. All this garbage must be replaced with positive values. I think that it's very necessary to bring about this awakening. And not on stage. There is a lot of disco dancing on stage. Let us leave the stage for all that. I feel that to present it in the open is best and it should be done as simply as possible.

SANJOY. There seems to be a belief that it is difficult to find an open space in cities, it is easier in the villages. I feel that we need to review this because, in Calcutta, theatre in the round was a movement and many people used to stand and watch. Since then, the popularity of this theatre has somewhat diminished but, on the other hand, we see that people are not attending plays put up in theatres as much as they used to. So even those who perform on stage are saying that they do not get an audience. But in our experience, if we put up a play at Sealdah Station, there are about 1000-1500 people watching. They don't leave. We put up plays in Curzon Park. They stand and watch. So we cannot say that an audience is assured in an auditorium, where they come in out of their own interest and cannot leave in such a hurry. If you perform well, people will stay and watch.

Now, if we want to do a forum by inviting some special people—say we invite some school masters to a play on the problems of literacy—there we can do it in a room or a hall . . . But we will try and convert that space into what best suits our theatre. Before proscenium theatre came into this country, we only had our traditional forms, which involved theatre in the round, with the audience much closer. The very purpose of stage theatre was to increase the distance between the

performer and the audience. The British came to India and saw that our folk theatre had a great capacity to influence people. They wanted to destroy this form. Therefore they brought in proscenium theatre, and moved the audience far away. That's why you will see that when it comes to joining in the forum, the frame of mind of a spectator at a stage show and that of a spectator of theatre in the round are very different. In the round, it's easy to get into the act and come into the space. In an auditorium, getting to the stage is quite difficult. Our experience has been that the audience has to transcend this fourth wall to come closer. So you can perform on stage, but we should never assume that people watch plays on stage but walk away from theatre in the round.

RATNA. Forum theatre can be used like water. Water assumes the form of whatever vessel it may be poured into, but it remains water. We want to spread Forum theatre everywhere and our aim should be that it becomes popular among all classes who have to face problems. There are some people who will not stand in an open field or in the middle of the road to watch us—it's a matter of prestige for them. But they also should watch our plays.

MALLIKA. Suppose we want to convey something to the people involved in law and order—something about what they have been unable to achieve or maybe some problems that we are facing because of them. If we go and perform that in a bustee, it won't reach them. So we have to choose a place where they will come and see the problem for themselves.

RINA. I do feel that the stage is restricting, but I also agree that for the middle and upper class it may be better. Because they will never admit that they have any problems. They have but they will never admit it. My husband is very good, my son is very good, that's what they'll say. They know the truth but only those with great confidence and those who are genuine people will accept that this is what is happening with them.

SANJOY. Yes, but just because you are going to show something to do with law and order doesn't mean you change the form.

RATNA. But we are not talking about changing the form. If the target audience will only see it on stage and if we say that we perform only out in the open, we are losing an audience. There may be some politicians whose work we admire. And we want to present a problem before them. At some function that the leader is attending, we could put up this performance. And involve the audience.

SANJOY. We must go to the people. We cannot assume that the people will always come to us. We have to go to them.

RATNA. I have heard that you have performed abroad quite often. Do you perform in the open there too? How does the audience there respond to your performance? What are the difficulties you face performing there, or is it easier? And how do you manage? Because not everyone can understand the language. Say you are going to Germany. They do not have the same language. So how do you manage the forum? Or even when you travel outside the state. Say you go to Maharashtra. They cannot understand Bengali, nor can we speak Maharastrian. Then how do you communicate?

SATYA. When foreigners came here to work with Sanjoy-da, they went to one of our villages with their plays and performed in their own language—French. But in villages, they don't even understand English, let alone French.

SIMA. And we don't understand French, either.

SATYA. Yes. But we saw that after the play all the local people came forward to

participate in the forum. They could not understand the language but they could see the problem being addressed before their eyes.

SANJOY. The performers were speaking in French . . .

SIMA. . . . but the local people were speaking in Bengali.

SATYA. They were communicating through signs.

SANJOY. That means that theatre has a language of its own. If you go to watch a foreign play, you may not know the language but the movement has a language of its own that you can relate to. And when we go abroad, we perform in the open. We come off the stage and perform.

MOUSUMI. The problems that Forum theatre is dealing with . . . we perform mostly before those who are being affected by these problems so that they may find solutions to them. But those who are creating them—many so-called educated people, the administration, members of the household—does the forum affect them positively at all? Does it bring about a change in their attitude?

SANJOY. It does. What happens sometimes is that those who are the oppressors do not realize what they are doing. They think that they are exercising their rights. When they understand it . . . inside every human being there must be a capacity for good, we must agree to that if we respect human beings. And many times they do realize that what they are doing is wrong.

One of Forum theatre's objectives is that the oppressed person may have a sort of rehearsal of how to get out of the problem he or she is facing. That's why we tell even the oppressor to express his viewpoints. So that they may know that if this is the solution I come up with, this is how the oppressor may react. So even this must be included in the rehearsal. The main objective is not whether the oppressor will change or not, but how you can get out of that situation. It is here that Forum theatre is most effective.

SIMA. They understand that they should not tackle the problem in this way because these may be the probable consequences.

SANJOY. At least, amongst the oppressed, we can create some sort of awareness. They can recognize and understand their oppressor better. They may come to know of some way in which to stand up to the oppressor. Another thing that happens sometimes . . . in villages those men who beat their wives at home come into the forum and start talking very righteously about finding solutions to this problem, replacing the protagonist and behaving like a saviour of sorts. This piece of acting on his part sometimes affects him positively. We can cite at least five or six examples of this. Those who come before the forum in this way receive a lot of applause . . .

RATNA. So he understands that if he sides with the oppressed wife in the forum he will be applauded, that's why he does it?

SANJOY. Yes. At first it's pretense. But when he sees that people are applauding him, he thinks to himself that this may be the way to be. So gradually a change comes about in him.

RATNA. After all the applause and praise.

SATYA. When people in the villages try and come up with solutions about such problems, then the oppressor sometimes changes as a result. Suppose I do a forum about ineffectiveness or corruption in the panchayat. I point out all that they are doing, and people participate. The panchayat can see it. Even if they are not present, news will certainly reach them. So, as a result, they start changing.

SIMA. Some element of fear creeps in. They think that now we may be questioned by the people. This is possible. Most probably the panchayat leader will never be present at this performance. But he hears of it and understands that such solutions are being thought of and may be implemented if he does not change his methods of working. So he prepares himself to fight this. And the only way he can do it is to humanize himself. So this change comes about in him.

SANJOY. Often the panchayat members stand a little way off from the performance and intermittently send their people into the forum to change the general direction or to pass a sarcastic remark. When that happens, we have seen that these people get harassed no end by the other spectators. This kind of intervention often takes place. To create some sort of tension. Again, there are some areas where we do a lot of Forum theatre, if we do a play regarding women we see that there is a lot of participation from the men. They are the ones who intervene first. They replace the women and only later do the women start participating.

And as a result of frequently attending such forum performances, their entire attitude towards women has undergone a change. Today, in the village of Digampur, the women are going from door to door collecting funds for a Spring festival. They have taken the responsibility of collection, while the men are doing something else. And there the men and women work together as one group in any project. Together they do everything. This complete change in their mindset was not there before. It is happening now.

Translated from the original Bengali by Vikram Iyengar

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‘Group building is very important’

Jana Sanskriti evaluates the workshop experience

***STQ* organized an evaluatory discussion with Jana Sanskriti in which Sanjoy Ganguly, Satyaranjan Pal and Sima Ganguly from Jana Sanskriti, and Paramita Banerjee and Anjum Katyal from *STQ* discussed the workshop process and how expectations and experience matched up.**

SANJOY. Different psyches react to things differently. Some people express their emotion, while others suppress them. Naturally, when I am working with some people who express their emotions and others who suppress them, these opposite modes of expression pose some difficulties if I look at it from an artistic point of view.

It is also difficult because, in the kind of work we do, group building is very important. Normally, in theatre groups, when they are preparing for a performance, someone in the group may be pro-feminist, another may be anti-feminist, one of them may think that the suicide law should be changed while another may not. But they continue to present performances. As a result, after some time that group becomes dysfunctional or it splits up, because they do not discuss their individual problems very seriously. Until they form a group where the members know each other on a deep level, no individual problem can be discussed because no one will open up to anyone else. That trust, that feeling of respect, how your friend will react and reciprocate . . . until and unless this is very clear, I will not open up. If I am offering theatre as a space where you can discuss your individual problems and try and overcome them, when this scope is being provided, then group building is very important.

So this was our priority for this workshop. We just sat together and talked as if we did not know of any of their problems, and they, too, placed themselves behind an imaginary wall when they spoke to us. We knew that they were not going to trust us so quickly and easily. They do not trust each other, why should they trust us? We called them over to our place, ate together, spent the whole day together, chatted together, played some games. Never did we give the impression that we had to put up a play or develop artistic expression or anything like that. So, by proceeding in this manner, we tried to bring about some sort of relationship between us. And this happened automatically. When they understood that it was beneficial to build up a relationship with us, or that we would be good friends, then we did not have to press them into anything. The participation kept increasing.

When we began practice, one thing that we looked at very sympathetically was that each and every one of them worked somewhere or was looking for a job. So their timings and attendance were very irregular. But however irregular it may have been, this is the challenge when working with these people. Even in villages, people migrate, they don't come regularly, get caught up in various other things . . . So we deal with this very patiently though it takes us very long to complete a project. But we never feel that this is an irritation or an obstacle. Later, there came a time when all of us decided to meet every Wednesday. No one ever felt scared when they missed a rehearsal or wondered what excuse to give to explain their absence. Rather, they were always thinking up ways and means to

ensure their attendance. That's why I think that it was good that we didn't put any pressure on them. I was sure that no form of imposition of time or attendance would make any sense because the moment they themselves are involved, they will manage to be at rehearsal somehow or the other. And that's what happened. When we were doing workshops, some people couldn't come everyday. But they themselves felt very bad about not being able to attend. This involvement from their side was very clear. So that is why we were able to put up something.

SIMA. I didn't really expect very much when I first went to work with the Swayam group. I didn't go with the goal that they have to do a play for International Women's Day or anything like that. I'm working with them, they will find a space for themselves, it will build self-confidence—that's how I looked at it.

But when the group decided that they wanted to do something for 8 March—and even before that—they felt inspired and believed that this was something for their own good, we should do this.

I'd tell them repeatedly to come at five o'clock. Sometimes I would be waiting for 45 minutes, then two people would turn up. Just two people. At first it was really . . . with just these two people I would chat for about half an hour and come home. But that's okay. Mousumi had at the very outset said that she had a real problem, she would not be able to come a single day—after that, she did not miss a single rehearsal!

After we performed on 7 March, we asked them if they wanted to continue this kind of work, and almost everybody else said, yes, we must continue our Wednesdays. [I have made] so many friends—if I ever face any problems, I will get so much support. That feeling has surfaced among us after working together for so many days. And they felt so happy, after they performed for 8 March, that many people heard and asked about it. But even the day before they were saying what is this, we cannot understand anything. So we said, okay we can't show it like this. Come to the programme and you'll see it there. And on that day they were so happy. They felt that they had got a lot out of it. They felt confident that they were capable of standing up for themselves.

SANJOY. I have interactions with many theatre group members, and they tell me stories of the old days when directors used to hit them, and there was some sort of regimentation, and how good that regimentation was. They feel that because this regimentation existed, they were able to learn a lot of things. As if, if regimentation is absent, ultimately nothing can be achieved. And however much we talk about democracy, however much we talk about alternatives today, actually we have one thing registered in our minds and, whether we like it or not, it comes out—that I must be under some form of control. But when we went to work with these people, we managed to completely sidestep this feeling. Here there was no control, no imposition, no rules in the name of discipline . . .

ANJUM. . . . it came from inside . . .

SANJOY. Yes, from inside. From a scenario with no rules. They themselves made their own rules. Like Gopa-di, she has worked with other directors before. And her experiences before and her experience in working with us are completely different. This is what is known as strength of dialogue. The way that dialogue can bring out someone's sincerity, their genuine urge, this exercise has proved that. Many people thought that the whole thing is so loose, no punctuality, most probably nothing will materialize finally. But day by day, they tried their best.

SIMA. One could not expect any more from them. At times when we were working out something, they would say, wouldn't it be better if we did it this way, Sima-di? And as soon as I would say, yes, this is really a great suggestion, they would say, no one has ever praised us so much. Are you sure you're not saying this just to make us feel good? It really is good, isn't it? And they used to feel happy that they had some say in the presentation, and I used to say, this was your suggestion yesterday. I noted it down immediately so we could work on it.

SANJOY. The first day I went, there were only 2 or 3 people. And this continued for about 2 or 3 weeks. I had first thought about the things I would teach them. Then I found that they did not show any signs of hardship or sorrow. I have been working with village women who go through a lot of suffering and difficulties. But I found no signs of this in them.

While working, we found that some people had good voices, some were good at acting. When we taught them songs in a group, some of them used to ask for special attention and ask why they were unable to pick up the songs fast, why and where they were going wrong. Someone must be going wrong, so we must find out who it is. But if I pulled up whoever was going wrong, then they would feel even more hesitant. So we followed the same procedure that we follow in villages, and practised till everyone could sing in the same way. We have always worked with a group. Like Gopa-di. She said, let them sing separately. But we did not agree. I knew that Rekha would not be able to manage. Nor would Shikha. They would retreat even more into themselves if we showed them up. So we just had everyone sing and Shikha and Rekha would follow. By singing together it would ultimately sound harmonious.

Rekha . . . she was always in a world of her own. Even if she was sitting in the group, her mind was somewhere else . . .

SIMA. Rekha, Shikha . . .

SANJOY. . . . always somewhere else. We would be discussing something and she would be thinking of something else. Shikha's only thoughts would be, how do I manage my income. She used to carry her work along in her bag. She would do the play and, as soon as there was a break, she would get out her work and start on it. So we had to bring her from that frame of mind into our midst, into the games and the play.

In the process, the whole thing took shape and they suddenly came up with the idea of 8 March. There were not many days left then. Anyhow, we managed a ten-minute play. We had some idea of what we wanted to present. It took shape through our discussions with them . . .

SIMA. They were the ones who put it together in 3 or 4 days . . .

SANJOY. We began with each one telling us her ideas—she would act and speak out her desires. Then Rekha told us her story and, from that, we developed the play. That from childhood she was told that as a girl she could not play games like the boys, even though she enjoyed doing so. Then what happened during her marriage. The play is based on all these instances. Then, at the end, when the idea was clear, it was polished up.

SIMA. Satya-da himself is from the village. When he came here and saw these middle class women all so well-dressed and groomed, he wondered what problems they could possibly have? This was his first reaction when he met them.

ANJUM. So it was a new experience for you?

SATYA. Yes.

ANJUM. Can you say some more about the comparisons, if there was anything new or startling in this, any adjustments that you had to make. Or whether this proved something that you had already thought about . . .

SANJOY. Personally, when this project came our way, I looked upon it as a great challenge, and of course I really wanted to do this kind of work. We started working with women for different reasons, there was no International Women's Day or anything at that time. We had started our work in the Tebhaga belt, where women struggled for their rights. Though many women had played brilliant roles [in the militant Tebhaga movement of 1946], there is no recorded history of their work, and later the Communist Party did not offer membership to any of those women. And—Party historians always write history as it suits them—there is no acknowledgment of the contribution of those dedicated women. So we started work in this scenario. Now we go and see, in the very same block, women cannot come out of their houses.

ANJUM. Cannot?

SANJOY. Cannot. This change within the last 40-45 years seemed very shocking to us all. We know theoretically why women do not go out, what the problems are, etc. But after we began our work, we found that our theoretical knowledge was not sufficient. During our work we got to know in detail why women cannot come out, what the exact family dynamics are, why the mental health of women is not developing because of these family problems. We learnt from our experience that those woman who are able to handle these family problems—and sometimes even humanize the husband, humanize the family—are the ones who come out and make very good workers in politics, in social work. We decided that we would bring out the village women through theatre, as theatre is a powerful tool for this purpose. So we began experimenting with that.

In a crisis centre, whenever a problem concerning a woman turns up, it is always at the aggressive stage. Maybe the husband has turned her out of the house, or was on the verge of murdering her, or will throw her out tomorrow, something like this.

ANJUM. You mean after the dialogue stage?

SANJOY. Yes, after that. It's gone into aggression. Now, we differentiate between the oppression and aggression stage. Boal uses the words oppression and aggression. We think that if we handle matters at the oppression stage, a lot can be done before it reaches the stage of aggression. Either the woman will go to court, or she'll leave home, or she'll go to a crisis centre, or she'll come up with some other alternative, or she'll be able to handle the family successfully and confidently. If we can start working from the oppression stage itself. Now this is what we are trying to convince the crisis centres, that if you deal with problems at the oppression stage itself, you will be able to solve the situation much earlier and with less complications, and accordingly you can carry out whatever needs to be done.

Many people question the whole business of Forum theatre without ever practising it. Without having tried it out to see whether it works or not, they say it is not possible, it won't affect the people. This attitude of undermining the people . . . Many people don't subscribe to my opinion that the IPTA movement, though it was very successful, undermined many segments of our society, like the folk artistes. The talented people in the villages, the power of judgment of the people, the conscious mind that is within all of us, this has been totally undermined. And this has happened because . . . again I come back to

democracy. However much we may talk about it, centralization is such a strong force within us, we do not think it necessary to think about and solve our own problems. We always expect someone else to do it.

We have tried to promote, time and again, that when people are oppressed—we call those people who do not speak out, who only listen and watch, oppressed—they need a kind of political space where they can express their political will, where they can discover their own significance, where they can say, this is my problem, this is my reality and I have an opinion about it which I want to express. And whenever this opportunity is given to them, they take the space. This is a proven fact. We do not give them the space because we think that they are not capable of using it. This is a wrong idea.

And today, working with these women, I have seen that again. I did have a few doubts at first. But these women, having gone through this process of oppression day in and day out for so long, have got to know their oppressor very well. And the moment there was an intervention, they were able to express the oppressor's will—we saw the fight between this will and counter-will in that space. This is very important and one does not need to teach this to anyone, or rehearse this. This comes automatically. And this proves that they want to deal with their problems, they want to think about their problems, seriously. Theatre is to them a magnifying lens that shows them small things very clearly.

I feel that this exercise is an example for those who question Forum theatre, and that women's groups should use this more and more. That's what we would like to do. We are very grateful to Augusto Boal, because he has brought us this approach—to use what is essentially a performing art . . . It helps us to recognize both ourselves and others.

We were talking about group building just now. A group does not mean that people of different understandings come together to do a performance and then leave. That is not a group, that is a collection of people. But a group has an identity of its own, an understanding of its own. When I get some sort of feedback from someone, instead of antagonizing them, I should myself examine what was correct, what went wrong—this political culture has been greatly emphasized in Boal's theatre. Those who seriously practise this should practise this aspect, too. It helps a great deal in group building. You get a much better understanding. And we also want the [Swayam] group to evolve as a group so that they will definitely be able to carry on.

SIMA. Yes. If I think that he is going wrong somewhere, I have no qualms in telling him so. And he, too, does not shrink from criticizing me.

ANJUM. Speaking of group building, at the stage that you have now reached, what would you say are the exercises or the kinds of interaction you need to have this group progress further?

SANJOY. One thing we have achieved with this performance on 8 March is that they have gained confidence in performing before an audience. So, in that sense, we have gone forward a lot, if I look at it in terms of a performing art. But the other things—like talking about and understanding each other's problems—we have fallen behind on these. The advantage now is that through this performance the sense of teamwork and team spirit have come in—that we are doing this together, as a group. This has increased tremendously. So now we will try more and more to concentrate on their problems, how they look at them, how they should look at them—these are the areas where we now want to work.

PARAMITA. One thing that had come up in conversation with the Swayam group

. . . The first day, we had taken up two stories. One was Rekha's, which we ultimately followed up on, and the other was—remember the one done by Sameera's group? About that girl . . . they had tried to put it across in a very abstract manner.

SANJOY. Yes, yes, Rina's story

PARAMITA. The girl kept writing letters to her family saying that she was happy and fine but actually she was very sad. Now, after this thing was over everyone was on a high, everyone was very happy, understandably. While we were doing the stories, Rekha said, I had talked about the fact that I liked to play games, but one thing has changed . . . we changed it ourselves when we were trying to think up images . . . but in real life, since the story is mine, the mental pain and injustice that I have had to bear is much more. But since none of us could think of that, we converted it into physical exploitation. And even in the other story, we could not really bring out the mental anguish the girl must have felt. So this is one thing we still have to learn—how to portray the mental condition of such a person. It's not that she has to be beaten all the time to bring out the pain. So this is something that we have to work on.

What I wanted to know was, in the exercises you are talking about, is there any such thing that will help bring out these more abstract details and capture them through images?

SANJOY. This mental condition that you are talking about that we could not express and ultimately had to show in a crude manner, no one was satisfied with that. There should have been more of her mental condition—her feelings are very important. Everyone's mindset and feelings, what is common to everyone, how one has to learn to experience others' feelings through one's own—these will take priority in our next phase. And gradually, more theatre or performance skill will come in here. That we have to bring about gradually. But one point of focus remains . . . because we want them to work with other women's groups also. What happens often is that while facing a particular oppression, people may not always act rationally. They become irrational. So when facing a challenge or an oppression, we say, why didn't you do this? This is what you should have done. This is me talking in my rational mind. But when the other person was facing the situation firsthand, it was not possible to think in that way. Now, naturally if, through exercises we can show how to calmly face any sort of challenge . . . This struggle between the rational and the irrational mind that takes place all the time, I think we must try to express this more. Those are the techniques we need to explore.

PARAMITA. In this sort of work, the growth of the person—their own development, their own maturing, their way of looking at themselves—all these aspects are very much on the agenda. So how has this aspect developed in the people with whom you started working? Apart from the skills of being able to perform or do a play . . . as persons. The Rekha, Ratna, Mallika, Mousumi that you started work with and the same girls today. Has any transformation come in, started coming in . . . ?

SANJOY. Somewhat. When I first came into contact with them, I thought that they would not be able to achieve anything. They had all come dressed up—Satya doesn't see this kind of woman often. And they kept referring to their husbands in the honorific mode. There was one day when we had said, bring your children. Something like a family festival. So they took their children, many of them brought their sisters and others along also. And there, we found that they were

trying to portray to us a picture of a happy family. At that time they didn't understand that we knew about them.

SIMA. 'He will come home, it will get late, He'll start worrying . . .'

SANJOY. 'His father . . .'

SIMA. Then you would think that they had no problems in the world!

SANJOY. Because they looked at it as . . . we have to do a play, we have to discuss it . . . they didn't take the matter very seriously. So this was a phase. Then, removing their masks and talking about their individual problems . . .

SIMA. And they themselves did it. None of us asked them to. They came forward themselves. And some of them cried while they told us.

SANJOY. Each one of them came to us with their problems and asked us for suggestions to solve them . . . Their daughter's name has to be changed on the West Bengal board. Maybe she has the earlier father's name, now she has to switch to the new one . . . So they spoke to us quite frankly about these problems, there was no hesitation. That I want to change the name of my daughter's guardian. It was this but now it has changed. Not the slightest hesitation. So we reached that stage.

Plus, we allowed them one other thing. Say only four people had come and two more were supposed to come. Those four were just chatting. We let them chat completely undisturbed. Whatever support they needed, we gave them. They used to talk about each other saying, you should have done this, why didn't you? You have this situation in your house? In my house, it is this. Look, I handled the problem in this way, this is what you should try. No, you don't understand, it doesn't work that way. Why not? This kind of debate among themselves has continued for a long time. And we always gave them some time for it. When this has happened, we have never gone in and said, okay, break it up, we are going to start work immediately. We let them continue till we saw that they were nearing the end of their conversation and then we brought them out to do some work. So the actual theatre work done was less, and this was more. But to have good theatre work, this interaction was needed.

SIMA. Mousumi used to say that she has no time because she has two young boys at home and no one to help out with the cooking. Her husband comes home very late at night and goes out again at six in the morning, and she has to handle everything. So it was quite impossible for her to come. But at the end, she said, I feel that coming here is like taking a breather. I find so many friends here that if at any time I experience any terrible trouble, I can share it with them and get support. I have a lot of friends here. I will never miss a Wednesday meeting. I have to come. At the time of evolving the dream sequence, she said, shall I do one about me? There we saw that sometimes she wants to hit her husband. As if she cannot bear the strain and exploitation any more, she wants to get rid of him forever so that she can get some peace. Then she thinks, but at the end of every month, I need Rs 7000. If I turn him out, where will I get that money from? I am not capable of earning it myself. I get only Rs 400 a month. So how will I run my family? And I've now come so far in life that I cannot turn back. So I want that as well. But at the same time, I want to throw him out. So when he comes home, I just ignore him, don't talk to him. He takes the food like some stranger and eats it himself. So when she saw that we were doing this play, she said, why not take my story? Let's see what everyone makes of it. Then I may get a few suggestions of how to deal with my situation.

SANJOY. Have you noticed something about Mousumi? I don't know if it's some kind of catharsis for her but, if you observe her, whenever there is any discussion about any problem facing anyone, Mousumi always takes an arrogant and strong [role] . . . the role of the strong oppressor that she played in the play . . .

SIMA. It was nothing else but her style of walking . . .

SANJOY. I think that after being oppressed for so long and by observing the same oppressor, she has become a strong oppressor herself. And she is able to find release for herself through that strong feeling. This is quite common even in the villages, in others who are always being oppressed. We have seen some village women who will never replace the oppressed. Instead they want to become like the oppressor. Either they are not able to understand the problem and become oppressors themselves or they remove the oppressor and humanize him. Maybe they think that if we reversed roles, what good would it do? This tendency to humanize the oppressor is there in quite a number of women. They are not always like Mousumi. Even in Mousumi's reaction, she is trying to get attention.

PARAMITA. When we decided to do this story, the first change that was done . . . I don't remember who suggested it, but somebody did. That first change was in the character of the mother-in-law. Just a change in the image, no dialogue or anything. She was shown as controlling her son, stopping the oppression . . .

ANJUM. I had asked, during the discussion with them, which theatre exercise they had enjoyed most and why. Everyone came up with one or two favourites. What was interesting was that whatever they mentioned, like the mirror exercises or whatever—you had said that these require more concentration on the partner—listening to them carefully, internalizing what they say—but they only thought about themselves. They said they liked a particular exercise because it helped them to concentrate on themselves, because they liked it themselves. I felt that they hadn't reached the stage where the partner comes into the picture. They were only thinking of themselves.

SANJOY. You see, the first stage is coming face to face with yourself. Only after that comes the second stage of opening yourself up to others and letting others into your life. They have not reached that stage yet. They will get there gradually. They have started. And then the exercises that are basically introspective techniques, we didn't really want to . . . We had to do the exercises keeping in mind the performance also.

SIMA. We started about mid-September. It took us the whole of October to just build a relationship with them. We used to meet only on Wednesdays. And that too, they would come half an hour late. Attendance would be irregular. So, to build up a relationship with them took us quite some time. Then this business of performance came along. So we really didn't have time to do all the exercises we had planned.

SANJOY. I had no doubts about the success of the Forum theatre. The only problem was how much rehearsal time these women would be able to give. But I was sure of the success, because wherever we have done Forum theatre—even in places where there is no concept of Forum theatre at all—there have been many interventions. I was speaking to Mahasweta Devi the other day and she said the urban and rural audiences are quite different. The urban audience has got so used to seeing theatre that they can look at it quite objectively. In the nineteenth century, the socio-political conditions and the political desires of people at that time were rightly identified by those theatre persons. Their calculations were so good that their theatre was successful and created history. Today's commercial

theatre has not been able to achieve that. Similarly in group theatre. The standard is quite poor. So when a play like *Dayabadha* comes along, naturally you have a great audience. Now, among the same audience who go to see a third-rate play, there will always be some progressive people who want to see good theatre. This is inherent in the Theatre of the Oppressed. We take into account the fact that everyone is dichotomous. An oppressed person is oppressed at home. Everyone has a surface personality and then a dormant one. So to attract the progressive people, you need to tackle subjects that are progressive. Then worry about whether there is or isn't an audience. If there is no subject of interest, why should there be an audience? Similarly, in Forum theatre, we try to correctly identify the problem. In this society, no human being will ever be indifferent to any problem that affects him or her. People are forced to live with the belief that one day a solution will be found to their problems, that is why they carry on in this way—because they have no choice. But actually they are not so blind. If you present their problems, they will definitely come to see the plays.

PARAMITA. May I ask a theoretical question? This point has suddenly struck me. You were saying that if you present a relevant problem, you will certainly get an audience. Since you have been working for a long time with women, maybe I can say that your focus is women as the oppressed. Now, apart from the many obvious and clearcut problems of this issue, there are many which are so much an in-built part of our psyche that maybe even we women have not been able to identify them as oppression. These undefined areas . . . for example, the discrimination that we face daily on the streets as part of everyday life. We've become so used to it, that we consider it normal now. Suppose you were to try to do the same work addressing these problems, do you think that it would be as effective? Do you have any experience in this area?

SANJOY. Yes, you're right, there are certain oppressions that are so deeply rooted in us that we fail to see them. This varies even according to audience. Like in the villages, if the husband hits his wife sometimes, it is not considered unusual. The women do not look at it as oppression. In the urban context it's different. But wherever you may go, this problem persists. The oppression has penetrated so deep into our system that we look upon it as normal. And the strength of the introspective techniques is that they help you to identify these internalized problems. Of course, at first I don't even want to admit to myself that I am oppressed. But later, I do. That's why we often do role reversals. We ask the ones who are oppressed to do the role of the oppressor and the oppressor to do the role of the oppressed. Just to understand how these things happen. You must have heard one story that Boal often repeats. In Sweden—even in the educated West there are these problems—at a workshop, there were many boys and girls from West Europe. Then it was decided that the girls would put up a programme in the evening. Suddenly a Swedish lady said very arrogantly that she would not allow the girls to perform because she did not think that there was any oppression of Swedish women. Then Boal asked, in Paris, a woman gets paid less than a man for working the same hours at the same job, what is the situation in Sweden? The lady said, for the same hours of work at the same job, a man gets slightly more than a woman. Not that the woman gets less, but that the man gets slightly more! Now this is absurd, but true. Because I have been brought up in an environment where this has been instilled in me, where this has been the situation for years, naturally I will accept it as normal. In the documentation that we are carrying out on the kinds of oppression on women, there are many cases where the women do not even realize that they are being oppressed.

PARAMITA. If you'd rather not, you don't have to answer this question, but I'm asking it purely from the theatre technique point of view—can you understand and identify these problems within yourself?

SANJOY. These patriarchal values were instilled in me, are in me even today. You can't wipe them out completely. That I have understood. I did not know this before. While working with women for so long, all this came to light and I realized that even I had some of these attitudes. For example, if a middle-aged lady is riding a motorbike and I have to sit at the back, I feel slightly embarrassed. Even in my family, my behaviour with my wife—there were some taboos, this is the way it should be done and not that way—practically oppressing my wife. Then I realized that I am oppressing someone else, I should not behave like this. That was the pattern. Plus, generally looking at all of society, not just women, but human beings. Treating them with respect and goodwill, this I have learnt from this theatre philosophy. All these days, I was undermining others, and I did not even know it. Because I thought that they will all follow me. I have come from a political party where I have been taught that people will follow me. I used to follow some people, others used to follow me. This was the norm. But now I understand that I have to respect other people. If I want to change society, I need people. And if these people are blind, then there is no point in changing anything. So I need conscious people. If I need conscious people, does it mean that I have to make them conscious, or is it that they already have a suppressed consciousness in them that I have to bring to the surface? That was the question. I have come to the conclusion that the consciousness only needs to be brought to the surface. Now, to do that, I have to respect people. I cannot undermine them. And above all, I have to love the people I'm working with. Otherwise they will not love or respect me. So this attitude towards people, this way of looking at any social problem, has come about because of theatre.

In my childhood, I had read that great statement of Vivekananda's: 'Education is a manifestation of the perfection already in man'. In our young days, we may have read it or quoted it in a debate of some sort but we never took it very seriously. But now I realize its worth and truth.

Many people say that what we are doing will lead to anarchy. How will we solve such problems? I have a very simple question for them. When East Europe broke up, it was called anarchy, mob anarchy. Now this anarchy developed from a highly centralized political system. So you cannot say that such a highly centralized political system does not lead to anarchy. Does it benefit you to have a system that will be broken down violently? Let's rather come to a consensus and proceed accordingly. Those who do not agree with me are welcome to put their arguments before me. If I refuse to have anything to do with people who have other opinions, this is what will lead to anarchy.

Marxist dramatists come up with solutions that seem like magic to us: to problems like communalism, for example. When there is a Hindu-Muslim wedding among us, we do not understand how to behave with our relatives. There is a child who calls me father and who is a Muslim. Now I'm too frightened to go to their house. If I do, they might kill me. This is the level the tension has reached. Someone who is not in this situation cannot understand how communalism is breaking the framework of the family itself. Breaking a relationship that has been founded for years and years on no discrimination at all, broken by something momentary and external. This the Marxist playwrights do not understand. So they give us magic solutions.

I can be an authority on the matters which I understand, experience, only on

those can I express myself. But we have been told that as far as Forum theatre is concerned it's a case of too many cooks spoil the broth. They say that discussing it with so many people makes no sense—you have the solution, so give it.

SIMA. And they say that people come only to see and hear but not to participate and offer their own opinions, so it's not possible to have this kind of theatre. Even those we have told about it have no conception of it. They have never seen it, how do they know whether people come or not?

As for Paramita-di's point about changes within me, I have understood this much—maybe my friends will be able to say this better—but the point that he was making about getting to love the people you know and work with, theatre has helped me a lot in that sense. I have learned how to get closer to people. Like in the villages . . . I did not have this feeling before. Before doing theatre, I did not even know that I could do what I am doing—going into the villages and living with them—I used to live only in the city. I faced all the usual obstacles and hesitations as to whether I would be able to manage or not. But the fact that I have been able to draw people closer to me is purely due to theatre. Now, automatically, I share my joys and sorrows—it comes from within. I don't need to try separately nor do they need to come and get it out of me.

SATYA. The village boys do not know so much about politics. They debate over the same problem for 2-3 months. There has been a debate going on with the Dimapur team for 2-3 months. On the same topic. Maybe they are meeting twice a month to discuss it. Their confidence is increasing.

PARAMITA. So they have reached this confidence through dialogue?

SANJOY. If you actually attend one of our General Council meetings, you will find that there is no one who is completely blank on any issue.

SIMA. They all contribute.

SANJOY. They have a basic understanding. They know that they are capable of carrying on the struggle. This is how our theatre politics develops.

SANJOY. If you look at the political situation of the time that Forum theatre was developed, there was a dictator in Brazil, a dictatorial government that gave no democratic rights to the people. A situation where there is no room for dialogue, that is the scenario in which Forum theatre developed. So the very origin of Forum theatre is connected with dictatorship and fascism, challenging a kind of exploitation. Richard Schechner's point that Brecht revolutionized theatre is very relevant. Because people learned a lot from his characters. The term 'people's theatre' came into use. Theatre was helping people to understand the system and methods of oppression. So people are important here. Now Boal has gone one step ahead. Here the people are so important, they are being told that they can even change the character. It is taking it a step further.

I'm reminded of another thing. Our friends in the cities—when they start theatre, they don't know anything about folk performances and what happens in the villages during these performances. I had never seen them either. Now when I go and see these performances in the villages, not only do they affect human beings, they also manage to bring in inanimate objects into their performance. When those 20-25 drums are playing before a Purulia Chhau performance, the whole atmosphere vibrates and, with it, your heart also beats in time. That means, not only you, but even the objects around you have become involved in the performance. This tremendous strength of folk art—it is able to take the spectator completely into the arena. People are not able to remain indifferent. A

strong relationship is created between the audience and the actor. For anyone who has not seen this, it is very difficult to believe that theatre . . .

I said that the origin of Forum theatre is in South America, but the origins lie here as well. Because in our folk arts, there is always a strong relationship created with the audience. Forum theatre is just a revised form of that. People who have not seen it will obviously think that people will not participate. To those who have seen actual folk art—not a distorted version—will say, yes this is already there in our culture.

We have some people in Agartala [who do Forum theatre], then some people in north Tripura, south Tripura and in Ahmedabad in a completely rural belt near the border of Gujarat and Rajasthan, and then another group in the city. In a city slum. But in Calcutta we have not been able to locate any such group.

SIMA. In Tripura, there was this old gentleman . . . he was so happy to see Forum theatre. He said that all this time we would just come, see the theatre and leave. But you have given us so much respect by asking us for our opinion. Asking for our views to help deal with the problem. They were so taken with it, they refused to let us go. They said there is another village close by where they are having a lot of problems. You must do a show there. It will be very relevant there. There was a car for the group to travel around in. They wouldn't let the car move! They said, first do the performance here, only then may you leave. Then there was an old woman. You cannot imagine. It was as if she was blessing us. She had tears streaming down her face.

SANJOY. There was an oppressed person who she pulled out, saying, how can you sit there and continue to get beaten up?

SIMA. Why are you falling at their feet? Get up. She pulled her up. She did not have enough strength of her own.

SANJOY. When she saw she could not raise her alone, she called out to us for help.

SIMA. From the audience she was calling out.

SANJOY. And at the end of it she blessed us all.

SIMA. She put her hands on our shoulders and blessed us. She said, what you are doing was beyond my imagination. Carry on with the work. This is helping all people so that they do not have to fall at anyone's feet again.

SANJOY. Once, in a village show, a girl had come up and scratched Paresh-da on the cheek.

SIMA. Yes, it was bleeding.

SANJOY. He was playing the oppressor, so she came up and . . . Immediately after, she put Boroline on it, but first she scratched him. And we didn't understand that she was coming towards us do that. Then we would have stopped her. Another time I worked with a French group on the theme of sexual harassment. After a few days of working together, we said, let's take this to our villages. You are doing something about how sexual harassment occurs in your offices. Let's see how our village people react to it. So we took it to the villages. Now there . . . how old would Menoka-di be? A lady in her mid-sixties. With us was this man called Christian—he was playing the main oppressor. He is very tall. She just jumped up and gave him a resounding slap across his face. At first, he was totally astounded. Then he turned the other cheek and asked her to give him another slap.

SIMA. And to get such reactions from the women in the village on such a topic as

sexual harassment is a big thing!

SANJOY. The forum lasted for one and a half hours!

SIMA. One and a half hours! It is beyond belief. It was great. Another person went up and said, stand away from her in the bus. Don't you dare come any closer. So that he is unable to even start harassing her.

SANJOY. Now, they cannot understand the language.

SIMA. Yes, but they understood it at once just by seeing it. They are talking in French, and he is carrying on in Bengali. 'Stand away from her! Go on!' It was really great.

Translated from the original Bengali by Vikram Iyengar

Fiction

Wildfire and Other Stories

Banaphool

Translated by Somnath Zutshi

Illustrated by Anandjit Ray

Balaichand Mukhopadhyay (1899-1979) adopted the pseudonym Banaphool, or wildflower, the name by which he is widely known to the Bengali reading public. A practising physician with a busy medical practice, he still succeeded in turning out an impressively large number of literary works, including novels, short stories, plays, poetry, essays, autobiographical writings and so on. But it was not the mere quantity of his outpourings which made him one of Bengal's most celebrated literary figures; it was their quality. The accolades came in many forms. He received several honours and awards, whilst leading figures including Rabindranath Tagore heaped praise on his writing.

Banaphool, who was as uncompromising and individualistic in his personal life as one of his protagonists, seems to have taken all this praise with great composure: 'Such opinions were always received by me with total calm. They never agitated

me.' The only occasion when he was shaken was when a train driver reversed the engine in order to pick him up. The driver, a fan who recognized him, refused to leave him stranded on a remote country platform all night. Banaphool commented later, 'I had never expected that life would allow me such a gift. Later I was to receive an honorary D. Litt and the Tagore Prize. But never did I feel so honoured as on that day.'

These forty-five pieces by Banaphool are representative of his multifaceted talent. There are plainly whimsical tales, several ghost stories, a few morality fables, some bitterly critical political stories, and a number of stories which examine the consequences of religious belief when taken to levels of bigotry and exclusionism: in a word, communalism. In short, Banaphool retains a relevant and contemporary touch, writing about an India we can easily identify with even today.

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‘Theatre is a very powerful medium’

Anuradha Kapoor, founder and managing trustee of Swayam, talks to Anjum Katyal about using theatre as part of Swayam’s activities.

At Swayam, the support group is one of our most important activities. We found that women gain a lot of self confidence by actually sitting together and talking with other women who are sharing similar problems. Because a lot of the time they feel very much like, this is happening only to me, there’s nobody else going through this, and so on. So when they sit together and share experiences, they also start feeling it’s not only me, there are others, others are able to cope. Because different people have different levels of coping. And they learn from each other. They form friendships which go beyond the support group: they might meet, go out together or just know that in times of need they are there for each other. So it’s also a place where they can have fun, enjoy themselves. Which is something they don’t have in their lives, a place where they can just relax.

Initially, we wondered whether it would work. But it was amazing. From the first day there was this real synergy and people were talking, sharing their experiences. And we tried to make it innovative and exciting through posters and drawings, through exercises not just talking, but trying to use exercises of different kinds, fun things, to help bring out their emotions and so on. For instance, we would end by holding hands, and saying something like, I’m worthwhile. Even for them to say that was a big deal. A lot of them felt, I can’t say it because I don’t feel I’m worthwhile. That was the level of self esteem they had. There were other things that we did. Like we said, why don’t you think about what you felt as a four or six-year-old child and then draw your experiences on a piece of paper, and explain it to everybody. A lot of them revived these really lovely memories of being free and able to do what they liked, no restrictions—so what came back were very positive memories for them and how things have changed for them now and how they would like to go back to that kind of situation. And then growing up and their experiences of, say, marriage. How that had negated all these really nice things in their lives. But at the end of the exercises, all of them said, suddenly, we were remembering things that we had completely forgotten about, that made us feel, we’ve had good times as well; and those are things that we can still aspire to. Simple exercises that most people use in workshops. But around them we did a lot. Playing, getting to know each other—there are games to do that—because these were all women who had never met each other before. We used a lot of drawing, singing, and then as the group sort of gelled, started getting closer, we started talking about issues that were affecting them. Not just talking about themselves, but about issues like, say, sexuality. And we would discuss them not just by talking, but through experiences and exercises and so on.

So the group became very vibrant and used to enjoy coming. Everybody kept that Wednesday free. Then 8 March [International Women’s Day] was coming up, this was in 1997. And we said, we would like to do something for 8 March from Swayam. Because we normally

participate with Maitree [a network of women's groups]. And then the support group said, why don't we do a play? That actually came out of another exercise we were doing with them. We had taken an outline of a play on domestic violence. And we asked them to complete it—it was just a scenario, not really a play. You had this man and this woman and they were fighting, a domestic quarrel; and the man's responses and the woman's responses—and then we said, complete it, thinking of what would happen if the woman said different things or if the neighbours or parents intervened and so on. They really enjoyed that exercise. So they said, why don't we just enact this as a play? And they enacted the play themselves without much help—except for Paramita [Banerjee] who came in for a few days and helped them a little bit, directorially. But it was a first time for all of them. None of them had acted before. And they really enjoyed it. Going on stage and performing in front of so many people gave them a real high. They came back feeling they'd achieved a lot, and wanting to do something with it.

So we felt that since this is something that they've enjoyed doing, we should carry on the process. And they all really wanted it. But we also decided that you can't continue doing something like this at a totally amateurish level. We were also thinking that if they developed into a performing group, we could use it as part of our awareness programme. So we needed it to be a bit more professional, we needed it to be guided and directed better. In a sense, we proposed the idea that this would be a good medium. You see, whether they wanted to continue theatre or not was independent of the awareness programme. They wanted to do it. Then we felt that if they wanted to do it, we could mesh the two, and it would give them an added sense of purpose, the satisfaction that they can actually go out and help others, the feeling that they are capable of doing something, a lot of courage and confidence and all the rest. That one performance did a lot, and it was appreciated also, so I think they got inspired. So we felt that if they wanted to continue it, let's do this more professionally, get them some training and so on. And we talked to them and they were very open to the idea. That's around the time when Seagull was beginning its Theatre for Change project, so it worked out well.

I think the collaboration was a good one, the choice of resource persons—Jana Sanskriti—was good. It is not something that we would have done on our own. We wouldn't have known who to approach. And the form also worked extremely well. The use of Forum, the theatre technique which Jana Sanskriti uses, is very suited to the kind of issues that we are going to work on.

Theatre is a very powerful medium—when you watch something perform live, it has much more impact than when you read about it. And Forum, being interactive, brings people closer. That makes a major difference. When the interventions happen, different solutions come from different people, and you can examine the problem from different points of view. There might be someone in the audience who's grappling with the problem and doesn't know how to cope with it—he or she might get an insight or a solution; people who are actually being oppressors in their own lives might feel that they should examine their own behaviour. It's a very involving technique.

The theme of the play they evolved was the same as the first one, but

it came out of the process of the workshop—the dialogues changed and things like that, but the way they developed it was very different and the process by which they did it was also very different. And I think that process was really good for them as well. They started coming for the support group on one day and the theatre group another day—they actually took extra time off to come for the theatre workshop, which was also very exciting. And finally, when they actually performed at Triangular Park, they did an excellent job and they got a terrific response from the audience. This audience participation makes them feel more like they're doing something, not just a performance but interaction with the audience and so on.

After Triangular Park, they performed again in Curzon Park in December for the Violence Week, the fortnight from 25 November to 10 December. I think that what keeps them going, also, is the performance itself. There was a stretch of time when they were just workshopping, and the interest level drops. But the minute they know there's a performance coming up, they're all there and ready to go. It was an excellent performance. The Forum was very good. There were a lot of men who intervened. The crowd was very different. At the 8 March performance, it was mostly a Maitree crowd. Here, except for about ten of us, it was total outsiders. So getting responses from them was very good. A woman came up and caught hold of the mother-in-law and said, you must remember that you also came into this house as a bride once—why are you harassing this woman? A few insights of that nature. Most of the time it was the protagonist talking back and standing up for herself, rather than having the other people change.

We decided, after the Seagull project was over, that we'd continue working with them and give them time to develop. It can't be done in a hurry but as long as they're interested, we're committed to giving them the support that they need. Over a period of time, some of them have emerged as a core group. And I think that they will continue.

I think it's been very good for them. And also for Swayam. Because it's a Swayam group, something that we've started, that we've initiated, something that we've been involved with; so when we see it grow, we feel that something positive is being achieved, and we want that to continue.

Now, when we do our programming, we keep the theatre group in mind. We are going to do two workshops with judges—we've decided to take them to do a performance. In a year we're planning at least four performances which will be linked to our various programmes. It could be in a community hall, it could be in a workshop situation, it could be in the open, it could be for 8 March.

At one point we were wondering whether to start new plays, and Sanjoy said, they've still not mastered this play. And it's an issue that will always be alive. So they can always do this play. Once they master it, they can start a new one, but continue to perform this one. It makes sense for us to perform this play in different forums. And then maybe we take three or four days, get them into a workshop situation, and evolve a new play.

A Note on Swayam

Swayam literally means 'oneself'. Committed to fighting violence against women, it was set up to provide holistic support to women facing violence in their lives, to empower them by reinforcing their belief in themselves, as well as to question and try to change established norms and values that have deemed violence against women acceptable.

Swayam's main objectives are:

- to provide direct support services to women facing violence in their lives
- to conduct awareness programmes to spread consciousness on the issue of violence against women
- to conduct research and documentation work on violence against women
- to initiate and conduct campaigns against violence on women
- to intervene with different state agencies to influence policy
- to build relationships and collaborate with likeminded networks and organizations

Their activities include:

The Support Centre

Swayam runs a Support Centre which provides the following support services to address the varied needs of women facing violence in their lives.

Counselling

Swayam provides women with a place where they can talk without being judged. Counselling is done in a confidential, non-judgemental and non-directive manner, over the phone as well as face-to-face, individually and in groups.

Swayam helps facilitate support groups for women who meet to share their personal experiences of violence and abuse. This helps reduce their sense of isolation and they forge strong friendships and derive emotional strength from each other.

Drop-in Centre

Swayam's Drop-in Centre provides the women with a space to get away from their troubles for a while, and create some time for themselves. They read, listen to music, talk with other women, make friends and feel free to relax and enjoy themselves. It addresses an important emotional and psychological need for the women who are trying to deal with the violence in their lives.

Interaction and Follow-up with the Police

Swayam helps women in reporting cases of violence to the police and follows up the cases with them. We try to ensure that the cases are dealt with properly and timely action is taken.

Legal Aid

Swayam provides free legal consultations to women through its panel of lawyers, and financial support to women who are unable to meet their legal expenses. Swayam's workers accompany women to court to support them during the legal

proceedings.

Health Support

Swayam's workers accompany women to the hospital whenever they need immediate medical attention. Financial support for medical treatment is also given to women who cannot afford it.

Vocational Training and Employment

Swayam provides help to women with regard to training and employment in various ways:

- referring women to vocational training centres depending on their skills and providing financial help to those who cannot afford the training
- placing them in jobs once their training is complete
- helping them to set up businesses on their own
- referring them to banks for loans if they need capital to start enterprises.

Shelter

Swayam helps women in need of shelter by:

- referring them and their children to shelter homes
- getting their children admitted to schools and hostels
- providing them with financial help towards shelter until they can support themselves.

Public Education and Awareness Generation Programme

Swayam's Public Education and Awareness Generation Programme aims to generate discussion and debate in society about violence against women. We try to promote consciousness of the fact that violence against women is a crime and has various facets. Through our awareness programme we attempt an analysis of the causes of violence and see how various social groups can combat them.

Swayam also publishes materials that help create awareness on the issue of violence and give information about existing resources for women.

Networking, Campaigning and Lobbying

Swayam believes that it is important to work with other organizations and networks working on similar issues, if we are to bring about any significant change. These links of solidarity make our campaign and lobbying efforts more fruitful.

Swayam is a member of Maitree, a women's network which provides an effective platform for campaigning and lobbying.

Research and Documentation

Swayam is conducting research on violence against women and related issues, and plans to use the findings to campaign and lobby for broad socio-legal change.

Theft of an Idol

***Text and Context in the Representation
of Collective Violence***

Paul R. Brass

“An impressive attack on ‘primordialist’ explanations of contemporary violence in north India. Paul Brass, who is among the best-known political scientists working on India, writes on a controversial topic in an engaging way that will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers interested in interethnic violence.”

—Benedict Anderson, Cornell University

As collective violence erupts in many regions throughout the world, we often hear media reports that link the outbreaks to age-old ethnic or religious hostilities, thereby freeing the state, its agents, and its political elites from responsibility. Paul Brass encourages us to look more closely at the issues of violence, ethnicity, and the state by focusing on specific instances of violence in their local contexts and questioning the prevailing interpretations of them. Through five case studies of both rural and urban public violence, including police-public confrontations and Hindu-Muslim riots, Brass shows how, out of many possible interpretations applicable to these incidents, government and the media select those that support existing relations of power in state and society.

Adopting different modes—narrator, detective, and social scientist—Brass treats incidents of collective violence arising initially out of common occurrences such as a drunken brawl, the rape of a girl, and the theft of an idol, and demonstrates how some incidents remain localized while others are fit into broader frameworks of meaning, thereby becoming useful for upholders of dominant ideologies. Incessant talk about violence and its implication in these circumstances contributes to its persistence rather than its reduction. Such treatment serves, in fact, to mask the causes of violence, displace the victims from the centre of attention, and divert society’s gaze from those responsible for its endemic character. Brass explains how this process ultimately implicates everyone in the perpetuation of systems of violence.

Paul R. Brass is Professor of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Washington. He is the author of many books, most recently *Riots and Pogroms*; *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*; and *The Politics of India since Independence* (2nd edition), a volume of the New Cambridge History of India.

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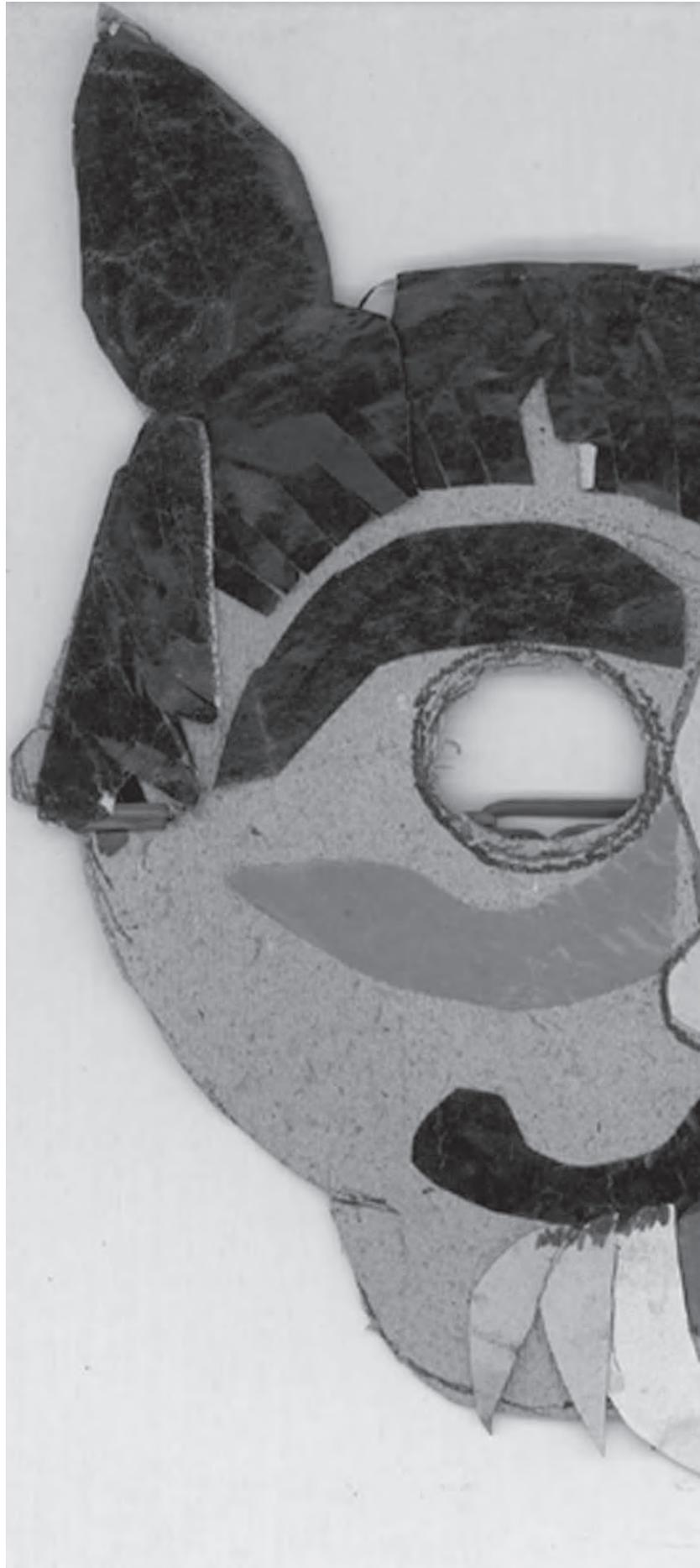
**'Theatre is . . . a game,
but not just any game can be theatre'**

Jayoti Bose

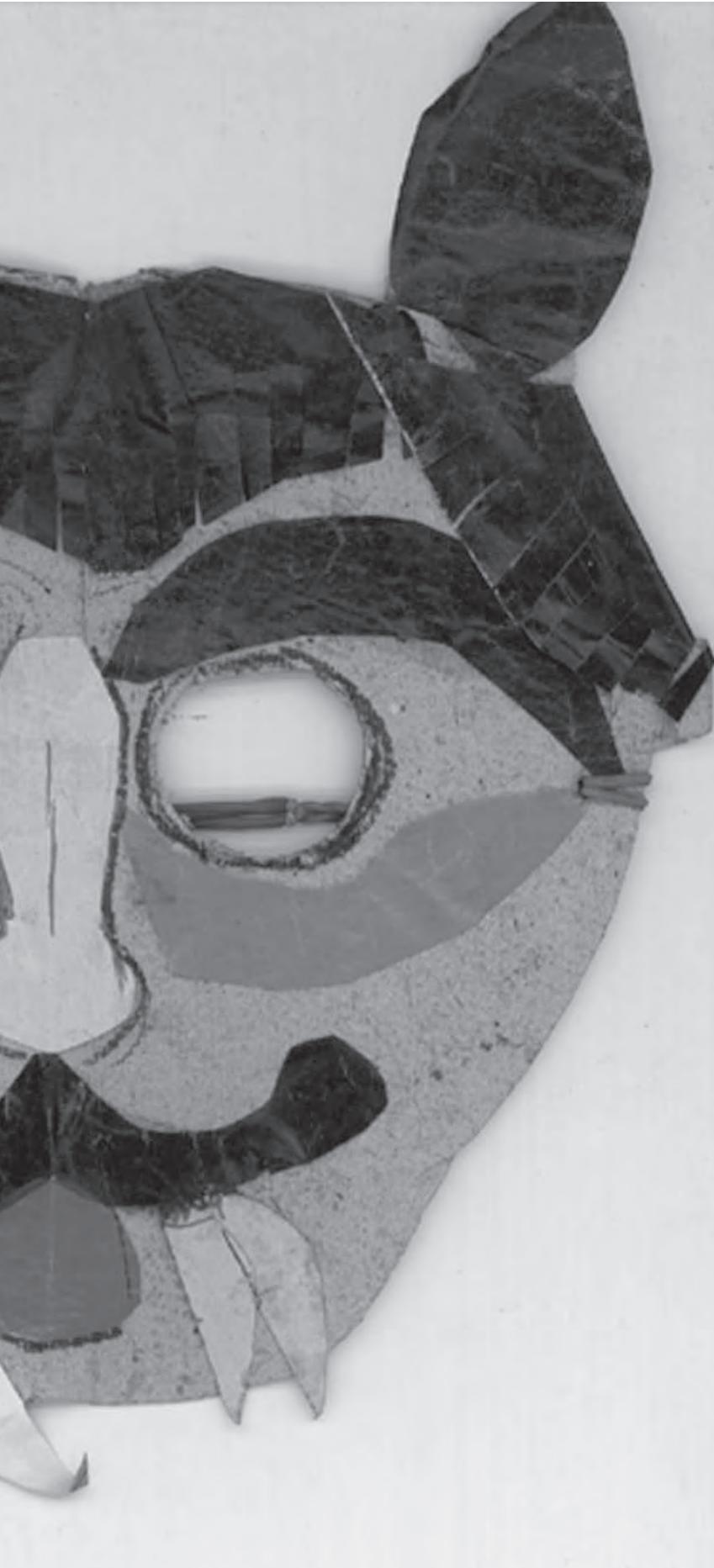
A report on the Jabala project

The first day: a room on the first floor, like a big hall. Children of varying ages (from 4 to 14)—about 25 of them—jumping around in great merriment. The moment we entered, they started shouting ‘Good evening, Aunty/Good morning, Aunty’ in chorus. They continued the refrain till we responded. That’s one of the first things they learn in school: whenever a teacher comes in, one of their ‘aunties’, they must always stand up and greet her. How was one to make them understand that there was no need to regard this drama session as just another class? This was something that I needed to work on, but how?

What followed was a session of displaying their own plays. Two to three short plays. In one of them, the father was going to office, the mother was attending to house chores, and two young children—one son and one daughter—were having breakfast, going to school, attending classes, coming back home, the father returning from office . . . familiar day-to-day activities continued with no end. On the other side of the performance space, the younger children who had posed as flowering plants, as snakes and so on, gradually started to slump onto the floor, horseplay started amongst them . . . but the main characters were too busy acting, taking care of their household and daily life—far too involved in just that. ‘Why are these plants and snakes here?’ I asked them. ‘The daughter will disobey the mother, go out into the garden and get bitten by a snake’, they replied. ‘But the snakes are nearly falling asleep’, I argued. Quickly they changed the time into night and enacted that part. They were enjoying this exercise which was



Jacky Singh Anand, Class II



like a game to them. Theatre is certainly like a game, but not just any game can be theatre. How was I to make them comprehend that? That was the second point I noted.

The play put up by the older lot (10- to 14-year-olds) had an interesting variation: the brother, who was the elder one, fails in class while the younger sister does well. Back home, the brother gets scolded, runs away, and attempts suicide when he comes back. Had they themselves scripted it? They told me that the 'dada' who taught them theatre (Arindam) had told them the story, and they'd themselves built up the play on that basis. Fine, but their own thoughts, their own viewpoints had certainly not been reflected. Going beyond prevalent ideas to articulate the thoughts in their own psyches—only through theatre could that be achieved, but how was one to reach that level? That was the third point I noted, identifying that as my main objective. When *STQ* had approached me to do a theatre workshop with disadvantaged children, this was the only goal I could set for myself . . .

Then I started working. On my second day there, I made all the kids sit in a circle around me and said, 'Tell me your names, the classes you study in, and what you enjoy most, one by one.' Not that all of them responded very promptly, but the funny thing was that each one of them claimed 'studies' to be what they enjoyed most. Finally I asked them, 'Well, tell me, who amongst you like to dance?' Quite a few hands were raised. 'Who likes which songs best?' I asked next. Different voices started singing various Hindi film songs, songs by Salil Chowdhury, and even old Bengali hits like

Halud gandar phul dey eney dey (Bring me yellow marigold flowers). Some stood up to start dancing to the tunes. I don't think anyone could have had the strength to stop them at that point. When the whole thing reached the point of uncontrollable cacophony and chaos, I asked them to stop. I asked them to sing a song in chorus. They all stood up in a circle, holding hands, and started singing Tagore's *Amra sabai raja* (We are all kings). They all knew that song; maybe they have learnt it in school. I told them to sing louder. That resulted in quite a bit of off-key singing, but the kids were singing freely. Then I told them to let their hands move freely with the song. Gradually their bodies started swinging with the rhythm; the song was then being sung with their entire bodies, not just their voices. I suggested a few movements to them; nothing beyond a slight organization of what they were already doing. They loved it. Continued doing it—never getting tired. Even when I asked them to stop, they wanted to carry on a little longer. Finally it was 7.00; a roll call and then it's over. Once more, they kept shouting 'Bye, Aunty', 'Good evening, Aunty' as they jumped down the steps. It seems they enjoyed the workshop. They were happy.

But I wasn't. This was my first experience of working with children. I'd been quite prepared theoretically, but nothing matched with this first practical experience. I was feeling rather blank. Couldn't understand much—nothing seemed to gel. Maybe I needed more time, more patience. There was certainly no harm in waiting to see what the process would lead to.

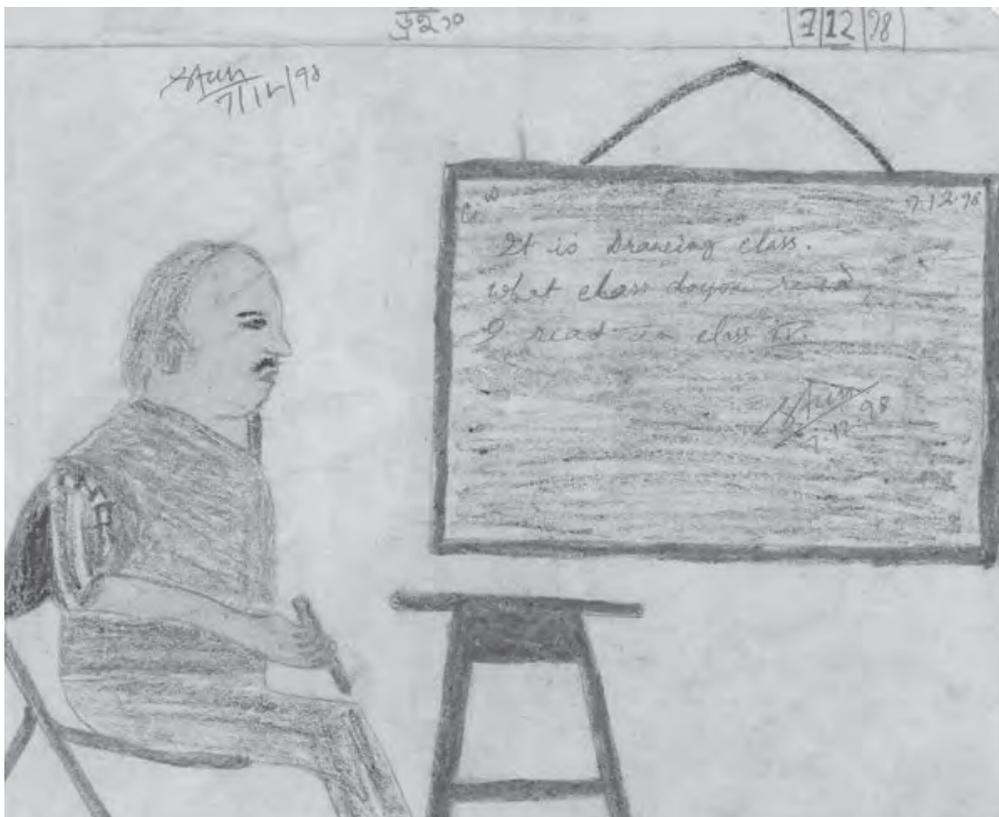
What emerges as the biggest problem is the necessity to work with children of different ages for two hours on a single evening, in the same space. How is one to proceed? What is one to do? How is one to achieve anything at all? The space is insufficient to organize them into two or three different groups and work with them simultaneously. It was also impossible to work with one group while the others sit and watch, for the inactive group will automatically start chatting, teasing, fighting among themselves, and, within minutes, there will be complaints of 'Aunty, s/he's pulling my hair' and so on and so forth. It is not possible to have children of different ages come on different evenings, for just this one day in the week is specified for theatre. Nor is there permission to move them into another space.

I started playing short-spanned theatre games with them. We divided the children into two groups. Gopa-di [Gopa Das] started working with the kids under the age of 8. She is a cool and collected person, sweet-tempered and soft-spoken. She's been working with them with songs, dance, drawing and painting, and short bits of choreographed movements with sound. I wouldn't have been able to manage this. The kind of theatre discipline I'm accustomed to would have been too much for these kids, and it would take me too long to unlearn that. I feel that Gopa-di is the right person to be in charge of the little ones. I've been working with the 9-and 14-years-olds—there are about 15 of them.

I started with some games that would make them react to and with each other as they played. In the first game, everyone stood in a group. Then they started throwing a red ball—about the size of a tennis ball—at one another. They could give the ball to whomever they wanted, but there was one condition—they would have to meet the eyes of the person they were going to give the ball to before they threw the ball. As if they were going to give the other person a gift. The first problem which arose—and I have noticed this problem in the case of adults as well as children—is the girls' ineptitude when it comes to catching a ball. Perhaps this is because they are less used to this kind of game. Then the first job becomes to restore their confidence. If one child cannot catch the ball, the

others laugh, she feels embarrassed and her awkwardness grows. Then a little individual attention has to be given to help her to overcome her problem. And this does not take very much time, it only requires patience.

The second problem which arises is that they throw the ball rather than give it. We often do not remember what a difference there is between throwing and giving when we are handing over something. When we give



Sofi Aziz, Class IV

someone something out of love, how we give it—perhaps this awareness is not consciously developed in childhood. On the other hand, we are always a lot more ready to receive. Consequently, I had to explain to them over and over again that when you are giving the ball to someone, give it in such a way that they will easily be able to catch the ball. When this part was more or

less assimilated, then I added another ball, which was a lot bigger, almost a football. This was called the 'jhak-jhak' ball. When the ball is passed from hand to hand, it makes a sound like a heartbeat. This is why it is called the heartbeat ball or the 'jhak-jhak' ball (this is the name the children prefer). This ball was to be passed from one person's hand to the next in a clockwise direction and never dropped, it had to be caught. If it was dropped, then the heart would stop. And the heart stopping means death, so close attention has to be paid to this ball. At the same time, the give and take of the first red ball continues. Gradually, other balls of different colours, sizes and shapes were introduced. At any point, all the balls will be circulating from one hand to another. This game was played for an hour at the start, and gradually reduced to half an hour, and then 10 minutes. The number of balls was increased over a period of time. This game develops concentration and the spirit of cooperation.



Alongside this, I introduced another couple of games. For example, everyone sits in a circle with their eyes shut, holding one another's hands. One person starts at first, and squeezes his or her neighbour's hand to pass energy. That person will then do the same to their neighbour and, like that, the energy, through the pressure of hands, will be passed back to the person who began. Everybody is told that you must exert exactly the amount of pressure on the hand of the person next to you as was exerted on your hand. At first, they had a few problems in understanding, but later they found a lot of enjoyment in the game. Normally, we would play this after a few warming-up games. Consequently, their minds would be a lot more focused then, their concentration would grow.

But that was all very temporary. Sustained concentration was very, very difficult for these children to manage, and this is largely a result of their pressured home lives, in which privacy, space and silence are almost nonexistent. Their attention spans are tiny. They are easily distracted. At first, this used to annoy me. I am used to many days of thought and contemplation. After three days, I realized that this was my problem, not theirs. Of course their objects of interest would change from moment to moment—this is the age of discovery. I have to match this search of theirs. But how?

There was another game. One person stands and his partner, behind him, puts only his hands under the front person's arms. The front person's arms encircle the person behind him. Now the person in front—boy or girl—will start making up a story and the person behind will instantly start giving the story a visual form with his two hands, which are in front of the person in front. And the others will



Left Jhuma Mitra, Class IV

Right Jacky Singh, Class II

just watch. The funniest thing was that I had said that these two people should only stand. That is the rule. But they didn't hesitate to overturn the rule. What transpired was that they would break the rule to walk and sit. Finally, that itself became the rule.

To make their imagination work in different ways, I gave them a plastic water bottle. They sat in a circle and one person had the bottle in his/her hand. How many uses they can put the bottle to depends on how many ways they see the bottle/how many things they imagine the bottle to be. It will not do to just think of the bottle as an empty bottle. The games gradually got more enthusiastic. The awkwardness began to pass. Once they understood, expression was well within

their capacity. In their hands, the bottle became a spool for the string of a kite, the schoolmaster's cane, a rolling pin, a lipstick—it was transformed into all these with ease.

These exercises were also to help them concentrate, though that's been achieved only for a rather short span. They would pretty often have their eyes darting towards the other group, their attention veering towards what was happening there. But despite these odds, some kind of a group feeling started growing slowly. Not much has been achieved, but alienation among the kids is definitely on the decrease—that's the positive outcome.

Though the problem that I started facing was this: one day I would feel that we'd reached somewhere, but when we met next, after a week, there would be no trace of that in the children. So one had to start afresh again. That slowed down the rate of progress considerably. I think that if this kind of work can be continued on a regular basis daily or every other day for about a month initially, then the scenario would be much better. It becomes much easier to analyze what is happening, how it is happening, and also identify which process is not really working. Once a certain level of communicative interaction is established, maybe then it would be possible to carry on working even just once a week. This is what I felt at this juncture.

Now we started the improvisations. A school situation, the playfield, a railway station, etc. They got the most fun out of improvising the railway station, so they wanted to do that every day. The first situation was that the platform was empty, the train had not arrived. Gradually, the passengers start arriving, one, two, the hawkers start wandering around, though they sell nothing but eggs, tea and *puchkas*. Frequently there are arguments and fisticuffs over payment. And pickpockets—after a couple of days, we found that everybody wanted to play the pickpocket—and then the consequent fisticuffs. The fisticuffs are an uproarious affair. The little boys would not let this opportunity go waste. They climb on one another's backs and grab fistfuls of one another's hair. Even when the peace-loving girls come as policemen to separate them, there was no one listening. If I scold them, then the whole spirit of the thing is lost, so I make the train come in, blowing its whistle furiously. Instantly, everyone rushes to get on board. Then they hold on to one another's waists to form themselves into a train and chug around the room in a circle. At a loss for words, I break into laughter.

One day, three of them were reciting a poem they had learnt in school:

Johnny, Johnny! Yes, papa.

Eating sugar? No, papa.

Telling lies? No, papa.

Open your mouth! Ha, ha, ha!

Suddenly, I got an idea. I told one person, you are Johnny, and another boy was his papa. Then we started developing the situation: was it morning or afternoon, what was the father doing, where was Johnny . . . If he was hiding in the kitchen and eating sugar, then how would his father become aware of this? The story began to grow and this four-line rhyme was transformed into a 5-7 minute skit. We used other Bengali/English/Hindi rhymes which they knew in a similar manner.

Towards the end, we were doing a play. The story was known to all of them, but as a story only. I had with me a prepared play. Instead of beginning by rehearsing the play, I began the first day by just telling them the story. They



Sofi Aziz, Class IV

began to improvise as they pleased. Everyone played the same characters in turn. Then they decided themselves who would keep which role. Gradually a new play started to evolve. What I liked most was when they spontaneously made different kinds of sounds to create an atmosphere at different points in the play

For almost a year, we have been meeting once a week. Some ten days must have been lost in holidays. The first half hour of the two-hour stretch goes in getting the children to quieten down and concentrate. Then there was the problem of irregular attendance, a chronic problem with children from such unstable and insecure home situations. What I've been able to achieve in this one year is regularity of attendance and punctuality—about eighty per cent of the children are now coming regularly, and on time. There is a certain level of interest among them. They were interested before also, but this interest is somewhat different. They haven't put up any play yet, but they haven't lost interest as a result. Rather, their eagerness is increasing. Before, only one or two of them would always act as the spokesperson, but now they are all vocal, voicing their own opinions. There's one boy who previously would never open his mouth, but now it is hard to keep him quiet.

Such changes make me feel hopeful. One needs more time, so that they could keep talking. Maybe then these children would reach a stage where they would gain the courage to speak their minds, their own feelings, have some confidence in themselves. Now they are at the stage where they can improvise some sequences on their own—not based on the 'reality' of the world of cinema, but a manifestation of the reality they have themselves observed all around them.

Translated from the original Bengali by Sayoni Basu and Paramita Banerjee

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Series Editor: K. S. Singh	<i>Hb: 240pp 17 photos</i>
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Working with the Younger Children at Jabala

Gopa Das

Extracts from a process report

16. 8. 98: Reached at 4.30 p.m. Had to resort to storytelling to get the kids to quieten down. Then they recited poems one by one. I read out poems from *Abol Tabol* [famous book of nonsense rhymes by Sukumar Ray] to them and made them recite those also. I also got them to do some physical exercises. Then we talked a bit about Independence Day, and they finished with playing the train game.

30. 8. 98: As always, first I told them stories, then they formed pairs and arranged pictures, and then I was busy getting them to do dance steps to Tagore's *Amra sabai raja*, when Jayoti came in. It was around 5.30. She continued with the dance steps. We were there till 7.00 in the evening. The children left after a roll call.

You've spent your life, Compassionate Mother,
In serving the poor, the destitutes and lepers—
How can death touch you? Never!
In our hearts you'll live forever.

6. 9. 97: Mother Teresa left for her heavenly abode the day before. So I told them briefly about her life and activities. Some of the children voiced their own views about her. With a view to paying homage to her departed soul, I taught the children a song and made them sing it—*Prabhur seba jara karey tader maran nai/Maranjayee prabhu rayechhen tander kachhe sadai* [Those who serve the Lord can never die/For the immortal Lord never leaves their side].

13. 9. 97: Today also I started with a story to get the kids under control. Then they wanted to play the train game. I let them. Then the children recited poems, sang songs or danced one by one—as they wished.

20. 9. 97: I got the children to sing songs to calm them down. They then wanted to listen to a story; I told them the naughty cowherd's story, and also the story of the hare and the tortoise.

27. 9. 97: Once I managed to get the kids under control, I got them to play the following games:

1. Making the sounds of a cat meowing, or a dog barking, a bird chirping, etc. They were to make these sounds one by one and the others were to identify them.
2. Demonstrating different things like an umbrella, a pitcher, a cycle etc. with their hands. It was played the same way as above.
3. Exercising their hands and legs slowly at first and then faster to the accompaniment of some melody and rhythm.

18. 10. 98: Today we had the first class after the Puja holidays. I told the kids the story of goddess Durga and asked them to form a tableau of the idol, complete with the gods and goddesses who are her four children, the demon, the lion, everything. They did that pretty well. Then I asked them to depict a fair, or some festivity, and they did that. Then they also depicted (with themselves as ingredients, that is) the immersion ceremony.

8. 11. 97: Today I told stories to the younger lot. Then I got them to play the game of someone saying something, and the others continuing one by one to add to that so that the whole thing would finally emerge as some kind of a story. Then they sang songs. I told Jayoti that I was trying to evolve something with the young kids—I felt that at least 4/5 of them would be able to perform fairly well, even if all of them might not be quite up to the mark.

15. 11. 98: I did the following:

1. Told them a short story about a rabbit and a tailor bird.
2. Moving and stopping at an order.
3. Everybody would keep their eyes closed. One would make a sound and the others would have to decipher what that sound signified.
4. Taught them the first four lines of a song—*Amra nutan, amra kunri nikhil bananandane* (We are new, we are buds in the world's great garden).
5. Some exercises.

22. 11. With the younger lot I did the following:

1. The go-stop game.
2. Forming a line and coming to the middle as per numbers called out, according to their position in the line. But two kids were not to come when the number 2 was being called out.
3. Body exercises.
4. Asked them to think of something. One by one they were to come forward and enact/display what they had thought about. I gave them the conception, like what is a river, what are the different features of it, or what is a garden and what are the different things in a garden, etc.
5. Posing as a picture, either alone or in pairs.

6. 12. 97: Today I read out a story to the children. Then we

1. Played the river game.
2. Made different sounds with our voices and asked others to identify the sounds.

13. 12. 97: Today the first thing I did was to tell the kids a story to get them to calm down. Then I got them to do some physical exercises with melody and rhythm. Then they played the go-stop game. Then I divided them into groups of two; one was to become a sculptor and the other was to be clay. We finished with some songs.

20. 12. 97: Today the children seemed to be very excited about some forthcoming Jabala programme. I got them to calm down somehow. Then I made all of them sit in a circle with one kid standing in the middle with her eyes closed. Others were to come forward one by one and make some kind of a sound. They were not to talk, though. The child in the middle would have to identify the person making the sound, and also the sound itself. That was all I could do today, for most of the children left for dance practice for the programme after that.

10. 1. 98: Went to Tollygunge after quite a long gap. All the children were very happy to see me again, and their enthusiasm warmed my heart. We started with songs. Then movements and turning into a statue as soon as a sound was made. Then I got them to do the mirror game. They played the game of composing a picture in pairs. We finished with the kids representing a forest, rabbits, birds, deer, butterflies etc.

17. 1. 98: When I reached Tollygunge today, I found the kids playing ‘theatre’. They demanded a story as soon as I reached. I told them the story of a rabbit. Then I got them to walk and stop in rhythm to music. Then I got them to demonstrate how terribly angry, sad, loving, funny, etc., one could get. Some three or four of them did this pretty well. The little ones also posed as trees, a forest, a river, flowers, etc.

7. 2. 98: The children were playing the game of posing as a tiger, snake, or butterfly, and making appropriate sounds when I arrived. Jayoti came and started her class with the elder children and the younger children were getting distracted by what the older ones were doing. We played at forming pictures in pairs without making any sound.

14. 2. 98: A few children were already there when I arrived and a few more came in later. About four or five kids come regularly; the others are fairly irregular due to various difficulties. Anyway, first I got them to sing a song. Then I asked them to improvise and show something—whatever they pleased. Two of them did a football game; another pair did a student-teacher scene and so on. I got them to play many different games today:

1. Walking and stopping to music—slow, then fast.
2. Posing as a peacock, a deer, a frog, a snake, a tiger and a butterfly one by one.
3. Enacting a woodcutter felling a tree.
4. One threatening and the other feeling frightened.
5. An ape and a human being.
6. Walking through a jungle and facing a snake, a tiger, and a gang of robbers.

They then did a little playlet on the theme that blood has no caste.

21. 2. 98: I got the children to stand in a circle, holding hands, and then to sit down. Then I asked them what they wanted to do. Some wanted to play the forest and woodcutter game, some preferred the river, fish and crocodile game, others voted for the moving and stopping to rhythm game. I got them to learn part of a song: *Kishalay amra, amra kishalay/ Nabadigante amra udita suryoday* [We are buds, buds we are/A sun rising on the new horizon]. They enacted a scene of the Dakshineswar temple, with monkeys and beggars. Then I told them to do something for me from among the various games they’ve learnt. They thought for some time; then they put up a piece from the forest game and a bit from the rabbit story. I helped them a little, but they themselves created all the dialogues. Seeing the final output of their efforts, I strongly felt that these kids would be able to do much more, given a chance. They needed a lot of practice, though. Firstly, they are very restless and can hardly sit still. Secondly, because the two groups have to work in the same room at the same time, they cannot concentrate fully.

Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee

‘We wanted to bring some colour into their lives’

Kusum Gupta and Baitali Ganguly, co-founders of Jabala, talk to Sameera Iyengar of why they decided to use the performing arts for their activist work. The following statement is based on the verbal discussion.

The areas where we started our work—Muchipara, Bowbazar—have concentrations of professional sex-workers. They live in very poor conditions, and their children are at great risk, especially the little girls. They are left unsupervised for long hours while their mothers are with clients, and they hang around the streets. Although their mothers desperately try to prevent this, the girls often end up in the profession for lack of other occupational options. These are crime and violence-ridden areas. The children are exposed to fights, quarrels, drunkenness, petty crime. We felt that although it was beyond our ability to change the whole system, if we started our intervention with the children, they might develop a larger mental landscape, broaden their horizons, gain some exposure beyond the poverty and crime-ridden environment they lived in, and that perhaps they would attempt to follow a different lifestyle.

When we began we wanted to bring some colour into their lives. The social stigma these children live with, surrounded by social and psychological abuse, results in very low self-esteem. We began to run daily sessions with the dual aim of keeping the children off the streets and in a safe environment, and giving them a cultural exposure and experience they were denied in their daily lives. We wanted to expose them to the arts, to creative self-expression, and we wanted to help prepare them to enter the formal educational system, to tutor them and place them in schools, so that they could gain an education and some opportunity for employment. We also began to provide follow-up support by way of help with homework and tuition. So we held classes every day for a couple of hours, and the children began to practise singing, dancing, mime, and natak (acting/theatre). They all clamoured for natak, they seemed to love it.

This was very much an experimental project, it started in 1992 with the performing arts—along with theatre, we are using mime, dance, music, songs, all the performing arts. We felt that the children were bursting with energy and with skill and talent—they were such good natural mimics, very free and unselfconscious, and they were good at copying what they observed on the street, in their daily lives, characters, figures: policemen, street vendors. At our first anniversary party, we saw how the children just improvised sticks and things into objects like props, they were very imaginative. And we told them a story, which they instantly decided to enact, and they did it very well. They had a flair for it. We also had a fancy dress party once, and they came dressed as lepers, beggars, jugglers, and it was amazing how accurately they portrayed them—their stance, their way of walking and talking. However, what we noticed was that they only portrayed what they saw around them. This made us realize all the more how important it was to broaden their range of cultural references. We wanted them to have the freedom to do things, experience things they could not do in their homes. We would get them colours and they would just express themselves with colour on paper.

There was so much delight over the paper because it was a luxury they do not get at home. They do not get to play with colours.

So our aim is to provide them with the space and the exposure. We are not there to tell them, don't follow your mother's profession. We just want to give them stimuli which can help them realize that there are other options, and to help them avail of them if they so desire.

Very recently we had a mime show. They were practising with a teacher—they prepared it after two days' practice only. The teacher was playing some music he had brought that day, which had some tabla in it. And the children were making a fuss, saying no, this will not go with the mime—they tend to think a lot about what should be done, and what needs to be thought about; and they speak up, they will say that this music will not fit. This is the sort of confidence-building we are working towards. They like doing these programmes and drama, and they come in with their own agendas.

Initially we started doing theatre informally because we had no funds. At one point we started using theatre formally, getting someone in to teach and things like that, because we had funds. When we got the funds, we decided that we would have a little play. We contacted Pinaki Guha of Chetla Krishti Samsad, who does a lot of children's theatre. It was 1995 when we did our first stage show. Then we asked Pinaki to arrange someone. We thought it was a chance to have classes using body language and other things. So they started doing drama. Pinaki was very, very strict with them, he really introduced discipline. He intended them to know about drama, that there is a lot more to it than just going on stage, which is all the children knew. But being with Pinaki meant that they would do voice and training, stagecraft etc. Last year we asked him to do a play on an issue related to the environment. That was also very moving.

We found that doing performances for the public, on a proscenium, in a formal, organized way, was a tremendous charge for the children. They really looked forward to it, and they felt extremely gratified and excited, ready to give their best. It gave them a real sense of fulfillment and self worth. So we often get them to perform at different forums, it all adds to their exposure. Performance also helps make their guardians and parents more accepting of the time they give to these classes, because these children are expected to work, to help at home and so on. It is not easy for the parents to realize the benefits of their children spending time on creative self-expression, it seems too much of a luxury, too distant from the harsh reality of their lives. But when they attend a performance, see their children on stage, see the appreciation they receive, it's something tangible and the parents become supportive, more positive about letting the children come to these sessions and workshops.

When Seagull brought up the idea of a collaboration as part of their Theatre for Change project, we decided to introduce a theatre workshop at our Tollygunge centre. In Tollygunge, we were working through the auspices of Christian Relief Service (CRS), who were working with a local community club called Jai Hind Club, which ran a school and had a club building. There was a largish hall there which we used for dance classes and so on. Actually, CRS asked us to introduce a cultural package over there. We had started to do this around the time when the Seagull offer came. The children at the Tollygunge centre are from nearby bustees. There are lots of women who are working as domestic servants in this area—their children came to this centre, too.

A Note on Jabala

Jabala is an action research organization formed in April 1992. Interactive experiences with the sex workers of Bowbazar, Calcutta, brought to focus the acute need of doing something towards a healthier life for the children of this area. That led to the birth of Jabala, with the defined aim of assisting these children to gain a respite from the continuous socio-psychological abuse around them, and help them gain the rights that society denies to them.

Over the years Jabala has branched out into various areas and activities.

Partners

Sex workers and their children. Also, other slum and deprived children.

Areas of work

Bowbazar and Tollygunge in Calcutta; Barrackpur, an industrial suburb of Calcutta.

Satyakam

This programme consists of a chain of three evening schools situated at Bowbazar, Tollygunge and Barrackpur for the children of sex workers and other children in difficult situations. These schools aim at providing holistic and nonformal education through creative inputs designed to facilitate a child's social and human development. This programme aspires to instil in these children a sense of dignity and self-esteem while simultaneously attending to their basic learning needs. Children in the age-group of 3-6 years receive pre-school education and nutritional supplementation. Children of 6-14 years receive supplementary coaching, classes on the arts, yoga and meditation. Education tours are also organized.

Sathi

Jabala's counselling centre for the mothers of the children they deal with, offers expert guidance in handling children's behavioural problems, along with addressing their own needs for counselling. Also guides mothers on health and nutritional care through regular health check-ups for both the children and their mothers.

Sahajog

Jabala's vocational training centre, aimed at generating some income for the trainees, also acts as a sales counter of the products. The objective is to make the trainees take the first steps towards an alternative source of livelihood.

Shibir

This drop-in centre for girls has been started recently to help the girls remain creatively occupied and away from possible abuse, while their mothers attend to their clients. Along with various relaxing activities, the time the girls spend here is also utilized for discussions on community health, child rights and gender awareness.

Sambal

This scheme has been started recently to help the women save for their future. Lack of access makes these women extremely reluctant to use the standard banking system, which in turn makes them dependent on local moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest. The scheme is expected to redress this problem.

Samparka

This is a child-to-child programme through which children are being trained to disseminate information on health, environment and child rights to other children and communities.

Sankalan

Jabala's documentation and research unit, aiming primarily at research on and documentation of various child-related problems and achievements in combating them.

Sampreeti

Jabala believes in actively networking with other organizations involved in different activities for people in difficult situations. As part of its networking activities, Jabala has become an active member of Maitree. It is also closely associated with Prajak, the Calcutta chapter of the Naz Foundation, and with the NGO AIDS Coalition.

**'The village ruffians don't mess with them:
they are TLL women'**
Theatre Living Laboratory

Theatre Living Laboratory, based in Madhyamgram, outside Calcutta, has been working for the past two years on a project, deep in the rural areas of Bengal and Bihar, aimed at the social mobilization of distressed women through theatre. The two areas where this project has been functioning are Dooars in north Bengal (Jogendranagar/Mejbil villages) and Khairachatar, 50 km outside Bokharo Steel City, where they are working in the tribal and scheduled caste villages of Domkuli, Tangtona, and Nabadi.

The motivation behind the project was to help instil a realization of their own value in rural women who, although they contribute hard labour to the family and community, still suffer from low social and economic standing. The project sought to build confidence in them, and help them develop as all-round personalities capable of participating actively in all important decision-making processes of the community, whether political or social.

The project began with a Programme-in-Charge and a Development Communicator, who was trained in theatre techniques. Both these were local people, from the area in which the work was to be carried out. They selected four volunteers, also from the area. By talking, motivating, encouraging, they brought together a group of 500 women who wished to act in some way to change their depressed condition. They were divided into groups of 25 members each, and helped to select their own group leaders. These leaders received in-house training. Issues covered included what is meant by participatory process, and what are its benefits; how to identify goals and expectations within the bounds of what it is possible to achieve; identifying the community's problems, threats faced directly or indirectly by the women.

These issues were all expressed through theatre. With exposure and constant discussion, the women started questioning basic social conditions sanctioned for centuries as 'natural': untouchability, the role of religion in oppression, reasons for poverty, etc. In short, they began to be politicized. Naturally, there were murmurs of disapproval and apprehension from the men of their society as well as from various interest groups. A seminar was organized to convince them that the project was not anti-men, but for the society; that strengthening the women could only further strengthen and benefit the community. The Block Development Officer, doctor, teachers, men of the community, were all invited. It was explained that if women are enlightened and educated, the welfare of the children would be heightened. Moreover—since financial considerations bear weight with the men—it was shown how the women, once they gain awareness, confidence and information, can directly access the myriad government schemes for women. This has led to a change in socio-political structures, with some of the women even contesting elections.

Recently, groups have formed village committees, from which members form a central committee. They will take up issues such as

development of local resources, income generation, etc.

Prominent and active members are invited to Madhyamgram for advanced training and a yearly evaluation, which is undertaken in the field as well.

In November 1997 Anjum Katyal and Paramita Banerjee, on behalf of STQ, visited one such training workshop. After watching a play presented by the women participants, there was a discussion with them—at which Probir Guha of TLL was also present—about their involvement in the project and the different plays performed by them.

Below are some excerpts:

Manju Bhattacharya:

I come from Bokharo. Our village is some 40 or 50 km from Bokharo district. A very backward place. Many women would not emerge from their homes, they wouldn't talk to anyone, they didn't even want to say their names. Then we joined TLL and we started doing organizational work in our village. Gradually, we taught them to say their names, to sign their names. The women of the organization had come with the intention of awakening [other women]. Many women have now come forward. They have even started going to the DC's office. Before, they would not receive any land, now they are receiving their own. Before, everyone used to fight over oil and women used to get beaten up. Now they say, no, no, she is from TLL, be careful. That's how the women have progressed. That is why we enjoy working at TLL. Those women who had fallen behind, they are bringing them forward.

PARAMITA. When you work on the plays, can you tell us what stories you use and why you use them?

Dain (Witch), the play, was a true story. There was a couple like that in our village. No child. They had a lot of land. The people of the village wanted to take over the land. They killed the husband and put his body in the well and they killed the wife and buried her body under a tree. They took away the land and paid off the police, gave them some Rs 25,000-30,000. The police knew everything that the villagers had done, but everyone kept quiet, nobody said anything.

ANJUM. When you made this into a play, did you do it in the village? Did you get any reactions after this?

Yes. At first they said, what is this? We haven't done anything like this. But it kept coming out, how this had happened.

PARAMITA. What did you want to say in the play?

That this is not a matter of male-female confrontation, that it happens between women. In every home, women persecute women.

Manoroma Jaiswal:

I have come from Bokharo. When we began work [for TLL] the women there didn't know how to speak out. They did not come out of their homes. If they had to speak to a man about anything, they would die of fear. If they saw the police, they would be scared. Now, within one year, we can see that the women who formerly lacked awareness are very aware. They know their rights, they can now seize them. They have been

trained in camps, we show them where they are suppressed, socially, politically, economically, through plays. When we began working, there were a lot of problems. We thought many times that we would have to stop doing this work. But we did not stop. We worked with all our hearts and souls.

Jyotsna Burman:

I come from the Dooars area. When I first began working, there were many problems. I did two workshops with Uttaran Natya Sangstha. One of the things we did was on women's awakening. When we began working on that, we faced obstacles from many sides. While working, we began to try to circumvent the obstacles. We had a lot of training—awareness training, cultural training, development training, People's Participatory Process training—these four things. After we took the training, our village has changed a lot. After taking the PPP training, we are working with everybody in participatory training, getting people to participate with us. We can now understand one another and stay in touch with one another. When we were taking the PPP training, there were some problems, because that was the time to sow wheat. As we were doing the training, our work had fallen behind. We resolved that we would all work in one another's house for two hours. We all worked together and now we all stay in touch with one another.

We knew that the play we had done was training for our real life: *Shashuri Bouer Jhaapta Chaapta*. We women think we are being dominated by men. But seeing this play, you realize that we women are being persecuted by women. There was a blind mother-in-law who had become somewhat ill. And the daughter-in-law would not give her any food, because she would shit if she ate, and the daughter-in-law would have to clean up. So she would not let her eat. She used to say mean things and torture her. Some of us workers saw this. And we came here and made a play. When we performed the play, many children saw it. And they went home and told everybody. The people of that house were very angry with us. The woman said, whatever happens in my house, happens. Why should anyone comment on it? We took a decision to go to that house. So we all went and called the daughter-in-law out and explained everything to her; and now she takes care of her mother-in-law. Now the daughter-in-law is transformed.

It is now easier for us to do our work. We do it through plays. All these little incidents, we do them as plays and show them in all the villages.

PARAMITA. Why did you select plays as your medium?

From an early age, I wanted to do plays. I had this desire. Later, when the Natya Sangstha did the workshops, then I put in my name, I said, I too will do plays with you.

ANJUM. What do you like so much about theatre?

It makes people remember what we have to say. Also, when I do plays, I can understand better the collective pain of the village.

PARAMITA. All these examples of torture—the mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law—you said that after everyone talked to her, the transformation happened. But why did you not show how this

transformation took place, in the play? You showed the torture, but not the change . . . you must have said something that caused the daughter-in-law to change her attitude. What was that?

The daughter-in-law had not understood clearly before—what I'm doing to my mother-in-law, my behaviour—there was less comprehension on her part. Now we all sit down and study together. That woman had never studied. We not only do plays together, but we teach those who have never studied.

PARAMITA. You are showing fights between women; when husbands beat up their wives then do you confront the husbands?

Yes, of course we do. There was one woman who used to come to TLL from Calcutta for our creativity training. Every day, when she went back, she was beaten up. She used to come and tell us about this, and then one day, we said, let us all go to your house and tell him. We all went together and the man did not say anything much. He told us quite nicely, okay, she can go from now on. We did not need to tell him anything, he just saw all of us and that was it!

PROBIR: If you go to some villages, you will see that the situation now is such that the village ruffians don't mess with them: They are TLL women. They have defeated them directly.

Anita Burman:

I come from north Bengal. Jalpaiguri district. When I first joined, there were objections from every side, terrible obstacles. I had to leave. And then finally now, a year later, I started working on the play [Jyotsna] was talking about. Initially, I was not allowed to go for the training because men and women mix together here. Many things might happen. That is why I was not allowed to come. There were many injustices like that. Many people used to make many kinds of threats. We see these things, they have mothers and sisters too, we work together as brothers and sisters. Anyway, I came to the TLL camp. It is a noble endeavour, to make the women of the village become more aware.

Jyotsna Burman:

I am from north Bengal, near Jaldapara forest. That is a tribal area. There are adivasis, Nepalese, and we are Barmans. When our women's project started, I was not there at the start. Three or four months later, I became connected to it. How? Well, I used to teach two children singing. When I was going to teach them, I noticed the group. Firstly, there were many women over there—some 20, 25 women or more than that. That made me very happy. So I went there one day. Music, singing, with everyone else. What I did not know was that they were also talking about their sorrows and—I liked it very much. I started going there. The training we had there at first, that did not have to do with theatre, that was just mutual understanding. About the village, the problems of the village. Why people are cutting down trees, selling wood, the lands we have—the three or four bighas—if we grow crops there, why the elephants are eating that up, why are we living in such difficulty? There are no shops or markets near us, no good fields . . . We had the training and then, none of us had any education. There are many women there who have never studied. When they came to do the training, when the papers were first

given to them, they said, what shall we do with the pen and paper? Yet they drew pictures to make up stories to tell us. They have improved so much since they came here, you can't even begin to imagine. They used to shiver when they were saying their names. They can speak their names now, some of them can even write their names, we are doing plays as well. The plays we are doing, the women are now very . . . There was a woman in the village who was told, you cannot leave the house after dark. Some drunkard might assault you. If a woman sits down and talks to a man, there are many restrictions on all sides. When we went to sing, we understood many things. That we are people who have been born and that we will die after some time, that we are acquainted with everyone, we have sung that and you can understand that through a song.

Saraswati:

In 1985, I went to a TLL meeting. After that, in 1992, I joined an organization whose full name is Association of India for National Advancement (AINA, a theatre group). In the management committee we used to raise problems which were related to women. They used to abandon women after marriage, dowry, all these problems are very common among women. So when they used to come before us with all these problems, we used to want to make the public conscious. So we used to make a script. And this script—we used to modify it a bit—and in the villages where the brides were being tortured, we used to do it there. And the names used to be those of the people there. And more women from those villages joined our training. And they wanted to use this training for doing this kind of work. We did at least four or five workshops. And we are trying to resolve the problem through this drama, to motivate people, and to give legal aid to people to help them. We have helped in at least 256 cases like this, to bring about an understanding. And all the women here have been . . .

We call [Probir Guha] our guru because we have learnt singing and dancing and everything about theatre from TLL. And what the themes are of theatre and everything else.

I am from Khairachatar village of Bokaro district. The play we have just done is of things we have seen before our eyes. In Hisim village, a boatman, his name is Bhatia Majhi, and his wife used to live. They had no children. When the people of the village realized that their land was not coming within their grasp, they thought these people are too lucky and we are living in poverty. If we could remove them, then we could enjoy all their property. The people all got together and decided, we have to kill them. Someone counselled, if you kill them, then you will be in trouble. Don't kill them, do something so that they just go away. Then there were other disputes with him and they planned to kill him. They killed him. We showed until that point. After that, we made the play on this theme and we showed it in the village where this was done. Now the criminals are in jail. He was a Jharkhand leader, the administration was with him.

Urmila:

My home is in Mejbil, north Bengal. I like music, singing, theatre. I enjoy learning all these things. I came here because I wanted to learn these things.

I heard of TLL from everybody, in our neighbourhood, village, from people in my family. After I joined here, one of my daughters died. The day she died, even that day I came here. I had not eaten or anything. But we had a meeting that day. I wanted to share my sorrow with people here. We all sat together and talked and I liked that.

This is the first camp I have come to. I enjoyed it very much.

Tapan Barman:

I come from Jalpaiguri district. I have been doing plays for many years. Then, at one point, I met Probir-da, in '89 or '90. We met at a workshop and then later at a theatre festival, at Uttaran. Everybody here knows of Probir-da's work, especially the tribal people. This is completely a forest area and there is little agriculture. At first, getting the wives and daughters from people's homes to come out to act was very difficult. They were not allowed to come out at all. When it was time to get the village people involved, we would go from house to house and chat with people, to persuade them to let the women come out. Then, gradually, the women came. There was a great fear that we would harm the girls, take them to Calcutta and sell them off, smuggle them out of the country. They are building a new group, there might be something fishy involved. This matter was causing a lot of head-wagging. After three or four months, we did a seminar, Probir-da had gone there. Then we were able to more or less establish the group. Then ten women from the village had come. They stayed here for ten days and they got good behaviour and good treatment and when they went back, the suspicion was gone. But there was always a social, family, barrier. That this was an organization where we were working with women, where the women were gathering, conducting meetings, the political parties, CPI(M), Congress, RSP, BJP, they were a bit wary. They didn't know what could happen. And because the CPI(M) were in power, they were a bit suspicious. Then, as we were working, the organization was growing, women were responding more and more to our call, participating in different projects, the political leaders started saying, the work that the TLL is doing is very good. We too can do the work that they are doing. The different organizations of the different political parties, they call meetings, but no women go there. Yet if we call a meeting, then all women come along.

Because this is a village, and people here are all working, nobody has very much time to give such an organization. So we have to fit everything in within a short time span, where people can sit down and talk. So we try, while chatting, through plays, to raise important issues so that they can be grasped quickly. Then we have to explain, that these are the facts and issues. What they cannot grasp after listening for three hours, can be explained through a ten-minute play. All the plays usually are related to local issues, have local relevance, like women's torture, dowry, zamindars, all such matters, some political issues.

PROBIR. Do you think doing the plays has changed the women in some way?

Briefly, we can say that there has been no change of immense magnitude. They have come out of their former places, of their shells and now they are standing somewhere different. They have come to realize that doing plays is not bad. That talking to men, sharing their grief and sorrows, is

not wrong.

Translated from the original Bengali by Sayoni Basu

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An Interview with Tripurari Sharma



Tripurari Sharma talks to Anjum Katyal about her life in the theatre, and her commitment to theatre for social change.

Where should I start? Actually, there is nobody in my family who does theatre. My father—it was a very middle-class kind of family—had a government job, my mother stayed at home, four children. My father's dream was that each child should be very highly educated and get a good job. Our whole orientation was towards that. And we grew up with the idea that our studies were the main thing and that we had to work hard and make something of ourselves. But my parents—they didn't force anything on anyone and in some way, I think everything went the way they planned. Very persistent. My father wanted each one to have a separate job and my brother was an engineer, my sister was a doctor, my other sister was a lecturer. He thought that I would probably end up in the IAS, that was the great dream. Our education was in a typical convent school in Delhi. I was born and brought up in Old Delhi.

I went to Presentation Convent, which was opposite Red Fort. We stayed at Kashmir Gate. So we were really in Old Delhi. We used to walk to school and back. Otherwise, the family was very conventional. Sometimes I feel that we were a very odd mixture—we had this very Western, English education and very conventional relatives. The family rarely did anything outside itself, very much within its own circle, within its own way of living. We grew up with that and I think my work—I mean, I look back and some of things that come back to my mind are the rituals, the family rituals, which were very important to our family. Something or the other was always happening, it was a very ritualistic family. These ritualistic patterns, I think, have left some impression on me.

What kind of rituals?

All kinds, you know. For example, weddings, or the festivals. My father was a very religious man. Our house was not really on the banks of the Yamuna but if you stood on the terrace, you could see the Yamuna. And around the Yamuna, the temples, where the various pundits would stay. My father used to visit them and, as a small child, I used to go with him. I think those were the sort of impressions that I . . . I mean, even though I have outgrown so many things, I don't feel uncomfortable, you know, if I find myself in an atmosphere which is very conventional, in a Rajput haveli, for example. I suddenly feel . . . I somehow understand it—it feels very natural to me because it has something of my early memories. We had an old house—a haveli—in Kurukshetra, Haryana, which was always under dispute. And this court case was going on and on. When I was a small child, my father would say, come with me. So I used to go, hang around with the old lady in the house, play with the children.

When you were growing up did your father, for example, have different plans for his daughters and his sons?

No. And each one had a very separate and distinct career. I did not feel [any gender discrimination] from my father. What I did feel was that he had very definite plans—that was very clear to me. He worked hard towards it. And in a very nice way. He was willing to go to any lengths, to sit with you, to work with you if you needed help. He never missed a parent-teacher meeting. Very involved with his children, but in a very distant kind of way. He never misused this involvement. He was that kind of person, he kept to himself. My mother was very warm although she was very reserved. Both of them were.

Most of the time, I used to play with lots of neighbourhood children. Now, with my son, my mother finds it very strange, why do I get him so many stamps and this and that. So I told her, you know we never had time for these things because we grew up with children. We never had time to think of stamp

collections or coin collections. Because in the neighbourhood, there were twenty-five, thirty children. And we would spend most of our time in each other's houses, playing cards, we would play for a minimum of four hours if we went to somebody's house or if somebody came to ours, eating our meals wherever we were. That was the atmosphere in which I grew up. So it was a very playful atmosphere. I enjoyed it very much. Children playing together, fighting, building those kinds of bonds. I remember Durga Puja near our house, then there was Ramlila and we used to go late at night. We went in groups. Everybody was going, so you also went along. Everybody was coming back so you also came back. Those were—I mean, I very distinctly remember the community feeling . . . And all the festivals we celebrated together, Holi, and Diwali, again with the other children. We grew up like that.

I did do plays in school but I never did lead roles or any such thing. I was good at debates and writing. And by the time I came to Standard VII, I was very clear that writing was going to be a very important part of me. Because I started enjoying writing. Even the so-called school essays and such things, to me, started meaning something. I wasn't really so sure of the theatre. I enjoyed the theatre, I enjoyed reading about theatre, I enjoyed going to see whatever I could. But I didn't realize then that I would be in theatre.

After school, I went to Miranda House. I took up English. It was then that I got exposed to dramatics and dramatic societies and a more serious kind of drama, improvisation also. What we had in school was very different. And then I started getting more and more interested. It suddenly gripped me and it was like getting more and more attracted towards theatre. I started seeing more plays. I went to see [M. K.] Raina, who did Gorky's *Lower Depths* in St. Stephen's College at that time. And wrote a review of the play for a magazine. I had sat for my school-leaving exams and there was six months' time. And in that six months, I did some writing for one or two newspapers and youth magazines, mentally preparing my father for my saying, look, I may not do IAS, I might do journalism instead. Something like that. But he thought it was just a phase and would pass.

And then, of course, I did college and during college, I did visit NSD—I think it was more a romantic notion of theatre. And another thing which attracted me was that in college, we got involved in politics and tried to understand society, and I had this feeling that theatre is probably a better medium than writing, communicating with people and creating a kind of culture of the people. And I felt that I could reach out more to the people who matter to me than by just sitting and writing. This was probably more a justification . . . I think theatre was a very mysterious world for me. And I was very attracted. It seemed a bit of an adventure also, to join NSD and know more about it. So I applied . . .

Which year did you apply?

1976. Frankly, I knew nothing about theatre. I just went along and appeared for the interview and later on, I was told, you will be accepted. And my sister at that time was working, she was doing her Ph.D., she was working on Subhas Chandra Bose. We went to Calcutta, I was with her in Calcutta, when the letter came. And my father was . . .

He knew you had applied?

He knew I had applied. And he wrote to me in Calcutta, saying that the



Workshop performance, Saharanpur (1985)



Saharanpur, 1985

acceptance letter had come, about how much he disapproved and that he was in no way going to support that kind of foolishness and . . . I mean, he was very clear and very firm about it. We had to deposit some money, which in fact I borrowed from my sister, my younger sister. She loaned me that money and I said, when I get my scholarship, I'll pay you back. My father kept saying, do your MA, so that you can always take up a proper job. And then if you want to join NSD, do it. But first do an MA. But, you know, at that age you don't have the patience and I just wanted to do it so I joined. By and by, I discovered what it was all about. About voice practice and yoga and movement and . . .

So what was NSD like?

NSD was a little different from what it is like now. In the sense that now there is a separate programme for every year. But then there were main productions which were done as school productions. The entire school worked on them. And then we had classes. At the time that I joined, some of the teachers retired. So we did not have too many classes. There were places where one used to feel a little lost, a little inactive. I don't think the students feel that these days because the programme is so packed.

What are your most vivid memories of NSD?

The learning process. Because there were play readings and all. I had read a lot of plays by then. And I had very definite views on, say, Strindberg, or Ibsen, which were quite fascinating for my classmates. And then there were subjects which I knew nothing about—till today I can't sing. So there were whole areas where I could do just nothing. And some where I felt I could contribute a lot. So it was a very see-saw kind of a thing that I went through, especially in the first year, because sometimes I used to feel that I was in the right place and then I would feel that I had made a big mistake. But I didn't want to go back and admit that I had made a mistake. So I carried on with it.

Then Alkazi left and again NSD went through a low phase, until [B.V.] Karanth took over and things started looking brighter. I remember once telling



Workshop performance, Madras 1987

Karant, look, I want to leave now, I don't think I can make anything work . . . He said, don't worry, just attend every class. Don't think of whether it is making sense to you or not. Just go and do that for three months. And I think it was just the sheer discipline of attending classes that got into me and I stopped thinking too much and sort of made it through.

Towards the end of my second year, I wanted to write a play. I started working on it, I started thinking about it, and I wrote *Bahu* in 1978. It was done for the first time in '79 in the school. It was a final year student production, where you have to direct a play. We were supposed to select scripts and perform and . . . I took up direction—I could never do too much acting.

What about Bahu? How did the idea come to you?

You know, in our old house, where I told you I used to go, there's an old woman and she is still alive—she was old then and she is still alive—she must be now about 110 years or something. She was one of my ancestors' mistresses, and in his will, she was granted access to the property as long as she lived, but her children could not inherit. She started selling off bits and pieces in her lifetime and she had taken control of the whole thing. And she always had one man with her. She was a very intriguing personality for me at that young age and the man—he used to work in the fields, but you knew there was a deeper relationship than just that.

Even though she was quite old?

She was old! I mean, I remember seeing two or three of these men in the time that I went there. I used to find her very fascinating because she was an extrovert and the way she used to speak—of course, nobody liked her. I was fascinated by her. And this character in *Bahu* that I portrayed, somewhere I have that house in the background. And this woman—though not, of course, exactly the same woman. But the story of a daughter-in-law who is widowed very soon after her marriage. One day her husband comes home drunk and she doesn't open the door. He goes away and he dies. Nobody knows what happens to him. The play

opens with the news of his death. This character, *Bahu*, is a woman who everyone tries to make feel guilty and she fights back against the guilt. She also has a relationship with her brother-in-law—who is younger than her—after her husband dies. In Haryana, they have this Jaat tradition where if one brother dies, then another brother is married to the widow. The Brahmins don't do it, more by way of reaction. So there is this woman who got involved with the younger brother, but he cannot marry her because they are Brahmins. So they are both trapped in this caste thing, caste and class also. And this woman's emotions . . . And then she is going to have a child. The brother-in-law suggests that they do away with the child. And she refuses. There is another character in the play, who lives in the haveli, and does the accounts and all that, but who is not happy in his position and who has a grouse against the whole Brahmin family. So he offers to go with her somewhere, to leave that place and go away. But she senses that he is doing it more out of a resentment against them than out of concern for her and she does not go away with him. And there are some incidents concerning road builders who work in that area. She is attracted to them and she visits them and then the younger brother gets married, his wife comes into the family, and for some time she sticks to the claim of her child and the claim of her property. Then she decides to give it up. And finally, one day, she leaves the house, goes away and . . . The play ends a year later. Near Kurukshetra, there is a tirth called Pehova, a place where you go for the shradh—it's said the Pandavas also went there. It's a small pond, actually, not a river. So the play ends when Ramdutt, her brother-in-law, goes there to do the shradh, the one-year ceremony, for his brother. He meets her and asks her to come back, but she refuses. And he says, you know, my wife can't give birth to a child, and I would like the child. It is his child. And she says, no, the child is mine. And the play ends.

That was my first play. And it revolves around this whole one-year seasonal cycle, the festivals, sowing, harvesting and then autumn and winter. So I wrote this play and it was very well-received—very surprising. And Karanth said, you should let somebody else direct it. But I said, I want to do it. I did it as my student production at the NSD.

Then about two years later, Rati [Bartholomew] asked me for the play. So I gave her the script and we worked on the production. She did it . . .

At Indraprastha College?

Yes. Later, Bhanu [Bharati] did it at Sri Ram Centre. In style, it's not a folk play at all but it has a lot of music, a lot of Punjabi music. And the dialogues are not really spoken dialogues, it's more like a thought. You sense what I am thinking and I sense what you are thinking, but it is not a conversation going on. It was written a bit like that.

Did you visualize it as a naturalistic kind of setting, acting, dialogue?

The visuals that I had then were very naturalistic. But the acting style was not naturalistic. I mean, I really saw it as a style which used very few gestures, a lot of eye contact. But the dialogue would be spoken in a way which was not conversational, which would be of a slightly different nature, slightly flat, something like that. But I don't know, if I did it now, whether I would still visualize it in a naturalistic way. At that time I did, and I worked very hard on the set. In fact, before we did the sets, we travelled to these places and took pictures and came back and constructed the set and it was quite exciting.

Was that your first directorial venture?

No, before that I did Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata* [*Court Chalu Ahe*] as *Khamosh*, in Punjabi, with an independent group outside NSD. We did it in the Sri Ram Centre basement, which had just about opened at that time, just about—I think this was the sixth or the seventh play that was done. I think this was in the winter of 1977-78.

Before that, just as the Emergency was lifted, just as we had entered second year, I did a programme, *On Imprisonment*. The experiences of prisoners from different places. I took poems, extracts from novels—*Tale of Two Cities*, Dostoevsky's novels, Gorky, and some newspaper reports—I did a kind of collage. In NSD, with other students, in our free time. It was also open to outsiders.

After the first play you wrote, did you feel that you were more cut out to be a playwright than a director?

I always saw the two as combined. Not that there weren't plays that I didn't want to direct. For example, it was in NSD that we studied *Adhe Adhure* and at that time Nemi [Chandra Jain] used to teach us. And I wrote a critique of *Adhe Adhure*. I had a very different viewpoint to his. He was very encouraging, he said, yes, yes, it's good to think. Then I felt that I would like to do *Adhe Adhure* in a very different way. I did that five years ago at the [Mohan] Rakesh festival. I did it differently.

It was not as if there were no plays I wanted to direct. But if I was going to do something, it had to be something with which I was very deeply involved, which I wanted to communicate. I am sure there are plays which communicate much better than anything I could ever do, but I would get the feeling that this should be done, and this is the way that I would like to convey it. I wanted to write my own plays and direct them. And people tell me, you know, you should direct other people's plays and let other people direct your plays. I am sure there's a value to it, but when the two come very much together then there is the problem of—you see it visually and the writing is a kind of prelude to actually doing it. It's part of the whole that comes to you. So maybe that was how it happened with *Bahu*. Of course, there was a bit of a problem, because in our third-year exams, you're supposed to interpret a play. If you write your own play, you can't call that interpretation! I think that was a bit of a disadvantage. But there was a bigger advantage in trying out an exercise, in doing something you really wanted to do. So I just went ahead and did it.

Then, immediately after passing out, I started freelancing. In fact, immediately after I passed out, I got an assignment in Ujjain with the Lok Kala Academy, to direct plays and also to teach in the evening course, that kind of thing. I had to hold some sessions in costume designing and so on. I directed plays, I acted in some plays with them and I also wrote a small play, *Vikramaditya ka Nyayasan*, which is Sister Nivedita's story about the judgment seat of Vikramaditya. Which I wrote mainly for the school because the story is set in Ujjain.

Then, while in Ujjain, I got a chance to work in nearby places like Nagda, Devas.

I was going to ask you when you got into your socially active phase because you said that had attracted you towards theatre.

I got my first chance at Nagda with a worker's union. There were these two people—they were attending the Academy sessions—very progressive men. They asked, will you do a play with workers? I was more than happy to do it. So I

went with them and met a group—it was basically a union group which was trying to start its own theatre troupe. They were mainly workers at the Birla chemical factory.

Initially, the idea was not to evolve a play, but the scripts I had didn't quite go



Famous Chattisgarhi actor Madan Lal in *Birsa Munda* (1981-82)

with what they wanted to do, or what their need was. So we decided to improvise and evolve. The acting classes I had done came in handy. I referred back mentally to some of those exercises and created some more, and then evolved a script with the group. As soon as it developed, we wrote it down. But when we wrote it down, they could not read it—it was very difficult. After that, we never wrote things down, realizing that it was not very wise to do so.

That workshop was really the key to many other workshops. Seeing what working in a factory does to you—it makes you feel so stiff, taking all the colour out of your life, a dark room, no colour. Even the men who used to work in the thread factory had so much colour all around them—bales of pink and blue and brown, orange—but they never could refer back to them as colours. So I also did a lot of recollection, observation, concentration, these exercises with them. And the script, too, was slowly, slowly, made with them.

The story of the play is this: one worker dies in the factory, while working on his machine. And the repercussions of that on his co-worker that night. How he keeps thinking about it, imagines his widow, the insecurity, the kind of work they

do, memories of the home village. It had no conclusion as such, but it really revolves around this man's experience of having seen this happen to somebody very close to him. Then, from one individual, it became a kind of group experience. And they made songs, it was songs and images, action, and it was forty, forty-five minutes long.

Tell me, by this time, had you seen Janam's work or the work of any of the other groups who were doing socially active theatre. . . ?

I think it was after coming back from Nagda that I saw *Machine*, and I had seen *Aurat* behind Miranda House—I was doing a kind of a short story with Miranda House at that time. I had also seen Badal Sircar's plays, he had come to Delhi around this time with *Bhoma* and one more play, *Jaloos*.

Do you see the influence of all this in your work?

Yes, I think so. Indirectly, it would have definitely influenced, in the sense that—I think in creating images which do not have to necessarily connect through a story, that have other connections with each other. So there definitely was this kind of influence in the structure. That there was no defined story-line, the images came and went.

So the workshop at Nagda was the key. Also the sense of doing workshops with a group like this where you felt it would be an intervention . . . So from there did you do other workshops as well?

Immediately after that I did a workshop for Manushi, which was with Miranda House students, college students, and we worked in the college hostel.

What was that play?

That play we called *Ahsaas*, and it was a play which until recently was being done, the script has sort of found its way to other people.

What is it about?

It is really about women's experiences. And—now every second play is dealing with conditioning—but it dealt with how, you know, girls are more segregated. Boys can play cricket and girls can play with dolls. It dealt basically with the experiences of two or three women and a mother—it also dealt with a mother and daughter. Basically how a young girl of eighteen or nineteen relates with the world, her friends, and with her mother—how she watches her mother and how she wants to be different. A friend of hers gets married and is not happy. This girl tries to do many things and it really ends with these two women coming together and telling each other about their . . . ahsaas.

There was one sequence about eve-teasing and we had to take a lot of care in working that out because we wanted to make it something unusual—not the usual scene of a girl walking by and boys singing songs. So we removed the boys. We just kept a bus queue and a kind of a tap, you know—the girl just senses that it is a boy and she passes a message to the other girl, you know, take care. So you get the tension, what you feel when you are insecure and there is somebody prowling around you. We just kept it like that and then we had a kind of song. Rather than do it in a very realistic way, which I feel never works. So we did it differently, and I think it got the point across.

When the play started, we showed it to women and small groups and it worked very well. And many girls from that group later did different things. In fact, the script got passed on to other people, other friends. One year, there was a lot of trouble at Holi and a group of girls wanted to protest, so they picked up

this play . . . Even a couple of years back, I got a telephone call saying we're doing this play. I don't know how, but it seems that this play has circulated. It was done in Bikaner as well . . .

After Manushi, what next?

After Manushi, I did a workshop in Old Delhi with some NSD people [and] with a small group in Bhubaneswar. Then I did a workshop in Kanpur with some textile mill workers . . . In Raipur, with an NGO working with tribal youth—about deforestation and rural life.

How did you feel about this moving from group to group, doing different workshops?

At that time I really enjoyed it, because for me there were many things opening up. I was travelling to so many parts of the country which I knew nothing about. And as I tell my mother, it was only when I started freelancing that I discovered that the staple food of this country is actually rice and arhar daal—Punjabis don't eat arhar daal at all. I only started discovering what this country is all about when I started travelling. I knew very little about this. So working in a place like Chhattisgarh, I worked with groups in Chaibasa and Chakradharpur, after the Guha firing. There was a procession which was fired upon and the groups there had become very discouraged for a while. This was around 1981-82. I also did a workshop in Varanasi, in Benaras Hindu University, with a progressive group. So like this . . . I was always travelling.

Were these evolved scripts or were you going with something already planned . . . ?

Most of these were evolved scripts. And each one was different: different music, different style. And it incorporated local dance patterns or song styles—this happened automatically in the group. So each one was very different and very distinct.

When I was in Chhattisgarh, I came to know of Birsa Munda. . . and I wrote *Birsa Munda* with that group. In fact, we had done something with Habib Tanvir, we managed to get [his actors] Madan Lal and Dwarka and others to act in the play. So there was a strong team of actors working on this. We did shows in Raipur and then we went to Tatanagar and performed in Chaibasa and other places.

There were times when I was working with groups and evolving, there were times when I was trying to write something.

Apart from travelling, apart from learning about different regional forms, what do you think was valuable theatrically for you in this period, in doing the workshops?

I think, discovering how to create in a group. That was very valuable and also changed my style of direction. Because when we started, we all started with the same notion of a director—that the director should be prepared well in advance, should have the production script ready, should have all the answers—that was the approach.

What I learnt was how a group actually works, how a group has its own resources. That you may be the centre of an activity but you cannot be all-in-all, that there is much to learn from others. This was a different sensibility. Over a period of time, I found that when directing, I was not directing as I had learnt direction. I work in a very different way. I mean, I trust my actors a great deal

and I also trust their intuition. I try to go by things that would make sense to them and they even outdo some of my own ideas, which I may have thought of earlier. I am very open—at least, I think I am very open—I don't know what the actors think of me! I think I am sensitive to the changes that might take place—to change a lot is something I am prepared for. I don't feel the need to shout too much when I am directing. I have learnt to trust actors. If an actor cannot do something that I want, it is not always that the actor is not trying hard enough—this is what I have learnt. It could be some other problem somewhere else, something wrong somewhere else, not that the actor is not trying.

While I was doing this, I also did this play called *Katha Nandan ki*, a Tamil play—Indira Parthasarathy—which is about untouchability. We did it in Kanpur, with a group called Darpan. It was a good play—the group was very happy. We took it to Bombay and Delhi and many places. So I was doing two or three kinds of things: I was doing these workshops, I was working with amateur groups on professional assignments and I was writing on my own and trying to figure out how to put up those plays, also directing plays. So it was a cluster of different assignments . . . Some of these plays were also helpful financially, to tide over rough times, and others were more fun.

What else did I learn theatrically? Probably also how to develop structures. How structures can have a storyline, how structures need not have a storyline, how structures could be based on images. I learnt some of this when I was doing workshops—how to develop different kinds of structures and . . . Also that these plays had their own aesthetics. That there was a need for creativity and ingenuity here, too, improvising, making your own scripts. You know, it is also very easy to evolve scripts—I see a lot of people doing it—to put across messages. But to evolve something more experiential is more difficult. The style that you take up should have some base in some game, you know how you incorporate games and riddles or you incorporate a certain property to mean so many things. That becomes the aesthetics of it. I mean, you just take a piece of cloth and how that piece of cloth weaves into the structure of the play in such a way that—the shapes that the cloth can take on are also those which the play can take on. There is an aesthetics to that as well. When I find the connection between form and content, then a lot of things make sense. If there is a knotted cloth, then the opening of the knot itself can make a structure. You can dramatically conceive it and convey it—that can become the structure, that you undo the knot and open the piece of cloth. Even that in itself can become a happening. It's the way that you weave in these things that really make it complete. All this, I think . . .

You learnt all this through your [work]. Tell me, apart from actually doing and learning, were there also other kinds of theatre that you were watching or seeing that were also influencing you and helping you learn? Other people's work, traditional forms, work abroad?

Wherever I went, I would see the traditional forms. And I appreciated the power that they have. Actually, at that time the street theatre that Janam and other groups was doing was very different. It was still the black uniform and the choral speech and more about information and facts, with snippets of dialogue. What we were evolving was very different. I got a chance to work in villages and in tribal areas. And the cultures and the audiences there—I was not sure whether all that should come into street plays or not. Because that was not the kind of street play that was happening in Delhi at that time. . . Songs, for example, and dances, properties, masks . . .



Lal Lal Haathi, Theatre-in-Education, NSD (1996)

Secondly, I discovered that the chorus style is impossible in rural areas and small towns. The chorus should move in coordination, whereas these people were so individualistic that it was not possible to do something all together. It has to be enforced on them. Ultimately, you sort of compromise or discover another way—I mean, we are used to standing in queues and being part of a crowd and acting like a crowd but for the actors in these places, it would kill them if they had to do it. So I gradually did away with some of these things. What evolved was very different.

I remember this one workshop in Hyderabad that we had done. We had made a very interesting play with a rural group. There is a landlord and he gets possessed by a woman's spirit. Suddenly, one morning, when the servant goes to wake him, he is behaving very oddly, like a woman. And they can't understand what has happened to him. Ultimately, it is discovered that he had raped a girl and thrown her into a well and it is her spirit that comes and possesses him. And how everybody condemns him and . . . So it was a kind of a comedy. Now, this is something that I had never thought—even when I made a comic situation—that this is one of the ways of dealing with life. And so comedy, bits of comedy, started coming into the plays.

You mean that the play is saying something serious but in a comic way?

I am saying that a comic approach also conveys a message. Also, the whole question of who is laughing at whom. Generally, you know, you are laughing at Ramu naukar, the servant, but here you have reversed it and you are laughing at a landlord. Doing it in a village situation, some of the organizers felt it was not in very good taste. Because you were laughing at the landlord. If you were laughing at the servant, nobody would have said anything. But the audience enjoyed it very much. So there were always a few new things happening in each place.

In Saharanpur, we did *Uplabhdian* (Achievements). It was a play we did for 26 January, a kind of satire. So there were all these black bands and people shouting, Englishmen, leave India. There were different images here, flags, three colours. We had used a pitcher, it was the pitcher of our achievements, a book, our Constitution. And everyone keeps pursuing the pitcher and when they finally open it, there are all these things inside a long sari which they all keep pulling and when they let go, they all fall down. So that's what our achievements are like! So while it was very simple, it also caught the imagination of the audience. And it was like a game, because it was also funny in that sense. So things like this, with which a group would identify, and they could also improvise with.

I remember also that in the plays we did in Saharanpur, suddenly language became very important because it is an Urdu-speaking area. And generally language is the least important factor, but in the plays that came up in Saharanpur, language was a very important part of the whole thing because it was very poetic language. Suddenly, when the audience was repeating lines they were hearing, I realized for the first time that powerful spoken language has an impact even in a street play. That was a specialty of that area, a contribution. Ghazals—I had to bring in ghazals—and oral poetry, and so a lot of very rich dialogue-base came into some of the plays that we worked on in this area.

When we worked in Rajasthan, then humour or story, lots of colour—they are already in the songs and dances—and a lot of puppets. A lot of those things found their way into the plays that we worked on in Rajasthan. So every area in that way contributed so much. Which was at one level so familiar to the group, and at the same time, was very new because it was being used in a different

context. It was great fun working and trying out . . .

So when did Allaripu get formed?

Allaripu was formed somewhere in 1984.

Had you by then given up the workshops?

No . . . By that time, one can say that the workshops were getting known, people were hearing about these workshops and I was invited to speak about what was happening. It was getting a bit more established. There was this workshop for FAO at Jodhpur. They asked me to do this workshop with a group of activists—Kamla Bhasin was organizing it. They wanted to send someone to observe it. I was initially a bit taken aback. It was Lakshmi Krishnamurti. Lakshmi I had seen before, she was a friend of Karanth and Girish [Karnad], I had seen her in NSD once or twice. So she came and she liked the workshop very much, she kept a diary of the workshop. So some kind of followup was made. Then she decided, why don't we start an organization?

So Allaripu was formed—what was the purpose of it?

The focus was to do workshops with groups, to train them and follow-up, so that they were equipped in that sense to carry on with this work and not depend on people coming in from outside. So it started with that. We did two or three very big workshops, actually, with ten or eleven NGOs coming together in one place, and then we followed up with each one, visiting them. If it became too big, then it could become a trifle mechanical. Towards the end, in the 90s, in '90-91, I started feeling it was becoming repetitive. Then we started exploring in terms of—with education, plays for children, working with children—at that time, I started doing slightly different work. Until that time, it was really in high swing.

In between, I wrote a play called *Aks Paheli* (Riddle of Images). This was for the Society for the Portrayal of Women in Media, a lot of women's groups came together, also theatre colleagues. We had taken three images: Kaikeyi, Sita and Laila. It was a kind of a rehearsal process and how the actresses start exploring the characters differently, drawing on their own experiences in life and so on—how three of them can be looked at differently.

So Allaripu became a way of continuing your workshops but in a more systematic way?

Yes, but then it outgrew the workshops, in the sense that it moved into education and . . . it grew a lot and this was one of the activities. And gradually, other people took on similar workshops to what I used to do—people who had been with me for five or six workshops, they started . . .

After Allaripu started, one thing that got added on was working with women's groups. This had happened before also, with Manushi. But after Allaripu started, we got together, Lakshmi and I, and we both discovered something beyond theatre in the sense that the very process of the workshop does so much for women. The process is an end in itself. For women who are not given to articulating their views, women who are not given to exploring their bodies in a creative way, for feeling good, for feeling fresh. Just doing physical and breathing exercises is a liberating experience for them. Then sharing experiences with each other and discovering that they are not insane, you know, discovering that every woman has dissatisfaction and negative feelings, touching other lives . . . When you come together in a space, you develop a trust, sharing

with each other, enjoying just being in this space, enjoying singing and creating, out of your own experiences, your own plays. These experiences have become another way of looking at theatre, a totally different view.

Sometimes I used to feel very bad, most of these groups could not do too many shows of the plays they evolved. They would do only a limited number of



Lal Lal Haathi

shows and we used to feel that it was a waste. But when we met them again, the way they used to relate and the way they used to talk about the workshop, made us realize that it had meant much more to them. Then you feel, okay, this is also something important. I think it is the fact that they are in a non-threatening atmosphere, there are no questions asked, there is no probing about your past life, rather, there is a sharing. And you have the garb of make-belief. The line is very thin between what you are and what you are enacting. I felt that there was another level I was beginning to comprehend, working with women. And another whole different range of things came into it. What I feel is the intimacy found in their plays, the kind of first-person narration of themes—usually we say there is no place for feelings in street theatre; what they have are very intimate feelings, very heart-felt feelings, which makes it very intimate. Suddenly you feel you are not watching a street play, but a very intimate play. It has bridged so many gaps and made it into a very intimate form. So women's songs come into it, wedding songs, the tunes of these songs are used to make others. The utensils, the sounds of the utensils, the use of different instruments like that, the use of images like sindoor, ghunghat, pallav, you know, all these kinds of very feminine images have also entered into the theatre.

Very interestingly, the first play we did was on sati, I don't remember exactly

when, three years before the Roop Kanwar case. We were doing a workshop in Mirzapur—one of these NGO workshops I was telling you about, from different organizations. Three people had come from Rajasthan and one of them said, my wife is a sati. We were really shocked. How can your wife be a sati, you are still alive? At that time, we thought sati did not happen any more, it was a big joke. He explained—there is a sadhu in his village who made a temple. And he said how excellent it would be if the kalash at the temple came from a sati. And all the women there were willing to become satis, so they drew lots and it fell to the share of this man's wife. When he died, she would become a sati. And now many people come to visit his house and light lamps; and he was very happy and proud of this. At that workshop, we were about nine women and about twenty men. And the women were feeling a bit—they wouldn't open up completely—and we were working with them separately at night. So we made a play about sati, called *Intezaar*. The play was about a woman who was waiting for her husband to die and all that, and the news of his death comes. But she doesn't become sati, she goes away. And it was dealing with a woman's side of things. Then after the Roop Kanwar case, there were suddenly so many shows of the play that I was feeling a bit scared, as if I had foretold something. But it also showed how deep the roots were in the psyche of the people, that there were all these incidents . . .

So some of these things at a workshop emerge spontaneously—in a totally unplanned kind of way. But it turned out to be probably the most important play of that workshop.

You were saying that for women, the whole experience is so different. Was that in a mixed group or in an all-women group?

In mixed groups, we used to feel that women don't open up. We started working separately with women, like in Mirzapur . . . Then we saw a whole change which came about. In a mixed group, what would sometimes happen was that the women would do very well in reaction. The men would say 'nothing is happening' . . . and the women would come up and do something fantastic. But we didn't realize it could come out deeper than that. It's only when we started working with all-women's groups, with the freedom of being in a non-threatening space where they did not have to prove anything at all—we started discovering that this meant so much. We worked with adolescent girls, with them, too, there were excellent results.

I began to get great enjoyment from working with women's groups. You could see how they would become confident and . . . There were a lot of women who had pains in their shoulders, because you use the shoulder for so much work. We would do shoulder exercises and then, in five days, the pain would disappear. You notice it on their faces, they start looking relaxed, there are no frowns and many things change.

Shortly afterwards, we did this project with UNICEF on leprosy and we did a play, *Kath ki Gadi*, which was an Allaripu-UNICEF-NSD collaboration. We did some field work at NID, Calcutta, Puri; we did two-three workshops in many endemic areas, in Burdwan and Purulia, and shows in many villages.

And what is the story?

Actually, it is a play which has no storyline, in fact, I was very nervous about this play. It was like a play being performed by a group and the group has invited these two people, Kanu and Madan, who were patients at one time, to come and narrate their experiences. And the play starts with a journey to Puri and Madan

goes there and there is chaos and the actors comment and the play starts. And there is Kanu's story and Madan's story—these two stories—how they went through the experience of rejection by families, finally rediscovering a home in a leprosy colony, among people. The person on whom I based Madan's character was actually a pro-Vice Chancellor's son, but he was kept locked up in a house, and he did not even know that he could be cured until he actually ran away from the house. Then later he was cured. And he said that wherever I worked, whenever they wanted to hurt me, they always brought this up against me; like a sin you have committed, like a black mark in your book which is brought up every time. So finally he went and settled in a leprosy colony. Looked after their colony or whatever. And Kanu was a girl whose husband threw her out and she came away and then later she started living in a leprosy colony. Then her father died and her mother was ill and she went to look after her mother. She was accepted at home because she was willing to look after the mother. Two different stories, one where she was accepted back and one where he rejects the world. Madan's was a very angry tale, Kanu's was more healing. These two stories keep coming and going and the action keeps getting interrupted in between. And NSD did this and, to our great surprise, it was very well received. It had no real story, it was more that the actors worked so hard. It was the Junior Repertory, with students who had recently passed out, and I did it with them. They showed tremendous enthusiasm and collected material, visited the colony and asked people there to write about their experiences. So they really made the play—the actors. Then UNICEF organized for the play to travel to Bombay and Pune, Hyderabad. And we had all these meetings after the play, and the actors actually participated in the group discussions. I think it was a very meaningful experience for them, apart from being very creatively satisfying. This was in 1984-85.

What were the other plays you did?

We were working with the Industries Department, Human Resources, the Education Department, and we would work with women's groups and with children and we were lucky enough to get some money to do a play also. In fact, *Reshmi Rumal* was performed . . . This is a play about women who live in purdah, about life in purdah and there is this woman who is considered very 'good', she is a loved bhabi, a loved daughter-in-law, her husband lives in the city. And there is the younger brother-in-law and his wife . . . She is really the queen of the house. She is always making these handkerchiefs and doing embroidery and all that. And the day before Holi, the woman is wondering whether her husband will come and what they would do for Holi. There were a lot of these women's games which they play, dulha dulhan and so on. And then her husband comes and just then, she gets a backache. She is always sitting and doing things. And then the singers come to the house. There is this one singer-dancer who is dancing and she is very fascinated by him. There is a whole sequence where she gradually throws away her embroidery and follows the dance step by step to the extent that she goes wild and her hair comes undone. The singers just go away after that. But she feels free and different. And they try to hold her back, but that night she disappears from the house. They do not know where she has gone. They keep wondering—the husband is waiting, wondering, and there is a whole sequence between him and his sister where—being so close they feel they are strangers to each other and he feels the same about his wife. And then she is brought back by the brother-in-law and he says she was just standing by a pillar with her bag. And there is the whole thing because she stayed out. And there is a mami who is very clever in a good sense and she gets a baba to exorcise her

because she says she is possessed by an evil spirit. So she is taken back into the house but she is no longer the same person. And her husband, for the first time, realizes that his wife had so much more in her than he had thought, that she was capable of such passion and intensity. But she is more and more distanced from the house and she can never get back to her embroidery—getting back to the images—she has outgrown many of those things. There are other characters, there is her daughter who is growing up, there is an aunt who is a child-widow. It's partly a fun play, and partly a serious play. I wrote this in 1986-87.

And after that?

After that, I wrote two short plays. One is *Dayre* and the other *Badlar*. *Dayre* was about two women, a mother and a daughter, and the other is a solo piece, post the anti-Sikh Delhi riots. *Badlar* is seen through the eyes of a woman-sweeper, who sweeps the streets of Delhi and loves Delhi and has seen the whole carnage. This is a kind of monologue.

And you directed all these?

I directed all these. Working with different groups and different people. But you know, Bhanu [Bhanumati Rao] was there in *Reshmi Rumal* and in *Aks Paheli* and in *Badlar*. And Bhanu was there in another play we did later on, called *Lado Mausí*, in '94. That was the last play we did together, we have not done anything new. But she acted in *Lado Mausí*.

And what was that about?

That was actually an Indianized version of *Travels with My Aunt*. The politics of the novel is not there. It is more the character of the aunt who is fun-loving . . .

Does it say anything about women?

Well, it does definitely try to bring out the fun-loving side in *Lado Mausí*, who at seventy-five, is younger than most men at fifty-five, and has this zest for life, this exuberance. This character caught my fancy and I read it and re-read it, and Lakshmi also said why don't we do something light for a change? So I thought about it and Bhanu just fitted into it.

Dayre, you said, was about a mother and daughter. What is the theme?

It is set in Delhi, and it's about a mother who has been a housewife and has great aspirations and dreams and she has sort of pinned them on her daughter. And her daughter has grown up and she doesn't stay in the house and is leading a very carefree life while the mother is looking after a sick husband. And the daughter comes home one night and she has an offer to go to Cyprus. And her great dream was that her mother should come with her. The thing was that mothers do have dreams for their daughters, but daughters also have dreams for their mothers. Her dream is that she would like to take her mother along . . . that her mother is no longer caught up in domesticity and she can laugh and play around and come with her to the sea and all that. And the mother is very taken with the idea but she doesn't want to enter her daughter's territory, she feels that the home is her own territory. She makes all kinds of excuses and the girl is, of course, disappointed at the end. The mother won't go, she is not willing to be on the receiving end rather than the giving end.

What came after that?

After that was *Poshak*, in 1992. It's about a young boy who loves to play music and his family, of course, wants him to get a job and get on with life like his other

brothers. But he likes to play his mouth organ and compose songs. It's a very unstructured play, free-flowing, basically about this boy. He goes to the bazaar and somebody tries to grab his mouth organ, and another boy comes and saves him with his Swiss army knife. And then this boy is dazzled by the power of this knife and he also picks up a knife. And one day, he goes to the ration shop and when he doesn't get the ration, he takes out his knife and it creates a commotion. He becomes a hero in the bustee. But his mother is terrified because the police could get him. And how he falls into this trap . . . on the one hand, there is his friend who wants to get into the business of making music cassettes and selling them—commercialization—and on the other, there is this neta-type of man who sees in him a great possibility of creating a local hero and who sort of takes him under his wing. And he becomes a local neta (leader) with a lot of money, a lot of influence in the locality and over boys of his age. But how gradually he finds that even the neta is actually using his voice and the friend has commercialized his songs—both are his words but he doesn't identify with any of them. The play begins from the end and this boy is not wearing anything. He says, I have no clothes which fit me, because all my clothes are either too small or too big. All the clothes which he has worn all his life are things which have not quite fitted him. And the play is really about that: poshak means 'clothes', but it also means 'identity'. So it is about this young boy seeking his identity; a very unrealistic sort of play.

And after that came Azizunnissa?

Yes, I wrote that in 1997. It is about this tawaif (courtesan) in Kanpur who joined the sepoys when they revolted against the British. She is said to have been behind the massacre of the British women and children which was part of the history of the mutiny in Kanpur. She was from Lucknow but she had settled in Kanpur. There could be various reasons for her to be in Kanpur but I saw a streak of independence to the point of self-destruction. I felt she was the kind of character who would not want to be under anybody's protection. Very bindaas. She had this very public affair with Shamsuddin Sawar of the 42nd Cavalry, who was actually on the frontline of the mutiny in Kanpur. And the soldiers had many reasons to be wary of the British, but one was also the pork and the beef fat, and I looked upon it as a kind of call of the conscience. In the sense that over and above all the advantages that they were getting from the British, there were many other reasons . . . the taking over of Awadh which the sepoys resented very much, their own lands in the villages were being taken away by the British, not being able to defend them, all these reasons were there, but this was the last straw. And I think the courtesan also felt the same way about her conscience as the soldiers did. The fact that she had no family, the fact that she was not under the protection of any man, was an asset, so that she could step out of her house and take part in the mutiny. It was like a choice between the pen and the sword. Ghalib lived at the same time but Ghalib did not take up the sword. So that was in my mind, why did Azizun do it? Why did she feel that being a singer or a poet was not enough? She really had this desire to prove herself. Or probably the desire to be part of a man's world, because war is really a very male area. These things also probably played a role—apart from a desire to serve the land or the country, there were other things, the desire for adventure, the desire to be part of a man's world, that got her into it.

First, apparently, she started spying for them, getting information from the British club. And there is a suggestion that she is attacked and can't defend herself—so that desire to be independent, protect and look after herself, was

probably driving her. The first half really deals with her coming into the male world. And the second half, when I now look back at the play, was really a kind of questioning. A woman tries to prove herself in a man's world and tries to be a man—what happens to the woman inside her? What happens to her music, to her song? What happens to her relationship with other women? For example, there is a sequence in the play when Kanpur was temporarily in the hands of Nana Saheb. The soldiers are revelling and they want Azizun to dance again for them. Azizun does not dance, but there was this other girl who was under her, Roshni—she compels Roshni to dance for them. Azizun also wants to prove to herself that she can be as much of a man as the other men around her. And there is the incident of Ali Khan who was eloping with the general's girl whom he had fallen in love with and married. And she feels that Ali Khan should give up the girl to the Nana because she is white—or rather, of mixed blood. But he says that she is my wife and I will not give her up. Then they have a kind of a duel and Azizun loses. And he says, you are a woman, so I will not kill you. And again she feels that she has the need to go on proving that she is as much of a man as any of the others. And therefore, this whole massacre that took place in Kanpur, of the British women and children . . .

So I question—it is probably unfair to question an event that happened 150 years ago, but it is a way of questioning our present—that if women are to be in positions of power, then is it going to be the same agenda as the men or is it possible to have a different agenda? Also, is it possible to read this from the point of view of a woman's consciousness? And what about the factors of race? Black and white—even in America you see that. A black woman would first identify with the blacks and a white woman with the whites, rather than with each other. So these are also our identities, not just those of a man or a woman. And these are the questions that too many history books ignore—when I was going through them, these were the questions that were coming to mind.

I have a fictional character within the play called Zubeda, who is very close to Azizun, but who disagrees with Azizun in the second half of the play and questions her. And some people ask me, who is the heroine, Azizun or Zubeda? Zubeda is probably a different consciousness. Neither is perfect, but I think Azizun began participation because she had a desire to win God but after the massacre she feels, I have lost my God whom I wanted to reach out to. I have lost him. So it was a great tragedy also, for this reason. What she began with, she lost midway—she loses Shamsuddin, he dies. The British, too, have lost, because it was a battle which nobody won. They may have got the land of Kanpur back, but they lost the people they loved, and they lost their own souls. If you follow the history, it is very interesting that none of the main generals survived the war for long. They were killed by the heat of India and by cholera and Neil was murdered, the general who caused the greatest atrocities, he was killed. And a lot of Englishmen who stayed back had very stressful lives after that, they could not get over the fact that they had been unable to protect their dear ones. And I think that was the hurt that the Indians were trying to inflict on them, a moral wound. We will not let you have the glory of having protected your own people—and that was a combination of both guilt and defeat they lived with. So they also lost and, in Kanpur, nobody really won.

In fact, Bhaskar [Chandavarkar] had done the music for the play and he was telling me that in Kanpur they have this place, where there is a platform. And when I asked someone to take me to the place—Bibighar—they took me there. It is a park, called Nana Park, Peshwa Park. Children playing cricket and all that. So

I thought this was not the right place, but I saw the same picture of the place in many books, the Memorial. And I thought the children should really not be playing here. Those who wanted to go away, by the very fact that they are buried here, have become eternally part of the land. How will you remove them? Those who have drowned in the Ganga have become part of it. You can never deny it. Now they belong to this land—there is a line in the play also, to that effect. You don't know ultimately who is of which race because both have become part of the same mud, part of the same place.

Do you feel that as a woman in theatre, your approach is different?

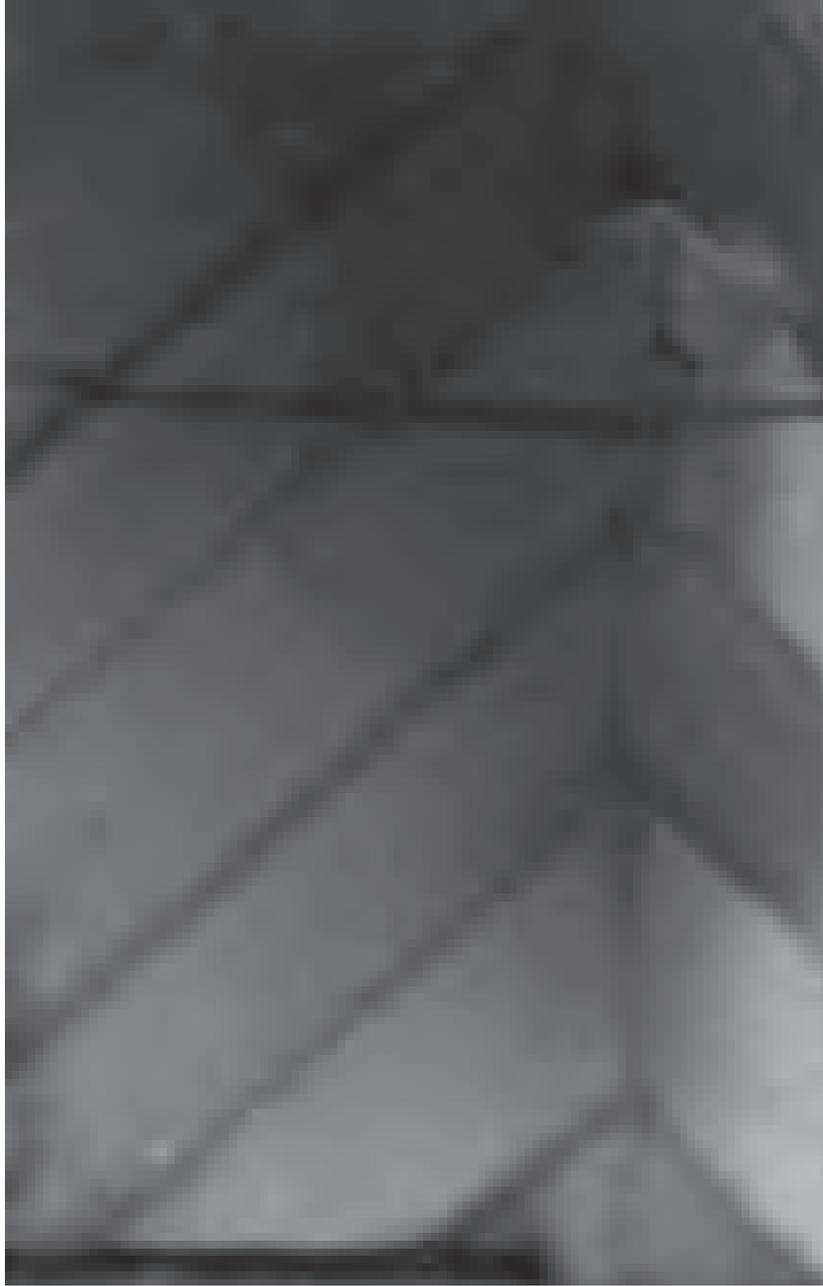
I think so, yes. Because the values that we have got are very different. Because we are not in prominent positions, we didn't really learn how to live with the world, how to deal with the world in a way that future generations may get the experience of the elders being there. I think that innocence helps and I think that innocence is in itself of great value because then you can do things in a different way. You don't have to compete. There are many things that you can decide for yourself, for example, as a director you don't always have to prove yourself. You can work with an approach where you can make space for others to come in also, you can be more exploratory in your work and less academic, you can be more true to your own experiences. I also believe you can do interesting things with your women characters. For example the *Adhe Adhure* that I directed. It's an anti-Savitri play. When I did it, I looked at Savitri as a working-class woman, who has to bear up with all the prejudices that the play has . . . Like we have seen working woman in ordinary life putting up with all these prejudices . . . Dealing with the play, and the contents of the play as being more prejudice than really dealing with the truth. And just working from there on and playing her as a working-class woman. The fact that Savitri is not having an affair with everyone, maybe she has had one or two affairs. The fact that if she hadn't had those affairs she would probably have gone insane, that she needed those affairs . . . In the play, the relationship between the mother and daughter became a very important aspect. When I was doing the play, the girl who was doing the mother and the girl who was playing the daughter and myself—all our children were with our mothers. And we did see that Savitri did not have a mother she could go back to. The daughter at least had a mother she could come back to, okay, whatever be the relationship, the mother was not going to throw her out. The relationship between the mother and daughter was developed as a very gentle one. And if there is one character within the scenario who understands the woman and has sympathy for her, so many things change for the audience also. She is not being hated by everyone, she does not hate everybody. It makes an important difference.

Again, it was very challenging . . . We didn't change the text at all, although I was tempted to. And I think it worked. Many people said it is surprising that the play was not looked at like this earlier. It seemed a very simple, commonsensical approach.

So things like this, bringing in certain values. Not going to the extent of making women just mono-characters without shape or evil—the good and the bad is in us all. The point is how you judge it or how you don't judge it and I think not judging it is a better way of allowing a character to grow. So I think that kind of work woman directors would do and are doing.

And in terms of dealing with actors?

What I feel more and more convinced of, even while working with students, is



Sumati, Delhi (1989)

that the student or the actor's own sense of well-being, sense of being centred, is crucial. And I see acting more and more as a question of concentration. So having your attention centred, concentrated on what you have to do, and to be alive to the vibrations that you receive from your co-actors. To build and develop on that. There are some sessions we have when I tell them to look at each other and keep working. And there is a whole script that they feel, a whole relationship which starts developing between them. More and more I believe that it is the actors' feeling of well-being, feeling good, feeling relaxed, and feeling the trust and confidence, that allows miracles to happen. You have to allow it to happen, you don't hold back. And also, of course, all the other things, understanding the play, understanding the character, understanding the logic, all that—you have to allow yourself to enter into a situation and be in it so completely that the situation guides you and you follow it, almost, not be holding back and questioning it all the time. Often the actors get scared, I should not be thinking this, I should not be doing this. You have to think, but before thinking there is a level where the thinking is done for you in a way that you don't have to force yourself into it . . . I have a feeling that this is very, very important.

Also, I would say, trusting your own experience, trusting yourself also. Because as women in an area where there are very few women, you don't very often even think what this could mean to you. But I think it is very important to keep asking yourself how close this is to your experience. Trusting your experience when you are doing something or arriving at something. Very important.

Like there are some roles, and when girls are given those roles and told to do them in a particular way, they just do it, they don't question it. But I think it is very important to ask yourself whether it feels true to you or not. Or whether it is a kind of imposed view that you are rendering. And I think it is important for actresses and directors and even designers to bring in this element again and again. To bring in their experience into whatever they are doing. Not to leave their experience out, and go by what may be a view given to them, but to test it on their experience. I think that is how we bring in something of our time in theatre, when we test it on our experience.

Tell us about your experience at the Beijing Conference

For the Beijing Conference, there was a special cell created by the NGOs here to coordinate our representation at Beijing. Theatre has been part of the women's movement in India, and groups had been using different kinds of theatre. Some of them did performances, some of them did role plays, some used it in workshops . . . songs had also been used a lot. We felt that this kind of creative expression of women should also find a place in whatever we had to say at Beijing. Also there was the feeling that there would be too many discussions and seminars, so why not also have a different way of putting our issues forward? And thirdly, also, I think a lot of the women going to Beijing were rural women, they were very articulate but not highly academic, and I think this form was part of their expression in many ways.

They asked me if I would coordinate this programme for them. So we tried to trace groups which had used this form in some way—we also wanted it to be a little representative geographically. So we did five workshops in India. In the north-east, in Imphal we did it with the Meira Paibai group followed up by a workshop in Guwahati, to which other groups from the north-east also came, from Tripura and Mizoram and so on. In Kanpur, we did it with Sakhi Kendra

(see *STQ 9*), in Raipur, with Chhatisgarh Mahila Mukti Sanghatan, Hyderabad, where a lot of groups from the south came together. And in Bikaner there was not exactly a theatre workshop but a huge mela with the Urmul Trust, in which there was everything: theatre, puppetry, origami, all kinds of creative activities, to which about 500-600 women came from the neighbouring villages. And then from different groups women were selected and we had one workshop in Delhi,



Azizunissa, NSD Rep (1998)

in Anandgram, and we all stayed there for 15-20 days, and we tried to cull out some common concerns, evolve new plays. We made three plays. One was the army versus the citizens, you can say, based mostly on the problems of the north-east, where there is a kind of terrorist activity or movement going on by the youth, what happens when the army comes in. One was on multi-nationals coming into India. And one—this really turned out to be the main piece of the workshop—a panorama of the Indian women's movements, the beginnings, how it has gone into different areas, what are the issues and concerns, how the movements in the different parts of the country were picking up . . . So it really was taking an overview of the entire movement with music, collages, movement, and eventually this turned out to be the main piece of the performance. When we were having the workshops in different places, we had taken a huge long piece of cloth and wherever we went, all the women who came to the workshops, to the melas, they had put their handprints on it. In Beijing, at the end of this we used to bring the scroll onto the stage, it was really like bringing in the signatures of all the women who had participated in the process. Here, we found it very effective dramatically. When we went to Beijing, it became a very emotionally charged moment. We were there with the memories of so many other women's participation, who were not there physically but who were very much there in

our minds. That was very beautiful, and we became very emotional, and I think the audience also became very emotional. So this we did many times over, actually. Even on the main stage, there was one slot for each country to do an item. So from India, they decided that they would put this collage up. It was 30-35 minutes and we tried to cover it all—the different strands of the movement, from the freedom movement to the fisherwomen's struggles and the anti-arrak movements and all this. And this really worked the best.

Was there any follow-up later with the women whom you met at workshops?

There were some plans of follow-up, that we should take these different plays to different parts of the country . . . But everyone was very busy and they had to go back to their own groups. So there was no formal follow-up. But in the next project we did—on pandavani—we tied up with them. They helped with organizing the shows and the shows became a source of feedback from women's organizations. And the informal follow-up still continues. There is a lot of exchange but not in a very organized way.

There was lots of talk that the group should stay on for six months and perform and so on, but it didn't happen

And the current project that you are involved in—can you talk about that?

It happened after Beijing. There was a seminar and various groups had come. Allaripu was also there. And this whole question came upon once again. It keeps coming up and Allaripu has been asked many times why they are not working on folk forms and why are they not incorporating folk elements. My answer is usually that I belong to Delhi (*laughs*). But I think deeper than that we felt we did not know enough. And also we felt that the forms each have their own origins, their own histories, and, you know, it's not just enough to take up certain elements . . . There is no harm in it either, because we are always taking up and learning things from everywhere. But that could not really be called experimenting or working with that form.

You were saying that you felt that it became an urban exercise, that it enriched the urban theatre, that it wasn't giving anything back to the traditional form itself, in terms of its own evolution.

Yes. Because the form is there where it is. When we like the form, we take certain elements and incorporate them in our own work. So it is an experiment of the modern urban theatre scene—it does not become an experiment within the confines of that form as it exists and where it exists. We felt that if at all we should do any work that is more related to the folk artists and to the form, it should be in the context of the form in the place where it exists, with the people who do it and for the audience that traditionally goes and sees that form. Most of the things that we do are minus the traditional audience. That audience does not exist when we do it. Until you have that form, that place, those players and that audience, you can't have the form or any important work for its evolution. It can be important for other reasons, for another purpose, which is equally valid, but it would not be in this context. So we were then asked to devise a project and we thought about it. We devised a project in which over a period of three years we would be working with five different groups in different parts of the country and the project was on the portrayal of women in the popular folk medium. It was a very broad-based kind of a thing. So we had to know what they are doing already, go into depth about some of the important women characters which are already being played in these forms. Then, the second stage of the exercise was

that we would do a new play, prepare a new performance with them which would do twenty shows in their own belt of performance. This was the basic outline that we worked out. Then we traced the groups and we have so far worked with khayal, nautanki, pandavani, and the group Surabhi, which is the old-style company theatre in Andhra Pradesh. With two groups we have done two workshops, khayal and Surabhi, and we plan to do the fifth one in Maharashtra, on tamasha.

When we started working, we were more concerned about the form and content of the performance, how it communicates with the audience. At that time we had not thought much about the role of the woman performer, or what is the psyche of the woman performer and how it contributes to the whole presentation. This much we had thought, that we would do khayal, where there are no women, and that we would do nautanki, which is full of women. These were the two we had earlier thought of. And when we were working with nautanki, we starting seeing connections. You see, both khayal and nautanki had their origins in the raas, the Mathura raas. So we could see how khayal had developed in a more musical way and the nautanki that we worked on was the Kanpuri nautanki, which is different from the Haathras—Haathras is very musical. But Kanpur is a kind of dialogue rendered into music, khadi nautanki, it is rough and much more dramatic. And it incorporates elements of Parsi theatre and also has dialogue built in and so on, it's a mixed style, with elements of company theatre in it. When we were doing the nautanki, we thought it would be a good idea to extend this. In fact, for nautanki, we had worked with two groups. One was a group in Kanpur and one is a group in Banda. Now Banda is very close to Madhya Pradesh. So we decided that since we had come so far, we must work on the pandavani. It was a kind of belt. To see how it has changed gradually from a place where there was no women, to women, to where the woman has emerged as a solo performer. We started finding this very exciting. So we added pandavani.

When we started working—myself and Bhanwar Gopal—at that moment we were only concerned, you know, about processing the project, to be very honest. It was very difficult getting the groups to think in a different way. If it was something like the song and drama division, they would have done it without thinking. Because they do some of that. But here the plays were the things we were working on, making slight changes in women character, and seeing how three-dimensional the woman is. Of course some of the traditional women characters in their own scripts are not bad. They have quite strong women characters in their scripts also. But these women were like saints or bhakts or had sanctity of some kind. That's why the first one we did was *Meera*, but the second one, we thought we should do *Piyu Sandhi*, because she's a sensuous woman who marries, has children, is beautiful and is not averse to sexual contact, she is more than willing. We wanted to deal with this kind of character as well, she should not just be very one-dimensional all the time. Not that Meera is one-dimensional, she is full of her own flourish. But then again, in people's eyes she is a bhaktin, a legend . . . in the case of Meera they agreed, but they were not willing to work on Sita or Draupadi because they felt that unless they could be convinced from the shastra point of view, about our interpretation, they could not make any changes. The main khayal artist, Ugamraj, felt that he would be answerable to people if they questioned him and he should be able to tell them why he did it and quote from texts and substantiate his argument. He felt very strongly about this. So we thought, okay, we'll do this later. So first we worked

on Meera, and the second time, we did on *Piyu Sandhi*, a Rajasthani folk tale.

So how come Meera was allowed?

Well, he's from Merta, and Meera was born in Merta, near Jodhpur. It is culturally very interesting that in and around Merta, Meera is accepted. But, in and around Chitor, Meera is not accepted even today. Her songs are not as popular in that area as around Merta. Because she was a daughter of Merta and a daughter-in-law of Chitor, where she went against all norms and left and went to Dwarka as a bhaktin. So in some ways it was an insult for Chitor and many people say today that it was really Meera who was the undoing of Chitor. The way we looked at Meera was not as a legend but as a historical character and we got material, we traced material which we could even share with Ugamraj. He was convinced, but we had to do this whole exercise of sharing the material with him and discussing with him and he did not disagree with what was there, was factual. It was very interesting—there is this famous thing that Meera is brought this glass of poison and she drinks it and nothing happens. We felt, logically and historically, what could have happened? What we found really as an answer was that maybe . . . Meera was very popular in the women's harem, her songs were sung by all the working-class men and women. So she was obviously very popular with them. She was not popular with the king who did not like her and she was also a threat to him politically because of her popularity. So he was the one who was going to poison her, nobody else. But the king was not going to carry the glass of poisoned milk to her, it would go through servants. So it was obviously some woman dasi who was carrying this and who suspected it, and it would have changed hands because it was going from one palace to another, it was not likely that the same servant would walk through palaces—and somewhere it changed hands and somebody brought her a glass which did not contain poison. That is what we had worked out. Ugamraj found it a bit disappointing that the miracle should disappear. We told him, look, this is a bigger miracle, that she was so popular that the people protected her. So he agreed. And later we thought maybe we should have kept the poison coming and nothing happening and then explained how it could have happened. Then we could have retained the magic and also contemporized it. But it was written in as a very straight kind of thing—that the dasi changes it and nothing happens to her. So these were the kinds of things that we had to work out.

We saw that Meera had a politics, and the politics was a politics of equality and also of peace. Because hers was a political marriage, a loveless marriage. The politics was very real for her, she was a victim of the kind of alliances that were happening at that time in all the princely states. That was also the time when Akbar was fighting with a lot of these states of Rajasthan and they were constantly losing. And losing battles meant losing money, it meant losing people, losing soldiers, it was not an easy thing for the states to battle. And therefore we understood somewhere that why she became so popular was that her idea of peace must have appealed to the people who were bearing the burden of these wasteful wars that were taking place. I mean, it was also partly ego that these states were constantly fighting each other to establish superiority. It was really against all this that the poetry of peace and love comes up and we saw it in that light. And I think Ugamraj-ji also saw it in that light. He did not disagree with all these things. She refused to be a sati when her husband died. And that is also on record. In fact, her belief in God seemed to be a source of defiance—you know, I believe in God and only in God and therefore I will not bow down to anybody else. And I think it gave her a lot of courage to stand up against the

family and their philosophy, I think she got a lot of courage from her faith in God, or her love for God, it was not just an empty love of God, there was a sociological base to it. So, that is the way we looked at Meera and that was the way we evolved the script and then we sat with the script-writer and we worked with him . . .

The script-writer is a local khayal script-writer?

Yes, and then the actors came and we had to work with the actors. And again, within the form of khayal, where there is both singing and dancing, dancing,



Kath ki Gadi (1984)

which in this day, has become very vulgarized. I mean, it is vulgarized, but very odd, because they are all men and they dress up as women and what the audience receives is images of women dancing like that but the audience also knows that they are male. And after a while, it is such a sexual image—it ceases to matter that they are men or women . . .

It is the same thing which happens with the naqqals in Punjab. It is a very titillating, sexually arousing dance, very deliberate—the men know they are men but they respond to them as if they are women and at the same time that they have the licence to catcall, whistle and . . . you know, there's no question of their wives minding. There's a strange free space, because they're indulging the sexual attraction but they are not tying it up with the morality thing because they are not women. It is a very strange thing that happens.

Yes, there is a kind of sexual energy and it does not matter after a while whether it is a man or a woman. But it is the release of that energy, both in them and in the audience. So to take out all that and have only dances which go with Meera, go with the play, was very tough for them. Learning a new play is a tough thing

and learning to adapt something which would have to relate to the content was also very tough for these artists. But Ugamraj was a good teacher and he brushed up their skills, taught them many things, it was a learning process for them.

And they were thrilled when they performed this in Pushkar, which is their annual khayal mela. There the play was a big success and it was accepted by all the khayal artists who come to see one another's work. When they felt accepted by them, then they really felt that they had achieved something. Till then they were doing it but I think that they were getting unsure of what they were doing,



Kath ki Gadi

and after this, they felt that this was worth it. And next year, when Ugamraj did it, he used a stronger team. He got the leading performers, including Pukhraj, who is a really wellknown performer. This time they performed *Piyu Sandhi*.

How did you work on Piyu Sandhi?

Piyu Sandhi is a Rajasthani folk tale, about a woman who promises her father that she will avenge the theft of their cattle. And after the father's death, she dresses as a boy and pursues them. She is so strong that she ties up with a chieftain and they drive away the Pathans who come to steal their cattle. And then the chieftain discovers that she is a woman and proposes marriage and she accepts. And after marriage, she tells him that she has been engaged to somebody in her childhood. And then he comes and tries to enter their house, but she kills him. And she gives birth to two sons and the sons kill a lion. And the king comes to know and he is very surprised and he says he wants to see the mother of these children who are so strong. So he calls the husband and says, I want to see your wife. The husband is very worried because it is taboo, you can't take your wife and show her to the king, nor can you say no to the king. Then she again dresses

as a man and goes where the king is on shikar and joins him as a young lad. And the king is very impressed with her and gives her his turban. But she still has to go to court and her husband is vexed. And she says, don't be vexed, just go to court and show him the turban. And he does that and the king realizes that the young lad was his wife. And he is not only impressed by her bravery but also by her wit and the way she handled the situation. And so they gain acceptance and they live happily ever after. So it's a very happy story and very challenging because the boy who plays the woman has to play her playing a lad. Boy playing girl playing boy, so disguise upon disguise. A young boy in the group did it, very well. He was also called Pukhraj—junior Pukhraj we used to call him. And this time we had very little to do. The script-writer wrote the script almost by himself, we did not have to sit with him and structure it. And Ugamraj handled the training of the performers. They were much more at ease with the performance.

Did the play go down well?

Very well. And now a new text has been added to their repertoire. And we performed both the plays in Nagor, Merta, Ajmer, Jodhpur, in that belt.

Then the second form we took up was nautanki. It was very sad. We started when Gulab-bai was still alive, we got in touch with her, she passed away while we were making plans. I had met her earlier when I was working in Kanpur. So we let some time pass and then we contacted her two daughters, Asha and Madhu. Asha composes most of the music, Madhu handles the direction. So we contacted them and they were willing to tie up with the project.

There was the story of the three sisters who committed suicide in Kanpur a couple of years ago? So we took that, but we changed it. We had three sisters, but only one committed suicide, one runs away from the house and one is the typical 'good' girl; and we had the three lives we tried to bring out. It was very interesting, because the girl who runs away becomes a dancer and the 'good' girl is happily married, but her husband is having an affair with another woman. And to tie up the plot, the other woman is the dancer and then the two sisters meet. So Madhu said, when the two sisters meet, the one who is the dancer, the one who has erred, she's the one who should die—typical Hindi film ending—the good sister and her husband should live as husband and wife, happily after this. She was very excited about this script she had worked out and she said that it would work very well with the audience. So we had to have this whole session with her and the others, to ask, why can't the sisters live together? We tried to convince her that it would work; she was very worried that the audience would not accept it. We said, let us try it out and if they don't accept it, then we will change it.

So what was the ending that you proposed?

That both women reject the man. When the girl goes there and sees it is her sister, and they talk and she says how they got involved and all that . . . Their feelings for each other also come back. And the husband comes and sees the two of them together and he tries to reject them, first one and then the other. He is angry with his wife for having come there. And then when the other woman says something to the effect that no, that is not fair, then he gets angry with her and rejects her and wants to go back to his wife. And there was a comical bit here about how he goes from one to the other. Finally, he has to leave and the two women decide to live together. The script here was very well written, with a lot of good poetry and music in it.

The audience accepted it?

The audience accepted it. And what was very nice in this Kanpur thing was when we performed in the villages, people said that they were seeing a nautanki after a long time. Because nautanki has just become dance, film songs and dance. There is a play, but you hardly do the play for about ten minutes—the rest is all dancing, singing. So old people said that they were watching a real nautanki after a long time. People watched it because it had a story and very dramatic development and so on . . .

What happened to the sister who died?

Oh, the memory of her remains. Because of her committing suicide, the girl runs away because she doesn't want to commit suicide like that. So that was the thread and connection . . .

Another thing we tried to do at Kanpur was perform at colleges. That was a very big thing because nautanki is not looked up to and for the nautanki group, that was a very important thing, because that means a certain kind of acceptance. We performed in women's colleges and in one or two places we had a very good reception, like when we did it in hostels—late into the night, we had discussions. So for the group, it was a new experience, that a performance could lead to discussion and sharing on a equal footing. And it was a wonderful experience for both sides. They did, I think, more than 20 shows, about 24 shows.

You haven't gone back to do a second play with them?

No, we haven't. We are having some difficulty. We want to because we want to do the second play on Begum Hazrat Mahal. It's a very good, very interesting story . . . We're having a little problem with funds. But we still want to go back and do it . . .

What is the story of Begum Hazrat Mahal?

You see, Wajid Ali Shah had this huge harem. He had this parikhana, all these women who would dance with him and sing with him in his performances. And he used to marry them all. So he had this huge harem of begums. And Begum Hazrat Mahal was one of most inconspicuous begums, actually. In fact, there is a story in Amritlal Nagar's book, that Wajid Ali Shah was involved with a woman. And she was his mother's maid. And the mother did not want him to get involved with the maid, so she said to him, she has a snake mark on her back and that is very inauspicious for you. So he laid off. But then he got all his begums inspected so that whoever had a snake mark would be thrown out. Begum Hazrat Mahal was one of the eight unfortunate women who had something like a snake mark. They were chucked out of the harem, effectively divorced. So they were living outside the palace. She had no status within the court. But when the army laid siege to the Residency, and Wajid Ali Shah was under arrest in Calcutta, they needed a prince to be crowned king, in whose name they could continue the war. So they approached the begums. And at the first round of meeting and counselling, no begum was willing to take the risk. Also, while Wajid Ali Shah was still alive, to place her son on the throne of Lucknow was not something any of them was willing to do. Begum Hazrat Mahal was the one who stepped forward and said, okay, I will make my son—he was very young at that point, six or seven—king, fight the battle in his name. And she was a much-loved woman. The stories about her are very beautiful. People talk about how she distributed gold and silver, how beautiful she was and how brave she was, a very popular heroine. And she never actually surrendered to the British. She fled to Nepal after

the defeat and when she was called back, she refused to come. She stayed in Nepal—she died in Nepal. And so she rose from a dancing girl to a warrior.

In the course of this work, you must have come across real clashes between your way of approaching content or thinking about things, and people you were working with. That was one of the challenges, right, of learning to respect the separate points of view which comes out of the different cultures and be willing to negotiate. So can you talk to me about a few such examples of your way of looking at a text and their way of looking at a text and how you adjusted your ideas?

Like with the khayal, with the style of performance, I still feel that we should have paid more attention to the acting. But Ugamraj would tell me again and again that this is not a play, it is khayal, essentially singing. And that is the way it has to be. I kept feeling that the dramatic growth of the character in terms of acting was not really coming out, but Ugamraj just felt that that is the way it should be left and the actors were really doing their best so that one could not go on insisting that they do more, one had to see that one can't insist beyond a certain point.

There were actually many more such situations . . . The sequence of things, for example. They really wanted to keep kings in their full glory, which we had to allow, finally. Like Rana Sangha had to be like Rana Sangha, there was no real confrontation with him in that sense, that we would have liked in the play, not to the extent that one would have liked. He remained a great hero. But I think we had to find a meeting point, and we felt that we should not do anything that they are not convinced by. They should not do it because it was our project, they should do it only if they felt it was okay. So we had long arguments, long discussions, over the style of performance particularly. Ugamraj was a lot more open than I could have imagined because he also believed that this kind of vulgarization should go, and that it would go only when the original purity of performance was brought back. To bring that back, a good story, a good theme, was necessary. A good story and a good theme are necessary for a good portrayal of the women, also. You can't create a good powerful woman character with a shabby structure and shoddy story. So we had discussions on those lines. We couldn't do Sita with him or something like that which we would have liked to do.

Sita was mythological so she was out of bounds, but Meera was historical, so you could re-interpret her?

Exactly. With the Kanpur group, we had a lot of discussion on a theme to make the play on. And they were a bit unsure about this three-girl story. Eventually, they felt it might work because it is a Kanpur story and we had a good script-writer, Awasthiji, so if he could do the script, then it could work. So they got convinced . . . But what the nautanki group really did was, what I liked in the way they directed was that they used the nautanki style of melodrama and all that, but they used it effectively to accentuate the woman's point of view. I liked this about their work very much.

Was that something that came out of discussion or was it an instinctive performance?

Partly out of discussion, but partly, in shows, out of their own dramatic intuition. Like when Madhu was directing, I was impressed by the way she handled her actors and the way she created her climaxes. She made them at points when there

was something of the woman's point of view and, at the end, where the husband is rejected, the script is straightforward but she made it into a kind of a comedy. How the husband gradually loses his status confronting the two women, when he is actually commanding both at the opening of the scene; where he actually loses his status. And she handled that sequence very well. Where the girl commits suicide, we just had narration. A very powerful voice singing when one of the girls sees and comes and tells them that this is what has happened. Madhu felt that we should bring in the body and all that. We said that that is sensationalizing and not necessary because the music conveys much more, and that would be gory. And this will appeal at a different level. We really discussed this a lot, she felt that the audience would not respond. But I felt that no, anyone can create a tearjerker by bringing in the dead body, but if you can move them without that, just by using the song, it will be really something. So this kind of thing . . . she finally accepted it.

Another thing she did was, in the wedding scene she introduced a lot of singing and dancing. She felt that without dancing, it won't really be nautanki. So she said, I'll do it within the situation, but I'll bring it in. A wedding has to have dancing, so we'll do it here.

How long was this piece?

The piece was about two, two-and-half hours long. It varied according to audiences. When we did it in colleges, it lasted a couple of hours. In villages, it was done in more leisurely fashion, lines were added and repeated. It used to take longer.

You mentioned your work with children earlier . . .

I have worked with children at NSD, Sushma Seth had done a workshop with us. We worked with groups of children, prepared pieces with them. At the time I thought that working with children meant doing plays with them, doing them in a way that children would not get upset or angry. Gradually, as I worked with them, a whole new concept of working with children has evolved. How it is linked up with education and how the growth of a child is more important than the performance. And how to take up themes and subjects which are more child-centred and not just ones that make interesting performances. This kind of a shift was gradual. And I have done workshops with different schools, where there were no plays, but like classroom exercises. And even how one evolves a script, the method of working with children is different. And why I want to mention this is—I had done a play with TIE [Theatre in Education], *Lal Lal Haathi*. Which is an evolved script with a theatre company. It was not written. It was based on earlier bits I had worked on, in bits and pieces. It was a longish play, an hour and three quarters. About children, adults, and what the child thinks is right. The child believes that an elephant can be red, when everybody is telling him that elephants are black. And how the child's belief is so important to the child. And to continue believing in what he believes in. A story like that, a combination of fantasy and reality. There were two or three things which we found. Attitude to children, working with children and others performing for children. And also evolving at length. It was an important exercise from that point of view also.

Before this I had done *Kaath ka Hans*—a Vijaydan Detha story with NSD students. That was also an evolved script like this: I had wanted to do an oral play. We had done many shows. And new actors have come and done it and got into it. It still remains only a performance and does not exist as a script . . .

What are the differences in working with children and with adult actors?

Very, very different, absolutely different. Because children have their own resources, which are different from the resources of the adults, and one has to learn to shape along with the children. One has to be conscious of making the whole procedure very exciting and meaningful for the child, not boring, not tedious. Exciting so the child can become more aware of his or her possibilities. It is a total area of non-competition for me, children's theatre. It is teamwork and groupwork and it is also an exercise of learning to express his or her ideas or notions. Gaining confidence in trusting those ideas and putting them across. All these things are very much more important than the final play . . . One is now seeing the growth of theatre, theatre for children, children's theatre. Society is seeing meaning in theatre, at least in children's theatre—one can see that happening in places like Delhi where theatre doesn't have very strong acceptance or roots. It is a very important phenomenon for us because we see it developing roots now. We see the children now, and the parents who come with them or want the children to do something in a theatre workshop, people who are getting involved with the world of theatre I see that as a very, very good sign for the future—significant work which for years went unnoticed is now bearing fruit,

Forthcoming

Theatre Studies/Photography/Culture Studies

Dramatic Moments

Theatre in Calcutta since the 60s

Nemai Ghosh

Nemai Ghosh is best known for his photographs of Satyajit Ray at work and in his more private moments and moods, and his stills from Ray's films. Ghosh has exhibited at Cannes in 1991, at London in 1992, and several times at Calcutta and Delhi, and published a selection of his Ray collection, *Satyajit Ray at 70: Photographs by Nemai Ghosh*, with a preface by Henri Cartier-Bresson (Brussels 1991).

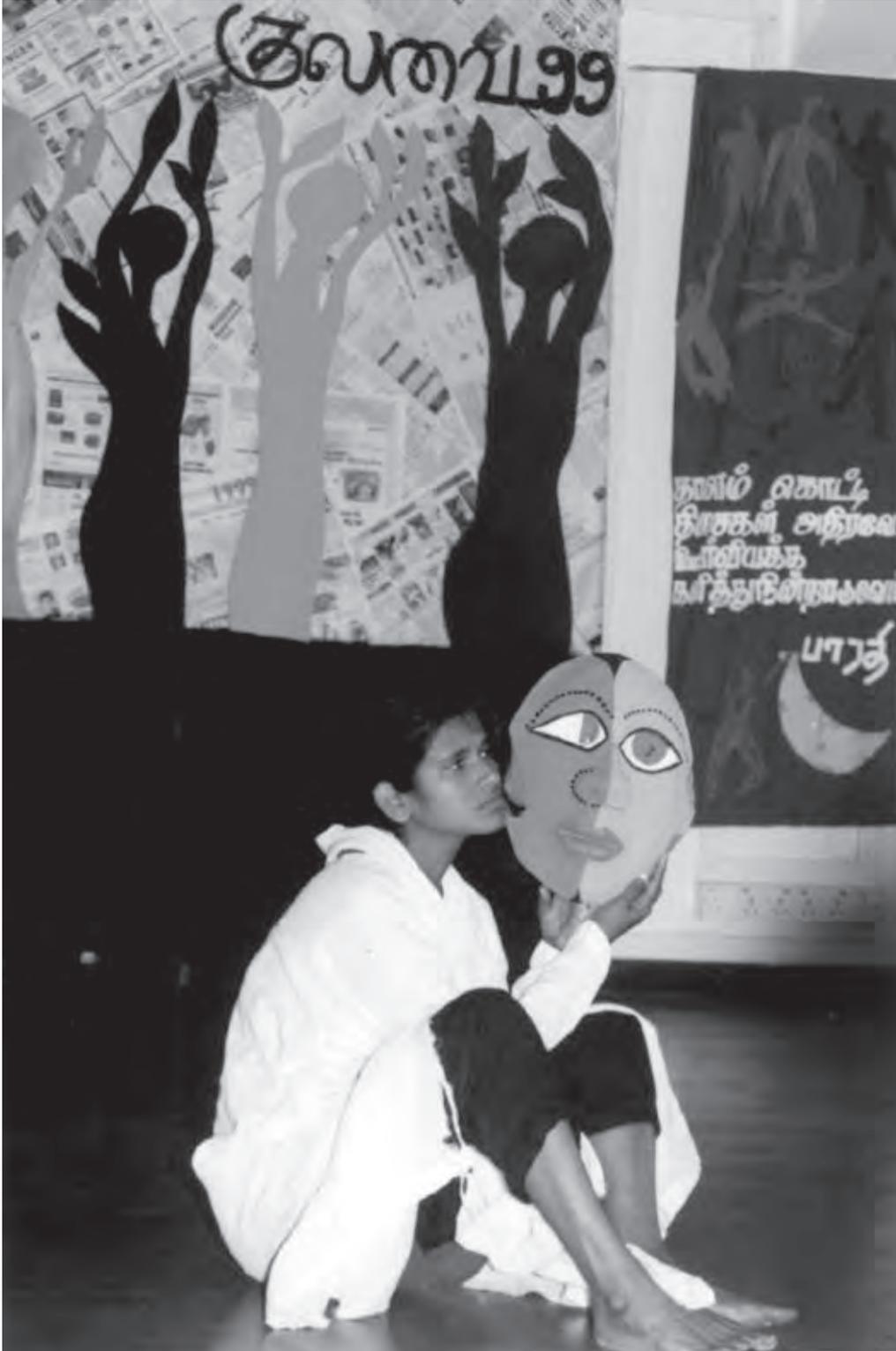
His second collection of photographs forms a pictorial history of theatre in Calcutta over the last four decades. He concentrates on the experimental theatre groups of the city and its neighbourhood—more than a hundred of them active at any given point of time—with a repertoire that features the whole range of classical and modern dramaturgy from all over the world as well as original, indigenous works. The photographs capture the distinctive individualities of renowned directors, actors and actresses like Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Tripti Mitra, Badal Sircar, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Manoj Mitra, Bibhas Chakraborty, Keya Chakraborty, Kumar Roy, and others, in performance as well as in directorial presence. Commentaries by theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay contextualize the performances that are further illuminated by a selection of readings and memorabilia—poems, directors' notes, interviews, reminiscences.

Ghosh had begun his artistic career as an actor, and brings to his theatre photography a strong subjective slant, the dramatic moments representing his own *reading of situations*, drawing on his memories and associations as an actor—the outsider/recorder turning insider to catch a fleeting, delicate shade. As he puts it himself, 'As a viewer and as a man who had loved and been in theatre, I *compose* my shots to underscore the dramatic elements and thrusts.'

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Kulavai 1999: A Report
Sameera Iyengar



Demo by Chandrika of Medha Theatre, Thrissur

Kulavai '99 is the third in a series of theatre workshop–conferences organized by Voicing Silence of M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF). Voicing Silence describes itself as a group which hopes to act as a catalyst in the process of women's awareness and development, and uses theatre as its primary medium. Kulavai, conceived as an annual event, represents Voicing Silence's initiative to create a space for the coming together of theatre workers who concentrate on gender-centred themes and presentations. Kulavai '96, the first of the series, brought together theatre persons and groups from across the nation, who have been addressing women's issues through theatre. (see *STQ 9*). Kulavai '97 was a confluence of stage artists of Tamil Nadu, a forum for sharing the experiences, ideas and opinions of women whose profession is considered 'disreputable'. After a break, Kulavai '99 brought together persons from the four southern states of India who assert the role of theatre in cultural activism and who feel the need for gendered perspectives in social action. It was an attempt to share the insights,



Scenes from *Baliyadugal* by Chemmani, Tirunelveli

experiences, problems, priorities and requirements of those who work in the field of theatre activism.

The workshop ran from 11-13 February, and was held on the MSSRF premises. The first two days of the workshop were devoted to getting a sense of the activist theatre history and practice that existed in each of the states, especially in relation to gender. Each state was allocated a session, which was to consist of presentations and demonstrations, to be followed by a general discussion of the issues raised. In the Tamil Nadu session, Dr. M. Jeeva spoke on Dalit Feminist Theatre. Demos were presented by Snehidi Kalai Kuzhu, Thiruvannamalai and Swathi Kalai Kuzhu, Karur (The latter was presented on the following day). Discussion revolved around whether subjective experience is necessary for one to be able to do Dalit (or other oppressed group) theatre, as well as the issue of aesthetics or lack thereof in activist theatre. Chelimi, Hyderabad, gave the demo for Andhra Pradesh while Kiranmayi gave an overview of women who have 'acted', either/both as actresses and/or as activists, in Telegu and Urdu theatre (the latter specific to Hyderabad). In response to D. Srinivas' (Janapadam, Hyderabad) aggressive assertion that many of the groups spoken about could not

be called theatre groups, there was an animated discussion about who gets to define what theatre is. Four people represented Karnataka. Sulochana from Samuha, Raichur, spoke of her experiences as a theatre activist working to remove the practice of devadasis and prostitution. Much debate surrounded an incident she related where a town had rid itself of prostitution due to Samuha's theatre activism, and as part of this process of cleansing itself had changed its name from Somvarpet to Ashoknagar. The problem was that in this process the prostitutes had merely been pushed out of the town; no change had occurred in their lives. The role of the theatre activist came under scrutiny and A. Mangai (Voicing Silence) stressed the responsibility of the theatre activist. Malathi of Prajna Theatre Group presented next. She highlighted the gender hierarchy that still existed within 'progressive' organizations, and also asked a pertinent question while lamenting the dearth of women playwrights: Why is it that while women have become writers in other genres (poems, short stories, novels), these literate



women remain aloof from the performing arts? Chitra (Vimochana) stressed the need for interaction between professional theatre artists/groups who take up women's issues, and women's groups who use theatre for their work. The former group, she felt, tend towards individual exploration, while the latter have always also taken up larger issues; interaction between these sensibilities could only enhance the work of each. Sulochana, Chitra and Rashmi presented demos of their work for the Karnataka session. During the Kerala session, Azad, from the Progressive Writers' Forum in Kerala, spoke of his anxieties and concerns regarding theatre, specifically the problems of representation and historical context. He raised the issue of questioning Hindutva representations. Chandrika (Medha Theatre) presented a demo of her work, and also gave an overview of women's theatre in Kerala, tying its roots to propaganda theatre. She found the existing leftist ideology in Kerala to be insufficient for addressing the concerns which haunt artists and intellectuals. In her view, it is women, dalits and tribals who encapsulate within themselves both the forces and the passion for change. This juxtapositioning of women, dalits and tribals, was something that came up a number of times during the conference.

The issues of aesthetics and the relationship between form and content were brought up over and over again. There was sharp criticism that activist theatre often gets bogged down in activism and forgets that it is theatre. It was agreed by all present that aesthetics were extremely important and should be focused on. However, as many people stressed, it is also imperative not to view mainstream theatre as the norm and to confound aesthetics with the aesthetics of that theatre. Nor should one try and compete with mainstream theatre. Activist theatre, as Mangai pointed out, has its own specific concerns, and its own specific constraints and possibilities. This theatre often has to act with urgency and immediacy; it does not always have the time to create a perfect piece. Nevertheless, experiments and innovations that take into account the context of activist theatre must go on. Only then can people truly be theatre activists and not just activists. Chandrika repeatedly stressed the need to be self-reflexive and self-critical in order for the movement to progress. She suggested adopting a more professional attitude, which would include paying attention to theatre training as well as searching for suitable forms. Behind all these concerns was the imperative that theatre activists should not assume acceptance simply because they were women doing street theatre. They must respect theatre as a communication form as well as enrich it.

The demos, all of which dealt with serious issues, tended to be extremely intense and exhausting, both for the performers and the audience. Furthermore, some of the demos still used a very simple social realism or stylistics which did not really enhance the content of the piece presented. Many participants questioned the continued practice of listing injustices and/or consistently presenting women as victims. Was there no place for humour in activist plays? Wasn't it important to portray women as agents, even when they were being victimized? And how about being less simplistic, including more nuances? A number of participants felt that they had to present things simplistically, and include the listing of injustices, because they were taking their plays to rural areas which had not had much exposure to such work. Others felt that this attitude was patronizing, and that we should not underestimate the knowledge or capacity to understand abstraction and nuances of the rural population. In fact, as Sanjoy and Sima Ganguly (Jana Sanskriti) pointed out, the traditional art forms of rural India were themselves extremely stylized, and also had a rich history of satire; if anything, their own work showed that rural populations are extremely comfortable with abstraction and stylization.

Jeeva's talk had spawned debate over whether non-Dalits could adequately portray Dalit experience. The issue was revived later through discussing insider-outsider positions. Sanjoy Ganguly cautioned that looking at a problem from the outside can leave out the experience of the problem and lead to offering unrealistic ('magical') solutions. He felt that theatre should give people the scope to act to solve their own problems (see *STQ 2*). Malathi offered the opinion that the purpose of theatre was not to offer solutions at all, but to raise consciousness and to provoke debate. Finally, it was decided to recognize that activist theatre had many stages. Many 'actors' in activist theatre are from oppressed communities themselves. When they first perform, what may appear as theatre to them may not necessarily be a performance of any quality to an audience. However, that first step is incredibly important. It marks a shedding of inhibitions—a socially important step—a possible road to catharsis for the self, and it must be recognized and accepted as such. Of course, one cannot stop there. One must then undergo theatre training so that one may finally, truly,

become a theatre activist in all senses of that word.

At the end of the second day, a three-member panel consisting of resource persons Subodh Patnaik (Natya Chetana), Sanjoy Ganguly and Malathi summarized and spoke on some of the main issues that had surfaced during the workshop. Then five groups, representing the five main issues, were formed under the leadership of the resource persons, and the workshop participants were asked to join whichever group they wished to. Malathi headed the 'Perspectives' group, Mangai the one on 'Representation', Subodh the one on 'Form and Content', Kalairani (Koothu-p-pattarai) and Chitra the 'Process' group, and Sanjoy was in charge of the group on 'Social Activism'. These smaller groups discussed their particular issues at length and, as required by the workshop, presented them the next morning in theatrical form. This was the first time that such an exercise had been attempted at Kulavai. Mina Swaminathan observed that it was very interesting that while all the groups worked on the topic given to them, each one of them fell into a different process, with the final presentations being almost textbook illustrations of different kinds of process. After two days of intense discussion, these presentations were a welcome change, with both performers and audience really enjoying themselves. The smaller group formats also allowed for a certain intimacy between participants, which was a great way to wrap up the work put in for the workshop.

The afternoon session of the third day involved some discussion of the presentations, and then a feedback session. The feedback was by and large positive. The organizers had taken care of the participants exceedingly well, and the entire proceedings had gone very smoothly. The main criticism was that there had been too much talk and too little sharing of actual theatre. Members of activist groups such as Snehidi said that they had felt a little left out on the first two days, but had really enjoyed the third. It was suggested that the format be less academic for the next Kulavai workshop. Kalairani suggested that resource persons be more intensively utilized throughout the proceedings. Mina Swaminathan (MSSRF) added that they would also do a better job of informing participants as to what to expect the next time around, so that people could come to the workshop more prepared.

Hectic and intense though the workshop was, it was not without its share of treats and happenings. On the first and second nights, we saw four excellent pieces of theatre, two on each night. B. Jayashree (Spandana, Bangalore) performed *Uriya Uyyale* (see STQ 18), Chemmani (Tirunelveli) performed *Baliyadugal*, Kalairani (Koothu-p-pattarai, Madras) performed *The Song of Loweno* and CUTE (Creative Unit of Third Experience, Thrissur) performed *Janus*. These plays, in many ways, spoke to the themes we discussed throughout the workshop. They provided examples of the meshing of form and content, of social/political concerns and theatrical ability. They suggested possible paths to follow or learn from. We were also treated to a Terrukoothu demonstration by members of Kattai Koothu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam. Rajagopal, the leader of the group, has trained women in the art of Terrukoothu, a folk form of Tamil Nadu which has been and remains almost exclusively male. In Rajagopal's troupes, women and men play roles of both genders. In the demonstration that we saw, all the men played women and all the women played men, and this was used to heighten the comedy of the scenes shown. A discussion of cross-dressing and the ability of women actors to play men followed. It was interesting that no one thought to comment on or question the male actors' ability to play women, especially since I thought the women's performance far outdid the men's (except



Kalairani of Koothu-pattarai, Chennai, in *The Song of Loweno*



A terrukoothu demonstration by Kattai Koothu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam. Usha Rani plays Keechak

for Rajagopal himself). This points to an issue which I believe is a central one in women's activism, through theatre or otherwise, but which was not discussed very much at Kulavai—the building up of women's faith and confidence in their own ability to 'act', on stage or elsewhere.

The importance of the aims of Kulavai was summed up, however, in an unplanned happening. Rashmi (Bangalore) presented a demo piece on Dopdi, a character from Mahasweta Devi's short story. Dopdi gets raped by the police, but refuses to get silenced or terrorized by that rape. Instead, in Rashmi's demo, she insists that she will talk about, will let the world know, what has been done to her. After Rashmi finished the piece, she broke down and cried while the rest of the participants looked on in silence. Mangai asked someone to sing, and Chandrika began singing a song with a catchy beat. The energy that burst forth with that simple action was incredible. The entire assembly joined in, clapping, keeping time, supporting Rashmi. Two girls from the Chemmani group began dancing to the song. No words, just strength, just a will to go through and beyond a palpable pain that had enveloped the hall when Rashmi broke down. The song kept going, and won through. The spirit of so many women, so many activists, so many actors, won through. In the future, when I look back on Kulavai '99, I believe it is this memory that will continue to define it for me.



Kalairani of Koothu-pattarai, Chennai, in *The Song of Loweno*

Theatre Activism in Britain: Some Examples

On a recent trip to the UK, Anjum Katyal contacted some theatre groups involved in social action. Reports on three such groups give some idea of the different approaches and segments of society with which such work can deal.

Chicken Shed Theatre



Chicken Shed Theatre

A North London barn and former chicken shed is an unlikely place for the birth of a theatre movement. But this was, indeed, the backdrop against which the Chicken Shed Theatre was born. Mary Ward and Jo Collins, co-founders of Chicken Shed in 1974, aimed to provide challenging and innovative work that would entertain and move audiences—in itself, nothing unusual—but based on the principle of inclusion. The concepts that define Chicken Shed's attitudes towards performance are best summed up in their slogan, 'Excellence without Exclusion'.

Chicken Shed does not see itself as a club for the disabled or a theatre company for people with special needs. Nor do they follow the policy of inducting only people with proven talent. They believe that any person who wishes to perform should be allowed to do so. Each performer, whatever his or her background, is an individual with talent and ability that only require a stimulating environment to develop. Each individual has special needs and special talents, all of which are seen as positive, exciting and shareable. It is this integrative and inclusive approach to theatre that has earned Chicken Shed its remarkable reputation.

The company has now moved from the site of its humble beginnings to their own building and theatre in Southgate, London. Located as it is in a less-than-affluent area, on the margins of a lower income housing project, it services a community with a high percentage of disadvantaged children and school dropouts. Currently, it comprises a Children's Theatre—three groups from 5 to 11 years; a Youth Theatre—12 to 15 years; and the full-fledged Company, all over 16 and seasoned veterans of the Chicken Shed way. Music, dance and mime are pivotal to the Company's productions. Voice and acting training, stage management, lighting and direction are also given equal importance so that in a performance the emphasis is 'Look at us' rather than 'Look at me'. Earning a reputation for quality productions, they have packed halls such as Sadler's Wells, the Royal Albert Hall and the Picadilly Theatre.

Though they do not project themselves as an educational establishment, Chicken Shed is associated with two projects which involve training in theatre. The first is the Theatre In Inclusive Education (TIIE). This initiative aims to bring the Company's inclusive approach to performing arts to schools and colleges through a team of Chicken Shed actors who work with students at these institutions on specially devised projects. In 1990, TIIE produced its biggest performance to date—*Anansi*, a Caribbean musical. This production involved over a thousand children from 22 London boroughs. Two hundred and fifty of them were from special schools, but 'no one noticed'. This great success reiterated that by involving such people Chicken Shed does not compromise on standards: rather, it deepens and enriches the experience. Chicken Shed also offers a Business and Technicians Education Council (BTEC) National Diploma in Performing Arts. This course has been created for Enfield College and is run at the Company's Southgate Theatre. Storyworld is another project undertaken by the Company. A weekly workshop for pre-school children and their parents, it involves interactive sessions and time for free play.

From their home in Southgate, Chicken Shed takes its philosophy around the country. They crucially believe that the best way for everyone to learn and develop is together. It is indeed rare to see people from such a variety of backgrounds coming together, united by a love for the performing arts. Rarer

still is the sight of the able bodied and disabled performing together—a mutually supportive experience that can be carried beyond the hall. Attending a runthrough in their rehearsal space, I saw the results of this inclusive approach in the informal ease and unselfconscious friendliness with which youngsters in wheelchairs interacted and fooled around with others who had no visible disability; in the natural way in which they all helped each other up and down ramps, in and out of doors, whenever necessary, without thinking twice about it.

Chicken Shed is remarkable for having put into practice an inclusive theory based on self belief rather than self doubt. Theirs is a positive view, marking the way for a positive change.

Small World Theatre

In 1979 Ann Shrosbree and Bill Hamblett formed Dandelion Puppets. Their first show, commissioned by the Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, dealt with the broad theme of ecology. This show set in motion a company that was to later become Small World Theatre, based in Wales. A pioneer in the early environmental theatre movement, their focus later widened to include other developmental issues. With their innovative use of actors, dance, puppets, masks and, perhaps most importantly, audience interaction, Small World Theatre has come up with a novel performance idiom for social development. Their style has proved successful in a truly global sense—their work spans countries as varied as Sudan and Great Britain, with positive results.

Among SWT's early projects is their work in Sudan, seeking solutions to desert encroachment. It took four years to convince funding agencies that puppetry was an effective mode of communication in Sudan. SOS Sohel finally took up the idea and puppetry became an integral part of their Village Extension Scheme in 48 villages of North Sudan. A team of Sudanese men trained by Small World Theatre performed the large-scale puppet play in villages with unprecedented success. In the Islamic society of Sudan, it is unusual to see women attending public performances, but as this was a completely unforeseen event, the first in any Sudanese village, they, too, joined the thousands of village people who arrived to see these performances, forming an impromptu amphitheatre under the open sky—children on the ground, adults behind them, people kneeling, then sitting on chairs, others standing, then on donkeys, camels, trucks and buses, and finally people on the roof. A whole cross section of the village population was able to enjoy these performances and receive the information as well. To channelize the great enthusiasm generated by the plays, Ann Shrosbree also worked with a Sudanese counterpart to set up a women's project in Ed Dammer. This led to thousands of trees being grown for sale by the women in their homes. Soon planting trees in the desert had become the thing to do. Over a million trees survived despite the terrible floods of 1991 and the project continued to use theatre in its work for the next ten years.

As a result of their success in the villages of Sudan, Bill Hamblett and Ann Shrosbree were asked by the FAO to conduct two consultancy sessions for developmental workers at Khartoum. Shows about forestry, health, nomad issues and women's income generation were devised and produced in the villages. In 1996, SOS Sohel received a UNEP 'Saving the Drylands Award' for their community forestry project. The women in Ed Dammer are now producing and making puppet shows as part of their programme. Schoolchildren in central Sudan and women in income generation projects near Khartoum also demonstrate the multiplier effect of the SWT's initial project and workshops.

Back in Britain, their experiences in Sudan prompted Bill and Ann to produce *Shadows in the Desert*. A colourful drama about the tree planting in the desert, this show toured in schools and theatres all over the country, giving people a glimpse into the life of a child in the desert. Later, Friends of the Earth commissioned a show on the destruction of the South American rain forests. The company produced *Manifesto de la Selva* with a soundtrack by Adrian Wagner, a reaffirmation of their strong environmental concerns.

Small World Theatre's next major project was in Kenya, in the shanty towns, with Parking Boys and then with the Nairobi Family Support Centre, Kibera, which works with disabled children and their families. The company collaborated with the latter to produce a show using 3D puppets. This was performed in the slum areas around Nairobi and encouraged parents of such children to use the Centre for help and advice. On their return to Britain, the company produced *In The Shadow Of The City* which highlighted the right of every child to shelter, clean water, health care and education. It also brought to the fore the role of international debt and government corruption in denying these rights. This show, designed as an activity-based learning resource, was performed in approximately 300 schools in Britain and generated a tremendous response from the young students, focusing as it did on the rights which many of them took for granted.

In 1992, Bill and Ann experienced first-hand the conditions inside a closed camp when they worked with young Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. They went on to Ho Chi Minh City as consultants and conducted several workshops exploring a variety of performance techniques such as masks, mime, puppetry, storytelling and drama. Some of the groups worked with street children, others with the deaf or people with special needs, and some with ex-prostitutes and intravenous drug users with HIV. Subsequently they worked with the Hanoi State Water Puppet company, collaborating with them on a show that was taken to the Chinese border where Vietnam's ethnic minority, the Dao people, live. This show performed with shadow puppets was a return to environmental awareness—the impact of slash and burn agriculture.

As an outcome of their experience with Vietnamese refugees, the company produced *Moving!* when they returned to Britain. This show, apart from touring schools, featured as a focal point for exhibitions, discussions, lectures, museum presentations and other cultural events in many of Britain's inner cities. *Moving!* tells the story of Nêñ and Tuè, two Vietnamese children who flee from their native village. They are sent alone in boats across the South China Sea to



detention camps in Hong Kong and then finally to Britain. True to their concept of audience participation, the play culminates with the protagonists coming

Small World Theatre: a scene from a puppet play.



forward to interact with the audience, bringing up questions about how strangers are accepted into a community.

A recent project was undertaken in Wales itself, with the community in Ely—an enormous Welsh housing estate established in the 1920s. This sprawling area was seen as a dumping ground for ‘problem’ families and was rife with social problems and criminal activities. Ely had gained notoriety for car crime by underage drivers, muggings and lack of respect for the elderly. This prompted

Age Concern and Community Education, Cardiff, to invite Bill Hamblett to start an inter-generational project in 1995. The first step in this process was to assess the attitudes and feelings that existed between the generations. Rather than use a questionnaire that would elicit the ‘correct’ response rather than the true one, STW decided to tap the creativity of the students from the three participating schools—they were asked to write poems about their attitudes towards the elderly. Over a 1000 poems were finally turned in and served as rich source



Clean Break Theatre Company

material for the final script. Predominantly, they showed that the young’s perception of old people was narrow-minded, any emotional involvement with them being restricted to grandparents. Several of the older generation responded in turn to these poems. Drama workshops were held separately with the Healthy, Wealthy and Wise group and the students. One session with the HWW group had Bill with a lifesize youth puppet which had to face a barrage of anger and frustration from the elderly participants.

The general framework of the drama soon emerged, based on an actual incident in Ely—the development of a relationship between a 14 year-old-boy and an elderly lady whom he injures while driving a stolen car. The scene of the

play was to be a hospital room with the injured boy and his victim occupying adjacent beds. The drama sessions with the students focused on instilling basic drama techniques such as mime, characterization and improvisation. Students were once asked to express age through their bodies and voice. Initially they portrayed stereotypical images of the elderly, but when this was discussed they evolved much more positive and realistic characters.

When the two groups were finally introduced to each other, it evoked a very positive feeling in all those involved. As soon as the two generations started to work together, the whole atmosphere changed. An interesting exercise was conducted during the rehearsal process, where the students were asked to create images of how they perceived the elderly. Most of them came up with images of being read to or protected in some way, diametrically opposite to the ones that came through in their earlier poems. The realization dawned that this was not just a school play but one that had an advocacy role to play within their community.

In fact, the community played an important role as well: parts of the set were donated by the local hospital, the costumes came from the local laundry and props were provided by parents of the students. The script was developed and revised by the cast themselves, who also made the puppets that they used. As it happened, the first time the entire cast was present was on the day of the first show, but this did not hamper any of the performances.

Small World Theatre is at present planning a project with working children in India and Ghana. If successful, it will lead to performances in Welsh and English in schools in the UK, exploring issues related to child producers/workers in poor countries like Ghana and India, and consumers in more affluent societies, thereby linking privileged children with their underprivileged counterparts across the world.

Through its innovative work in using theatre skills and technique to put across social messages, SWT has become one of Britain's foremost exponents of theatre in development, attempting to use this medium to communicate where more formal mechanisms are ineffective.

Clean Break Theatre

The first and only theatre company of its kind, Clean Break Theatre was founded by two women prisoners during their sentences in Askham Grange Prison in 1979. The company has now grown into a nationally acclaimed theatre group with a strong education programme, providing a unique and powerful voice to women ex-offenders, ex-prisoners and prisoners. Clean Break aims to help women break the cycle of crime and move on to further education, employment and a fresh start.

Clean Break Theatre conducts a comprehensive programme of education, training and performances, thus making their presence felt in two ways: educating the public on issues surrounding women and crime, and encouraging access to the arts and arts education among those who would not normally attend theatre or theatre training programmes. The Company offers free short and advanced courses and training programmes in a variety of fields such as Acting, Singing, Creative Writing, Dance and Movement and Video. These courses prepare women offenders for further education as well as employment. Experienced staff help students choose the right course and also provide counselling and career advice. These courses go hand-in-hand with a national outreach programme of training and performances for prisoners, offenders,



Clean Break Theatre Company: A scene from *Yard Gal*

probation officers, artists and other professionals working with the criminal justice system. Workshops and performances are also conducted in prisons.

The potential for success is illustrated by several case studies. One such example: a woman prisoner having heard of Clean Break through the Prison Outreach Programme joined the Company after her release. Having spent her childhood in a series of institutions and foster homes, she did not possess any formal educational qualifications. During her time with the Company, it was found that she suffered from dyslexia. Once this was recognized and the problem addressed, she grew from strength to strength. She now holds a University degree in Performing Arts and is a member of the Clean Break Management Committee. Another woman offender joined the Creative Writing and Video Skills classes. She was referred to Clean Break from a rehabilitation centre. During her time with the Company, she found her self-confidence again and made a film about herself and her experiences. She has now gone on to set up her own charity to help those like herself.

Each year, Clean Break presents a professional production which examines issues related to women and crime. These productions tour theatres, arts centres and prisons throughout the country. The Company commissions a new playwright to write the play for them every year. Research includes a residency in a women's prison, teaching creative writing to the inmates there and also to the students at Clean Break's London base. Women inmates of the prison may send their writing to the playwright in residence for advice and feedback. During the play's run, readings of playscripts by Clean Break students and women prisoners are presented before the performance, providing the audience with a first-hand opportunity to hear about their experiences.

In 1998, Rebecca Pritchard was commissioned to write Clean Break's play for the year. The result was *Yard Gal* produced in May 1998 in association with the prestigious Royal Court Theatre. A spare, hard-hitting production, the play revolves around two vivid and lovable adolescent girls, Boo and Marie. The girls are restless and rebellious, a mixture of naivete and street-smart cool, testing their collective energy and confidence to the limit. What comes through clearly is the violence amidst which they are forced to grow up and survive, and their own confusion and insecurity. *Yard Gal* is a description of the journey from youthful mayhem to mature reflection. The play is about survival, and demands that society take notice of this powerful force, understand it and enable it to change course from despair to hope.

Clean Break operates on an equal opportunity policy. It is committed to actively opposing all forms of discrimination, and promoting equal opportunities in its employment practice and service delivery. It provides women offenders the much needed opportunity to rebuild their lives by developing their skills, confidence and creativity, paving the way to a fresh start in their lives. The Company has now moved to its new lottery-funded premises in North London where it is establishing the only national performing arts centre for women ex-offenders. This new location will provide the Company with studio, workshop and office spaces and enable them to expand their work still further.

' . . . new forms and new approaches . . . '

An interview with Habib Tanvir

Habib Tanvir reminisces about his experiences in street theatre with Anjum Katyal and Paramita Bannerjee for *STQ* in August, 1996 in Calcutta

AK: Habib-da, you were telling us about your first experience of being in a street play or in street theatre as such . . .

HT: This was, I think, sometime in 1948 or later. There was still talk of peace and there were anti-war campaigns organized by the CPI and consequently by IPTA, which was attached to the CPI at that time. You see, there were skirmishes all over the world. Immediately after the war ended, it went on for some time in terms of small battles. And the effects and ravages of war on working-class life was the issue. And there was the question of minimum wages, in a factory, so it was connected with strikes and wages, and the effects of war on wages, and the inflation caused by war, and there was also the question of minimum wages and increments being improved. We were inspired by the Chinese Red Army at the time—they were organizing such things. I remember reading about actors in the Communist Party of China going into restaurants and starting an argument and getting to the climax and suddenly climbing onto the table and delivering a speech so that everybody was paying attention to what was going on—that was the agit-prop type of play they were doing.

Taking that [as] inspiration, I had written a kind of format called *Shantidoot Kamgar* ('kamgar' is the word for worker in Marathi—so the messenger of peace is the working-class man). It started with a poster about peace being posted at the gate of a mill. A policeman comes in and stops the actor from putting up the poster. An argument ensues and a woman enters—Dina Pathak—she was his wife, and a domestic argument starts, intrigues people who are listening and a crowd gathers. This was the idea: the crowd gathers . . . We went at the end of one shift when the workers were coming out. So when there was enough [of a] crowd, suddenly the man gets up on a table and delivers a speech. I was the man who puts up the poster and delivers the speech. We rehearsed it a bit and the actor who was doing the policeman's role was replaced—I think he was not punctual or something. He was told once or twice to be punctual, and then he was replaced. Finally the original actor turned up and apologized and we said, don't worry, go ahead with your role.

So we went to the mill, and we did it and the policeman came in—our actor—and he threw his cap down in a huff because he saw what he thought to be the other actor doing the policeman. And he said, how could you have done this to me? And I whispered, that is not an actor, that is an actual policeman; you go ahead with your role. And so he went ahead and there was quite a crowd and [I] delivered the speech.

AK: The real policeman did not interfere?

HT: He became part of the crowd and he didn't see anything objectionable in putting up the poster. That was the kind of street theatre, agit-prop play, that people were doing at that time, in the 40s.

AK: Were there certain issues that you chose to take up because of your Party line?

HT: No, at that time, not very many issues were taken up. It was out-and-out political as far as the agitation and propaganda went. I also sometimes did subtler things. I did *Shatranj ke Mohre*—Premchand—*Shatranj ke Khilari*—in the 40s, and then there were plays like Odet's *Waiting for Lefty*, which Ramesh Thapar directed in English. This was the English branch of IPTA. And *Inspector Calls* also. Than *Bhootgadi*, C.C. Mehta's play in bhavai form, done by Dina. These were done, they had political content most of the time, but they can't be described as agit-prop or street plays.

One remarkable play at that time—not quite a street play but it was quite a happening—was called *Jadu ke Kursi*. The general secretary of IPTA in those days was Rama Rao, a man from Andhra Pradesh. He was not a particularly creative man or an artist, but he was a good organizer. We didn't think much of him, but he came up with an idea. He said, why not do something about a man who travels all the way from Borivilli to Churchgate and works in an office and gets his tiffin and so on? Balraj [Sahni] took to the idea. Mohan Sehgal, who later became quite a well-known film director, was assigned the task of directing. But there was nothing except a small nucleus of an idea. So the actors were asked to improvise and do their own thing. I brought my lines for the judge—there was a judge in it—and my manner of doing it, with a stammer. And Dina brought her wit, and likewise all the actors improvised. And it became a hilarious, ironical play—a satire on social and political conditions. Balraj was wonderful as a comedian. I keep harking back to that because I think Balraj as a comedian, that aspect of his talent, has never been exploited in films. And he was absolutely wonderful. Dead-pan face, and lazy delivery, and he just went on visualizing an egg and a fish, he feels hungry and imagines the fish and he eats it, all in his imagination. And the moment he puts on his cap, he gets transformed, and he sits in his chair and becomes a different person all together. A comedy through and through, total improvisation.

We did it again in 1948 at the eventful Allahabad conference, which decided the fate of the Communist Party, splitting it into two. Upto that point, P. C. Joshi was the man—very deeply interested in and concerned about culture, and we were all influenced by his life, which was humane and very tolerant and very open. Then Ranadive came, with his harder line, Telengana and other things. This was in those days.

There was another play, an adaptation of a Chinese play, called *Dakhan ke Ek Raat* (that means Deccan). This was adapted by Vishvamitter Adil, who was a poet in Urdu—he lives in Hyderabad—and attached to the Communist Party. He adapted it from a Chinese play. And I was the old man.

AK: So your street theatre at that time was with the IPTA?

HT: Yes.

AK: And after that? When did you take it up again?

HT: There was a big gap. IPTA's swan song happened after that, in 1957 in Delhi. And then, for years, you heard that IPTA was not there at all. No agit-prop plays, no street theatre, there were other kinds of theatre. Only a few decades ago, the revival of IPTA took place, and then suddenly, in a big way, all over India street theatre sprouted with a new lease of life and with a difference—it had taken new forms and new approaches.

AK: Like what?

HT: Because now, you see, they really went out into the streets, as against the

past. And met people during the lunch break and also gathered wherever people gathered, open parks and malls. Then they would take up all kinds of issues: empowerment of women, exploitation of women, workers' issues, minimum wages, corruption . . .

AK: Are you talking of IPTA approaches or other approaches?

HT: No, other approaches. The IPTA revival had a different colour. When they revived, they had lost the political edge. Not necessarily lost—that may not be a good word—some people would say there was a gain, there was no loss at all. Because in the old days, of necessity, mostly, it was political and anti-imperialist and anti-bourgeois and pro-working class. That was the thrust. This had lost its point. And that's why, historically, IPTA had really ended its role. Finished. And when the revival took place, there were also great differences of opinions. IPTA in Bombay is accused of having become elitist and joined the mainstream. I am not passing judgment, just giving you the actual picture of what is happening here.

But IPTA in Patna, Kanpur, in Madhya Pradesh, in many places like Bhilai, even smaller places like Bhatapara, Abhanpur—these are *tehsils*—are at least . . . I saw their activities, and these groups, I saw, were doing very well. Raipur itself had a very active IPTA group. We had this workshop. We had all the groups perform things and I had some 'celebratory theatre activity', in which things end up in fireworks, with the help of Elizabeth Lynch and Geraldine Bone from London, who came to join me. There was an African story called *The Frog Laughed*. There was a drought and all the animals were worried and they realized that a frog had drunk up all the water. And it got bloated, and it sat there, sagaciously, quiet, and would not move, would not talk. So the animals came to the conclusion that they must make the frog laugh. And they try all kinds of tricks but they fail to make the frog laugh, till something very small happens and the frog laughs, and laughs all the water out. And in the process [it] dies, and is cremated—the body of the frog is taken out and a *chita* laid, and it ends up in fireworks—phut, phut, phoot—very beautiful fireworks. We did this with masks—Geraldine is a wonderful mask-maker. She produces wonderful works out of trash, newspapers, broken baskets—

And we did another play with the local students and the nagari kalakars from Raipur city, about the Pied Piper. We called it *Jadugar Kalakar*. In *Jadugar Kalakar*, we had children, students, of different ages, from tiny things to adolescents in the crowds, music and song. This was 1984-85. And they became cats and rats, and wore beautiful, carved masks. Deepak Tiwari was one of the rats and an Assamese boy—I have forgotten his name—Duleep Barua or something—these two daring chaps came down a rope as rats. A sheer hundred feet drop. There were other rats also, but they came head-first, scampering down. Quite spectacular. And the cats were waiting and the fight between the cats and the rats took place.

AK: You were talking about the revival of the IPTA groups. Some of the old IPTA actors also acted with the new groups. What was the difference between the old IPTA plays and the new ones? How about the new groups doing street theatre—how were they different?

HT: The difference, I think, was that they worked on issues, more than on political lines, Party lines. Formerly, a political Party line was taken. And now it is actual issues, felt and experienced. Or sensed, discussed and brought into dramatic material, into play form.

AK: Apart from differences in issues, do you see any other differences that strike you? In the way street theatre was being done? In terms of the forms, the components of the groups, the kind of people, or the audiences that they are seeking out?

HT: The audiences that they are seeking out are middle-class, lower-middle-class, and in some cases, peasants, farmers, *kisans*, factory-workers. And the group comprises generally between ten to fifteen—ten or twelve is average. More than ever before, they are performing in the round. In terms of form, they have, sort of, done this technique, refined it, in the round. They turn to all the sides and they manage the movements very, very differently. They must bring out the voice, because no mikes are used. It caters to a small size, not hundreds or thousands.

Safdar Hashmi, when he felt an urge to go out and be more political, formed Jana Natya Mancha (Janam) and started this street theatre. He had put in ten years in IPTA, ten years in street theatre, then Janam. At that point, I collaborated with Safdar and co-authored *Mote Ram ka Satyagraha*. The theme is that politics and religion do not go together, they must not be mixed. It's a farce. Safdar played the role of the magistrate and I directed it. That was just a year before he died. He came round to doing the so-called mainstream plays, feeling an urge to get his street-theatre actors trained in mainstream also. He felt that just shouting and gesticulating in the street theatre did not give them the roundedness they needed as actors. So, from the sheer technical point of view, he wanted them to be equipped in both. After doing two or three mainstream plays with different kinds of voice projection, and other subtleties of movement and coordination and grouping and everything else, when they go back to the street theatre and combine the two things, it will be qualitatively different and of a higher standard. This was his feeling on the technical level.

On the political/social level, Safdar had the far-sightedness to realize that as a street theatre artist, doing agit-prop plays in Janam, he had got isolated. Not from the people so much as from theatre artists. And he felt that theatre as a movement cannot be really organized if it remained so isolated. He sensed that he must become part of the whole movement, and should be able to talk in the same language as other theatre artists, as he very clearly enunciated in my house in those days, trying to pick up a story that would suit our theme of anti-communalism—it was communalism at that time that he was most bothered about. We had several different stories and also Premchand—it was Premchand Divas which was to be celebrated. I saw his perspective, his vision, and I realized that he could then become part of the mainstream theatre also and take up their issues, their difficulties, just as they were taking up other issues, women, working class: theatre artists, their difficulties, of space, of finding actors, of finding an audience, whatever, entertainment tax—then he could be part of it, he could lead them. There could be unity in and more power to the theatre movement. It is at that time that he was despatched, he was finished, which is a great pity because no one [else] was [as] able and as well-endowed with vision, political as well as theatrical. So it was never followed up, but this, in a nutshell, was what he was dreaming . . .

Now, at the moment groups are taking up plays thematically, taking up issues, like casteism. Our own group, Naya Theatre, for example. Now, I did some street plays with a big difference compared to plays like *Shantidoot Kamgar*, that the IPTA did. I wrote about Safdar, *Case Number 436* (or some such figure). It's about Safdar's death. It's a short play of ten to fifteen minutes, and I call it a street play, but some people think that it has a subtlety which does not belong to

street theatre. I, personally, do not think so, it's a farce. It's a black comedy, I mean, it's grim. It's all about a writer's death. But in a very, very different vein.

Then I did a workshop on literacy and produced *Sadak*. At the end of the workshop, it was sheer improvisation, but later on I wrote it and produced it as a much longer play. One-and-a-half hours, and then reduced it to half an hour, actually 25 minutes now, which we do in the street and also on the stage. That is about development, which may not mean the same thing to all sections of society. Village people and tribal people spell out their own way of development, with wit and humour and a kind of farce, again. *Sadak* was done in Pendra Road, in Bilaspur—it's a forest area, and quite isolated and cut off, a tribal area. This is where we had gathered—[the] literacy [campaign] people, and rural actors and Naya Theatre actors, not all, just a few.

Mangludidi is another play I wrote after a workshop in a village, also in Bilaspur, Janjgir. This was near Pendra Road. *Mangludidi* is about child-care and maternal health, which, in government parlance, you would call *parivar niyojan*—family planning and all that. In this, in a farcical situation, I make a man pregnant, and that is the comedy of it. And it spells out all the salient features of what is lacking in governmental programmes in terms of blood, transport, roads, *dais*, district units, and the ignorance of the people regarding certain basic issues concerning health, the mother's and the child's.

The Naya Theatre folk artists have inherited from their own stock of comedies many small skits—one of the very best of them is called *Jamadarin*. *Jamadarin* means a sweeper girl. This [play] has been going on since the 1930s. Originally, it was done by two actor-artists—both of them are now dead, I used to know them, they came to my workshop—Sitaram and Sukhram. You see, folk improvisation amongst the illiterate artists who can't read and write is usually based on an idea that they think up. They sit around and play with it and flesh it out with other ideas collectively, distribute the parts, get up without much rehearsal and *ad lib* it. And with shows, it sometimes grows. Some of them are very, very good improvisers. Now, this was inherited by later actors, such as Thakur Ram, Babudas, Bhulwa—again, Thakur Ram is dead, Babudas is dead and Bhulwa is with us. Laluram is also dead, Madanlal is in his eighties and very feeble and retired, he's too old and too frail [to perform]. Their party was called Ringni Raveli Party—these are the names of two villages. Actors from these two different parties had merged to form this party and it had become a very famous party, because of Thakur Ram, Babudas, Bhulwa and Madanlal. It became very famous all over the area. And there is a poet from Durg, whose name I don't remember at the moment, and Swaran Kumar Sahu, another local poet, he's dead too—there are songs in the play written by these two poets. The actors just keep on changing, it is a very compact form. Dramatically, I find it extraordinary, thematically, also, extremely bold. It is on casteism. And all with wit and humour and irony. Hilarious comedy. This earned us the curses of the BJP and stones from the BJP.

Theatre Log

Off to School

Motivating deprived children to participate in formal education

Child labour is rampant in India. Though it is universally condemned, little is ever done about finding viable solutions to this problem. A viable solution does not include having it banned as, more than affecting the employers, it will affect the poverty-stricken families of the children, who are often the sole bread earners. To come up with ways of striking a possible balance between the child's necessity to work and the child's right to play and learn, the Experimental Theatre Foundation, Mumbai, held a three-day camp in May 1998 which involved 26 children from such a deprived background.

The Experimental Theatre Foundation, under the leadership of Manjul Bharadwaj, has been following the philosophy of Theatre of Relevance since its inception in 1992. They have performed extensively all over Maharashtra and several neighbouring states, tackling subjects as varied as dowry, drug addiction, literacy, corruption, communal harmony and child labour. Their style of theatre also varies from professional proscenium plays to simple street theatre and workshops with children. ETF has been working with child labourers in the Kandivali area of Mumbai for the last three years with the aim of eradicating child labour and motivating children to attend school. Through their non-formal education centres here, they have succeeded in affecting this transition in over 250 children who have joined school and found self confidence and dignity in their new lives.

However, it was felt that a small organization with its limited resources could only affect a small number. For the 'School Jao Abhiyaan' to be truly successful, it would have to involve a larger number of people, including parents, teachers, the employers, the community at large, and, most importantly, the children themselves. This was the idea behind the motivational camp that ETF organized from 26 to 28 May 1998 at the J. J. Nursing Home, Mumbai. The main objectives behind the camp were to help children acquire a sense of responsibility towards themselves and their education, and to inspire these children to motivate others to join the 'School Jao Abhiyaan'.

The children were chosen on the basis of their regularity of participation in street plays and their interest in educating themselves. After assessing children over three months at the non-formal education centres, which included sessions with the parents, 26 children between the ages of 7 to 15 were finally able to attend the camp. During the three-day camp there were several activities in which the children were given opportunities to express their views on the lives they were leading. Two films were screened—*Awaaz* and *Jaldi Jaldi*—both on the problem of child labour and the efforts to eradicate it. Both the screenings were followed by intensive discussions where the children gave their opinions on the ideas presented in the films. One session was dedicated to poster

making with the children being asked to make a poster on the theme 'What a school should be like'. Each day there were sessions of recapitulation and interaction where the children were encouraged to talk about the aspects of the camp they enjoyed most. Invariably, singing and dancing headed this list. The evenings were spent relaxing and playing on the beach.

One of the most frequently used media for interaction was theatre. The first session of theatre was taken up with playing theatre games, allowing the children a chance to relax and get to know one another. They were also asked why they had come to the camp, and their universal opinion was, to further their education. With songs and dances galore, the seriousness of the topic was well balanced with the children's right to enjoy themselves. A later session on the first day provided the children with a case study. Divided into smaller groups each with a teacher in charge, the children had to improvise a short play based on this case study. Through this process many of them came to identify themselves in the roles that they were playing, and thus the relevance of what they were doing was brought home to them. One could see an immediate change in the attitude of some of the children, even at this early stage of the camp.

A similar session the next day focused on a variety of points relating to what a school should be, child labour, formal and non formal education, and the camp itself. All these ideas were taken up and presented by the children themselves with minimal interference from the adults. Each group selected their own story, improvised their own dialogues, and expressed their own views as to why education was necessary, what the environment in a school should be and the difference between formal and non formal education. One common idea that all the groups seemed to have was that schools should also provide time for singing and dancing as one learnt so much through these means. This was followed by an open session in which children were asked to come forward and perform. Seeing so many of their companions taking the initiative, other children who had kept to themselves till now also began to open up and participate in the merriment.

On the last day, the children were asked to perform on the basis of their experiences at the camp itself. This was a completely independent venture with no adult participation. The results, needless to say, were excellent! Each and every child got involved in the process of choosing roles, improvising and recalling their dialogues with great excitement. It was that they had internalized all they had learned and experienced at the camp. Their new-found confidence and sense of responsibility shone through. All the children in the camp voiced their intention of going to school and of motivating other children and parents to take the same decision. Some of them even announced that they would not work for an employer who would obstruct their education. As a result of this initiative, all the 26 children who participated in the camp are now admitted in formal schools.

(Compiled from material sent in by ETF)

Theatre Notebook

These entries have been compiled from announcements and literature sent to *STQ* by theatre workers and groups in the country.

Productions

Pins and Needles

St. James' School, Calcutta, presented yet another musical extravaganza, *Pins and Needles*, in December 1998. Their previous presentations were *Smike* (1988), *Piper* (1990), both directed by Phyllis Bose, and *The Dreamer* (1995) directed by Shonali Ghosh. The script, lyrics and direction were by Shonali Ghosh, while the original music score was composed by Debashish Chaudhuri. The musical, based on 'The Emperor's New Clothes', tells the story of Dan de Lyonne, the fashion-conscious ruler of Epicurea, who faces his comeuppance at the hands of Beau Tye and Jack O'Naves, two conmen posing as tailors. In classic musical fairytale style, there are scheming ministers, bungling spies, wacky jesters and frequent song-and-dance sequences.

The conmen arrive in Epicurea to find the whole town busy with the rehearsals for the Annual Imperial Fashion Show which 'displays the newest and most innovative designs possible'. (This promise is more than borne out in the climactic Fashion Show, where the costume designers obviously had a ball producing the most bizarre clothing imaginable!) They discover that the Emperor thinks nothing of taxing the townsfolk heavily to pay for more additions to his overloaded wardrobe and so decide to pose as tailors and offer to create a new suit of clothes for the Emperor—the *piece de resistance* that he will parade at the Fashion Show. And so, the emperor proudly appears at the fashion show in a pair of polka dotted boxer shorts.

As realization dawns on the townsfolk, the humiliation of the emperor is complete. As for the conmen, they proceed to their next stop—Nirvana, to pose as Reiki masters!

Ghosh points out that the play has 'strong relevance in today's fast-moving world where fashion has become an idol' and the play incorporates many contemporary references. The bizarre clothes mock the contemporary fashion scene where 'anything goes'. The set was designed as a makeshift ramp for the fashion show. *Pins and Needles* took 'The Emperor's New Clothes' into the real world without losing any of the fantasy or charm of a fairytale.

Ghosh's expert handling of a young and largely inexperienced cast of 50 and a backstage crew of 30 was impressive. Perhaps the yardstick by which the success of *Pins and Needles* can best be judged is that many of the participants now desire to be permanently in touch with theatre.

Compiled with inputs from Sunando Chakraborty, Mihika Chaudhuri, Bikramjit Ghosh, Vijay Narayan and Shubhodeep Shome.

Natarang Weekend Theatre, Delhi

Delhi Theatre groups Abhiyan, Asmita, Ruchika, Act One, Chingari, NSD's Sanskar Rang Toli and Theatre & Television Associates, have joined hands with the Natarang Pratishthan to bring theatre within the reach of the South Delhi citizen, both in terms of distance and expense, at the new B.C. Pal auditorium in Chittaranjan Park. The attempt is to woo audiences to the theatre by developing a regular weekend venue which features plays in rotation by these well-established groups, who together will bear the expenses of hiring the hall. There will be plays there every weekend from January to May 1999, including

many classics of Indian and world theatre.

Bhoomika's *Charana Dasu*

The most recent production by the Telugu theatre group Bhoomika, established in Secunderabad in 1989, is *Charana Dasu*, based on the Habib Tanvir play and written and directed by G. Udaya Bhanu. The group is dedicated to experimentation in form and content and has always striven to make theatre a part of community life. Their plays are in Hindi as well as Telugu. They have also conducted many workshops and seminars.

Courses

Ranjabati Sircar: The Body as Design

The dancer and choreographer Ranjabati Sircar offered a course on 'Body as Design' during her time as guest-teacher at NID, Ahmedabad. The course covered aspects such as awareness and breath training, movement analysis, improvisation and visualization and exploration of contemporary Indian dance. Some of the issues discussed included colonization, orientalism, appropriation and patriarchy. The students gave a final presentation which incorporated the issues explored in the course with elements of design, which was filmed by Chandita Mukherjee and her students as part of a course on film production. This course constituted part of Ranjabati's research into developing a multifaceted dance training programme in Calcutta.

Workshops

National Workshop on Women's Theatre

The Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, Thrissur, was host to a ten-day National Workshop on Women's Theatre from 19 to 29 December 1999. The event planned to feature about 16 plays, workshops, two major exhibitions and about 20

lectures. The Women's Theatre Workshop was to be an attempt to focus on an authentic and honest representation of female experience on stage. Some of the points that the festival expected to bring to the fore were distinctions between feminist and women's theatre, the interaction of social norms with the diction of performance, the aesthetics of a tradition, the deployment of female bodies on stage and the changing status of stage actresses. The drama festival included productions which focused on women's contribution to Indian theatre. The workshop aimed to provide both practical and theoretical training in all aspects of performance. About 25 women participants were to be chosen for the purpose. Two exhibitions were planned: one, a collection of photographs, news clippings and other material on the history of women's involvement in theatre; and the second, books, periodicals and audio-video cassettes. The lectures delivered during the ten day workshop will be compiled in to a book, as will the memories of old and retired women theatre activists.

Festivals

Nandikar's 15th National Theatre Festival

Nandikar presented its 15th theatre festival at the Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta, from 16 to 25 December 1998. The festival began with felicitations being offered to four theatre celebrities—B.V. Karanth, Ram Gopal Bajaj, Ashok Mukhopadhyay and Nilkantha Sengupta. Thirteen theatre groups participated in the festival which had a total of fourteen performances. Besides Indian groups from three states of South India, Assam, Delhi, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal, theatre troupes from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Switzerland were also featured. Many

of the participants this year featured young people. Women also enjoyed a pride of place in the festival's bill of fare.

Tribute

Brecht Beyond 100

On the occasion of Bertolt Brecht's 101st birth anniversary, several theatre personalities gathered to pay tribute on 10 February 1999 at Nandan, Calcutta, under the auspices of Rangakarmee. The programme was conducted by Usha Ganguli, director of Rangakarmee. Eminent personalities including Sova Sen, Arun Mookherjee, Ashok Mukherjee, Chitra Sen, Saoli Mitra, Supriti Mukherjee, Sohag Sen and Nilkantha Sengupta presented songs, poems and other excerpts from Brecht's work. Rangakarmee also presented scenes from their productions, *Maa* and *Himmat Mai*. This maiden venture gave participants and spectators alike an opportunity of witnessing such performances out in the open.

Publication

Twentieth Century European Drama.

The Department of English and Other European Languages, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan, has recently published *Twentieth Century European Drama*, edited by Pronoti Sinha. This contains the proceedings of the international seminar on the adaptation and translations of European dramatic texts in Asia, which was organized by the department and the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, Calcutta, at Visva Bharati in November 1994. The issues discussed relate to the reasons and problems associated with translation, the motives underlying the choice of texts and the relation of the original to the translation/adaptation. The participants at this seminar included theatre persons, translators and

scholars from India as well as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, France, England and Germany. A special area of interest was the development of the Grips theatre movement in Germany and India.

STQ invites theatre individuals and groups to send in reports and announcements of productions, workshops, seminars and other significant news items they wish to share with the theatre community through the forum of this Notebook.

Twentieth Century European Drama

Edited by Pronoti Sinha (Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan)

is available in

a limited hardback edition at Rs 250 + Rs 30 p&p in India/ \$ 15 + \$ 5 p&p elsewhere)

from the Department of English and Other European Languages, Visva Bharati.

The payment should be made by bank draft, payable in Bolpur or Santiniketan and payable to the Registrar, Visva Bharati.

International Radio Playwriting Competition, 1999

The BBC World Service and the British Council are together organizing the sixth International Radio Playwriting Competition, 1999.

The contest is open to all writers who are not normally residents of the United Kingdom. The play, which should be the original and unpublished work of the person submitting it, should be substantially or entirely in English. It should be of about sixty minutes' duration and have a maximum of six central characters.

All plays must be submitted by 30 April 1999, accompanied by a completed entry form. The first prize is £2000 and a trip to London to see the play being recorded for the BBC World Service.

For more details and for entry forms, contact the British Council.

Jerzy Grotowski: An Obituary

Jerzy Grotowski, stage director, performance researcher and one of the modern masters of theatre who rejected the notion of theatre as entertainment, seeking instead to revitalize the ritualistic function of performance as communion, died on 15 January 1999 at his home in Pontedera, Italy, near Pisa.

Born in 1933 in Rzeszow, Poland, Grotowski studied acting and directing at the State Theatre in Krakow and in Moscow. He made his directorial debut in Krakow with Ionesco's *Chairs*.

In 1958, he was one of the founders of the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole, Poland, which later found world acclaim as Laboratory Theatre. While its earliest productions seemed fairly conventional, it was founded primarily as a laboratory where theatrical experiments in performance theory and presentation styles would be conducted. His collection of essays, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968), stressed performance that challenges the expectations of the audience and called for a theatre that does not merely serve as a mirror for human deeds but underscores the process of self-discovery, both for actors and audience, in the act. In 1968, the Laboratory also performed *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, critically recognized as Grotowski's masterpiece.

Grotowski's belief in the importance of returning theatre to its roots in ritual and in the importance of paratheatrical experiences resulted, by 1970, in a move away from conventional theatrical performances to 'projects' which included members of the Laboratory Theatre as well as people from diverse walks of life. The projects were structured events, lasting for days or weeks, sometimes in closely confined spaces, sometimes in mountains or forests. The underlying idea was an attempted 'extermination of the mimetic' and of the 'mask of representation'. The conventional structure of dramatic performance was replaced by improvised activities involving spontaneous contact between a team of experienced workleaders and a number of outside participants.

Spurred by the success of the group's various paratheatrical experiences, in the late 70s and early 80s, Grotowski embarked on a series of experiments that came under the general title of 'Theatre of Sources'. He worked with a multinational group of people, and conducted innumerable expeditions to various parts of the world to study source techniques. He abandoned participatory work, finding it no more suitable than conventional theatre to facilitate his goal of authentic communion.

Grotowski left Poland in 1982, during the period of martial law, for the US, and the company closed in 1984. In New York, he began developing a programme of research which he called 'Objective Drama', which involved an investigation of techniques and performative/ritual elements related to various world cultures. Three years later, he moved to Italy and opened the Workcentre of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas

Richards at Pontedera, where he developed his work on art as vehicle from 1986.

‘For Grotowski, theatre itself was a kind of religion. He described himself not as an artist, but as a craftsman, a spiritual instructor’, according to a fellow Polish director, Wojciech Krukowski. He was an early pioneer in the field of environmental theatre. His contributions to contemporary performance include a reconceptualization of the physical basis of the actor’s art and an emphasis on the spiritual aspect of the process of acting as well as the exploration and refinement of performance technique. He received honorary degrees from Pittsburgh University and DePaul University, Chicago.

Grotowski had desired to be cremated and to have his ashes dispersed in India. His links with India date back to his early work on Theatre of Sources.

Compiled by Sayoni Basu from The Grotowski Sourcebook, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (Routledge, London/New York, 1997), and The Polish News Service.

Cinema Studies

The Absence Trilogy

Mrinal Sen

Scripts reconstructed and translated by Somnath Zutshi and Biren Das Sharma

Mrinal Sen’s films *Ekdin Pratidin*, *Kharij* and *Ekdin Achanak*, considered amongst his most highly thought-of works, are sensitive portrayals of the middle-class psyche. Although not strictly forming a trilogy, having been produced years apart, each in its own way deals centrally with the idea of absence: the sudden absence of one member of a unit, exposing the absence of certain values, and leading to a qualitative change in relationships and attitudes amongst those left behind. A thoughtful and discursive introductory essay explores this common thread that runs through the structure of these three very different films.

This volume contains shot-by-shot reconstructions —post-production filmscripts—of all three films, as well as a comprehensive introductory essay which reads them from the point of view of ‘absence’ and its impact on the present and future of the people involved. The volume is profusely illustrated with black-and-white reproductions of scenes from the films.

Mrinal Sen established his reputation as one of India’s leading alternative film directors decades ago. He continues to make cinema which is hailed as sensitive and thought-provoking, winning kudos nationally and internationally wherever serious cinema is discussed and shown.

Rs 250

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Letters

This is in response to the response given by Mr. Schechner to my article (*STQ* 18).

Mr. Schechner says that most of what I have said is untrue. What does he mean by that? If he means that I have reported the event (including questions and answers) untruthfully, then the truth is easy to check, as a video tape of the event is available. I have not reported it in detail or verbatim, but I do not think that I have committed any serious error. On the other hand, if he is referring to my interpretation, then he can say that there is difference of opinion, or contradiction, rather than saying that it is untruthful. This should actually come naturally for a person who accepts, in fact virtually glorifies, contradictions. Anyway, rather than going on in a general way, I will try to answer him point by point.

1. I will answer his first two observations by clubbing them together.

a) He asks when or where he has made a particular definition of theatre. The answer is, in the concerned lecture. Not once, not as a passing remark, but time and again. 'Can Athey's performance be regarded as theatre?' was a question central to the discussion. The question was not asked with the intention of getting a technical definition as an answer. We are not so naive (as Mr. Schechner seems to think) as not to understand that terms like theatre, culture, art, etc. are virtually impossible to define. At one end of the spectrum, the question was related to the real-life events happening on stage, like a planned murder (actual murder), a planned suicide, a planned accident wherein somebody gets hurt or loses his life. Can this be theatre? Can actual rituals carried out on stage be called theatre? (It is different to talk about theatricality in rituals.) At the other end, it was trying to enquire about the content, beyond the element of novelty and shock. I do not need to repeat what I have written in my article. I need only stress that Mr. Schechner did define theatre in the way that I have reported, time and again, in the lecture. Anybody can see the video recording to confirm the point.

b) It is true that I have not had the opportunity to be exposed to Mr. Schechner's other work, whether creative or theoretical. It is quite possible that he has expressed some very different opinions about these matters in his other writing. Does that mean that I should not write about my impressions about his lecture? I have taken full care in my article to follow the academic discipline by very clearly mentioning that this article does not talk about either 'believed-in theatre' as a whole, or about Mr. Schechner's entire work. Has he not written about my article? Has he read my plays and my articles before claiming that I am after simplistic solutions? I was as disturbed by listening to his lecture and answers as he was by my response. If he thinks that my article was insulting, then his lecture and the way he answered some of the questions was even more insulting to our intellect. It is absurd to say that I should respond only after reading his entire body of work.

2. It is for *STQ* to answer why they published my article. Probably

they did not think (and neither do I) that his article or interview in the same issue answers the questions I have raised?

3. About the blood on the towels. A question was asked if the persons who were 'operated' (for the want of a better word) upon were HIV positive. The answer was—yes. Not only are they, but it is also important that they are. It is also important for us to know that they are. The towels were soaked in the blood of the actor as far as I could see on the video. However, it is possible that that particular actor was not HIV positive, or that the towels did not contain his blood. But where have I commented upon this event either in derogatory or in laudatory terms? Whether these towels were soaked in HIV-positive blood or not is immaterial as far as my objections or observations go. It is as immaterial to the contents of my article as any mistake I might have committed in mentioning the colour of the trousers of some actor, had I indulged in doing so. Would my objections change if the towels were not so soaked? I referred to the video contents very briefly only to give some idea of what we saw to those who had not had the opportunity to do so. If there has been any error in that, I take back that part of my narration with an apology. However, I must vehemently add that this narration does not liable Athey even if it is wrong, as I have not expressed any opinion on the matter, neither does it feature in my objections or observations.

4. I would like to combine his points nos. 5 and 6 here. There are two aspects of this question, which are as follows:

a) I do not use Mr. Schechner's reference to Van Gogh in an historically absurd manner. As Mr. Schechner seems to have forgotten, I would like to remind him that the reference to Van Gogh was made not in connection with whether he was recognized as a great artist in his own time or not. It was made in connection with the question of whether he was mentally disturbed or not, and if this had anything to do with our evaluation of the artist. As I have clearly mentioned in my article, I totally agreed with him that generally the mental state of an artist should not be considered while determining his greatness. And I also clearly mentioned this before asking my question after the lecture. I will repeat the question which was as follows: Though this is generally true, can we take this stand while evaluating 'believed-in theatre', as by his own claim who and what the artist is, is of prime importance in this case, as the artist is portraying himself—like if he is HIV positive or not. Can we be selective in our knowledge about the person? I will not repeat Mr. Schechner's answer to this question. The question of understanding artists in their lifetime was not the issue at all.

b) I do not claim to know what messages Mr. Athey had to convey, neither do I expect his work to have any message. I did not and do not expect any simplistic solutions. I did not 'wonder', as Mr. Schechner claims, if it conveyed any deeper understanding etc. I repeat the question which was related to the reference to Van Gogh and was clearly phrased. The question was clearly preceded by the acceptance on my part that, on the one hand, what we saw was a very short video clip and, on the other, most of us present were of a different sensibility than those for whom the performance was probably intended. Does this explanation seem to demand any simplistic answers? However, as a reference was made to Van Gogh and Dostoevsky by Mr. Schechner himself, I asked him to

enlighten us about the deeper concerns expressed by Athey, as it was impossible to gauge anything beyond the shock and simple message I have mentioned. I never ever said or implied in any way that that was all Athey had to say. If I had thought it to be so, I would not have raised the question at all, or at least with the preamble I have mentioned above. It was a clear effort to understand Athey's work. There was virtually no answer given to that question, and that was what was disturbing. If somebody is propagating a particular kind of theatre and has claims to scholarship on the same, one is supposed to offer some sort of answer to such questions. However unsatisfactory they may seem, they provide some insight. Or was Mr. Schechner answering the questions with a preconceived notion that the people present there were simpleminded, and not listening to the sincere questions properly? I do not know.

5. Now about contradictions. Anybody in the late twentieth century accepts contradictions as part of life. I do not challenge that. However, in my opinion, there are two important points, which we have to understand clearly. Firstly, we should be aware of these contradictions, otherwise they do not remain contradictions in the philosophical sense but become confusions. Contradictions should not be confused with confusions. Secondly, when we say that we accept contradictions, we should try and tackle them seriously. I do not think that they need be glamourized, because the danger of them being accepted according to convenience creeps in. I was trying to point this out when I was talking about contradictions. I was not chiding him alone for accepting contradictions. I am fully aware of their existence in today's life. The question is not whether we accept them, but how we accept them.

Makarand Sathe

I have read with interest Makarand Sathe's response to Richard Schechner's 'performance' at IUCAA, Pune and the reply given to him by Richard Schechner in *STQ* 18 (June 1998). As a member of the audience present on the occasion, I wish to say a few things on this matter.

Sathe has tried to construct a detailed narrative of Schechner's lecture. I found his account to be substantially correct and written with due respect to Schechner's submissions, despite his dissenting view. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same about Schechner. And I would like to deal with his arguments in order of the points enumerated by him.

1. Schechner denies having said that [theatre is] 'any performance done for the audience for a fee, which an audience sees on buying tickets, QED.' In this case, I think, he could and should listen to the video tape of his speech and not rely on his memory, which seems to be rather weak. In fact, I remember being taken aback by this sort of a definition coming from a man of his stature. Further on, he tells Sathe to read books written by him in 1983 and 1988 for enlightenment. But the question here simply is, what exactly did he say in Pune in October 1997? The argument is about that statement.

2. On the issue of the relationship between ritual and theatre, Schechner again refers to his 'extensive writings' on the subject. Arrogance is implicit in this attempt to draw a red herring across the trail. He also comes up with the cliché (read excuse) regarding 'complex relationship and limited time at my disposal.' May we explain to Schechner that laconic expressions and complex realities are not incompatible at all: e.g. 'Visual space has essentially no owner' (Wittgenstein); 'Fashions pass, culture remains' (Sergei Mikhailovich

Eisenstein); $E=MC^2$ (Einstein). Period.

3. This is yet another piece of an arrogant advice. Here again, Schechner refers to something which was not a part of the proceedings. If he is so insistent that the audience that comes to attend his lectures should have read his 'extensive writings', then maybe he should make that a precondition! Only then can he ensure a 'qualified audience', i.e. an audience which has thoroughly read all his work.

4. Sathe says (*STQ*, 18, p. 24) 'The clip of the play *Martyrs and Saints* showed an HIV infected person cutting up by knives, piercing by needles and performing violent acts either on himself or on another HIV-infected actor on stage. There was a lot of blood. Paper napkins or towels soaked in this blood passed over the audience present for this play.' Sathe was not the only one in the audience to think this. As Schechner himself says, this was not a live performance for the Pune audience, but a record of a past performance coming to them through film. A film audience derives meaning for itself, by relating the screen images sequentially. Surely Schechner knows this very well! Yet, he chooses to remark 'That Sathe heard me say something I specifically explained is either a lie on his part or a fantasy. Sathe so much disliked what I was saying that he heard me say things I did not say.' This vehemence is uncalled-for. It only exposes Schechner's intolerant attitude.

5. References to Van Gogh and Dostoevsky by Schechner in this context amused me no end. Van Gogh's as well as Dostoevsky's insanity could be understood as an uncontrollable surge of passion within human beings possessing uncommon sensitivities. This passion was quite often generated by positive human values such as love, compassion, solidarity. Their work opened up many a door of perception for humankind. These godly madmen did not 'play' anyone. They were themselves. Their violence was a private matter and what the public received were the lucid expressions of their passion. Their work is the proof of the perceptive remark 'Within all great art there is a WILD animal: tamed' (Wittgenstein again). Athey's 'bloody exhibitionism' is simply not fit to hold a candle to these geniuses. Cheese is cheese and chalk is chalk. Vive le difference!

6. Schechner says, 'I think it more likely that Athey is sharing in an experiential way his situation—in the hope that some collective or communal catharsis might be achieved. But I insist that my interpretation is only that: a possibility.' Schechner is entitled to his own interpretation. But he should also sensitize himself to seeing the 'collective/communal repulsion', that Athey's act produced in Pune on that day. That was *the* reality of *that* particular day.

7. Schechner makes out Sathe to be his inquisitor-in-chief and resorts to melodramatic self-justification. He concludes, 'My performative approach to living is in many ways related to the maya-like view of life deeply ingrained in much Hindu, Brahmanic and Vedic philosophy' (whatever that means). 'I am not aloof.' All one can say in this respect is that his adrenalin is pumping for wrong reasons.

I think that on the whole Schechner is playing 'the injured artiste' a little too loudly. He is accusing Sathe of lying, distorting his words, hallucinating, not taking him seriously etc. I think that it is very unfair. To my mind, Sathe has articulated what almost everybody in the audience felt that day. Schechner only had to listen to the conversations in the lobby after his 'performance' to understand this. But alas, he was carrying too many roses with him that day, for him to smell anything else. Amongst his audience on that day were theatre and

film personalities, writers, painters, academicians, scientists, students and others. They had heard of his 'Environmental Theatre' in the garages of New York, of his *Mother Courage* in the villages of West Bengal, and had come to listen to this 'avowed enemy of the proscenium theatre' with respect and admiration. Instead they got a showman in love with his own words and gestures (the flower syndrome!), incapable of understanding the import of their questions. They came to participate in a meaningful discourse, but were treated to a TV talk-show.

Looking back at the whole thing in today's socio-economic perspective, particularly to the hollowness of Schechner's arguments, a thought crosses my mind: art and artists that live by political ideas ALONE—maybe—also perish by them?

Anil Zankar

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India Foundation for the Arts: Call for Proposals

India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) is an independent, professionally managed, national grant-making institution. Given the richness and diversity of the arts in India, IFA seeks to provide sustenance to creativity, collaborative work and critical reflection.

Twenty-four grants awarded earlier under the arts research and documentation programme supported the study of subjects like compositions in Carnatic music, popular and commercial art, craft traditions and lifestyles, women photographers, architectural history, mural and miniature painting, and the traditions of Indian sculpture. This list is only indicative of the diversity of interest generated by this programme and the range of the projects it attracts.

Arts Research and Documentation Request for Proposals

IFA now plans to offer a third round of grants for research and invites applications from individuals and organizations.

We intend the arts to be interpreted widely to include the written, the painted, the crafted, the performed, the broadcasted, and the filmed: both the traditional and the modern.

Our programme envisages not only support for the documenting of histories, but also investigation and interpretation of arts processes, comparative analyses, and theoretical research. We encourage efforts directed towards fostering critical attitudes and appreciation with regard to arts practices in the country, and strengthening methodology in any area of the arts. We also seek to encourage the examination of the arts in relation to other areas of study.

IFA attaches importance to research that investigates marginalized or relatively unexplored areas of concern, both historical and contemporary. Research proposals may also be collaborative or interdisciplinary in nature.

We also envisage seed grants for preparatory research towards exhibitions, literary publications including fiction, educational audio-visuals, films/videos, stage productions, performance tours, workshops etc.

Proposals that address the practical concerns of the arts community, like support systems for artists or issues of cultural policy, are welcome. We invite proposals concerning language development activities that have a bearing on the arts.

IFA interprets documentation to include films/videos on arts subjects and systematic archiving of valued cultural materials and collections, which are placed in the public domain and address the interests of relevant audiences and users.

Documentation proposals should be grounded in a well-articulated research perspective.

Application Guidelines

Proposals may be formulated in any manner that conveys project ideas and concerns effectively. Applications should, however, contain the following:

1. Brief narrative of the background and context of the proposal, and the needs, issues or opportunities it addresses.
2. Overall goals, specific objectives, and rationale of the proposal.
3. Description of the research or documentation methods that will be used or developed.
4. Description of the anticipated outcome of the project; its educational or social value; and dissemination, preservation or other strategies that will enhance its impact.
5. Proposed duration of the project.
6. Detailed budget and explanation, including any funds anticipated from other sources.
7. Published literature, visuals or other supporting material, if any. (IFA will be unable to return any material accompanying the proposal.)
8. Address, telephone/fax number and e-mail address, if any.

Individual applicants should also submit their bio-data, and those of research associates, if any. Institutional applicants should submit background information on the organization (legal status, main sources of funding, management and staff structure, current activities, and a resume of the principal researchers associated with the proposed project).

All proposals must necessarily be accompanied by a summary of not more than 750 words highlighting the salient features of the project.

General Information

1. Proposals may be submitted in any Indian language including English.
2. Indian nationals, registered non-profit Indian organizations, and persons resident in India for at least 5 years are eligible to apply. Collaborating researchers should fall into one of the above categories.
3. The duration of the proposed project may be two years or less.
4. Grant awards will be determined through a competitive process and, wherever necessary, proposals will be referred to specialists.
5. Support for up to Rs 5 lakh may be requested. Proposal evaluation will take into consideration whether the budget is realistic and appropriate.
6. Support may be requested for fresh, ongoing or preparatory research activity. However, funds will not be available to cover costs incurred before the grant is activated.
7. The identity of the applicant should not be made evident in the text of the proposal.
8. Funds would be available only for project related personnel costs, activities and travel, and for modest equipment and materials, if necessary.
9. Institutional overheads, building costs, and infrastructural development should not be budgeted. Funds would also not be available to pay for exhibitions, screenings, productions, lecture tours, or publications.
10. Requests for support to present or disseminate project results may be considered at a later stage, following an evaluation.
11. Short listed applicants may be invited for an interview and/or to

respond to evaluations. IFA staff or consultants may also make site visits to gain a better appreciation of the proposed project.

12. IFA's decision on grant awards will be final.

13. Proposals sent by fax/e-mail will not be considered.

IFA staff will be glad to discuss proposal development, and respond to draft proposals or questions regarding this grant programme. Written enquiries should reach IFA one month prior to the deadline for applications.

Timetable

Applications should reach IFA by April 30, 1999. Grant awards will be announced on or before September 30, 1999.

Applications and all other communications should be addressed to:

The Executive Director

India Foundation for the Arts

Tharangini, 12th Cross

Raj Mahal Vilas Extension

Bangalore - 560 080

Tel/fax: 080-331-0583/331-0584

e-mail: ifabang@blr.vsnl.net.in

Film Studies

Time and Dreams

The Films of Buddhadeb Dasgupta

John W. Hood

The alternative cinema in Bengal has a considerable reputation, with masters like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen establishing a reputation for originality and artistic integrity. Poet and filmmaker Buddhadeb Dasgupta upholds this tradition with his sensitive films which have won critical kudos and awards at national and international film festivals.

With his very first feature film, *Duratwa*, in 1978, Buddhadeb Dasgupta was considered a filmmaker to watch; Satyajit Ray found the film 'poetic'. Two decades and ten feature films later, he has lived up to his earlier promise, continuing to win recognition at film festivals and establishing his reputation as a sensitive and serious filmmaker.

By way of an introduction to his cinema, this volume takes a close look at his feature films, tracing significant themes and motifs through the *oeuvre*. A complete filmography and list of published works are also included.

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