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## Editorial

In April this year, STQ was invited to participate in the fifth international Performance Studies conference held at Wales, UK—a vast gathering of over 400 experts, scholars, researchers, academics, graduate students, performance artists, theatre directors and practitioners. Apart from the presentation of papers, there were panel discussions, performances, viewings of works in progress, feedback sessions and meet-the-artist sessions.

This conference is held by Performance Studies International (PSi), a worldwide association for scholars and practitioners in the field of performance. PSi is a professional association committed to promoting communication and exchange among scholars and practitioners working in the field of performance. Two years ago STQ was invited to be one of the featured journals offered at a special discount as part of the newly-formed PSi's membership scheme. The other featured journals are Performance Research, TDR, Women and Performance and World Art (details about these appear elsewhere in this issue).

We responded expressing our willingness, and thus began a relationship with both PSi and Centre for Performance Research, one of the core members of PSi, as part of which, STQ was invited to participate in this conference.

The benefit of the conference, quite apart from the stimulation of seeing a widely differing variety of contemporary performance/theatre approaches and styles, was that it turned out to be an extremely valuable source of assessment and evaluation for STQ. It helped us understand STQ's difference from most other performance/theatre journals in terms of its relationship both with the field it serves, and with the world of academia and theory.

Unlike the other specialist journals which circulate within the academic system and which carry articles by scholars on various subjects, STQ is unique in that we prefer firsthand material, usually generating our own. This approach has evolved in response to the particular situation of performance documentation/research in our country, where, rather than circulate existing scholarship, the greater need is to initiate in-depth analysis and coverage, creating source material and archival documentation upon which future study can be based. We also foreground the voice of the practitioner rather than the observer/commentator/researcher. STQ has chosen to give space to the marginalized and little-known (vanishing folk forms, activist theatre, women's issues, for example), thus spreading information and knowledge about areas widely ignored by the mainstream media, facilitating networking and helping build links between otherwise isolated groups with similar concerns. We feel that we are helping strengthen the field of performance and theatre in the long run, giving voice to practice and process both laterally and from the ground up, rather than top-down, which is the predominant academic way. In other words, the conference helped us realize that STQ was, indeed, feeding the field of both scholarship and performance, albeit in a very different way from the other journals represented.

This assessment of STQ's role and function vis-a-vis the whole field of performance and theatre comes at a time when we are undertaking a programme of evaluation of STQ. With this issue we invite our subscribers to write in with critical comments, suggestions, perceptions and observations that can help us evaluate STQ's contribution as a journal over the past six years, as well as shape future directions. We hope that you will take the time to put your views down on paper and e-mail, fax or post them to us. As friends and supporters, your opinions count.

Anjum Katyal



### **Performing the Goddess Chapal Bhaduri's Story**

*'Now I'm Chapal Rani through and through. No longer Chapal Bhaduri.'*  
Chapal Bhaduri, alias Chapal Rani or Queen Chapal, leading lady of Bengal's traditional folk travelling theatre-in-the-round, the Jatra, spent his life playing women. Feeling like a woman. Until history changed tradition and women began to play female roles themselves. Out of work, ageing, he turned to a new livelihood: that of playing Sitala, the poor person's dreaded goddess of pox and disease, in dramatized performances of the goddess's sacred saga.

This video biography brings you face to face with a unique individual, reminiscing about the world of the *jatra*, discussing what it meant to be a woman night after night, talking of the essential loneliness that came from being neither one thing nor another, of living as a human being on the edges of conventional society, and showing how he metamorphoses into the goddess in order to perform her story. In the process we get a fascinating view of the milieu of the professional Jatra, an integral part of the people's culture of Bengal.

In-depth interviews on the life of a Jatra actor, extracts from milestone fragments of Jatra plays, the makeup process that metamorphoses a man into a goddess, and documentation of the play on the goddess, provide you with a rare entry into an unusual world, and a close look at Chapal Bhaduri's life and work.

*Colour. 44 minutes. Betacam.*

*Produced by:  
The Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Calcutta.*

## A Playwright of Human Relationships

An interview with Mahesh Elkunchwar

Leading Marathi playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays have been extensively staged in several languages. He is best known for his Wada Chirebandi (Old Stone Mansion) which grew into a trilogy. He discusses this central work and other theatre issues with Anjum Katyal and Paramita Banerjee for STQ. This interview took place in September 1996.

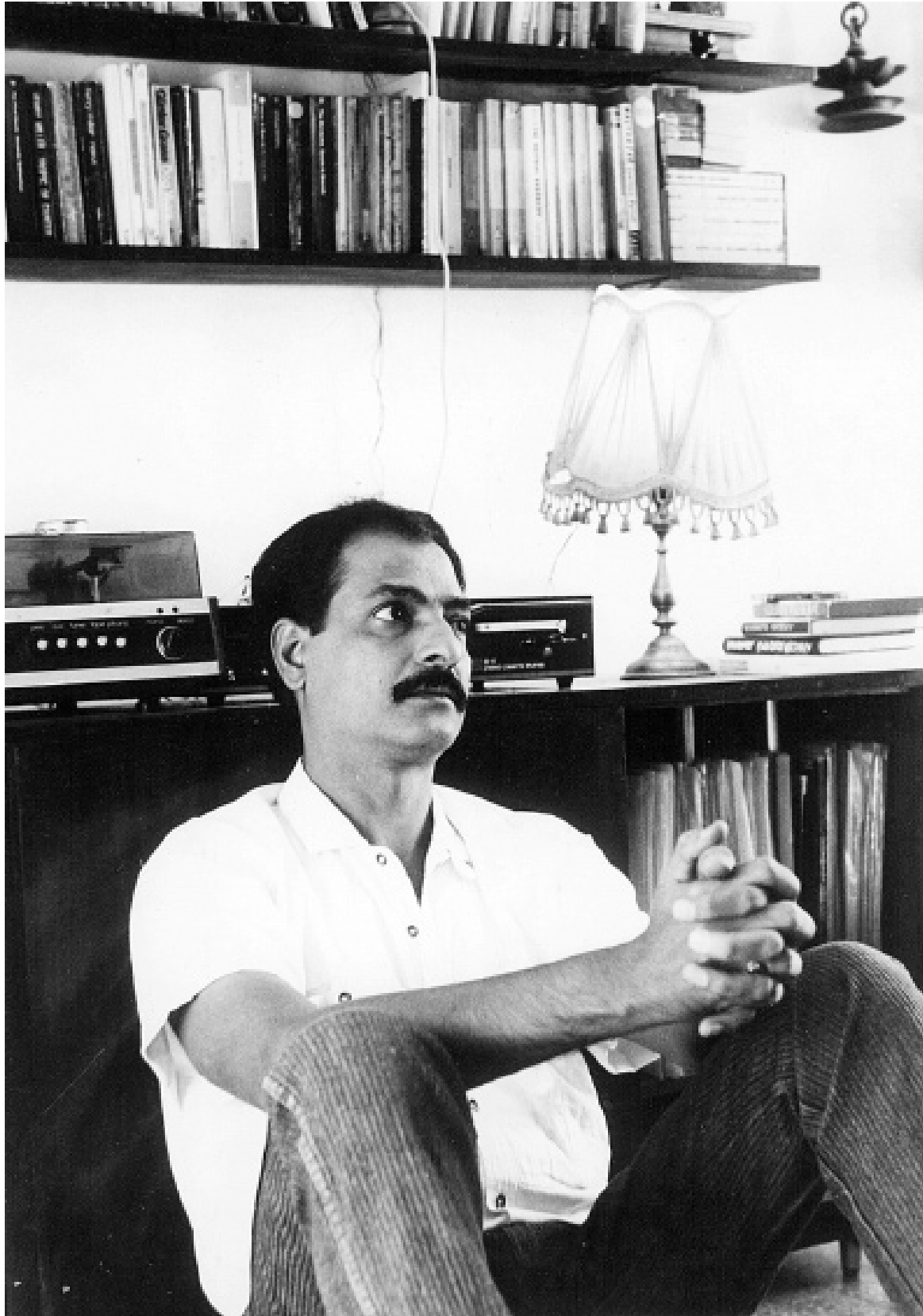


Photo: Sanjib Ganguly

AK: What I would like to know is how you first thought that you were going to write a play. How did the process happen? Were you already reading plays, seeing theatre? What went on in your mind?

ME: I drifted into theatre by accident. Because, as a child, even as a young man, I was not exposed to any kind of theatre at all. I was more interested in music than anything else, because my father used to sing, and my mother is a vocalist of some standing, and there was a lot of music in my house. As a child I had to stay with my uncle and aunt and, since I was away from my parents and I was rather lonely, I would find myself lots of books. And there was no radio in the house so I would go to barbers' saloons where the radio was always playing and under the pretext of having a haircut I would sit there listening to the songs and music. And books—books of any kind—were my companions. I would pick up any book and start reading it. And I was often punished for having read the wrong kind of books, meant for adults. I didn't know they were for adults. I think I wanted to run away from the situation I was in and books were a way to forget everything. I always read things which were not meant for my age, you know. I had finished reading N. S. Phadke, and V. S. Khandekar, the most famous novelists of the time, by the time I was thirteen or fourteen, and that was adult stuff.

AK: Did reading make you feel like writing?

ME: I contributed a few short stories to school and college magazines. Actually, I was not interested in literature as much as I was interested in music. And theatre was not even on the periphery of my life—it didn't exist. I had not even seen a play.

After matriculation, I came to Nagpur. I was a great movie fan. But until I had done my matriculation, movies were taboo. I was not supposed to see movies, just two or three a year, maybe. They had to be mythological and all that. So when I came to Nagpur as a student and started living in a hostel, I saw movies with a vengeance. I used to see about 150 films a year. At least 500-600 films in the four years of college. And I think that was a great education—I learnt a lot. I was introduced to the great classics of the world. The most famous novels, the most famous plays, were made into films and . . . that was a great education, because my background is that of a small town and I had no previous exposure to these things. I would have loved to go to the film institute, to be a film-maker, not an actor. But again, it was taboo. Economically, I was dependent on my father and I knew there would be tremendous opposition. I did talk to him about it, and he said, obviously, no. So there was no question of that.

AK: How many plays had you seen at that time?

ME: One or two, maybe. And they were all commercial musicals and they were a big letdown. I mean, I had almost taken a vow not to see theatre. Can you imagine a sixty-year-old Krishna, belting out all those beautiful natya sangeets, and a very corpulent Subhadra, fifty-something—that really put me off. I said, no, that's not my cup of tea.

AK: Did you see any acting you liked?

ME: You saw some extraordinary acting in Hollywood movies. Even Indian movies, Kagaz ke Phool and Pyaasa . . . I was introduced to Satyajit Ray later—in 1958, I think. And that changed my attitude towards the visual arts. It was a great education. So, even then, I wasn't interested in theatre. Cinema had become the top priority, music was another. I wouldn't miss a single concert in Nagpur. In fact, I had to cut corners and save a lot of money so that I could buy all those expensive tickets. But I don't regret it at all.

I finished college in 1962. I lost two years because I was always a vagabond. I became a drop-out twice. But I used to read a lot, even at that time, a lot of Marathi literature, although I hadn't read many Marathi plays.

Then one fine evening—you know, it was an accident—how it can change one's life! My friend and I went to see a movie and couldn't get seats. So we were coming back, and my friend said, let's go and see this particular play which is on. And I said, which one? He said, it's a Tendulkar play. I had heard of Tendulkar although I hadn't read him. This was in 1963. And he said, Dr. Lagoo and Vijaya Khote (she was Khote, not Mehta, at that time), are the actors. And I said, I don't know these people and I've seen two Marathi plays and that is more than enough for me. I'm not going to see this play.

AK: Both the previous plays were sangeet natakas?

ME: Yes, one was Subhadra and I don't really remember the other. But he insisted, so we went in. Within ten minutes, I realized that this was something different. It was Mi Jinklo, Mi Harlo, which is not Tendulkar's best, but I had never seen a production so fresh. First-rate acting—

AK: Naturalistic.

ME: Absolutely naturalistic. And it was such a revelation for me. Within half an hour, I was completely engrossed in it. And then I came home, elated, and said, this is something I can do, I think. I think I can write something like this. But I had to see the play again. I had to see how the actors moved from left to right and the mechanisms involved. So I went and saw the play again. I am not saying I learnt everything, but I could see that a lot of thinking had gone into it. Then I came home and bought all Tendulkar's works and read and re-read them. Then I wrote a long one-act. It was a terrible imitation of Tendulkar. I don't even remember the name. Because I tore it up.

AK: You said the first time you saw the play, you were engrossed by it and when you came home, you thought that this was something you could do. But you were thinking more about the technique than the content or the subject matter. Could you talk about what it was that gripped you—what was going on in terms of content or the technique and craft of it?

ME: The content of the play did not impress me at that time. Because, as I said, this is not one of his best plays. It's a reasonably good play about an actor who begins to compromise for success, you know.

As I told you, watching the play was an electrifying experience and it opened up doors within me. And I knew I could do it. There was this strange confidence. I don't know where it came from. So when I said I was curiously impressed by these actors—I didn't even realize . . . For example, I would be watching Vijaya and then, suddenly, I would realize, my God! She was on the left, when did she come to the right? Dr. Lagoo was centre-stage and then suddenly he is here! When did he do it? It was such a clever thing to do. I think even at the time, somewhere, I was subconsciously aware that it is a collective activity: the writing, the acting, the direction. There was something I was trying to understand, I guess. I don't know, I haven't really analysed it. But it was an experience which made me feel that I could write in this genre, that I could arrange things like this.

AK: Did you think from the beginning that you could be involved in the collective work? Or did you think that you could write, or that you would like to direct too?

ME: I wanted to write.

Anyway, I read out that prose play of mine to my friend and he said, it's a very bad imitation of Tendulkar, so why don't you tear it up, please? I did. And then I waited for a couple of months and wrote another one-act. This time, I had to take a deliberate decision not to imitate Tendulkar. I said, if I can't write something which is not like Tendulkar, then I should not write at all. I had to take great care not to be influenced by him because at that time, and even now, it's very difficult not to be influenced by Tendulkar—he is such a powerful playwright. Then my play, Sultan, got published in a prestigious magazine, Satyakatha, in 1967. It is extinct now. They steadily published five or six of my one-acts, which were considered absolutely new and totally different from what was being published at that time—stylistically, content-wise, everything.

AK: Were any other dramatic influences working on you?

ME: I was greatly impressed by Absurd drama at that time. I was reading European literature, and that was one of the influences. From 1967-70, I went on writing steadily and all my works were published in Satyakatha. I had not thought that they would ever be produced. I had thought of them as literature, as a literary exercise, and they were really never tested on the stage. So I did not know whether they would work on the stage or not.

AK: In your mind did you see them on stage?

ME: Yes, I did. Right from the beginning, I have always seen my characters on a given set. The first thing I do is I visualize the set, then I start writing. Sometimes I draw it on a sheet



and put it in front of me on the table. And I move my characters from point to point, I make many graphs like that. It's a game also: it breaks the monotony of writing. I use coloured pencils. I use a red pencil for one character and a green pencil for another. And I keep on drawing charts: now he is here, now he is there—they change their positions.

AK: When you draw the [set], do you draw the whole house, or just the things on stage?

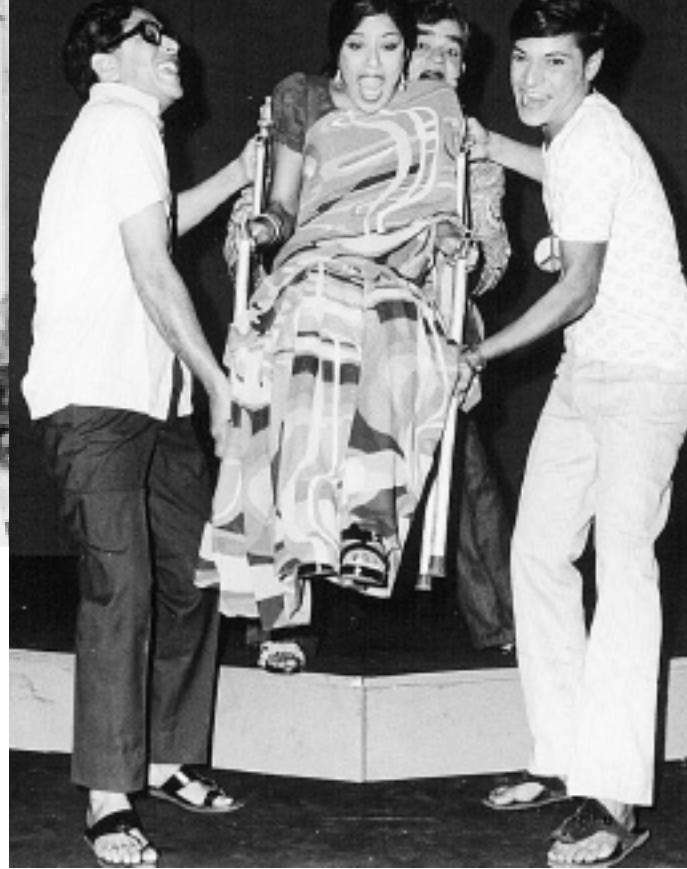
ME: No, first I draw the acting areas, there are three or four. And then I use the absolutely essential pieces of furniture, if at all there is going to be furniture. And exits and entries, of course.

AK: Only what is seen on stage?

ME: Absolutely. Only the functional area. I want a lot of space on stage so that my characters can move freely. I am aware of that, which probably means that there is a dormant director within me.

So, to go back, the plays were known for their literary strength, I guess, but I didn't know whether they would ever be staged. I had published 5 or 6 one-acts. And nobody would touch them in Nagpur, naturally. Then suddenly, out of the blue, I got a letter from Vijaya Mehta (she was Mehta by then) and she wanted to produce them for her Rangayan workshop. I was thrilled. She produced *Flori* and *Sultan* first. And later on, *Eka Mahataryacha Khun* and *Yatanaghar*. She produced all my earlier work during 1970-71.

When I received this letter, I said, my God! Because by that time I was quite familiar with the theatre scene, I used to read, after my exposure to the Tendulkar play, about what was happening in theatre. There was not much theatre in Nagpur. So I knew who Vijaya was and what her stature was. It was such a great morale-booster. Even then, I did not know whether the plays would work, but I thought, since Vijaya is doing them, there must be something to them. Then I went to Bombay and they were hits! Hits in the sense—there was always this microscopic section of our society which used to see this kind of theatre. We didn't



Left Mahesh Elkunchwar and Vijay Tendulkar (photo: Sanjib Ganguly); centre Shreeram Lagoo, Deepa Shriram, Dutta Bhat and Amol Palekar in *Garbo*; right Suhas Joshi and Satyadev Dubey in *Pratibimb* (Photo: Rajdatt Arts).





have a large following, but we had a very faithful following, and all the plays proved themselves. Theatrical stuff. So I realized that they may be literary, yes, but I can write for the stage.

AK: Had you begun to locate yourself vis-à-vis the other contemporary playwrights? G. P. Deshpande, Satish Alekar, Achyut Vaze—were you conscious of what they were writing, and how you were similar or different?

ME: Alekar came on the scene around 1972-73, GPD also in 1973. By 1973, I had already put in 5 or 6 years of work, I had already been produced in 1970. So I come between Tendulkar and Alekar. Chronologically speaking, it is Tendulkar, and then Ratnakar Matkari—he showed a lot of promise. I think Matkari could come up with something startling. He has the potential.

But, chronologically speaking, Tendulkar, then Matkari, then me, then GPD and then Alekar. Although we are clubbed together, I started writing much earlier and I was also produced—

AK: So the only one you could compare yourself to was Tendulkar . .

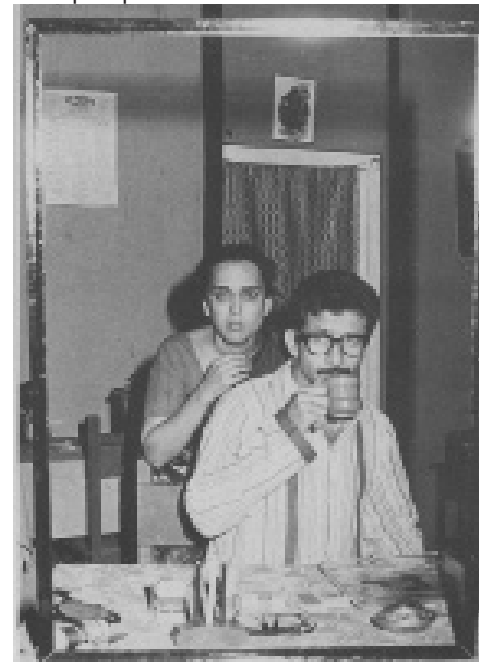
ME: Oh yes. Until 1973, I did not even know what Alekar or GPD were writing.

Now, I am going to say something very important. Vijaya has been a great and very healthy influence on my theatre career. She produced my plays and it was proved that they were theatrical successes, but even then she cautioned me. She said, Mahesh, you are sometimes too literary and you tend to over-write. Which I knew. Writing was always a very personal kind of exercise for me, in the sense that I always wanted to talk to myself or somebody. And words were something very precious to me and I liked playing with words, I liked to use them. Like a painter would his colours—he would use his colours to express himself. I like to use words to express myself and I am not ashamed of using words. In my art, you are not supposed to use a lot of words, I guess, and I did. But as an artist, it was my responsibility not to over-do it and I think that the stage should have been my priority and not literature. But then I always said I could strike a very good balance between stagecraft and writing. And even now, I don't consider myself a stage worker or a rangakarmi, as they say these days. Satish and Achyut say they are rangakarmis, they are not literary writers. I think of myself as a writer, writing literature. I am not a rangakarmi. Because I want my works to exist even if they are not staged. They should be available and they should be read as literature. And the contents should be accessible to all. I have never seen Chekhov[’s plays], but I have had access to Chekhov and I know what a great playwright he was. Or Steinbeck. It has to be literature if it is to remain on the shelves.

AK: What in your opinion are the qualities a work should have to make it dramatic literature as opposed to a performance script?

ME: It's not only a question of language . . . I don't know. It's a matter of how you arrange your material. I'll answer this question later on,

Suhas Joshi and Naseeruddin Shah in Raktapushp



I'll think this over.

Finally, I think it is more a matter of instinct, you know. I mean, an instinctive playwright will always come up with a dramatic text, with drama inherent in it. I know a few playwrights who go on writing and there is hardly a moment of drama in their works. They train themselves to be playwrights, they aren't born playwrights—it sounds a cliché saying this, but I think it is an instinct. Why haven't I written poetry? Why haven't I written novels? Why haven't I written short stories? Because theatre comes naturally to me. Maybe because I was visually trained, because I had seen so many films for four long years. My ear was trained for dialogue. So these things must have helped me.

AK: So do you think you always had this dramatic impulse within you that made you a playwright?

ME: Yes—I mean, I haven't thought about it. I don't know whether it made me a playwright or not, because I never wanted to be a playwright. I became one by accident. Probably it did help me a bit, because as a child . . . I was a really lonely child and I had no friends. There was no dialogue between me and the adults around me. So I would imagine people, all sorts of people. I would imagine friends, adults, and I would talk to them and react to them. It was a game I played. And they were always really happy plays, very loving people. There was a chorus, a very small chorus, which always ended up in happiness and all that. But I think this capacity to invent people as a child—naturally, there was dialogue—that was probably a kind of training I was undergoing, though I wasn't aware of it at that time.

AK: So you would invent people with interaction, as opposed to inventing places with descriptions and all that. It was more the people element that you were inventing. Because, again, if you are writing a play, what you are actually not doing that you would do in, say, a novel is the descriptive element. You are not actually spending a lot of time building up atmosphere, you are going straight into dialogue, into interaction. So maybe that has got something to do with the fact that you chose plays as opposed to novels or poetry—this thing we were discussing of why you should have chosen drama. It doesn't sound like an accident—it sounds more as if a door suddenly opened into a space which you always had inside you.

ME: Yes, the space was probably always there, I was waiting for . . . and it took about 26 years of my life for it to . . . it is quite possible. But I was quite sure that there was a vocalist in me, although I never could sing because of very practical, material reasons. As a child, there was never any chance of getting training. When I was older, as a college student, I struggled with so many things—I struggled with my personal and emotional life so much—that I had no money left to do anything. Writing didn't come naturally to me, but it happened.

AK: When you began to write your plays, were there any particular issues you felt you had to talk about?

ME: The plays all deal with families, the role of the family, and they were all personal statements, in the ultimate analysis.

There are two or three things I would like to say. I have often been branded a reactionary, a person who is not interested in social issues. Many of my friends are dedicated to a cause or many causes. This used to give me a tremendous sense of guilt, a feeling that there is some deficiency in my character. Because my plays don't claim to be about social issues. They are personal statements. They talk to you about an individual going through some deep psychological trauma. And these traumas are all in some way connected to my inner emotional life.

My first phase of playwriting started in 1967 and went on till 1974, and after that I stopped writing for eight years. I didn't write a single word.

AK: What was the last play of that first phase?

ME: Party.

PB: Don't you think Party has a lot of ideological connotations?

ME: I don't even rate it as a good play now. It's a clever play. I observed the people around me and I wrote it out. I didn't take any position in it, as a playwright.

AK: So why do you think you stopped writing for 8 years after Party?

ME: There was just a lull. I think I got bored, maybe. I just had nothing to say. At that time, I used to read a lot. I read a lot, even now. What I was doing was not really first-rate—one knows what is first-rate in world literature, in world theatre—and if I can't write something which is as good as that, then what is the point? That was one of the reasons. And then, maybe, I didn't have anything to say. I am a lazy person, basically. I write about 50 pages every 2 or 3 years. And I write for only about 10 days. 5 pages a day. Which means about 10 days in 2 years. That's real hard work!

AK: Tell us about writing Wada Chirebandi [Old Stone Mansion]?

ME: When I wrote Wada, I resolved many personal problems. Not resolved exactly, but negotiated them. And I was a quieter person. I knew how to cope with certain situations and that's when I began to see out of myself. I began to try to understand other people. I became more open, slightly more sympathetic. That was one reason I could write Wada.

And Wada, in a way, is a very personal kind of experience because I come from such a family, although my family has never fallen on bad days because my father was a very sensible person and made sure everyone was educated. Only my eldest brother has stayed, and he looks after the property and the mansion. But since 1950-55—the Land Ceiling Act came in 1949—I have seen these feudal families crumbling under the pressure. Three years of my life were spent in a place called Wani, when I did my ninth, tenth and eleventh classes. I stayed with a cousin of mine. That is where a lot of really rich families lived, all Brahmins, about 20 or 25 families. It was a place known for its rich people. And I could see their state of decay. I mean, those families are still there and all of them have fallen on bad days. And I could also see why it was happening. They had lost the work habit centuries ago, they had never worked in their lives. I could see it happening. And I had seen two or three friends of mine go through this experience, who were trying their best to cope with the situation, but were very unhappy.

AK: Can we talk about the 8 years when you did not write? What made you stop feeling that you could not write, and how did you prepare yourself to write again?

ME: I thought people were forgetting me! And that if I wanted to be remembered, I had to come up with something.

I have often wondered whether the need to assert myself has been the driving force behind my writing. I think I had a terrible inferiority complex. Even though I had tried, I had not got over it. You don't know how I suffered because of it. I considered myself such a small person—not just a small person but an absolutely useless kind of person—I had no self esteem at all. At the same time, I felt I had to prove myself. There must be something in me, I know I am good. So theatre gave me this chance. Theatre is a very aggressive medium, and that is why I chose it. That is why I became a playwright . . .

AK: When you weren't writing, were your plays being produced?

ME: Yes, and in Maharashtra, they were absolutely popular. Even Holi—Holi is 27-28 years old and still is being done everywhere, all over India.

AK: Did you always have a say in how your plays were being produced?

ME: Yes, I was with Amol [Vasanakand] when he produced Party, but my real exposure to the whole rehearsal game came when Vijaya produced Wada Chirebandi in 1985. Vijaya read the play and said, I want to come over to Nagpur and discuss the script. And she came over and we discussed it and we went to my village wada. Vijaya stayed with us for 4-5 days. Then Vijaya went into rehearsals and later on, I joined her—always working together.

AK: Do you have a clear idea in your mind when you are writing a play of what it will be like and feel like and smell like and look like? Do you feel possessive about it when a director is doing it? Do you feel that it is not coming out right or do you like to see people experiment with it?

ME: Well, right from the beginning, as I have told you, there has been a dormant director in me and I always knew how my plays should be done and how they should look on the stage. And I wanted them that way, etc., etc., etc. But very early in my theatre career I realized that if somebody else is directing your play, then he is another human being and

he is looking at your play from his perspective—he is definitely going to handle individual scenes in a different manner. So I had to give him this liberty, or otherwise, I had to direct my own plays, if I had the patience. Because I don't think I have the patience to deal with a group of twenty people for two months, or even one month. But often I was disappointed because the person didn't see, didn't get it across the way I wanted it. Sometimes, it was much better than what I had visualized.

AK: What about the process of writing Wada? Pre-text?

ME: Pre-text. Now I must tell you, there are certain lines of dialogue lifted straight from the conversations between my mother and my sister-in-law. They are two fabulous women in my family, absolutely fabulous. Their relationship was like that between a mother and a daughter. And now, my mother is dead and so is my sister-in-law. It was she who really held the family together. The bhabi in Wada is almost like her. She was a quiet, very firm, very gentle person. In 1983, though I was a part of the family, I was never really part of the family, always on the periphery, emotionally and also physically, I seldom visited. But then I started looking at them and I thought, there are some very nice people in this family. Like my mother and my sister-in-law, and why can't I write about them? And that is how I started.

Then I added to it. Like, I know a family where the daughter was not allowed to go to college, though she was an extremely intelligent girl. She is still alive, but the bitterness is very much there. Now she rejects everything in life, she's so bitter. So I said, I'll add this character to this play. Then the old woman—I had seen an old woman like that when I was a child. You don't really do it consciously, you know. When you start writing, things start happening, sort of vague and out of focus. It is happening and you didn't even know that the characters were waiting in the wings. The character simply walks on and becomes a part of the play.

AK: Did you start with characters or did you start with a theme?

ME: In fact, if I have to choose one thing, I'll say I start with an image. There was an image which was not part of my previous experience in life. I was talking to Vijaya about my family . . .

AK: This was before you wrote the play?



Shreeram Lagoo and Shubhangi Sangwai in Atmakatha

Dadi in the Kannada production of Wada





A scene from Uttaradhikar, the Bengali production of Wada Chirebandi, with Ati Das and Alaknanda Datta

ME: Yes, I was thinking of writing it. Vijaya also comes from the same kind of background. So Vijaya was telling me about her family—how they had bought a tractor but had never used it. It got sunk in the ground and finally . . . So I said, what a beautiful image! Maybe I can use it in one of my plays. The image stayed with me. Along with the old woman, the tractor also became part of the thing. Maybe Vijaya was responsible for the whole thing, I don't know. There are so many things happening in your mind, so many ideas, which are not really connected with each other at all.

AK: At which stage did you realize what the theme was going to be?

ME: I think, when I started writing, it was about women in such families. And how they had the strength to survive ordeals which caused men to collapse. That is something which has always impressed me. I don't know whether it was a feminist or non-feminist point of view—I know that the women were really exploited. But a modern woman is also exploited, she is doubly exploited, in fact, because she has to work 10–5 in an office and then go home and work for the in-laws and the husband and the kids. What impressed me about the women was that they were exploited, they knew they were exploited, and yet they would refuse to break down under the pressures of living. And at the same time, they had this tremendous nobility of spirit and ability to forgive people and hold the family together. And I was impressed by that. So I maybe wanted to write about these women and that's why maybe the women in the trilogy are stronger than the male characters. Parag, of course, is a very strong character, but then . . .

I also had the feeling that this was a lifestyle, and these were values, that were disappearing. Whether this is good or bad, I don't know. I don't want to be judgmental. There was a period in history when people behaved like this and they had their own value systems. Some of my metropolitan friends accuse me of being nostalgic and liking the feudal order, the values. Maybe, maybe, I don't know.

AK: Do you think you took a stance in this play? You said you didn't take a stance in Party.

ME: No, I didn't. I refuse to take a stance in any of my plays. I mean, I have sympathy for my villains also, because there are so many in my works. Because for me, any human life is a

complete human life, which should be understood and respected.

AK: Who would you call the villains?

ME: Exactly, exactly. I wouldn't like to paint any character totally black. I don't want to judge anybody.

PB: Don't you think—taking you up on the ideology question—that one of your major concerns in this trilogy is to show that there are so many shades in every character? So many sides to every character? Which comes through very strongly. I mean, you can't specify so-and-so as the hero or so-and-so as the villain. Isn't that a very important ideological stand?

ME: Well, you could call it a stand, but if it is a stand, then it is a good one, because I respect even the smallest life as an individual life, with as much right to assert itself as a king or a queen.

AK: That is exactly what Paramita is saying—that in itself is an ideological stand.

ME: I wasn't even aware of that. Thank you for pointing that out to me! Like Shanta the other day said, Mahesh, you think you don't have an ideology, but it comes across. I said, what is my ideology? I don't know. Because I would say that for me, life itself is an ideology. I have always had this conviction that no political programme, no ideology, no reason, can really change our lives completely. They might bring a little bit of redress from time to time, but LIFE is much bigger than all these. They all come under this umbrella called life. I am committed to life, in the sense that I will try to understand it according to my lights, according to my power. And I am really amazed by the variety of it. I will need many lives to understand it.

AK: Taking you back to when you were writing *Wada*, can you remember how it developed—what were the points in the writing that excited you? When did you feel satisfied?

ME: Writing *Wada* was a unique experience in many ways. It was a very physical kind of experience. I felt there was a glow within me when I was writing. I was basically writing about people who were very good, who had an immense capacity to live and to give, rather than to take. And there was a kind of radiance—the whole exercise was so radiant. I had this experience when I wrote *Holi*. And things started coming. I wasn't sure what was coming next. And the next minute, the dialogue would appear. The same thing happened during *Wada*.

One particular moment was when I was writing about these ornaments, which I knew was going to be a focal point of the play. Initially, I had a very naive and crude idea. That there is this gold in the family and the women in the house refuse to fight over the gold, somehow, while the brothers do. And I had to bring in the subject from time to time, with Prabha saying, give me my share, I will sell it. I knew how the mother would react—she says, this is our family jewellery and our Lakshmi, all that stuff. This part was easy—it was how an old woman of that era would react to the situation. Then comes the scene between Bhaskar and Vahini (the elder brother and his wife). And I don't know—I didn't do it consciously. I mean, Bhaskar showing her the jewels and Vahini adorning herself with the jewels and then the same thing being repeated by [Parag and Nandini in Part II]. I didn't know what I was doing: it just happened. And after that I said, my God! What have I done? I think this is going to work in theatre! And it does—I think that is the best scene in the play. So . . . it is very difficult to analyse the creative process, so many factors are involved, and then it drives you to do something. Sometimes you succeed, and sometimes you don't.

AK: What were some of the other high points . . . ?

ME: This was the real high point . . .

AK: Did you write it very fast?

ME: Yes, I always write very fast because I am a very organized writer. And I don't start writing until I am sure of what it is going to be like. But then, the first draft is always very weak, very weak.

PB: I was just going to ask you about the ornament scenes, Part I and Part II. They bring out

a totally different aspect of the relationship between the couples, whether between the eldest brother and his wife or the son and his . . .

ME: Yes, in Part II, it is very deliberate. I knew I was going to do it. I had to repeat myself, I had to show the contrast between the first ornament scene and the second ornament scene. So it is a very cleverly written scene.

PB: The first ornament scene—what prompted you? I mean, you said that you don't know, but was it the visual image or was it an oblique way of bringing out another aspect of the relationship between the couples? Or was it a combination?

ME: I don't know. One reason could be that we all come from this background and maybe it's a very culture-specific attitude towards jewellery, you know, ancestral jewellery. That is what it's like in traditional Marathi homes—stridhan. And it is respected. I had an uncle who fell on very bad days. But somehow they never touched the family gold, though they could have sold it and used it to buy a few meals or whatever. Later on, the situation changed and they had enough and they are happy now. But this gold is something you don't sell. I think it is a very Indian attitude, I don't know. And, as a man, I always love the sight of a woman putting on ornaments. It is about the most beautiful sight in the world, because she may be talking to you while she is doing it, but she is within herself, she is lost within herself. And she is a different person.

There is one sentence from an essay written by Durga Bhagvad, which has stuck in my mind. It's very difficult to translate . . . Even an ugly-looking woman, when she wears a new sari, looks as if she has bathed in the eternal pool of feminine beauty. It's a woman's association with new clothes.

Yes, I am very sensitive to feminine responses and masculine responses. And as a theatre-person, I know the strength of ritual. A woman putting on her ornaments one by one—and Uttara [Baokar] did it so beautifully. She was playful in the beginning and then she was erotic, and finally, there was this sudden transformation. But it was a very long scene and that is how it should be played. Many actors are turned off by it. I said, don't worry. The people in the audience are bound to enjoy a beautiful woman adorning herself.

AK: Do you remember when you finished the play? When did you know that it was finished?

ME: Yes, I remember. After four drafts . . . I wrote the first draft and I didn't know how to end it. It was a very clumsy end: I had shown Chandu going into the backyard and the wall collapsing and him dying in the debris—very melodramatic. There is a streak of melodrama in me. I was aware of it right from the beginning. And I have to make an extra effort, when I write, to avoid falling into this trap. Again, I was made aware of it by Vijayabai, yes, Vijaya was a great help, and Dr Lagoo. So it was a very melodramatic end and I really doubt whether anybody knew what to do with it.

Again, there was the character of a teacher in the first draft. I had written a scene between the teacher and Ranju, which was a parody of a Hindi film scene. It sounded very funny, but it didn't go with the nature of the play. So I slept on the script for a while—for six months maybe—and then I wrote Act II, from which I eliminated the teacher and to which I wrote a new end.

Then I wrote the third draft. I had read out the second draft to some friends in Bombay and they came up with some suggestions. So the play was with me for two years, I had a lot of time to think it over. I could see the holes more and more clearly. So I made a third draft. And that was the draft that was used by Vijaya. Even during rehearsals, we added a few bits here and there. Shifted a few lines from here to there. I won't call it a fourth draft but the third draft was slightly changed. I would say we rearranged, crystallized, it.

PB: How long was the whole process—from when you started to write it to having it [produced]?

ME: Say 1982-85, so three years.

PB: When you started writing Wada, did you know that it was going to be a trilogy?

ME: No, no, not at all. After 1985, when the play was produced, I didn't think about it for about two years, until 1987. But I used to talk to these characters, they never left me, they were living in my house, because in a way, emotionally, they were a part of me, all of them. At the same time, my relationship with my family had changed and taken on a different

dimension. This is all so mixed up that it is very difficult for me to analyse it at this point in my life. Then the characters demanded—yes, they wanted to come on stage, they wanted to say things. And I wrote the second part, and I was fully aware that it could easily be an over-sentimental play. I realized that I was getting old, and that I had become more soft and sentimental, so there are certain areas which can be sentimental if they are handled badly by the director. It's a big risk. I was fully aware of it, but I decided I was going to take it at the cost of being sentimental. There is nothing wrong in being sentimental, there are certain genuine sentiments, we are all sentimental from time to time in our lives. So why not? I mean, it's a valid experience. So it was like playing with fire: you will touch it but you will not allow it to singe you, that kind of thing. So it was a challenge that way.

Part II was over-written but I had decided I would write everything that occurred to me and edit it when the director began to work on it. Chandu Kulkarni, who directed my trilogy, did a wonderful job of it. It's a wonderful work: a very dedicated work. But he is so junior to me, he wouldn't touch a single word. He said, no, no, I am not going to touch a single word. I could have learnt a lot from Chandu but he refused to give me the opportunity [of editing it further].

AK: After you finished *Wada*, Part I, and read it over, what was your initial response and what kinds of responses did you get from people? Who was there the first time you read it out?

ME: I remember—Kumud Mehta, Govind Nihalani [and Satyadev] Dubey were there. It was a very theoretical discourse. They loved it, though the first draft was very weak, according to me. Because the heroine was absolutely bad. So I changed it later on. But their response, even to the first draft, was very encouraging. They made me think over it and that is what made it a structurally better play. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered.

AK: You kept working on it?

ME: Yes, the play was with me for almost three years. I wrote it in either December 1982 or early 1983. I distinctly remember that it was winter. After that Vijaya read it and wrote me a letter saying she would like to do it.

PB: When was it first performed?

ME: 1st May 1985 by Vijaya Mehta.

AK: During the time that you were finalizing it, how much did it change?

ME: Some very constructive suggestions came from Vijaya. Like she was in Nagpur and we were reading and re-reading the script. We worked on the script for about 4 or 5 days, and she was not really happy with the opening of the play. And we both thought something should be done. Then she came up with this idea. She said, Mahesh, why can't this play open in the night? (Initially it opened in the day, you know, Sudhir and Anjali walk onto the stage and that is how the play started.) And I said, what is the point? Why? And she said, visually, it would be so beautiful. There would be silence and there would be crickets chirping and there would be these three or four lanterns on stage. And the members of the family waiting for somebody to come. So the tension and the element of waiting would be established in ten seconds. And we can go on building from that point. And I said, that's beautiful! I will write that scene. I just sat down and wrote that scene. I mean, it is a one-and-half day scene. But that sets the tone of the play, you know. So this was a suggestion that came from her . . . you know, we worked so closely on it that neither of us remembers which suggestion came from whom. And for me it was an extremely rewarding experience: working with somebody who shares everything you have to say, you want to say.

AK: So she, as director, was trying to get your vision as playwright as completely and correctly as possible?

ME: Yes, that is true, but at the same time, she was seeing her own personal experience in it also. Because she said, this is something I have experienced, but my children haven't. Because Vijaya has a nuclear family and she lives a totally different kind of lifestyle. The middle-class Maharashtrian household. She said, this is not available to my children, they have missed out on something very important. She was rather nostalgic about it.

AK: Did you ever feel after you read the play—picking up on Vijaya's point—that there was a sense of history or the sense of a historical purpose in this? Because G. P. Deshpande



made the point that the way in which you have dealt with the social specifics, the space, the place in Wada Chirebandi is a very unique thing—a very historical way of looking at what is happening, very located, very precise. Did you ever feel that? He also said that though he didn't like the play, he felt it was important in this way.

ME: Yes, I was aware that it was in a way a comment on a particular social situation. But I didn't want to put any emphasis on it. My primary concern has always been human beings—human beings in a given situation—and it is their behaviour, their interaction, that suggests the kind of social changes that are perhaps taking place. I don't want to go out and make a definite historical statement. I am not interested in that. Because I feel that is being a bit too obvious. I wouldn't like to make obvious statements, I would rather do something which is evocative, which suggests. A direct statement, a categorical statement, might satisfy a few, but an artist strives to achieve much more than that. Because ideological theatre has a decided goal and once it reaches that, it makes no further claims. It seals the issue in a way. I don't think I could do that. Because there are certain issues, there are certain things about human relationships that can never be understood, resolved in toto, and life goes on. I am very interested in that. Although, even if GPD doesn't agree with it, Wada, the entire play, even Part I, is definitely a comment on the changing social scene.

AK: One of the things that comes through in the play is the whole business of value-systems, which, as we talked about earlier, is very closely linked to social structures. And when the social structures begin to change, so do the value systems. Which is a different way of looking at value systems, because earlier it was believed that values were something eternal that had come down to us through the centuries. But you show quite clearly that it is actually first the economic, and then the social, structures which start changing and therefore different values emerge. Was that something you were thinking about when you were writing? Were you somehow trying to show that there was a very strong link between changing values and changing economic structures?

ME: I became more conscious and aware of it when I wrote Part II. It is fully spelt out in Part III, which is partly a futuristic play, in the sense that it can happen tomorrow or day after tomorrow. And I think that is the direction in which we all are heading: complete devastation, complete annihilation. We are creating a vast desert around ourselves—a moral, cultural, sociological, political, economic desert. You might find this a pessimistic or almost nihilistic view, but it isn't. Look at the things which are happening around us. I sometimes feel extremely concerned that we are creating our own tragedies. And that is part of what I tried to say in Part II. Now this awareness becomes even stronger in Part III. So we can say that in Part I, the characters, their interactions, their emotional lives, are the main concern. In Part II, the characters, their interactions, and at the same time, the changing social scene, the changing values, were my concerns. Part III is totally about the change in values and society. And that is why it is stylistically so different from Part I.

AK: Can you talk now about the staging of Part I, the reception it got? And how did that lead into the writing of Part II—could you talk about that a bit?

ME: As I told you, by the time I wrote Part II, Part I had already been done by so many groups in so many languages, it had become part of the canon.

AK: What kind of feedback were you getting to Part I?

ME: It was universally liked and acclaimed. In Marathi, it's considered a classic. There are a few dissenting voices—GPD didn't like it. But they are very few.

Even die-hard leftists like Vidyadhar Date, who writes for The Times, loved it. But when I wrote Part II, it became a mystery for me too. I had forgotten the responses and the atmosphere created by the success of the play.

AK: You did write other plays in the intervening period?

ME: Yes, I wrote Atmakatha [Autobiography] and Pratibimba [Reflection]. Pratibimba came immediately after Wada Chirebandi. It is so totally different from Wada or from Raktapushpa [Flower of Blood]. Pratibimba was a throwback to my first phase. But I enjoyed writing it. And then came Atmakatha. It is a very cleverly-written, cleverly-crafted play. It was a huge success. Again, Atmakatha was about human beings and their interactions and how we try

to expose others and not ourselves.

AK: Did you try to bring out different aspects of human interactions?

ME: I don't know, I never try to. But that is one thing about human relationships. Most of the tension between two or three people builds up because we try to expose others. We call it understanding others and, at the same time, we try to hide so much of ourselves. We are afraid of laying bare our vulnerabilities because we are afraid of getting hurt. So naturally, in such a situation, there can be no give-and-take or communication. And this is exactly what happens between the three characters in *Atmakatha*. Again, this analysis is being done after I wrote the play, I wasn't aware of it at that time.

PB: Talking about *Wada* Part I, you told us that certain things from your real-life experience worked in the play. Can we say the same thing about Part II?

ME: They are the same characters, apart from Nandini. But again, the incident of her marriage to someone like Parag is taken from real life. I won't say that it has value as theatre because it is taken from real life; if it does not work in theatre, well then, it is bad art. I have a feeling that it does. Feminists had their own comments to make on this situation—an educated girl getting married to such a man and accepting her situation, etc. But I have a



friend who comes from a very rich family, a very nice guy. As a young man, a student, he had many affairs. Then finally he got married, an arranged marriage. He told me about the entire thing when we met up three or four years after his wedding. He said, on the very first day, I wanted to tell my wife about my past, because I didn't want any lies between us. And she listened to me for half an hour and then got up and gave me all the letters she had received from a friend, telling her about me. So I asked her, why didn't you rebel against this marriage? She had the same reasons, you know. She came from a poor family . . . These are very traditional, conventional ideas but if you are a part of that milieu, you have to conform. It's not a question of saving one's self. She wanted to save her entire family. It sounds very clichéd and filmy, but it did happen. Parag had to get married, that much I knew. But I didn't know what kind of wife he would get. And Nandini walked onto stage.

PB: Part I is a very finished product and so are the characters. With the two young boys, what they are going to turn out like ten years later is not indicated. Are the characters invented or are they prompted by some real-life experience?

ME: I don't think there are any real-life experiences. And it's really difficult to tell you how much of Mahesh Elkunchwar there is in Abhay or in Parag. Because ultimately I think that

Magna Talyakathi (The Pool)–Part II of the Wada trilogy (photo: Sanjay Pethe)



any writer who makes a personal statement cannot be separated totally from his creation or from his characters. All the characters that one creates are ultimately an indistinguishable part of one's psyche, somehow or the other. The character may not be totally like the writer but some aspects of his personality become the keynotes of the created character. So Parag and Abhay, both of them have something of me in them, though they have their own personalities; they are growing with me. Wada was produced in 1985, but I finished writing in 1984. And Part II was written in 1991. There was almost a seven-year gap. Abhay and Parag and the other characters were living in my house for seven long years. I could see them growing; I, too, was growing, so I have given a lot of myself to them.

AK: What are the various things that could have happened to them—directions in which they could have grown and things they could have done? Why do you feel they turned out this way? You were, after all, inventing them, you were making Abhay and Parag. Do you feel it was important to you in some way that they should turn out the way they did? Do you feel that the seeds of what they became lay in their earlier characters?

ME: For many, Abhay came as a surprise. They said, well, he was not like this in Part I. Abhay was a young man who rejected his cousin and he seemed to be a very selfish person who wanted nothing to do with his family in the village. So how come suddenly he becomes very nostalgic and all that? And I used to tell my friends, all that happened 10 years back. In 10 years, people do change. People do change in extremely unexpected ways. Again, that is no justification. If the change in Abhay is not accepted in theatre, if it is not valid theatrically, I have failed as an artist. A director and an actor have to do some detective work, have to find out why Abhay is like this. And there are enough explanations in Part I of why Abhay is like this. He is alienated from his family, father and mother. He detests his family. He was abroad, he is a different person, people do change. He confesses in Part II. He tells Parag, I was responsible for your not coming to Bombay. And Parag's change is not a change. It is a very natural, logical development of his character.

PB: Do you think—is it somehow significant to you—that while, on one hand, there is a gradual alienation between Bhaskar and Sudhir—even though there are a lot of childhood roots and things to keep them together, they are kind of at each other. Whereas these two cousins, in the next generation, they are coming together from a completely different place. No childhood memories, nothing like that. They are coming together—communicating what they have become as adults. This stark kind of contrast, the difference in values, this unity . . .

ME: It is not a very consciously achieved effect, you know. The contrast is there and I became aware of it later on when I read and re-read Part II. But I think the relationship between Abhay and Parag has a very personal element in it. In the last few years, one or two of my cousins and my younger brother . . . as I told you, I have always lived away from my family so there was hardly any bond between me and my brothers and sisters, whereas all of them grew up together. I always felt like an outsider. They were all so busy with their own lives, I really did not have any emotional contact with them, although I would visit them from time to time. But they are getting on and so am I. We have the leisure to sit together and talk it out. And we suddenly realized that despite whatever may have happened, we still have some fond memories of our childhood, common associations. It was nice to talk about them, to talk about how we share certain experiences. I think that is what came into this relationship between Abhay and Parag. I had to bring Abhay back and, once he was there, how were these two cousins going to react to each other? I didn't want them to fight, because Abhay is too sophisticated and Parag is too generous. And Parag did not know that Abhay was responsible for his not going to Bombay. So although there is not a lot between them, suddenly they become friends.

PB: It is interesting, the contrast. Because I think that is the high point in both the plays. The unity that occurs in such completely different [circumstances], the brothers on the one hand and the cousins on the other. This is a strong commentary on how values change.

ME: Another thing is that today's younger generation—Abhay's and Parag's—really try hard to understand their fathers and mothers, but their parents don't try to understand the kids. Abhay and Parag refused to dislike each other. I had to bring about some kind of

reconciliation between them, otherwise why bring Abhay on stage at all? I said, there won't be any confrontation in the bad sense of the word. Let them be friends.

AK: When you were writing Part II—Part I must have happened in a much more unbidden way. For Part II, you knew the characters already, you knew what had happened before, so it was a much more conscious effort. Did you have a structure—I will try and prove this in the play, or show this in the play? What were you working towards?

ME: I was trying to show the logical progress of the characters and the changing social scene that was affecting their lives. I must confess that it is a much more structured play, in the sense that I was more conscious of the structure. The ornament scene is repeated here, a very conscious choice. Also, Dadi's dead and her place is taken by the mother. She is almost going to be like Dadi. And there are certain scenes, certain sentences, from Part I, which are repeated in Part II. That is, again, a very deliberate choice. And I had to do this, I had to use these devices, so that I could convey a sense of continuity, a sense of programming. I personally believe that everything in your life is programmed. That life works in a pattern, that things tend to happen over and over again. I have never been able to find any explanation for this, but it is a very personal emotional response.

AK: Both Prabha and Chandu, who are almost tragic characters in Part I, are moved away from the centre of the action in Part II. Why did you do that?

ME: Because if you have to survive, then you have to have the courage of your conviction, to act for the cause you believe in. Prabha is a tragic character, all right, but is she a strong person? The other day I said, what is this girl crying and shouting about? Why doesn't she walk out? She could have walked out, she could have gone to a factory, she was a matriculate, she could have found a job. But the pressure of social prestige etc. is so heavy that she cannot cope with it. She is not rebellious enough. And Chandu obviously is a very weak person—very sensitive, very vulnerable, affectionate, loving, yes. But he is not strong enough to say 'no' to any kind of injustice. I sympathize with Chandu, but then I sympathize with every character in the play. I know their weaknesses also.

PB: Was it necessary for Prabha to die before the marriage? For Chandu to leave the wada? Why does it happen?

ME: What was I to do with these two characters? No, apart from joking, isn't it the logical conclusion? We don't know what is going to happen to Chandu in Part III—we are talking about Part II. He is resigned to his life, but he is the same Chandu. When we see him at the end of the play, he leaves the house, he is on a journey which might lead him to the destination he is seeking, which he may never find. And we know what happens in Part III.

Prabha's death, I think is a very natural outcome. And probably I wanted to accentuate her tragedy. Let me tell you that a writer doesn't take these decisions. He doesn't decide anything definitely. In the course of writing, a scene comes and things happen and the character takes over.

AK: But you can un-decide. Meaning that you can, once you have done it, say, no, this is not right.

ME: Yes, like I did in Part I. I killed Chandu in Part I, at the end of the play. Then I said, no, no. He's not going to die. Why should anybody die?

AK: But weren't there other things you could have done with Prabha?

PB: For example, Nandini and Prabha—that interaction could have been an interesting one.

ME: I think I'll quote a sentence from the play itself. I wanted to show how a beautiful, intelligent, sensitive life can be wasted.

PB: You definitely did not want a rebellion—

ME: I couldn't see Prabha leaving. And doing what? Prabha's future dies the day she decides to lock herself into a dark room. It's her decision, again.

AK: How long was the gap between Parts I and II?

ME: Well, Part II was written in 1991 or 1992. Eight years, almost. In between I had written *Atmakatha* and *Pratibimba*. But *Yugant* [Part III] came immediately after, within a year.

AK: And why did you decide that you needed a third part?

ME: Again, it came naturally. Yugant can be read as a very personal statement. Parag's response to a given situation, Abhay's response to a given situation, and Chandu's quest—they were all part of my personal, emotional, spiritual, intellectual life at the time. A friend of mine went to the extent of saying, Mahesh, you are imposing yourself on the characters. You are not allowing them to grow and develop naturally. I said, I don't think so. He said, these characters may not think like this, be like this. These are your personal concerns and obsessions and you are voicing them through the mouths of these three characters. I said, this may be true, but just look at Parag between Part I, Part II and Part III. Is it theoretically not valid? Does it sound theatrically, logically, intellectually okay?

AK: You told us that you felt they were created out of your personal concerns. So in that case, you were trying to make a statement through them.

ME: Almost.

AK: Is the statement a warning, that this is something that could happen in the future?

ME: It could be, yes, this might happen. Things now change so fast, although I am not a very social animal, I do get frightened by the kind of things that are happening in my life.

AK: What kind of changes do you mean?

ME: I mean the kind of dehumanization I see around me. I don't lead a very adventurous life but I go to a bank and the clerks there, they have been seeing me for the last 20 years and yet they are so callous and indifferent to me. Although they know who I am and they have respect for me, yet the moment they are across the counter, they become different beings. And I see these people treating doddering old pensioners with total unconcern bordering on cruelty. Look at the traffic, there is no respect for the rights of others. Look at the corruption, look at the way people go on hoarding money. And many college lecturers, who are paid handsome salaries, hold private tuition classes and mint so much money, and what do they do with the money? There is so much corruption. What for? This is something I don't understand.

What upsets me most is the corrosion of human relationships. I was watching Anna Karenina on TV with my nephew and some of his friends. They had come over to my place and they also sat there, watching. My nephew was nineteen at that time, he was a boy. And there was a passionate love scene, where they were declaring their love to each other and all that. I was not actually moved but I was looking at the whole thing very intently and these boys started giggling. So I said, why are you giggling? And they said, we find it so silly. At that age! I remember when I was nineteen, how starry-eyed I was, how I was prepared to fall in love any moment and how I believed in all that. Now the younger generation is so cynical. I don't know if they have the ability to love . . . no, I won't say that, that is perhaps going too far, but they are much more pragmatic. And this pragmatism [leads to] callousness and then cruelty in social intercourse.

India is a good example of people's inability to respect and understand the rights of others. A simple example. In Nagpur we have a minister who wants to chop down 100 neem trees—200-300-year-old neem trees. Because he wants to build a flyover. What do we do with a flyover in Nagpur? We don't need it. We have very broad streets, we have hardly any traffic, but he wants it because he thinks it is progress. And naturally some of us stood up and said we are not going to have this flyover, gradually I am getting concerned because you can't destroy things around us just like that. As a human being, I don't take many stands because I'm too lazy. And people have gone into litigation and the flyover may not—will not—be built, probably. I don't know. But all this mindless blind activity—you don't think of tomorrow. Why don't they think of the children?

PB: Part II of Wada ends on a very optimistic note, in the sense that there are a lot of new possibilities in it. For example, the relationship between Parag and his wife, that's a new beginning. Abhay sort of settles things with his parents and goes back to doing what he wants to do. In contrast to that, Part III is very shocking, very nihilistic. Why?

ME: I firmly believe the world is going to be like that after 50 years. What I am trying to say is, maybe that the whole scene is nothing but desert and devastation. You have the choice—Nandini says it—you have to make a choice. Either you run away from it or live and try to survive it. And if you want to survive it, the only thing you have to help you is

courage. For me, courage is the ultimate human value—absolutely.

AK: What do you mean by courage?

ME: Courage means being able to accept things as they come, with dignity. There are times when you can't fight back, unequal fights. If there is a drought or a child being ill-treated by adults, a child who is defenseless, a child who cannot hit back—what can the child do? But if he has innate courage, he might be able to survive the trauma. Yes, that kind of courage.

AK: The same kind of courage that women who are exploited demonstrate when they manage to survive?

ME: There are some spirits which refuse to die, refuse to be trampled on.

AK: Earlier you were talking about how you admire the women you have seen being used and exploited, who still somehow manage to carry on with grace. There is a very strong correlation between that and the child who managed to survive so many kinds of [abuse]. There's the same ability to understand what it takes to live that kind of life—because maybe you know what it takes to live that kind of life as a child, you know what I mean? There seems to be a correlation there.

ME: Yes, there are times in one's life when one would really like to disappear and say good-bye, enough is enough. But then why should one do it? You have only one life . . . the only thing that can help you is a definite decision to go on living. This is courage and you have to find it somewhere.

AK: The reason why I asked you what you mean by courage is because in some people's eyes, courage could also be this cultural attitude that we must keep a stiff upper lip—that's not the kind of courage you're talking about.

ME: No, when I speak of courage, it means total acceptance of life and that is only possible when you understand life and other human beings. You understand the evil also, which is an integral part of life. You understand it, you accept it with grace. For many people, acceptance is probably a very passive kind of activity, you know. You don't fight back. There are many areas in your life where you can't fight back—a domineering mother-in-law or a lousy husband or a bad boss or a political programme. There are many areas where we are caught without any defences.

PB: Of the two which is more important—the courage which makes people accept things or the courage that makes people stand up and protest?

ME: No, there is no comparison. I have tremendous respect for people who can take a decision to stand up and fight against certain injustices. That is courage, it is the other face of the same thing. I have taken an extreme situation, you know. I haven't shown people fighting back, but maybe Parag, Abhay and Nandini, if they find themselves in a different situation, will fight back.

AK: In a way, they did fight back, in Part II.

ME: Yes, they did. It's a retaliation and retaliation is a kind of fight.

PB: Part III—has it been produced separately, as an independent play?

ME: No, not yet, but somebody should try it. It's a short play. Previously, it was exactly ninety minutes. Now, with this edited version, the duration would be seventy-five or eighty minutes. And although many people have rejected it, actors love it. They love doing the parts—I don't know why.

AK: Do you think it would work as an independent play or would you need to know Parts I and II?

ME: No, I think some knowledge of Part I and II are essential for you to understand it.

AK: How would you want it to be done?

ME: In a very small auditorium, in front of a small audience, in a very experimental manner, so that we can find out its strengths and weaknesses and whether it can work without Part I and Part II. And when I say an audience, I expect a theatre-going audience. I have a feeling that although they wouldn't know the history of these characters, they would get interested in the dilemmas these characters are facing and concerns they have, because

they are all our concerns now.

PB: How has the trilogy been received?

ME: We have had about 40 shows of the trilogy in Nagpur at a stretch. Many times we would do Part I on one day and Parts II and III on the second day—Part I on Friday, Parts II and III on Saturday, and on Sunday, Parts I, II and III. People responded pretty favourably. They did come. Even in small places in Maharashtra. The whole trilogy went to Aurangabad, Nagpur, Solapur, Kolhapur, it toured all over Maharashtra. And the response was almost overwhelming: we always had full houses. Whether they liked it or not is a [different matter]. I have a feeling that our attention span is getting shorter and smaller. People do get tired after some time. Ninety minutes is the real attention span now. Then people start fidgeting. Ideally, the play should be done on three different evenings. Because after Part I, people are slightly tired, after Part II, they are absolutely tired and they are in no frame of mind or mood to take in Part III, which is very heavy. So ideally, it should be played on three consecutive evenings.

PB: Wouldn't it be very difficult to get the audience to come on three consecutive evenings?

ME: That is why we like to do it at a stretch. In Bombay, a person who is living far off cannot make it on three consecutive evenings—it is impossible.

AK: You have very strong views on the use of folk forms in theatre, don't you? Will you explain them?

ME: To begin with, I am really wary of speaking on using folk forms in theatre, because I have made so many enemies in the last 20 years or so, by being very vocal about my reservations over this. Naturally, people didn't like it because it was very much the rage, the done thing. My contention, to begin with [is that] when I use a particular form, I should know and understand the impulses that have given birth to that form. A folk form is the product of a collective mind, a kind of community leaning. Folk forms are necessarily a manifestation of this lifestyle. Today, the use of these forms is very individual-driven. And in fact, the [modern, urban] individual is an entity alienated from his surroundings. If he goes back to those forms, then how does he harmonize his impulses with the impulses that produce the folk forms?

Secondly, a lot of people said that this was an attempt to go back to our roots. And I said, what roots? Just because I am not aware of certain folk forms, or just because I do not use them, does not sever me from my roots. The roots you are talking about, the folk forms you are talking about, are almost extinct. And some of them are in their death throes now, you know. In Maharashtra, at least, which is one of the most urbanized states in our country, we hardly see anything folk. The day the State Transport bus reached my village, the day electricity reached my village, it was a different place overnight. The grinding stone disappeared, the power mills came and the moment the grinding stone disappeared, the *owi* which women sang when grinding, you know—they disappeared. There is not a single *owi* heard now. It is a form which disappeared because the lifestyle disappeared. The day electricity came, they disconnected the windmills, and pumps were installed, and all those songs which the *mali* used to sing have disappeared. The cowherd has a two-band transistor with him so he doesn't play on his flute or sing any more. Forms have disappeared right in front of my eyes, so what forms are you talking about? You can't revive a lifestyle. It's impossible. Like you cannot construct a lifestyle and you cannot construct a language. And what happened was, we ultimately lifted the most colourful aspects of the folk, decorated our theatre with it, which was fine—this was one way of probing, a quest, a very aesthetic quest—I respect it, but I see the futility of it. How many enemies I made just because I said this! Of course, I called it aesthetic kleptomania. Yes, I was being harsh.

As for the villages, there are now three video parlours in my village. They are very happily living with these contradictions. Three thousand years of a lifestyle and it began to disappear gradually, fine. And within the next ten years, there won't be a trace left of that lifestyle. But the villager has accepted it because he knows he has to survive. It is the guy who lives in an air-conditioned high-rise in Bombay who worries about the heritage and roots of this man. The villager is busy living his life, he is working hard, toiling hard. And I am more concerned about this man than the man in the high-rise because it is the man in the high-rise who is creating this desert for the man in the village, with his contradictions



and with his video parlours. He never asked for video parlours, we took video parlours to the village, with the bus and the road to the village. Now you will say, don't you want progress? I am not against progress. But there is no end to the kind of greed this kind of commercialization can generate. And now the villager is as greedy as the urban man. I have seen people planting teak. Do you know what we are producing on our farms now? Instead of cotton, instead of jawar, instead of wheat, instead of vegetables? They produce flowers because they have a market in Bombay. They produce cash crops . . . they'll be rich in no time. And by that time, the soil will be completely eroded.

AK: Are there any more characters in your mind that are waiting to be written?

ME: Right now, no. I don't know—they always come to me as a surprise. Like the recent one, Vaasansi Jeernani, which I wrote in the month of April, it came as a surprise.

AK: What is that about?

ME: It is again about human relationships. It's about a man, 60-ish, counting the last moments of his life. He is dying and waiting for death to come. Those last few minutes have been magnified into a 90-minute play. It's about him and his family. So everything happens in the minds of the characters. I mean, they do speak to each other from time to time but the major, important happenings or important thoughts are in the minds of the characters. They have to speak so that the audience can speak to them and I tried to lift one layer, after another layer, after another layer. And there is no end to it. I mean a human relationship which looked like this at one point looks totally different at another point. And it is an eternal surprise. How people try to reach out to one another but how, at the same time, they hide themselves behind so many facades and masks—there is not just one mask, there are 20. And at the end of it, you realize, my God, 60 years of my life and what have I left behind me but the debris of human relationships. So who was responsible? Maybe I was, I was not open enough. Maybe I was not courageous enough to confront people, to confront relationships—so many things. It is about all that.

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Are the 'culture wars' over? When did they begin? What is their relationship to gender struggle and the dynamics of class? In her first full treatment of postcolonial studies, a field that she helped define, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the world's foremost literary theorists, poses these questions from within the postcolonial enclave.

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is the Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University and the author of many books, including *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*.

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## A Feminist Retrieval of a Silenced History God Has Changed His Name

God Has Changed His Name began as a project by AVANTHI MEDURI, who approached India Foundation for the Arts with her idea of developing her thesis and research on the devadasi into a performed text. ANMOL VELLANI, Executive Director, IFA, guided her to the Chennai-based experimental theatre group, KOOOTHU-P-PATTARAI, headed by director and playwright N. MUTHUSWAMY. The subsequent theatre work, a collaborative effort between Ms Meduri and the director and actors of Koothu-p-pattarai, with considerable input from Anmol Vellani, embarked on an all-India tour and was invited to the Nandikar Theatre Festival in Calcutta, an annual event that showcases significant productions from all over the country. STQ talks to Avanthi Meduri and Koothu-p-pattarai about the project and its evolution into a theatre piece.



## By Way of Introduction . . .

Avanthi Meduri

The play [God Has Changed His Name], which draws on my doctoral research, tells the story of a real and imagined woman by the name of devadasi. If Englishmen described her as a prostitute in the 19th century, Sanskrit scholars idealized her as nartaki, and Indian revivalists hailed her as nitysumangali, the evergreen bride of god. One woman, so many names. But what was the devadasi's own name? Did she have a 'proper' name in which to tell her own story? What unspeakable things happened in the 19th century that divested her of speech and with it the ability to tell her own story?

Enacted in English and Tamil, this bilingual play is not only about the many kinds of violence concealed in the act of naming but also a rumination about Indian modernism as it was being shaped under the double imperatives of British colonialism and Indian nationalism, after the annexation of the Tanjore kingdom in the year 1856. The Western camera, English boots and white ink were introduced into Tanjore as part of the civilizing and modernizing goals of the Empire. 'British sounds mingled with the sounds of temple bells; the eyes of the empire clashed with the eyes of Hindu gods. Our gods were angry,' says the devadasi who alone witnessed this epochal clash between East and West which wounded and forever maimed the aura and sanctity of the temple. How are we to respond to her cry about hybridization and cultural contamination? If her gods could speak, what would they say?

### A Synopsis:

The play unfolds at multiple levels. The prologue introduces the narrator, an English speaking scholar of the lost devadasi tradition. What she has discovered through her research and imagination takes the form of a ghost woman, an apparitional devadasi whose spirit has possessed her. Like Amba of the Mahabharat, the ghost has held her breath, waiting to tell what happened to her after the British deposed her god/husband in 1856. The narrator has unwittingly called her from the void, but she is mute. The narrator is compelled to tell her story both as ventriloquist and an exorcism.

ACT 1. 'The Invisible Limp,' dramatizes the destruction of the devadasi tradition while deploying the gestural vocabulary of Sadir/Bharatanatyam. The narrative begins in 1856, when the British depose the King in Tanjore, her patron and the embodiment of her god. They convert the devadasi, the slave, wife and active principle of the deity, into a tripod for their machine, which in a flash doubles the image of her god. The devadasi tries to touch the original, but the temple god withdraws his body. The evil eye/I of the camera has put dhisti on her god that she cannot remove. The god opens his third eye, full of unshed tears. He is angry. The camera has destroyed the aura of her god. What should she do?

To remove the dhisti and atone for what she has unwittingly permitted, the devadasi undertakes a pilgrimage, a padayatra. She walks to the three cultural 'houses': the colonial, the Orientalist, and the Tanjore establishments. The padayatra on stage dramatizes the travelling history of the devadasi, and how she lost her name between 1856-1890. The devadasi is interrogated, misunderstood, unnamed and renamed. She loses her beauty and her jewels, leaving only traces behind.

The inmates of the three houses have fashioned life-size dolls resembling the 'puppet' the devadasi traditionally carried in her hand as a dancer carries her gesture. Colonial administrators hailed their doll devadasi-nautch girl; Orientalist translators, from the Sanskrit, called theirs the 'devadasi-nartaki'; the brothers in the Tanjore house hailed theirs as 'devadasi-nityasumangali'. Continuing her pilgrimage, she receives another blow in 1887. The devadasi Muddupalani's erotic epic Radhika Santwanam has been cut by Orientalist translators and condemned as obscene. The colophone in which Muddupalani traced her female artistic heritage has to be excised. The ghost woman wails, as she has for no manifest reason acquired a limp. How can the historical dancer of the nation perform arati in the temple with a limp?

The mute ghost woman overseeing the performance of her life story decides to intervene and act on her own behalf. She re-visits the big house, and demands an invisible crutch to compensate for her invisible limp. The inmates are terrified by her impossible demand. Each tries to compensate the ghost woman by taking the two hands of their own doll version of the devadasi and draping them on the ghost woman's body. But their gifts only make her six-handed, a grotesque parody of the goddess, and she is enraged. The gifts are poisoned.

The angry ghost woman breaks out of the frame of performance and decides to tell her story another way. She rejects the English speaking, academically trained historian, and replaces her with a male Kattiyangaran (folk narrator).

ACT 1 ends. ACT II, titled 'Chakravyuham,' is presented in the koothu style.

It is now the 1890s. Venkatratnam Naidu, the leader of the Anti Nautch social reform movement, summons a Panchayati (assembly) meeting to question the chastity of the devadasi. He invites to his conference: 1) Vivekananda, the great revivalist just returned from the 1892 World Religious conference in Chicago; 2) the English woman Annie Besant, who arrived in 1893, to set up the Theosophical Society in India on a permanent basis; 3) Coomaraswamy, living overseas, but writing to promote the revival of Indian art and culture. The guests are welcomed and named along with their accomplishments, in accordance with folk protocol. Naidu introduces the motion to ban the dedication rituals that transform a girl into a devadasi, a wife of god. Devadasi dedications, he argues, serve as a religious cover for the practice of prostitution.

Revivalists and Reformers are swept up into a performance that both mythologizes and caricatures historical figures. The actors enter the make-believe world of koothu performance. Like the Kauravas, the reformers and revivalists recreate the Chakravyuham (mythological war formation) and urge the ghost woman to enter the formation. The Koothu narrator intervenes, and assures her that all is play, lila, performance. The ghost woman enters the war formation, but her position is that of the invincible Abhimanyu in the Mahabharat who was unethically killed by the elders in the Kaurava camp. She tries valiantly to reason with the elders, but fails. She thus surrenders her point of view, but does so dramatically.

Unlike the invincible Abhimanyu who dies fighting, the ghost woman removes her dancing bells, breaks her bangles, and wipes the kumkum, the auspicious marking that identifies her as the evergreen bride of god, off her forehead. Why? Why was the performance real for the ghost woman and mere play, maya, lila for the others?

End of ACT II. Return of Research scholar narrator for ACT III, entitled 'Shiva's Dance.'

The climax of the play presents something uncanny: the corpse of a ghost. How should she be mourned? Should she be cremated as an ordinary, inauspicious widow or, the scholar asks, as the evergreen bride of god Vishnu? Who will claim the ashes of the devadasi? As the scholar ponders, Shiva rises as if from within those ashes of the ghost woman—from within the body of the shredded puppet that the ghost woman always carried in her hand as the dancer carries her gesture—and dances his tandavam. The devadasi question disappears into the sounds of Shiva's dance. How can the narrator enter the dance of Shiva and gather the ashes of the ghost woman, being incorporated into his luminous movements, into his god name? How can Shiva claim the ashes of the ghost woman when she was not his devadasi, and had been married to Vishnu in his temple? Shiva's dance, Vishnu's bride, devadasi's ashes, mingle. Who, then, is the dancer? Where are her broken bangles, her dancing bells? Where are her ashes?

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Can the Devadasi Speak?  
Issues of Feminist Representation and Feminist Form  
A Discussion



AVANTHI MEDURI, a performance studies scholar and trained Bharatanatyam dancer, currently teaching at Northwestern University, USA, talks to KAVITA PANJABI, a women's studies scholar teaching Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, and ANJUM KATYAL of STQ, about her project on the silenced history of the devadasi. The discussion took place in Calcutta in December 1998, after the play was presented at the annual Nandikar National Theatre Festival.







KP: What made you decide to work on the devadasis?

AM: I left my performing career with a big question inside me. You see, I was dancing at Khajuraho in the mid-eighties, performing Bharatanatyam, this traditional dance of India which goes back 5000 years, the Natyashastra, you know, the sculpture traditions and so on. And I would dance that dance, but speak about it in English, because the commentary has been in English for a long time. I would explain it with gestures that I would then dance. Because if I didn't explain, the audience wouldn't understand what I was doing. So I was like hidden in the light, I was dancing in a void. And I questioned this—what am I doing, something between two worlds or more, between the microphone and the English language—translation, the question of translation. And then going and embodying it, dancing it in another language. What is this negotiation? And then I would put the God Shiva on the stage. And he would be lit because he is the presiding deity of the dance. So we put Shiva on the stage and we light him with a traditional lamp. Simultaneously he is being lit by the electrical lights. So he also is being lit by two lights, as it were. The traditional and the modern—just like myself. Because I was negotiating one language structure, one ethos and I would speak about it in another language. So I was beginning to feel that tension, which was alienating, unsettling, perplexing. The presence of the modern in the tradition itself and its co-existence with tradition. I had to understand that question of the modern in the tradition.

That's when I left the dance and went off to the States. I did my MA on T. S. Eliot and Modernism—God is dead—their enunciation of modernism. I started choreographing another piece which nobody has seen yet, called Matsya. I worked on it for about five years. That's also about the tension between modernism and tradition. This is a question I have been worrying for some time.

AK: So you were bringing up this question in *God Has Changed His Name*—the question of the modern subject and the traditional subject . . .

AM: And translation, the question of translation. And alien gaze, alien text. What happens in the act of translation.

KP: You mentioned that you were part of this story through your great-grandfather—

AM: T. Prakashan, the first chief minister of Madras and Andhra Pradesh. He's quite a legend. In the twenties, he started the newspaper

Swarajya. They call him the Lion of Andhra Pradesh. He felt that 'respectable' women should take to dance, and bring something of the respectability of their lives to the art form. And that was the propaganda he was spreading through the Swarajya revival of culture in the twenties. I discovered this only after I did my research.

In 1992 Suzie Tharu and K. Lalita's *Women's Writing in India* came out, and for the first time I'm getting a name, for the first time in 1992, we, as dancers involved in that discipline, in the history of the devadasi, are getting the name of a historical figure. Mudupalini—Radhika Santwanam. Earlier, the names we had were those of mythic apsaras. That's all we knew about the dance (laughs). I'm reading this book, and I think, my god, there's a name of a woman here now, and then I see my own great-grandfather's name there, too. He had the book republished in 1947.

So I was reading about Mudupalini's Radhika Santwanam, of how it was banned and suppressed. I was afraid to enter the 19th century. I would lose my writing pen in that place. The truth is, I didn't want to go into the 19th century. I was going to do the 20th century story, of the revival and transformation of Sadir into Bharatanatyam. That's the research that I really did—Sadir, and how that dance became Bharatanatyam.

AK: It was a much more erotic dance.

AM: Bharatanatyam made it chaste, sanctified it. In Kalakshetra. Rukminidevi Arundale. Annie Besant sired the world teacher J. Krishnamurthi, and then she sired, ideologically, Rukminidevi, who she married to Bishop George Arundale, so that she would be the world mother and resuscitate Indian culture, in Kalakshetra in Madras. That's where the whole ritual transplantation of the tradition took place, in Kalakshetra in the 1930s, but of course none of the historians, none of the performance scholars have studied it in this way. They have not looked at that place, Kalakshetra, as an archive where the tradition was transmuted, broken down and reassembled on the body of the middle-class woman. Pieces put together, and stitched together, that's what she did, Rukminidevi.

So I did my research, I knew what had happened in the 19th century, I studied subaltern history at the University of Chicago and I said never mind, I'll just do 20th century performance ethnography, performance ethnohistory of the transformation. And then Mudupalini's Radhika Santwanam text. What happens in that text is—they declared it to be a pornographic text.

KP: Who did?

AM: The Orientalists. And the nationalists.

KP: No, the nationalists didn't call it a pornographic text. The nationalists and the revivalists were saying that it was part of our culture. That was the paradox.

AM: But it was political.

KP: That was the irony. That the revivalists were resuscitating something that they would have much more gladly banned. It was the nationalist interest that mattered more than the gendered interest for them at that point.

AM: Right. So when my great-grandfather says it is the pearl of Telugu literature, I don't know if he's even read the book. It was political! That was my question in my thesis. In the public debates of 1927, on the day that Muthulakshmi Reddy was submitting her bill for the abolition of the devadasi system, there is a record that the devadasis wrote protest letters. In the Legislative Assemblies. In the Egmore archives. The dancers, the dance scholars, the art historians, they have not recovered these letters. They signed it and submitted it one day before the submission of Muthulakshmi Reddy's bill . . . timing is all, you see.

What does it mean when the system is being abolished and the devadasi has been living under the naming—prostitute—from 1927 right upto 1947. Then arbitrarily the nation comes into being, at the stroke of Indian freedom, the devadasi system is abolished—the system has already gone in 1887, right?—and they're republishing the book in 1947, the same year in which the system is being abolished. So what was my great-grandfather doing? That's the question. That's how I'm implicated in the devadasis, not that this great man, you know, recovered the great text, but why did he publish it? There was a political reason why he was publishing it even in 1947. Just as there was a political reason why the revivalists claimed it. All this was only a political point that had to be raised. I mean,

her body was the site of a political debate.

KP: This reminds me of one of C. S. Laxmi's stories. There's one phenomenal story that talks precisely about the appropriation of the body of the woman by all kinds of factions. It's called Black Horse Square. It just brings up this whole thing in such a powerful manner.

AM: So he's fossilizing the institution that was already there in 1947. See, here's the story. I know that the Anti-Nautch movement began in 1890. And then in 1911 I know that the colonial government passed an Act to ban dancing. But I didn't know that in 1911 Bangalore Nagaratnamma was republishing the book.

KP: Which date did you say they passed the act to ban dancing?

AM: 1911.

KP: The same year.

AM: The same year, that's what was so miraculous, you see. So then I look up my research and I see that in 1927, Katherine Mayo publishes *Mother India* and there the devadasis are named as a problem. And you know what a furore *Mother India* created, right? And then Muthulakshmi Reddy has to respond to that. She comes from a devadasi family. That's 1927. And the devadasis are writing protest letters, that research I already had, and I hear from this research that in 1927 the 1911 book that Bangalore Nagaratnamma had republished is being banned again. Again the doubling, so you see why repetition becomes so important in the play. So 1911, in the moment when they are banning the dance, officially, the book is being published. 1927, when the book is being banned the second time, the devadasis are writing protest letters.

KP: Doubling again.

AM: Doubling again in 1927 and Muthulakshmi Reddy is submitting the bill. And then in 1947, the devadasi system is being abolished, my grandfather is republishing Mudupalini's book. He is removing the ban on Radhika Santwanam, the ignominy heaped on the book in 1887, and what does he say when he removes it? He says, 'What a struggle it has been to remove the ban, to release this book from the colonial yoke,' or something, 'It is the pearl of Telegu literature' and he gives orders for it to be republished and it is republished in 1952. So 1947, the devadasi system is being officially banned, and my grandfather is reproducing the book, bringing it back, we don't hear about the book, 1952 it is being published, we hear about it, all of us only hear about it in 1992.

KP: And when you hear about the book, the play comes out, so that's the last doubling, the latest doubling

AM: There was an urgency for me because there was already such a time lag in the practice and I didn't want to sit on it. I had a choice: either I write my book or I do the play. And I opted for the play. [I approached the IFA and] Anmol [Vellani, the Director] sent me to Koothu-p-pattarai. He said, we'll give you a provisional grant, see if it works. I can't think of any other group that can collaborate with you on this.

KP: One of the things that came across very strongly to me was that you were trying to communicate emotions, such as that of the modern subject, but the language itself was alien to a lot of Indian contexts. What must it have been like for you, in the process of creating the play, to translate these ideas to the people you were working with? And what kind of resistance did you face? Because in the play the interaction between you and the men you were speaking to actually retained some of the process of building up the play. Their very stern questioning, challenging—you're talking rubbish, we don't understand you.

AM: In the prologue I said that the devadasi has become a modern subject—if you want to think about the historical devadasi today, from within the dance and colonial history and how that history impacted on the dance practice—she has become a multilingual subject, a hybrid subject, and that's how she lost her voice. She becomes like a page, alphabets piled on her body. So that's why I used the English language. But, you know, in the second act we do it in the koothu style—that was really an ideological decision. Because I did not want to do it in the elitist mode, in the English language and the contemporary form of the first act, which was somewhat abstract, surreal, postmodern ruptures and all that. I wanted

to have the story told in another form, in another language, in another style, so it could speak to another audience. We don't know if it is working artistically between the first act and the second act. The shift.

AK: But when you did it in the koothu style, what seemed to come across was that even the koothu way of representing the devadasi was a way of seeing her rather than her story. So can you talk about that? What were you trying?

AM: Yes. There is a continuity, actually. That only comes through when we have these kinds of conversations. And when we had these discussions with theatre groups some of them would say to me, so you are the Sutradhar, you're the narrator. Yes, I'm the narrator, but I'm a feminist narrator. A feminist narrator can't be the traditional, classical, Sutradhar narrator. Therefore I go into possession. So they would ask, why do you have to become the devadasi. Because I'm a feminist narrator, who can function only through taking a subjective mode, taking her voice on, looking at the reality from her point of view. There's no objective point of view that she will speak from. She can only speak from her point of view. So possession. So I become a narrator and when I get out of that, this man, my internal spectator, makes a pass at me. That's the moment when I break out of it and say, enough is enough. I've told the story. I'm not telling you the story. At that point she rejects me anyway. So the male kattiyangaran in the koothu style now must tell the story. And he can't tell her story because he will never be able to take the woman's point of view. See, in koothu, the woman has never been a character. This is another thing. During the process when we were doing koothu, one of the problems was how to introduce the devadasi. They come through a curtain. She doesn't have a name. How will she speak, somebody has to come and speak for her. She can't introduce herself. Right? The character who appears from behind the curtain must name himself and introduce himself. What is the introduction that she is going to supply for herself? There also she needs a person. So then we tried all kinds of things. Oh, my god, I said. The devadasi cannot appear from behind a traditional koothu curtain. Only a named character can appear from behind a koothu curtain and the devadasi has no name! So then the interlocutor says, all right, go call her, then. Because she is your unconscious. And I go call her. So all these sort of tensions we had when we were doing the koothu. And Muthuswamy and others pushed me to the limit on this point. They said, see, if you can give the kattiyangaran speech—because he's mute, the male narrator, the kathakar. He comes out and he says, I was mute in the previous act. I prayed to God. He gave me mouth and now I'm going to tell a story. So the playwright, myself, I could give him speech. I could play God. Muthuswamy would say, well if you've given the kattiyangaran speech, why can't you give speech to the devadasi in the second act and let her tell her own story?! And I said, no. This is a historically muted subject God cannot give speech to, I can't give speech to. That is the condition that we have to work around. That she can't be given speech. So what are we going to do? So she remains mute. A historically mute subject. I told him it would be romantic if I could suddenly make her speak because I had the gift to give her speech. I mean, I have the pen to give it to her. So the kattiyangaran is unable to represent her. In the first act I am unable to represent her, try as much as I did. Possession trope, any number of points of view, and so on.

The final part, only ten minutes, is wordless. That's the point, also, that we make. That she is wordless. She doesn't have speech. She speaks through her signs, she's an absence. Her silence speaks. Silence as a strategy. So anyway, she breaks her bangles, right. Declares God dead. That's a statement. She says I have become a modern subject. All right, I'm a modern subject, so I'll break my bangles. If I break my bangles, interpreted, what does it mean, but that my God is dead. Vishnu's dead. And anyway he's a mutilated icon. Both of them have lost their coherence. So now what the actors will have to do is to come to terms with two muted, mutilated icons on the stage. What are they going to do? That's the resolution. So there's Vishnu who doesn't have a conch, who's without speech. And then there is this devadasi who has died in front of your eyes. So they have a crisis on hand.

It's completely wordless. First what they do is they lift this Vishnu up ceremoniously, take him round the stage in the ritual, put him right in front of the audience, and then change his face, and then they just take a trishul and they put it in place of the muted icon. So he becomes Shiva. Then they take him back and put him in the temple structure and then they bring the phallic symbol, the lingam, and they mount it on top. And sanctify the

stage, they do the puja. It all happens in a flash and they clear up, clear the stage. They get the God back into place. Vishnu is transformed into Shiva. But they still have the devadasi. What are they going to do with her? They lift her up. They carry her around, a ritual. All orchestrated now by this man, my internal oppressor, who knows the tradition. So he comes and they pick up this body and they put her on a ladder. So we do the rituals, death rites, on the stage. In the Natyashastra, you're not allowed to do death rites. She was the unmourned subject, right, that's what Uma Chakravarty said, where are all the dasis? We mourn her on stage. They mourn her but they do something bizarre and cruel in the process. That's her fate. They intend to do well, but it always turns into its opposite. It happened even in the first act. So they bring her in front of Vishnu, I mean in front of Shiva now, the body, they take it round. And then they marry Shiva to the devadasi. Three times again we have that chanting. They marry the corpse to Shiva. And then they take her bells and they tie it to Shiva. And then they send her away. So she's gone again as nityasumangali, not as a widow. Not with that statement, because they can't live with that. That God is dead. They have to manage the crisis.

AK: When you say 'they'—

AM: The actors.

AK: The actors, of course. But the actors representing society?

AM: The people.

AK: But do you differentiate between people—I mean, what kind of people do you see?

AM: Men who have to manage the crisis. At that point it's no longer a question of elite culture or popular culture, people's culture and so on. They're all men. And they have to manage the crisis. God is dead, what are you going to do? God is muted. Even in the koothu tradition they are traditional people. They do not let their God die.



KP: You know, listening to all this, the play seems to be framed by two of the most epigrammatic modernist texts: the horror, the horror, the horror; Conrad and Eliot.

AM: Yes, now that you mention it—

KP: It wasn't conscious?

AM: No it wasn't. But go on.

KP: What I find very interesting here is that even while you're using them, you're creating a distinct space for this context which you're dealing with; it's almost as if you can't really accept that God is dead. What you will do is shift from one God to the other, and keep shifting, in the hope of maybe being able to resuscitate some sense of God.

AM: Absolutely. They do these things to both these icons. And then the narrator who supplanted me, he comes in and we start again. We get back to the beginning. It's about seven minutes, I think, the scene. And then he comes (sings a phrase). That's how we started. So we start with that song again. And I'm going to my dolls, saying, all right, you've done this. Now I'm going to try to tell the story. Again. We're not going to give up. So I go to the dolls to start to tell the story again, the broken dolls, and then this fellow stops me. He says, enough, I'm going to tell the story. And he takes his book out. The actors become the audience, he becomes the narrator. He says, once upon a time Shiva was dancing, as said in the *Natyashastra* by Bharata Muni, in the celestial heavens. Bharata went to Shiva—and they repeat. So the nation is beginning to repeat this story. They repeat through microphones, the speaker is on the temple structure now and this is the ideological story of the nation. That Shiva was dancing his dance in the heavens, and Bharata went to him and said, give me something to give to mankind. Shiva taught him the *Tandava* and Parvati taught him *Lasya*, and then Bharata gave the dance; and they're repeating this. Mimicking him, repeating through microphones—stylized, you know, with cloth and so on. Very well done, that scene, actually. So the nation is telling the story of cosmic dance and then somebody from inside says, wait a minute. We want the story of the *devadasi*, we don't want this story. We want the history. What really happened to her? Then the protest from the sides. Then the light on me: I have another story to tell. These are the lines. I have another story to tell. They have sanctified the stage, they have reclaimed the dance in the name of Shiva. They have hailed it as *Bharatanatyam*, the dance of India. They have severed the links with a woman's history. They have severed the links with the *devadasi* history. She had an invisible limp in her foot, she needed an invisible crutch, but neither Vishnu nor Shiva could grant her request. I carry her limbs, her muted conch. I speak in many tongues, and I wait for a god who promised to come and I wait for a god who will come with another name. That's the end.

KP: In the context of retrieving women's history from the feminist perspective, so much work has been done on the *devadasi* that tells us this happened to her and that happened to her, this was the imposition and this was the burden, this is how she was silenced. Through most of it one doesn't get a sense of what it must have been like for the *devadasi*. Anjum was saying to me that here at least you get some sense of the *devadasi* perspective, what it could have been or might have been. And I think that was one of the most powerful things about this particular act of retrieval.

In this context what got me thinking a lot was, for example, how you talk of a thousand eyes boring into your body. That's an experience that is so difficult to translate to an unsympathetic listener. For me, it is a very, very private experience for a woman; and how do you translate it? You need to communicate it. But how? And I could see that there was wild debate raging on stage, too, with the men disbelieving you and you trying to communicate. How did you negotiate that, because I could see the major shift from 'the thousand eyes boring into me' to a 'thousand eyes boring into a god' which meant He was being insulted.

AM: But that's the point, you see. When I said that the eyes came into my body and they laid eggs and they multiplied into a hundred thousand eyes and the eyes roamed freely inside my body, touched everything, changed everything, I was transformed—the male interlocuter can't understand that story. But the minute I tell him about the god and say, listen, I couldn't take the *drishti* anymore. The eyes became a camera, became a double,

where is the original? Haah! he says, wait a minute! And then he said to her, you are responsible. What did you do? Because on your body they mounted the camera.

KP: The question I have here is—there was a shift being enacted, from what you were trying to say initially to what you had to say in order for this man to understand. Is it possible, through theatre, to communicate



that experience, of what it's like to have a thousand eyes boring into your body, and how it transforms your body by way of, not just experience but by way of gesture, by way of the tonality that issues from your voice, by way of the way you sit, the way you move, all these things. I mean, what you were trying to say then, which a lot of us caught on to because we're tuned in—are there any ways, do you see any ways in theatre of breaking through or breaking down the walls between you and, say, the person you were talking to on stage, your oppressor? Who wouldn't understand? Because the focus shifted from the woman's experience to the desecration of the god. But we need to retain that space also.

AM: The point is that I wanted to speak about the devadasi. So I have to speak about the

god. They are so intertwined with each other. Look at her! Bangles have disappeared into the cosmic dance of Shiva. I want to find her trace, I have to enter that dance. The god name. And I can't find her broken bangles there. Or can I? I don't know. But I have to enter that name. It's in that name. I had to talk about god if I want to talk about the devadasi.

KP: But aren't both completely intricately intertwined? The devadasi's sense of her body and her sense of god within her body?

AM: It's a male god, you see, that is the point!

KP: Yes, it's a male god. But the reason why I'm questioning this so much is also because you kept invoking Mudupalini, right? I was also wondering why, because Mudupalini had written Radhika Santwanam, which was celebrating female desire. It was definitely a devotional text, but just as the Vaishnav tradition combines eroticism and devotion, this did, too, only it was from a woman's perspective. So was there any reason why you left out that aspect? It would have really enriched the whole discourse on the devadasi, because the devadasi is also celebrating female desires. If you're talking about Mudupalini, specially. And that's yet another dimension to the devadasi phenomenon.

AM: But my feelings get a little complicated in that I have trouble with what Swapnasundari has done. She discovered this Mudupalini text, and she started performing Mudupalini's text on the stage. And you know what the critics said? I mean, she forgot again, like we always forget, that the whole situation has changed, that was then, this is today, the audience has changed. And she just went back and said, I've found the text, now I'm going to present the text on stage. And she presented the text on the stage. And the critics couldn't understand, they had no idea, how can they? And they said, it was not pornography, it was not erotic, it was benign! It had lost its edge. If there was an edge, we don't know. That text cannot be represented anymore. The context has been changed so radically, irreducibly. And I'm saying, you can't know her. She's unknowable. But she's present. And you really can't speak about women's desire on the stage. 'I'm waiting for a god who promised to come.' In this white light he can't come. In this white light I cannot tell the story of Woman.

KP: Why can't you speak about women's desire on stage? If you can speak about what's been done to Woman, in terms of a thousand eyes boring into her body—

AM: That's about as far as I can go and then I displace it and say, all right, let's go and talk about it in another way. From another place. I'm never able to go to her, to the site. I have to go to the next thing closest to her.

KP: But you could communicate some sense, not an exact definition, but some sense of women's desire.

AK: You know, I saw B. Jayshree doing Draupadi, there she dealt with desire. She dealt with what it felt like as a woman to have five men. And how each one of them touched her differently and how she responded to them and was able to love them differently and respect them for what they were. And it was legitimate to her. She was able to accept the fact that she had five men. And that became what the text was about. It was about relationships, it was about individual responses, it was about your body, how it feels . . .

KP: To me as a feminist, this would have enriched it. Because then, along with the devadasi's sense of what's happened to her over the ages, along with Mudupalini's stature as a poet and what she was capable of, would be this very confident communication about female desire.

AM: In what I have read of the [Mudupalini] text, what is so interesting is that this woman—you know, even our feminists are coy about discussing this—must have been performing this text, right. If the literary text was so difficult that they had to ban it, excise it, how much more subversive would have been the actual rendition of this text in body. And in the actual body what she would have done, because the style is an abstract style, it's a stylized form, it's not realistic, right. So she would play many roles. The dancer, if we're talking about this play enacted as dance, would be playing Krishna, she would be playing Radha—

KP:—and Iladevi.

AM: And Iladevi. What is the significance of this triangle? The woman is teaching her niece



how to seduce Krishna, right? And after she's taught her the seductions, she is watching this enactment. The third eye, a female gaze, is watching this.

KP: There's two kinds of pleasure coming in here, which are very complex forms of viraha and milan. Because on the one hand, it's a female gaze watching her niece, and on the other hand she is also creating a situation where she can remonstrate against Krishna, saying that you are not interested in me any more! And then Krishna appeases her. So it's intensifying the viraha and the milan through a third person who is a woman. Poor Iladevi, I don't know what she thinks about the role she is playing in this.

AM: You know why that text is important for me? Because if I wanted to bracket the question of desire, what is her desire? It is always implicated in that God name Krishna, who is implicated with the man. Women love each other, but in the presence of Krishna. Something else is going on, it is very complex, it's not Lesbianism in the way that the West speaks of it. And voyeurism! There's also voyeurism. For me it is important because the feminist spectator has arrived there. There is no feminist spectator in the Proscenium stage. For the Shiva Bharatanatyam dance, there is no feminist spectator. But if I want to start to think about performance and begin to think about a feminist spectator for dance or for culture, this would be the spectator that I would have, you know, the historical spectator that I would have to start from.

KP: Fascinating.

AM: Because there's no other way I can begin to theorize the position of a female spectator on the proscenium stage.

KP: You know it would be very interesting if you could perform the same play ten years later, and make this question of woman's desire more explicit. And then see the reception. It would be a way of charting, in some sense, the changes that might or might not have taken place.

AM: Look at this (makes the mudra for mushtihastam), it's desire, it's that whole stuff. How can I tell him that this is the desire I talk about—he'll laugh in my face. That's the eye that cannot understand, the patriarchal eye in whose presence I'm telling the desire and story of a woman. How will I explain it? Did you see the violence in the translation when I was telling him that a woman is like a tender leaf, and the man is like a thorn? And whether the leaf comes and falls upon the thorn or the thorn falls upon the leaf, it is the leaf that gets torn. Ha, ha, ha, he says. In fact, earlier, I used to say, can you stitch the leaf together again? I cut out that line. And then he says, oh you mean like Humpty Dumpty. A woman is like an egg. You see the violence in that. And then he goes and jokes about it. Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. And then she screams. Because, you know, we are telling one story and the guy has made it, already he has made it into another story. Because they cannot understand. Although they are sympathetically listening—men—to the woman's story, they will always understand it well within their own paradigms. Their own gaze. And woman's desire—the story cannot be re-presented . . .

KP: I think that's why that displacement from a thousand eyes piercing the body to the insight of the god was both interesting and tragic for me at the same time. Because you need to make these shifts in order to explain, but in the process you might lose out on the significance of what you are trying to say.

AM: That's why I don't want all these metaphors. Tell it simply, historically, exactly as it happened.

KP: But gradually we have to find terms for it.

AK: The other thing I felt was not probed enough was caste. The whole issue of caste, the fact that the devadasi is lowcaste. How much that would impinge on—

AM: The caste question has been dealt with in a certain way. I gave away the whole representation to another caste. It slips my Brahmanical hand or my elitist version of her in spite of my best efforts to be otherwise. And I give it to another style, mode of representation. And the bilingualism also deals with the caste question, in a way. But the other thing I'll say very simply—the devadasi is a very special subject. Now I have worried

this question of what might be her identity? She has no proper name. Draupadi? I mean then you'll have to ask, does a woman have a proper name? And so when we speak about woman's desire, it gets a little complicated for me, the question of desire. Because I think, essentially, it's so difficult to speak about woman's desire, particularly heterosexual desire. Because it's all complicitous with



patriarchy, just like the devadasi is complicitous with patriarchy. Although she was married to god, that god was also the patriarchal tradition. Our last line in my play is 'I wait for a god who promised to come. I wait for a god who will come in another name'. I could have very easily said, 'I wait for a goddess who will come'.

KP: It would change the whole play, especially when you're talking from the perspective of the devadasi.

AM: Yes! Because the oppression for her was a god oppression. And god is our problem. The jussance for the dancer, the orgasmic pleasure that a dancer has, the sounds and colours, the pleasure that she has, is intricately connected, particularly in dance, it's a love of god. And what is this god? It's a madness, you know. And we dancers particularly are very complicitous as feminists with the god question.

KP: I wanted to see the devadasi also saying this, what you just said. The joy and the

excitement with which you said this, I would have loved to see the devadasi saying this also. That, in a way would have covered this area. That for her it was also that kind of excitement, god being juissance.

AM: Whereas Draupadi doesn't have a god question. She has five husbands who have come to her as men and have touched her and given her pleasure or worried her or whatever. This man never really touched her [the devadasi], but he touched her life. The god name touched her life. She would mate with a patron or whatever, but with the mangalsutra of the god. That's a whole other story that would need to be developed . . .

AK: What I was thinking of earlier when you brought up this question of the devadasi accepting the god, and feeling the god in her body, was that we should be careful of assuming that her relationship with the god was a homogeneous one. There must have been resentment, there must have been bitterness, there must have been hatred, contempt.

KP: That's there in all the devotional Shakta and Vaishnavite literature also, where you have the devotee taking on the role of a woman. So it would be there in the devadasi who is a woman herself.

AM: She hated the god she married—

AK: And as happens very often when you're too close to something, she may have just lost any sense of respect or worship.

KP: And at the same time felt impressed upon not to let that out, that she had lost—

AK:—because the god becomes the oppression. Directly, the god is the oppression.

KP: As well as the one you wait for. That's also the trap in some ways.

AK: She'd had no choice in the matter. She was dedicated before she knew what was happening, like child marriage. So that would be another area to develop, but again whose voice do we hear? Who has spoken—

KP: So you think the entire range of emotions would have been fulfilled within the arena of that one god. The entire range from extreme love to extreme hatred would be worked out in that relationship.

AK: And probably went through changes all the time.

AM: She was not a mother, she was not a daughter, she was not a wife. She was always a 'not'. I don't think she's a subject that one can really speak about except as an abstraction, as a figure of a woman who was there and these things happened. And anyway, I'm only retelling the effects of what happened to her. I don't want to go into this question of her identity, because in any case I suggest that her identity was unknowable.

KP: What you are talking about is what she means to you today, as a dancer, as a young woman, as an audience?

AM: That's it.

KP: So there is meaning there, all right. Except that it's what she means to you rather than a definitive meaning. Which is, I think, so important. Because these things we've grown up with, these notions, ideas, become dear to us without our even realizing it. And sometimes we consciously reject what's dear to us subconsciously. To engage with that kind of thing is so important. Because we really engage with what it means to us.

AM: Right. I said somewhere, you reject only what you love. You don't reject something you don't care about. If you talk to any of these established dancers, you will note how they are haunted by the god question in their lives. How that name and that absence haunts their lives. God becomes the man, this invisible man that they live with. This entity, this aura. Their marriages break. The devadasi situation has been repeated in all the middle-class dancers lives. They can't negotiate matrimony, the domestic structure, once they wear the bells. They can't negotiate a harmonious relationship with a man, living in a domestic situation. Because they've already given themselves over to this god name. Sometimes I've heard people say that they think of their husbands as Krishna. I mean that's what Meera did. So that's really the question. When a god comes to you as a man and you are the dancer you live with that god man in your life.

AK: Couldn't you think of it as living with your own creativity rather than living with the god?

AM: That's right. Your own otherness that you project.

KP: Exactly.

AM: You know, in devadasi marriages, I believe, she would be married to the sword, which means the phallic symbol or whatever. There would be instances where another devadasi would stand in for the bridegroom, dress up in drag and the marriage would be consummated. She projecting her own otherness onto the other in order to be the self. A woman masquerading as a bridegroom. The mockery of the marriage ceremony! And nobody has analysed all this. What is required of all these things is analysis. Taking the facts and analysing, interpreting, putting a frame around it. It was really not even a marriage, it was a mock marriage to god, so that this society could exploit her. But she is so smart that, when she came into the twentieth century, she never admitted that it was a mock marriage, because that was the only way she could have her identity. She asserted that it was the real marriage, and thus shamed the god. You see.

AK: This reminds me of something I was thinking about recently while I was reading *Tears and Saints* by E. M. Cioran, on the lives of women saints, and this business of how they marry a god, their god. And what I was seeing was that it was such a wonderfully clever way of avoiding being pushed into marriage, or having your body touched, owned, by somebody who had no appeal to you. You took control of your sexuality and body—you became chaste. So you denied your physicality to anybody who had any power over you, by playing their game.

KP: The sublimation of the physicality.

AK: Yes, and you played their game. If they thought god was more important than anybody, fine. So now god's my husband, what are you going to do about it? You invoked the patriarchal value system to beat the patriarchal value system. And in a sense, the devadasi was doing the same thing, when she said okay, so now I belong to someone above all of you. So none of you really have the right to own me—

AM: They have not interrogated these questions, you see. In the protest letters presented to the court, the devadasis say, we are married to Vishnu and Shiva. This is when I got the idea that this is where this entire epistemological shift has occurred. We dance for, we are married to, Shiva and Vishnu, our gods, we are like nuns. Taking Annie Besant's line, you see. We are chaste, we are nuns. We are married to gods. They suppress their erotic history all together. They deify themselves, they make themselves into these nuns dancing for gods. And it's both Shiva and Vishnu now, it's not just one, they collapse the two and they say, I am married to Shiva and Vishnu, and you know what they said? In the rhetorical style of 'And God said unto Adam', they said— and he said to me, that only you, the devadasi, must dance in front of me everyday and do my puja. God said to me that only I should dance for him, day in and day out. And I only dance. The quintessential spectator for my dance is not the patron, is not the man in the street, I danced in the eyes of god.

That's what she has said in the protest letter written in the English language lying in the Egmore archive. And thus she sealed off very effectively all questions of her own exploitation.

KP: Tell me, what exactly does this epistemological shift from Vishnu to Shiva imply?

AM: Shiva is chaste and ascetic, yogic. But you have to interpret what they're saying. And you can only interpret with historical data because you can't interpret what they say according to their lives.

KP: No, no absolutely not.

AM:—but only in the historical context in which they are speaking.

KP: Yes, unless you have a sense of the impositions and pressures on them, I mean, what makes them take on a different voice.

AM: Exactly! They change their voice. In fact, even though the last act is spectacular (the actors conceived it; it happened like a flash, in 45 minutes the whole scene was done. I gave

them the concept, they did it. The entire scene. They are excellent at this, you know, the Koothu-p-pattarai actors) in the earlier version, you know, it was a bit more complicated. He dies, Vishnu's conch is muted, so she goes to Vishnu directly and she says, you are impotent. You are dead. What am I supposed to do? So he says, carry me out. Take my body. Because he's real for her. He's not an abstraction. Carry my body out. And when you carry my body, people will come and listen to you. And tell them that it all went wrong (very didactic, I changed it) in the temple and give me a cremation. So she carries him to the cremation ground—we started with the cremation ground, right, in the prologue? So she goes to the cremation ground and then she has to find a place to cremate Vishnu. And we have never thought of a place for the cremation of God in the cremation ground. So she has to create a place in the cremation ground. She takes off her ornaments and looks for the bones of the other devadasis because she can only cremate him next to a devadasi and she can't find the bones of a devadasi in that cremation ground. That's what Anmol was saying (Anmol was intimately involved in the process). So she takes off her bangles, she makes a little place and she says, all right, I'll cremate you here. And then she cremates him from out of her body, from out of her jewels. And as she is cremating him, he changes his name! And there she is—God has betrayed her. And he comes in as Shiva.

KP: When you were actually in the process of creating this play, you must have disturbed a lot of people with these ideas. Didn't you face resistance? When I say disturbed, I don't mean negatively, but creating a tumult, creating a turbulence within the actors. How did they take it?

AM: When we defiled the stage . . . although we sanctified it again, it was a challenge . . . that in India, a group like Koothu-p-pattarai could rise to this challenge. The tensions that I have talked about are part of any creative process. It was a fantastic group. But they have a lot of trouble taking authority from a woman. They don't know how to deal with a woman, they do not know how to deal with Chandra, the actress who plays the mute devadasi. This is among the first plays that Koothu-p-pattarai is doing with a feminist take on things, you know. There are lots of tensions happening everyday in the troupe. Koothu is a patriarchal institution. I don't call myself the director of the play. Notice that I wrote and conceived the play, but didn't direct.

AK: Was it a sort of equal give and take of ideas?

AM: I would tell them, this is what I want. Even, for instance that last scene, when the actor comes out as Shiva. It's a brief moment. I could have told him to dance (sings). I sing that song as he dances. That's the quintessential Bharatanatyam dance. We've done it for God knows how many years. So I sing it and he dances. I could have taught him in my vocabulary and taught him the dance and the dance idiom. He said no. And he evolved a vocabulary for that from Thang-ta, which he has learnt. Some amalgamation. Birju Maharaj, if he sees this, he'll say, what is this? This is so grotesque, this is bizarre, you know, it's a parody. He's very gawky when he moves as Shiva and then he does something in which there's energy, and then it becomes dynamic and then he retires into passivity again. So I gave them the idea and then they would evolve it. I would never impose, I was not the defined director who knows what she wants and would have it done only in the way she wants. This is really a collaborative work. So, for instance, even the text. I would come with the text and then we would put the text into the performance space and the structure, the concept and all would remain the same, but the lines would change. It would become a much more improvisational text, they made it their own. We have to do a lot more English though, if we want to do a second tour.

KP: Did they also challenge you on certain notions where they thought that they weren't quite getting what you were trying to say? I mean, for example, the basic notion of the modern subject. That's a notion that's not common parlance in indigenous cultures. How would you translate that kind of thing? What would be the reactions to that kind of thing?

AM: This was the place where that tension really, really came up, and it came up with the koothu. And I don't know if it was the politics or—anyway, they play this kind of bad politics, you know: you are an elite woman and you come from another caste, class background; and we are koothu. But they are not koothu, either. These are contemporary artistes. What is their relationship with koothu? If the koothu artiste wants to, he can say

that they are contemporary artistes who have appropriated his form and are doing it. You see, they have forgotten that complexity. And those who wanted to polarize the two segments of the play into the elite versus the koothu identify themselves unproblematically with the koothu, you see. Particularly when we went on tour. You don't know this. You're asking a very difficult question. You saw me enter in the second act. But I had gone out of the second act entirely. Because I couldn't enter it. They blocked it. They said, you've given it over to us, we will do it. And the question that would come up was, why can't you give her speech? I had to enter it as she is because of me. I have called her into being. Give her speech. That's also another way of saying, get out. Give it to us. (Laughs) which I understand. I'm not angry. And in a way, I did. Even up to the Nehru Centre (Mumbai) performance. They loved the play there, at the National Theatre Festival.

KP: Those performances didn't have you in the second act?

AM: Hardly at all. I had given it away. I would watch as just another spectator. [But the feedback I got from theatre persons in Mumbai] said this is not acceptable, your disappearing in the second act. You'll have to get in. You'll have to become part of the chakravyuha, because we're completely lost without you. We don't know what is happening, we can't read the text—They loved the theatricality of the koothu but they needed the credibility of the narrator. And they had learned to trust me in the first act as the narrator who's going to tell a story. Suddenly I hand it over to the koothu person, and he's jumping around as far as they are concerned.

KP: But when you question Annie Besant and Vivekananda and Coomaraswamy—it's such an important section in the entire play.

AM: I know. I only started it after Bombay.

KP: I'm glad I saw this version and not the earlier version. Because that's when the whole thing about the devadasi and the nityasumangali and the nartaki and all that gets concretized, gets linked up to the historical forces at work, otherwise it wouldn't be explicit.

AK: So earlier, when they did the koothu, they called in these three characters—there was no questioning?

AM: I gave the text to them.

KP: So who questioned the characters?

AM: There was no questioning. I enter in there by beginning the questioning. I introduce myself right inside when I start to say, there's no ethics to this, I'm not going to allow this, I'm going to stop it.

KP: All those edges—what is a nationalist? What does our nationalism comprise? All that gets lost if you don't question those three. And if you don't have someone come up and say, they're all nationalists, you lose all these edges.

AM: At some places, when I get in and I question the three of them, I get applause. Because they are convinced by the questioning. I was afraid that in Calcutta Vivekananda being questioned would not be accepted.

KP: No, no, in a lot of circles Vivekananda is being questioned heavily now. The whole of the Bengal renaissance is being questioned a lot in certain circles.

AM: When you saw it, did you notice that earlier, Vivekananda, Coomaraswamy and Annie Besant were actually involved in the mutilation of the devadasi and the doll? They pull it. The idea was already there in my head, I wasn't compromising. So when we came to Calcutta, I reconceived it in such a way that, they're in the chakravyuha. I don't know if you noticed, 'Vande Mataram, Vande Mataram,' they say and three people come in. The mob comes in. Three men out of character come and surround the chakravyuha. And what they do, which is another change we have made, is supplant Vivekananda, Annie Besant and Coomaraswamy and they come into the circle. So it's the people now. It's not the Coomaraswamy, Annie Besant lot who killed her. But all the crowd, the mob. So those three out of character people in slacks, they come and they pull the devadasi and they pull the doll and they all mutilate it. Was that happening when you saw the chakravyuha?

KP: I didn't notice. Maybe if there were more people coming in I would have noticed.

AM: It's good to know. Maybe that's what we should do. That was the change. So that we take off the thrust from Vivekananda and Coomaraswamy, in a sense. Because Vivekananda was really not, in a sense, implicated with the devadasis.

KP: But the question you asked him was very valid. He talked about Woman as Mother, but what about the rest? Which is very important, not just for devadasis but for all women. Even Ramakrishna has been interrogated in Calcutta. Vivan Sundaram's recent exhibition at the Victoria Memorial, I forget the name, but it was basically interrogating modernity in the Indian context from the point of view of Bengal. And the neon lights right at the back said, *jotho math, totho path*, which means, many paths, many views. You know, there were so many people who read it in different ways. Some thought it was a parody of Ramakrishna, some thought it was such a limp thing to say, you're not taking a stand when you say, many paths, many views.

AM: But it worked.

KP: It worked. See, the whole exhibition was a series of one parody after another. Very post modernist. So you couldn't not read it in that sense, this also being a parody of what Ramakrishna said. A lot of people accepted and enjoyed it. Because there is a lot of questioning of the Bengal Renaissance in certain areas in Bengal.

AK: As a feminist working on this play with this group, were there either adjustments or satisfactions or dissatisfactions that you had? Like you said, the business of authority was one.

AM: They also played the insider-outsider card. But it's not the whole group. It's just one or two people who play bad politics. And I have always pushed it to a forum. There's no contention, there's no conflict. But there is a problem.

AK: In terms of issues, concerns—I mean, you started this whole project and now that you've seen it completed as a play, what are the areas of satisfaction where you feel that you managed to achieve what you wanted and where are the areas that you feel that you still need to work things out, or where things didn't work out?

AM: I didn't know what I could or couldn't do. I just went into it like I went into my thesis work, the research and so on. I know something about dramatic theory, I teach performance studies. We do theory and practice. I'm a practitioner. Here I was, a dancer writing a play. And here I was collaborating with a theatre group. Enormous inadequacy. A sense of great inadequacy. A limp. It appeared as if I didn't have a name. I was not a dancer, I was not a scholar, I was not an elite woman, I was not, you know. I was neither, neither, neither. You know.

AK: Like the devadasi.

AM: Like the devadasi. I had a limp.

AK: Okay, but you could have presented it in a variety of ways. You chose one particular way. And a lot of the process of evolution is there in the final product. But what I'm asking is that, can you talk about what were the choices in terms of the form that you chose. Form from a feminist perspective. That you did not want to present it in a certain way, but chose to present it in another kind of way. Can you talk about that?

AM: I mean, Karanth said, this is not a well structured play. I don't know what a well structured play would be for a feminist, I mean for a feminist story. Like can a woman's story be told in that first act, second act, third act kind of well structured play. That was the question that I would have under different circumstances asked Karanth. You see. So in the first act you don't see it actually going, but it does. It doesn't go in a linear sort of way, but it takes you in that sort of circular way. But then there is also a resolution and there is something. It does go somewhere. She does get the eight arms, then she does reject. There is movement. There are two kinds of movements that are happening in the first act. It seems to me that that is what a feminist sensibility is. You take ten steps forward and you take two steps back.

KP: You know what this reminds me of? In literature, even Virginia Woolf, who was such a feminist in so many ways, would criticize Charlotte Bronte heavily for awkward breaks in her narrative, in Jane Austen, awkward breaks, rough transitions. More recent scholarship has

shown that there are other continuities that Virginia Woolf couldn't see at that point in time. You know, the fact that anger can be a source of creativity, that Virginia Woolf ignored the passages that talked about visions in moments of restlessness. And the fact that the very awkward breaks that Virginia Woolf talks about are actually transition points hinting at the dark side of romantic sensibility in Grace Poole's awkward laughter that breaks into Jane Austen's reverie. So, you know, I very strongly relate to you when you say what is form for feminist performances, feminist writing. There's constantly got to be breakthroughs in form. For being able to communicate things that have not been communicated before. It's just the same, you know, in literature you look for different languages and different forms. In theatre, too, it's the same thing that's happening.

AM: And then there's this radical vulnerability that one has worked out in the play. I mean, here I am trying so hard to recover, re-present this subject, and then she rejects me. I mean, I have set it up, of course. But that's radical vulnerability in saying my representation is inadequate. Okay, I'm so committed to her, all right, let her tell it the way that she wants to tell it. But I will still go along with her. And be there if she needs me. That's how I enter the chakravyuha.

I remember how the chakravyuha was evolved. We had finished the first act. It was intuition, I think, and also because I'm very, very aware of the charge of elitism. Gayatri [Spivak] used to say 'you have to unlearn your privilege as your loss'. So knowing my elite inscription—dance, my education and so on—and being acutely sensitive to it, to the tensions, the productive tensions . . . The group didn't accept me, because I was 'only' a dancer. Theatre people have this arrogance. They think theatre is better than dance. And [in socio-cultural terms] there is already that tension: that 'elite' dance had eaten up theatre in Madras. That tension was being played out. They couldn't accept me in the beginning. You know, that scene when she comes down, she's entering history, she's descending with a thud, and it's that thud which is all that remains in history—and she shows you then how the crutch, how the phallic symbol, oppressed her. So she has to come down, and how am I imagining it? I don't know contemporary theatre, I can only imagine it from within my research and my concept and







from within dance vocabulary. And I'm thinking goddess traditions, what I've seen, growing up in the south, the goddess is being brought down as she is in the oorkulam (street processions) and I'm saying, we have to do it like that and one of them says—that is dance, we don't do dance. This is theatre. Even where the woman is being churned, that rope with a cloth, the churning of the ocean. They don't have a visual metaphor like that in theatre. This is the Mahishasura Mardanam, which I have done in dance. So I'm mixing the metaphor and visual imagination of dance with theatre. Anyway, Muthuswamy mediates, you know the grand old man, saying 'Do it! Let's see what happens.' And eventually when he summarized, Muthuswamy said there are four or five visual metaphors in this play that we haven't seen in theatre before.

So all these tensions had been emerging, you know, the Koothu-p-pattarai actors saying, this is not a play, it is so repetitious; and I feeling inadequate because this is the

first time I'm doing a play; I don't know whether it's good or bad, I'm doing it because I'm convinced, I have a passion, and that's all. And as for repetition, I'm using repetition. But even though she's going to the same house, she's repeating differently. And it is boring because you can't understand the nature of this repetition. What is life but repetition? That is Modernism, too. *Waiting for Godot*. She waited and she waited. And she walked and she walked and she walked. So anyway, they all said, it's not a well structured play, she can't act, she's only a dancer, why is she writing a play? And then this other stuff that goes with funding, committee people coming to watch and evaluate a process in the middle, to say whether it is worthy of support. To ask, to justify. All that was a little unsettling. But all finally productive.

So one day, after all these tensions, I said to Muthuswamy, can we do the second act in the koothu style? Because I am always worried about my elitism, you see. He said, it's a wonderful idea, of course it can be done. I didn't know that the play would receive this kind of exposure, but I must have intuitively had a feeling that I had to break out of my elitism and my privileged way of telling the story in the English language through the form that I am familiar with. I had to give it over to somebody else. But I think I must also have been thinking, if the play went on a national tour, it would be my responsibility to bring this south Indian people's form to a north Indian audience.

KP: But you've also interrogated the form. Given it that respect in the contemporary sense that it deserves.

AM: I gave the text to them; in my mind I had envisioned that scene as a *chakravyuha* where everyone was speaking in everybody else's voice and she was trapped. I could see this analogy between *Abhimanyu* and the *devadasi*. In my mind the whole context of the 1890s was working out very nicely in that metaphor. And I wanted it also to be a mythological metaphor, not just historical because the *devadasi* was a mythological figure as well. So anyway, I gave them the text that *Vivekananda* speaks and all that and I went away to the States.

When I came back they had set the text to verse and composed the music for it. But when they went to the koothu artiste, they faced a major problem, because the first question they were asked was, 'What is this woman's name? We have to give her a name before we can write a story about the *devadasi* in the koothu tradition.' That was a problem—they needed to give her a name. So they jauntily gave her a name without consulting me. 'We will call her *Abaranji*.' Which means strange, rare, unusual. And I came back and I said, how can you call her *Abaranji*? She has no name. *Devadasi* is not a name. That's the problem! She doesn't have a name. That's the problem, then, of the play. That she can't then be introduced into the koothu tradition.

This is when we all awakened to the fact that she is a special subject, a special problem because she doesn't have a name. And only a named character can enter the koothu tradition. So how were we going to insert her into the koothu tradition? Not Muthuswamy, nor the actors, nor myself, had thought through this problem. That she needed a name. And the koothu artiste kept saying, I can't write this story for the *devadasi* till you give me a name. I said, why are you doing this? Can't you accept that she is a *devadasi*? That's her name. 'No, that's not her name. I can't even think if you don't give me a name for her.' So it was not just the content that we questioned in the koothu. There was this problem of introducing this un-named character into the koothu.

Also, when I came back and saw how they had visualized things, I was horrified. I saw the *chakravyuha*. And I saw what they were doing with the *devadasi*. I hadn't realized, hadn't imagined, the violence in the form. It's a patriarchal form and it's a form of the land. The way they pull her, the aggression, that movement, it's dynamic! And when they actually break the doll. When I came back and I saw it, it was unbearable. You know, the horror, the horror. I literally broke down. Finally, one day I spoke about it. For some weeks I couldn't.

This is when I rewrote my last act. That other ending was not appropriate after the koothu, after I saw the violence in the koothu form.

So the form was a problem. The content was questioned. Anjum, what do you think? I mean, there's a politics involved in doing it in the koothu style, we talked about it. But suppose we did that koothu section in a dance idiom? The *chakravyuha* from within a

dance idiom. We can try that mode. We tried theatre in the first half, we can see if the dance idiom can represent her. That's another way—visually it will be more artistic, more in line with the first act. Whereas now, it's—

AK: But I don't see that as a fault. I don't see that as negative. I would still, very personally, be reluctant to give up the political statement that is made by using koothu in order to make it more pleasing or harmonious. The koothu works. It's very powerful.

KP: It works very powerfully for me, for two reasons, in this context. One is that it contextualizes the thing so powerfully.

AM: It takes it back to the people.

KP: Exactly. It really contextualizes it, recreates the entire ambience, atmosphere, what happens in the interstices of expression, that's there in it. And the other thing is, it also brings with it the massive patriarchal power that one has to engage with in every local context. It's very important, I feel, to keep the koothu.

AK: Having already rejected the linear structure or the well made play, having already questioned it, the fact that the second act is in koothu and that it doesn't harmonize with the first, shouldn't be a problem. If you want to reject koothu on other grounds, okay, but not for that reason.

KP: You've also shifted your questioning. You're questioning something very different in the second act. And there are linkages and continuities. In the earlier act, you're questioning—

AM:—the name.

KP: The name, the context. In the first act one of the thrusts is this whole issue of living between two worlds. And what that means, what the devadasi means to you, to a contemporary woman, to all contemporary people. But in the second act it sort of focuses, zeroes in, on the exact locale, what's happening here. So your area of focus has also shifted. And with it the form has to shift. So I think it would be very damaging to remove the koothu.

AM: In the first act the local was being globalized.

KP: But in the second what's happening is—

AM:—the global is being localized.

AK: What I find very valuable in the koothu part of it, and in the interrogation of the koothu, is this: we recognize nowadays how the patriarchal tradition, working through classicism and the canon, has contributed to the oppression of women, seen them in a certain way and so on; but there's still too easy an acceptance of the fact that the folk tradition can be equally patriarchal, as unquestioning and uncritical of itself. So when you question the koothu content—not the form, but the content—you are bringing that question to the fore. Just because this time round the devadasi's own class or caste is representing her, it does not mean that there's any more legitimacy to the representation. It is still a representation. She still does not have her own voice. So in that sense I feel that it's an important connection. In the first part you point a finger at the colonial historiography, the revivalists, the revisionists; and then you also point fingers at the folk tradition, people's tradition. So I think, at least from a feminist point of view, you do show that the oppression of the woman goes across caste, across class.

KP: Another reason why I feel the koothu segment is very important is that you are there as a person living between worlds. But the men who perform the koothu are very rooted in their milieu. And the fact that they accept, that they want to represent what's been happening with the devadasi is a very important step. And for them to represent the devadasi—they're doing it in their own idiom. So I think from that perspective also, the koothu is very important.

AM: The kattiyangaran also loses his voice. He is given his voice and he loses his voice.

KP: Yes. But that's it. What happens when you try to represent the devadasi, why do you lose your voice? The first point of importance is that you accept, you want to do it, you want to communicate. And then the fact that you lose your voice shows that now the responsibility, the onus, is on you to face the inadequacies of that voice, of that form. So I think it's a very

crucial engagement of koothu. Otherwise it could well be just a person between two worlds trying to represent this.

AM: That's why I thought it was important, too.

KP: Tell me, the three devadasi figurines, were nityasumangali, rajnartaki and nautch girl—

AM: All dancers were nautch girls. And nautch means she was a prostitute.

KP: That's the downward movement. From nityasumangali to rajnartaki to nautch girl.

AM: And that's the other thing. Devadasi-nartaki, you notice that, right? 'What is the name you've given her?' 'Oh, we call her devadasi-nartaki, we call her devadasi-nityasumangali, we call her devadasi-nautch girl.'

KP: Which becomes the ultimate paradox.

AM: If they had just called her nartaki, there would be no problem. The real problem is that . . . let's say the devadasi's walking and somebody hails her (Althusser, right?) 'Devadasi-nartaki!' She will turn around. That's how she loses her name, right, because her name is in all these other names. The question 'what is a devadasi?' is bracketed, as is her desire and it's not really addressed. It gets displaced on to this other question of the god. You have to make the conscious effort to read this play as if it were a text.

KP: Oh, absolutely.

AM: That's what we teach in Performance Studies, we teach our students how to read cultural performances as texts. That's what we do in academia. What is desire? What is woman? It can go on and on. I'm also just thinking aloud as I speak with you. You see. The egg, mushtihastam, her courage, her pedestal, and then the figure of the woman on top of that, she mounts herself on her own—

KP: —her own courage.

AM: And then she falls. All the king's horses, they couldn't put her together again.

Evaluating the Experience:  
Koothu-p-pattarai discusses God Has Changed His Name



Sameera Iyengar talks to the actors of the theatre group Koothu-p-pattarai and also to N. Muthuswamy, the director, about their view of the collaborative venture God Has Changed His Name. The interviews were done in March 1999.

SAMEERA: Can you talk about your experience with the play, the process?

JAYARAO: I do the role of the Thanjavur brothers in this play. Apart from the title of devadasi, she is also a woman—if you see it that way, what is the position of women in this society? How does society look at a woman? We read about this and have seen things on it. But we live in a closed society which is scared to talk openly or comprehensively on this subject. Nowadays a lot of people have started talking openly about women's issues, particularly in the cinema, not so much in theatre.

I appreciate the initiative taken by Dr Avanthi Meduri. She put in a lot of effort, preparatory research. Before she began the play, she held discussions with us. How should we do it, what should we do? She spoke to everybody. Who is the devadasi? Initially her focus was not the devadasi, it was the origin of the dance. What is the origin of this dance? I am a woman named Avanthi Meduri. I was born to my parents. Who is the mother of my parents? Who is her mother? When you trace the story like this, you come to Sadir, a dance form. Only the devadasi was dancing Sadir. To understand how Bharatanatyam grew from Sadir, you have to study the devadasis. Why were they performing Sadirattam? What were they performing it for? What was the situation they danced in? What are the different forms? . . . then [you realize that] the devadasis, women, were living in a very difficult situation. Is this the life of a woman in our society?

This was the subject we staged. We acted with a lot of involvement. It is 20 years since we started Koothu-p-pattarai, and this is the first time we went on an all-India tour, made contact with lots of theatre groups. It was a good experience.

MURUGAN: I have been training with Koothu-p-pattarai for the last three years. I have acted in two, three plays. When Avanthi started to work on the play with us, she would come and rehearse daily. She would go to different places and collect different material and come and work on it here, make it into a play. But it was a little difficult to act in this play. The story didn't really gel. Some poetry, some other stuff . . . stuff that is hard to communicate. But I don't know who Venkatratnam Naidu is. That role was given to me. I acted it in Terukoothu style. That's all. I don't really know anything else about the play.

SAMEERA: Before the performance started, wasn't there a discussion of who these historical characters were?

JAYAKUMAR: Definitely.

VINAYAGAM: She initially brought this devadasi play to us as an oral tale, narrated it to us as a story. We thought of how we could do it as a play. Everybody had some ideas, contributed ideas and a play was conceived. I thought it was a big achievement. Initially, I was quite apprehensive—how will this be made into a play? It was built up bit by bit and made into a play. We did the second act in koothu style. I played Annie Besant. I was a little confused about what sort of a reformer Annie Besant was. I didn't feel involved as the character of Annie Besant. I took the character and performed it like a female character would be performed in koothu. Nothing else.

PAZHANI: I played Ananda Coomaraswamy in this play. The reason that I could build up the character is that I have been in koothu for a long time. [In koothu] a character should enter a certain way, exit a certain way, look a certain way. Because it is like this, we performed it quite easily. We didn't really take any risks or stretch ourselves or tax our brains too much. Folk has its own style, right? I just took all that, and performed. Didn't do anything else. There was no risk-taking work in this . . .

PAULRAJ: I didn't act in this play, I did technical work—sets, lighting, costumes, the help the actors needed—four of us did this work. We were also the audience. At the same time we were backstage and instrumental in doing a lot of technical work. Most people only pay attention to the directors and actors and not to what happens backstage. But backstage work is vital in a play. The actors can perform confidently only if costumes, makeup, sets, and all other requirements are ready at the correct time. We worked at that level.

We got a lot of experience because this play went on an all-India tour. The experience we got from this—experience not only as audience, different feelings and reactions from each state . . . for example, there were a lot of Tamilians in Delhi. When we performed there, we got a good response. When we performed in colleges, the students, being educated,

received the information quickly and responded to it. When we performed in more regional areas, some were of the opinion that the play didn't reach people. We performed amongst IAS officers in Mussoorie. They appreciated it a lot. So there were differences from state to state, artist to artist, audience to audience. In Tamil Nadu a number of magazines said that Avanathi was initiating a protest. There were harsh reviews. But we carried on in spite of this. When you look at it, the information reached the people. It strongly told people about the old culture and heritage, and also about the troubles that the devadasi had to undergo. We are proud that we said something through drama that movies or TV could not do.

At the same time, the artistes put in a lot of effort. Due to their having gone on an all-India tour and performed the play in all those places, we got a wider experience, wider range of views, audience views, and also lots of official contacts. I think this kind of experience is very important.

JAYAKUMAR: As far as this play is concerned, it was a challenge for us because we had to make a thesis into a play. Just as it is thought that Kamban's Ramayana cannot be made into a play, it is thought that a thesis can't be made into a play. But we have done it. There is a pleasure in that. With the belief that we can do it, we put in the effort. I would like to talk about the actor's contribution. My contribution. Because there is not much in this play for the actors. I think that this may be because the play is fully about the devadasi and so actors like me feel that we have very little opportunity for acting.

If you ask me what my most valuable experience has been for this play, the tour is the main experience. Because we were able to learn complete management during the tour. We have learnt how to go about a tour in a very organized way. Where acting is concerned, we think that what the play offered was not enough. There is a lot more work to do. We have created an embryo called devadasi. A child has been born out of that embryo. That is all. It is only a child devadasi. It has not yet developed as a devadasi. I think it needs to grow. Only then can we talk fully about the experience of the project.

My part in this play was that of an interpreter for the audience and English speaking people. But I don't feel that we were able to bring intense feelings into the devadasi play. It has still not happened. For me . . . I should feel when I act. Then we can bring out some emotionally powerful issues. What is there in the thesis has not come out in the play. It may. If developed further, I think we'll get what is written in the thesis. I'll be very happy if that happens.

CHANDRA: They gave me the role of the devadasi in the play. But still, I felt that I was simply sitting throughout the play. I have experienced happy and sad things in the relationship with Avanathi Meduri, and I have learnt how to interact with her. I learnt how to adjust, no matter what. Furthermore, on the tour . . . we have learnt how to travel with ease. Managing our luggage for these 40 days—all this kind of work has become easy for us.

In the beginning, I struggled a lot with the role of devadasi. I really, really struggled. I am still not satisfied. When Avanathi returns this time, even if she makes changes in the pattern of the story, I know I can adjust suitably and perform. I am looking forward to that.

GEORGE: Koothu-p-pattarai did this production with great expectations. When she came, she brought us the story only as information. It was developed in two, three steps. Initially, it took a long time to develop the information into a script. Because the entire thing is research, isn't it? It took quite some time to write the play because we were wondering how to conceive a play from the research information. When research is made into a play . . . an audience will see it, right? When people read news, they just read it. But when we present it as a play, the audience should find it interesting. We see it only as a play. We are actors. For her it is a thesis. But for us it is a story. We should feel that we are making a story into a play.

In that sense, writing this play, developing the thesis into a play, was a good experience, a new experience for us. Muthuswamy Sir created the basic structure for the play. Then Anmol Vellani Sir, because of his contact with Koothu-p-pattarai, helped us develop it further, not only the logic of the story but the logic for everything . . . when doing the thesis, she would write everything too quickly. This should be there, this should be there, this should be there. But we have to move with logic through each step of the story. Anmol Vellani helped us with that.

But according to us, we actors just performed as a chorus. We only did what was needed

to make the story progress and to present it well to the audience. The story was structured as prologue, first act, second act, epilogue. Finally it took shape. When she first told us the story of the devadasi, it was a new subject to us. A subject that has been forgotten for a long time. I had heard the devadasi mentioned before, but this was the first time I thought about it. There must be a lot of people like me. That's why it was interesting to us. When we were told that it was about the devadasi, we were immediately interested. It talked about the devadasis, their work, it even spoke about a devadasi's inner feelings, her psychology. When [Avanthi] developed the entire thing, it spoke about all this.

We gave good performances in some places, we took it all over India. We saw many different kinds of audiences. In the places where we gave a good performance, we got a good reception. It was well received. In some places, they simply came and watched the performance. Interestingly, this play even angered some white men, they felt it was meant to insult them.

We perform many different types of plays. We perform modern, contemporary plays. At the same time, we also perform street plays, for example on the mother-child theme. Similarly, we have performed this thesis in a different way. This was a nice experience for us. Now, if this story is further altered and worked upon, that will be a good thing. Even though, as actors, we didn't have major characters to work with, the way the play developed, how the performances went, these were rewarding experiences.

NATRAJAN: This is the first play I am doing lights for. I was afraid but after doing it twice, I relaxed. I learnt a lot about auditoriums, available lights, equipment.

JAYAKUMAR: We have gone to a lot of places on this tour—Mussourie, Jammu, Delhi, Bombay, Goa . . . We went through a lot of difficulty with transportation, with the brake van. But the difficulty we faced in just one day in Calcutta was more than the rest of the difficulties put together. They harassed us so much. The railway department in Calcutta is extremely bad. I brought in the things at 2:00 in the morning, went to the brake van and spoke to someone. He asked me for Rs. 2500. When I said I can't give that, he tried to beat me up. He fought with me saying, you should listen to what I say, you should give me the money I ask for. I





refused to give him the money, sent him off and went to speak to another person. This guy went outside and told a policeman. The policeman came, told us we weren't supposed to keep our stuff in that place and demanded money. It's an interlinked business. We didn't know that. We finally had to give him Rs. 300. Four people came and asked for Rs. 50 each. We gave them Rs. 50 each. Though I went there at 2:30 a.m., after dealing with all these hassles I finally booked the brake van only at 6:00 a.m. Our train was leaving at 6:30. Imagine what tension we underwent. Finally, when the things reached Madras from Calcutta, half of them were broken. I totally condemn Eastern Railways.

SAMEERA: How was the experience of acting in this play different? What was new? Different?

MURUGAN: In all plays, feeling and acting creates the play. This story and our acting—I didn't really know how to express it to other people. I can say a little about the second act—this happened, that happened. But I didn't really know anything about that either.

Venkatratnam Naidu, Annie Besant—educated people may know about them. But I am not educated. So I don't know. I acted in this play with the same involvement with which I act in other plays. But in this play I was not able to talk about it, so I acted without knowing. That's all. I can talk about all the other plays. This, I can't. I acted without having that involvement.

CHANDRA: The difference is, we have a kind of freedom in Koothu-p-pattarai's productions. All of us express our ideas and then do improvisations. But in this, she had very definite expectations and we could only act within those limitations.

GEORGE: Not just that, Chandra. This was also a thesis. So we can't add fables or logic to it. We have to work within what the thesis says. It could be because of that also . . .

CHANDRA: That is true. But since it is that lady's production, if she suggests that we stand a certain way, even in such details, we have to go according to her wishes. Because everything is in her hands. If it is our own production then all of us have some input. In this play we were constrained.

PAULRAJ: Murugan said that he acted in this play like he acted in all other plays. He told us



the difference between acting in this play and in other plays. When I watched the play like an audience, from the outside, I saw Murugan play four or five characters. For each role, he acted differently—different emotions, body language. How he acted when he was part of the chorus; how he acted as Naidu; how he acted in the last scene, the funeral scene, where he had to sing and dance; then in the Thanjavur house as a policeman . . . normally, in drama, a character develops during the play. One character can develop into another character. All that is needed when a thesis is made into a play is to convey the message. Since all the characters are in small bits, the actors have to work more than they worked in the other plays. When I saw his contribution from the outside [as audience], I could not see Murugan as Murugan. I could only see him as an experienced actor who had taken up various different roles.

MURUGAN: I didn't say that there was no chance to act. It's just that I can't explain the story to others. Because I was just acting. That's what I said. I acted as I do in all other plays, with the same involvement as I do in other plays. But I acted from the level where I could not talk about the story to others. That's all.

PAULRAJ: The same holds true for all the other actors. Because when an actor plays diverse characters, the audience notices. When each actor played three, four, five different characters, one could only see a strong production and the creative power of all the Koothu-p-pattarai actors. There is also a difference in seeing this play as a play. When you make a thesis into a play and introduce characters, story-telling, the actor needs to be in a heightened mental state. He has to create the characters immediately, in quick succession. In that moment, he has to remain in character. He has to change his costume. Take on another body language. Another dialogue-language. Go into that new psychology. Go from one scene to another. The chorus is on stage, some members are pulled out and asked to put on the koothu costume, and they have to perform koothu with koothu emotions. There is a situation where you need to perform a drama within a drama. The costumes had to be changed instantly and, as an audience from backstage, we got to see this very well. You could see all the actors from different angles. So many different facial expressions, emotions, body, speech . . . the way they have acted in this thesis is definitely a different and new experience for Koothu-p-pattarai actors. There was much in this to develop an actor into a praiseworthy actor.

GEORGE: The difference between other stories and this is, in all the other plays there is a chance for the actors to go as far as they can, with as much intensity as they can muster, in enacting the character. But in this play, how far to go, how much is needed, all that was decided in the beginning. So it became unnecessary for us to go fully into our work, our acting. It was not required for this story. It was important that the message be communicated exactly. If the acting was a little more—in other plays you'll be appreciated if the acting is a bit more substantial. But we can't give that extra bit in this. Because if there is more in the acting, the thesis will not be shown correctly. But in stories, when you make a story into a play, then if you put in more . . . there is no chance of going wrong. Even if the story changes, we can give a different shade of meaning. But in this you can't give a different shade.

JAYARAO: I keep hearing this word 'thesis' and I think I should say something about that. A thesis is a daunting thing, to do it is difficult—I seem to be hearing this. Jayakumar said this. We have done a play with just 4 lines of poetry for half an hour. If an ordinary person reads the poem, then even after reading it for a month they won't understand it. We have done something like that. We understood the poem through discussion, worked at the level of improvisation and created a play. Now a thesis . . . because there was no proper understanding between us and the person who wrote the thesis, we were not able to stage it properly. The same thesis—if they had handed it over completely to the theatre group Koothu-p-pattarai and had stood outside, then this production would have been successful for us. Now, according to her, this thesis [made into a play] is a success. It is not a success for us. It is not a success for a theatre group. We want it to be more than this. We have the stamina for that. But there was no place for that. If the subject had been handed over to us, it would have reached a different level. She got involved in it, we didn't know what she understood, she didn't know what we understood. Without proper communication it now

stands somewhere in between and that is why . . . she succeeded in whatever she wanted to say. She has achieved her success. But it is not a success for us.

JAYAKUMAR: I did not say a thesis is a daunting thing. A thesis is a flat level. Single dimension. It is a line. To do that as a play is difficult. We can go beyond that and create a play—we should work on this challenge.

MUTHUSWAMY: How can you say it's a single dimension?

JAYAKUMAR: Single dimension . . . it's a narrative.

JAYARAO: We can't say it is wrong. In that . . .

JAYAKUMAR: I am not saying the thesis is wrong. According to me, it was a narrative, she had injected her thoughts into it, but it was not a play. The thesis was not in the form of a play. We have also done the same thing. We have not made it a play. It would have been nice if we had performed the thesis as a play. We have performed the thesis as a thesis. As you said, she said whatever she wanted to, but we didn't create theatre. We should have done that.

JAYARAO: For us to do that it should have been handed over to us.

JAYAKUMAR: That's what I am trying to say. I did not say the thesis is daunting. It is on a certain level. It should be modulated into two or three dimensions. That's all.

JAYARAO: A thesis only has words in it.

JAYAKUMAR: What is a thesis? Tell me, what is a thesis?

JAYARAO: I am asking the same thing.

JAYAKUMAR: Research. She has written her research.

JAYARAO: What is the shape in this?

JAYAKUMAR: It is our job to give it shape. It is the actors' job. The thesis is just words. Koothu-p-pattarai has to give shape to these words. Poetry, words, we give a form to these. As a play. In this case, we didn't shape it into a play. Like we use words, similarly we tried to make a play using the thesis. The thesis is just words. Just words.

JAYARAO: Everything is just words.

JAYAKUMAR: But creating a play is not words . . . There is a form.

JAYARAO: That's what we did. We took her thesis, improvised on it and made it into a play. But it didn't become a play. It remained a thesis.

JAYAKUMAR: Why?

JAYARAO: For her, it was a success. Not for us. Because there was no understanding.

JAYAKUMAR: It didn't become a play. That's all.

PAZHANI: Since it is a thesis, she thought there would be a language problem. In drama, language is not that important. Expression, and the communication of the subject matter through that—this gives pleasure to the audience, enjoyment. If we say the audience has to understand each and every single line, then . . . you can give everyone a book and ask them to read it. Drama is different. Drama is . . . showing through enacting. We enact information. But I got the feeling that we just narrated a book. This is because she says there is a language problem. She says that when we go to North India, if we speak in English then everybody will follow. But everyone was unhappy with this in North India. What is this, why are you performing in English? Do it in Tamil, or in any Indian language. In India they like it only if you perform in Indian languages. English is not anybody's mother tongue, but you cannot do a play in the respective mother tongues. You can't make a play like that. If she translates each and every thing we say, we won't complete the play within 3 hours. If we say something, she immediately translates. If you translate everything, then what is the point? She did the play as if the people coming to watch it cannot see, and can only hear. That's why the play did not become a play. It remained a thesis because she was only keen on telling it. She did not give us much opportunity to visualize it.

She never gave us a chance to create visuals. Only the script. This is important, this is important, other than saying that . . .

MUTHUSWAMY: Maybe there was a fear that the message . . .

PAZHANI: There was. She didn't trust the audience to get the main message through images. Since she is doing a Ph.D. on dance and she is a dancer, she does everything in dance and narration. She was not able to feel that it could be done through expression. We tried so hard to give visuals. There were very few visuals in that play. Koothu-p-pattarai's plays have a lot of visuals. When the script is moving in one line, simultaneously actions will be going on in another line. That would go as one story and this as another story, and there would be a link between the two. Here, only the script is going in one line. Beyond that, there is no visual link. That's the problem of seeing it only as a thesis. Initially, if she had given us her thesis and told us that we had to do it as a play, this play would have gone to a different level. It would have been talked about much more all over India. It would have affected a lot of people. Everyone would have been enthusiastic about doing the play. The standard really fell—just nice to see. Like a play that is appreciated at the moment of watching it. But it didn't emerge as a play that will stay in the mind. Because there was this problem in shaping it.

MUTHUSWAMY: Seeing how you are all talking . . . there must have been dissatisfaction for her, too. It is unsatisfactory for our actors, too. Neither has complete satisfaction. Right?

JAYARAO: Her thesis didn't happen. The play also didn't happen. It is a problem.

MUTHUSWAMY: I think from the beginning itself she must have had the fear of people not understanding it. So she destroyed the steps taken by the people who tried to give it a complete shape. That is, the ideas or steps that are required to create the play in its complete form (I don't want to mention names), she destroyed those steps in numerous ways. This shows the fear that the play may not be understood. She sees us as people who do plays abstractly, carry out a lot of experiments, and because of this she feared that people would not understand the play. According to what the actors say, the steps taken to shape it into a play did not succeed completely. There is a dissatisfaction in that. It is like a thesis. She tries to explain everything. Our wish of figuring out its shape did not materialize. We heard this from Chandra also. We had to give only what she wanted, stand when she told us to and sit when she told us to.

Everybody is speaking about this dissatisfaction, isn't it so? But I don't see it like that. [You are] professional actors. She collaborates with professional actors and demands some things from you all: this is what I need. You give her that. That's all. The job is over with that. You must know how to work like that also. That's how I see it. Therefore I don't experience any conflict in this. The actors have conflict because they have expectations. My attitude is, I'll give you what you require. I know how to take this to the next step. But she doesn't want it. She brings us money, lots of effort, exposure. Fine, we will give you what you ask for. That's all. Then it's over. Tell me, where is the conflict in this?

Everybody was saying, we were able to manage, handle the luggage. At that level, there is a huge satisfaction. This is not a small matter. In this process we made lots of corrections, scrutinized every scene, dropped some things, added others, then improvised—all this happened. This process has given us great pleasure.

SAMEERA: Please tell us why you took up the project?

MUTHUSWAMY: Originally, when Avanathi brought her proposal to the IFA, she wanted to work with Ratan Thiyam. IFA suggested our group because her project was about Bharatanatyam and the devadasi and these are South Indian subjects. She came and showed me her proposal and discussed it with me. I was fascinated by the story of the devadasi. I am from Mayuram, which is now called Mayiladuthurai. [Thus,] I know how the devadasi suffered, how the devadasi's sensibilities got wiped out from the Bharatanatyam scene by the higher caste Hindu family girls. All these things fascinated me.

Because Avanathi was going to explore that subject, I immediately accepted. She also described the play to me. When she first described it, it was a very complex play. To bring on the devadasi in two or three different ways . . . a doll, a possessed woman, another mute devadasi we would have to create with an actress—when she described it, it seemed a very

challenging work. I accepted because of that.

The sensibility of the devadasi . . . they know all the sringara. The girls [in Bharatanatyam] are from orthodox families. They don't know anything about sringara. It exists only in their imagination. But, for the devadasi, because they are married to God, for their livelihood they have to attract people with their technique of sringara. All these things are missing in the present day Bharatanatyam. There is no struggle. With the devadasi, her life is a struggle. If she wants to lead a different kind of life, society won't allow her to. But because of her struggle, she . . . through her art, she sublimates it. To create true art you need to challenge your creativity. Then it works fully. In present day Bharatanatyam, that challenge is not there. It is mere technique. It is a text. It is not the feeling. It is not the struggle. But it was a struggle for the devadasi.

SAMEERA: The play. What came into the play from her idea?

MUTHUSWAMY: This is her thesis. What she wanted to create in the play, we helped do. We have not done anything of our own. We improvised and created the scenes. When I accepted the collaboration, it was the subject that attracted me. Then, when I began working, it was her story. She had written that story. I had to work within those limits. Because it is not my story. What she wanted from us, we gave her.

SAMEERA: What was the process like for Koothu-p-pattarai?

MUTHUSWAMY: It was beautiful. Because we have created every scene. The author is there. Her struggle, everything, is there. She wanted to create something. Creating, re-creating, accepting and rejecting—this kind of work is full work. That fascinated us. All the actors enjoyed that. They contributed from their own imagination, from their own creativity.

I am speaking about the process. I am not speaking about the end product. I am just speaking about the process. When they were rehearsing, when they were improvising, they were really in a beautiful state of mind.

SAMEERA: The way you speak about the devadasi is fascinating. Avanthi's play dealt a lot with how the British removed the art aspect and only treated her as a prostitute. But it did not deal with the earlier history . . .

MUTHUSWAMY: She talks of the history. What I am talking about is conflict, the psychology of the devadasi, the creative mind of the devadasi. That and the history are totally different. Avanthi is speaking about the history of the devadasi. How her life is affected by the course of history. What happened to her through history.

SAMEERA: What was the idea behind using Terukoothu in the second act? Can you talk about that?

MUTHUSWAMY: Avanthi wanted to. Because, even now, Terukoothu is raw, not sophisticated. What happened to Bharatanatyam didn't happen to Terukoothu. It was a traditional form, like Sadir, but its history was different. It has stayed the same. She wondered, if you give this story to Terukoothu artistes, how will they present it? She gave them the skeleton, I helped them, and they started writing the story. In that manner they created Vivekananda, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and so on. They showed how none of these leaders was bothered about the devadasi's sensibilities. Nowadays the koothu people's sensibility is completely ignored, their beautiful theatrical tradition is not recognized by the present day society. Because of that she chose this form to address the devadasi's problem.

SAMEERA: Would you like to say anything about the eventual performance, the kind of feedback you have received and where you think you are going with it?

MUTHUSWAMY: I liked the process. It is over. Our work, my enjoyment and everything is over.

SAMEERA: So for Koothu-p-pattarai the process was very important?

MUTHUSWAMY: Yes, it was very important to us. Also, this is the first time that Koothu-p-pattarai is travelling like this. So many performances all over India. This is a great experience for us. Our actors are not only actors. They are the cash-men, they are the lighting people, they are the labourers. They are doing everything. Loading the brake van, transporting the trunks from the station, erecting the set and fixing the lights, all these things—as a theatre group, the tour is very important. Aesthetically, they have made some compromises. They don't have time to rehearse properly in new places, these drawbacks were there. But that

process has helped Koothu-p-pattarai.

SAMEERA: And you are going to do more performances of this?

MUTHUSWAMY: Yes, yes. They are going to. She is coming again. What will happen, they don't know. How she wants to react to the reactions from the audience. How she wants to create the next tour, they don't know. Let her create what she wants to. We will help her.

SAMEERA: You said that you had an idea of what it would be, but later on you realized that she was going to tell a different story. Which is fine. And what you saw as Koothu-p-pattarai's job was to help her make that happen. What I am asking is, next time if you do a collaboration, would you like to have more input in the concept itself, or . . .

MUTHUSWAMY: Koothu-p-pattarai is an organization. We need money. Yes? We have to make some compromises. In our own production, we don't compromise. The collaboration, it is not our product alone. It is two people's work. In the process we have to compromise. I am ready for that. Because we need money, we need support, we need to travel, exposure, everything. We got all of this.

It is true that there were many conflicts; but at the same time, beautiful things have happened, which we enjoyed. There is no regret. We were exposed to an all-India audience, saw how they behave, what kinds of things they enjoy, how to use different spaces. These things have helped us.

SAMEERA: And you got a good reception from the all-India audience?

MUTHUSWAMY: Yes, yes. All over India, all the newspapers, the vernacular papers and the regional English papers wrote about it. Praised the production. It was well received at the Nandikar festival and the organizers appreciated this.

The interview with the actors is translated from the original Tamil by K.R. Archana

## The Colour of Feminism: Medeamaterial at the New York Fringe Festival 1998

Fawzia Afzal-Khan

The author, who teaches at Montclair State University, uses firsthand experience to investigate issues of feminist solidarity across differences of race, class and culture.

When Ibrahim Qureishi, a young South Asian theatre director whom I had met through mutual friends in NYC, asked me to join his production of Heiner Muller's *Medeamaterial* for the 2nd annual NY International Fringe Festival, I almost immediately said yes. The reasons for my enthusiastic response were several: the most obvious (if most superficial) being my desire to perform. Due in part to ethnicity, in part to the pressures of a demanding professional and domestic life—in other words, because I am South Asian, an academic who has teaching and scholarly duties to discharge and for which I get paid, and a wife and mother of two young children—I rarely have either the opportunity or time to perform in theatrical productions (unpaid or otherwise).

Over the past 18 years that I have been resident in the United States, I have managed to keep up with some of my musical interests—and, trained in Indian classical music as a vocalist, have evolved a partnership with jazz musicians in which we try to come up with intercultural forms of music for a variety of mixed-race, multi-ethnic audiences. From the way Ibrahim described his initial ideas for the *Medeamaterial* production, I would get to participate in, and help shape, a similarly intercultural theatrical experience that would pull together my own interest in drama and music, from a South Asian perspective 'rooted' in the diaspora, and hence, by its very nature, a multicultural enterprise. Furthermore, because of the fact that the play text is a quintessentially feminist one (despite both the original play and this version having been authored by western, white men)—and because I was told the role of Medea would be played by several women (myself included) who were from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, I felt I would have a practical laboratory setting to test my theoretical ideas of feminism and the women's movement in the United States.

Sounds good—very PC, in fact—doesn't it? Well, the reality of being involved in the rehearsal process—spread out over just under a month, and followed by a one-week performance schedule—raised many more questions for me regarding the complicated intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality (further complicated by issues of personality and ego), than answers. I came away feeling that if cross-race, cross-cultural, cross-class friendships are to develop between women (or women and men for that matter), in order that the goals of the women's movement be fully realized, then much work still remains to be done. Being in an 'alternative' creative space, working together as 'artists on the fringe', did not mean that we all felt marginalized in the same way, or from the same structures in so-called mainstream society. The questions that remained unresolved (and unspoken, except through my interview process) through this theatrical experience, become, then, both the point of departure and return for my inquiry here: who sets the terms for the discursive—or, in this particular case, the performative—space we enter with pre-assigned labels? What happens when those labelled 'marginal' speak up and wish to alter those terms? How did we—three South Asian women immigrants, one South Asian-American first generation 12-year old girl, two white women, and one African-American woman (all presumably heterosexual), plus a gay Brazilian male dancer and a South Asian male bisexual director—perceive ourselves vis-à-vis the centre/margin dichotomy played out in contemporary debates around multiculturalism and identity in the United States? In a play dominated by female energy (yet written and directed by men), how did the female actors react to each other? How, in other words, did we situate ourselves within the hierarchy of performance and what did this reveal about our positions within the larger society? Clearly, these questions have important ramifications for the ongoing debates within women's studies and the women's movement generally, regarding the possibilities for dialogue and coalition-building among different women in a multicultural, multi-ethnic society, which in turn, can and do influence the possibilities for progressive change in a world comprised of both women and men.

I should state at the outset that my methodology for arriving at any sort of conclusion to this set of questions was one based on the interview, and hence coloured by my own predilections and subjective criteria for the interview questions themselves. Being a participant-observer in this enterprise should further erode any pretence of scientific objectivity, but should present, in its stead, a more honest and situated analysis. What I offer, therefore, is one possible reading, my own, of an event in the realm of cultural production, which I feel sheds some light on the racial and gender politics of our times. My analysis, which takes into account both the positive and negative aspects of this experience, can also, I hope, suggest directions for future work.

Let me begin with some background information about the director and the female actors, because it is the group dynamics between us that comprises the focus of this enquiry and analysis. Due to space considerations, I have chosen to focus on those testimonies that feel most pertinent to the issues under consideration here.

Ibrahim Qureishi is a South Asian male in his early-mid thirties, born of Pakistani parents. His father was in the diplomatic service, so Ibrahim has moved around the world since he was a child, though the places where he has spent most time are Germany and Russia. He is the youngest of three children, the two older ones being female, and he describes himself as having grown up in a 'household of women'. He claims his parents had what he calls, 'a very complicated relationship' with Pakistan, and he seems to have inherited it. He feels that because of his Pakistani background, he is fighting a cultural tradition that is anti-women because it is so heavily patriarchal, and to do the right thing, he has vowed never to marry, because 'to marry is to perpetuate patriarchy'. Does this mean that he identifies with the cultural values of the west? Not really, because Ibrahim sees himself as 'not really fitting in anywhere', and he is both intellectually and personally aware of the racist and sexist traditions in western European and North American societies as well. He feels that as a director of South Asian background who has chosen to work with western texts, his work has been slighted by other western directors who have seen his work in Europe, and who have expressed the opinion that he doesn't really 'understand' the material he is working with. It was partly his resulting frustration in Europe that made Ibrahim decide to move to New York, and try to make it in the theatre world here. But he does not want to do 'ethnic' theatre. His politics seem to be more complicated than most identity politics debates in this country allow room for—that is, although he does not wish to be stuck with a 'South-Asian' label, he nevertheless wants to do theatre that makes use of South Asian culture, in order to de-stabilize the western texts he is committed to working with. 'I don't want to do what Hanif Kureishi does,' he says, in his maniacally energetic way; 'in fact' he pounds the table, 'I'm sick of that stuff, yaar, that constant exoticizing and explaining of the primitive Eastern psyche!' No, what Ibrahim wants is to do to the West what it has done for centuries to the East—to colonize its 'classic' texts by reinterpreting them through the eyes of the 'other'. Hence his decision to do *Medeamaterial*—itself a re-working of Euripedes' *Medea*—by German playwright Heiner Muller, to whose work Ibrahim claims he's particularly drawn because Muller himself had felt it important to address issues of racism/imperialism/sexism in western society. In fact, though born and raised in West Germany, Muller chose to live and work mostly in East Germany because of his anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist political beliefs.

So what exactly was Ibrahim's vision for this production? The most important concept for him, as far as I could tell, was the idea of having several representations of *Medea*, black, white, South Asian, and to use the performance space in non-traditional ways so that the audience is constantly thrown off-balance, as it were: to help with the latter concept he decided to invite a female visual artist of Pakistani background now living and working in New York, Shazia Sikander, to become a 'co-conceptualizer'. It is interesting that the concept really came together for him at a meeting several of us South Asian women, including Shazia, held in May to discuss the possibility of our working together as a group to do a multi-media performance piece for the Smithsonian, focusing on the history of women's resistance in South Asia. Shazia, who also happens to be my cousin, had asked me to pull together a group of women artists working in different media to discuss the possibility of doing something together, which she would then propose to the Smithsonian as a



programme she would like to initiate, having already been approached by their staff to come up with a project showcasing her own work. When she and I discussed directions such a project might take prior to this meeting, we both came to the conclusion that we would commit to a collective project only if it helped us grow politically and artistically. In order for such growth to happen, we realized it was important for both of us to conceive of something that would allow for a dialogical space to open up between not just different South Asian women representing a variety of national, ethnic, religious and other groupings, but also between South Asian women and women from other 'minority' groups within the USA, especially African-American women, because of the complicated position we 'brown' women occupy vis-à-vis 'black' women in a racially divided society where black women are unarguably the most oppressed minority of all. Hence, at this first meeting, I had also invited along Imani Uzuri, an African-American woman I had got acquainted with several months ago when I heard her sing at a function where I had also performed some music and poetry.

Sunita Mukhi, an Indian female performance artist who has grown up in the Philippines and has lived in the United States for many years, and who was part of this initial group, brought Ibrahim Qureishi along to our meeting because he had recently been introduced to her and was looking actively to develop connections with the South Asian artist community in New York so that he could draw upon this talent pool for his own work. Clearly, what happened at this meeting resulted in our going off in a direction other than the one for which we had originally gathered. Ibrahim, excited by the prospect of working with several talented South Asian women and one African-American woman, basically sold us on his concept for *Medeamaterial*: and since the play was already scheduled for production, we all decided to devote our energies to this collective project rather than the as-yet nebulous Smithsonian one.

Did this transference amount to a betrayal (on our part) of a woman-directed, woman-centred collective/collaborational enterprise, and thus, somehow, lead to a weakening of our political commitment to producing a resistant female aesthetic that would challenge both western and eastern stereotypes, and also challenge us to rethink our identities and political affiliations in diaspora? On several occasions during rehearsal, Imani and Sunita both confided to me that although it was a good experience to be involved with the *Medeamaterial* production, 'whatever happened to our original plan?' Ananya Chatterjee, a dancer and performance artist who had been part of the original group, decided not to participate in this project at all. However, her reasons for withdrawal point to the mixed motives we all have in choosing to do what we do, because, for her, working for/with Ibrahim meant working for little or no remuneration, and playing to audiences too small to effect any lasting impression or change. Ibrahim chose to view her refusal to work in the production as a lack of solidarity with her already beleaguered South Asian artist campadres.

So where did our willingness to engage with the *Medeamaterial* production lead us in terms of our feminist proclivities?

From the first time I walked onto the rehearsal stage, at a small studio called 'Context' in the East Village, I sensed tension in the air between everyone—especially the black and white female performers. Sheila, the white woman who was playing the 'textual' Medea, that is, who spoke all the lines of the play, seemed locked in some kind of battle for stage supremacy with Imani, who, in the role of Medea living in the past, had been asked to improvise vocal lyrics to the actual words of the text, and was supposed to sing these simultaneously while Sheila was speaking her lines. Sunita had been given the role—created by herself, she later told me—of Creon's daughter, and she was working on creating a physical counterpoint, through movement, to the verbal and lyrical energies/anger being expressed through the two Medeas; she was being assisted by Ayesha, a young Pakistani woman, who was playing her nursemaid/dresser, and basically preparing her onstage for her wedding to (a black) Jason. These women had been meeting and rehearsing under Ibrahim's direction for about two weeks prior to my joining them. For one thing, I'd been away on academic business attending a theatre conference, and for another, Ibrahim felt I had a more defined role to play, breaking into the text with certain South

Asian songs at strategic moments; hence he had not felt it was essential for me to be there in the initial, more exploratory stages of the rehearsals. My daughter Faryal, 12 years old and with some previous stage experience of mainstream musical theatre behind her, also joined the cast with me; I had told Ibrahim I wanted her to have this experience because I felt it was important for her to be exposed to this type of alternative theatre, and to be in a play about strong women. Most importantly, perhaps, I needed her to give me an alibi; my husband would not have tolerated my being away from home for the length of time it took to put a performance together, unless I could show him I wasn't neglecting at least one of our children. Can this be classified as feminist subterfuge?

I have to say that that first day of rehearsal, and the next, were both fraught with tension and mistrust between all of us. I could tell that Imani, my friend, was not pleased with what I felt she perceived as my intrusion into the play-space. Since we are both strong vocalists, it seemed inevitable that there would be some sort of clash. She felt—and expressed—that my singing interventions should be far more restricted than the first day when I was trying out a few ideas—and I definitely felt that she was too loud and her vocalizing too continuous throughout the piece, and therefore, overshadowing my contribution.

Meanwhile, it became clear to all that Sheila was experiencing her own difficulties with Imani, which were probably now further compounded by my arrival onto the scene (though this was never articulated). The problem seemed to be the same one I had difficulty with—Imani's extraordinary power and presence—which felt overpowering to the rest of us. At one point, during the second rehearsal I had with the group, Sheila just broke down and burst into tears of frustration at, as she then articulated it, 'not being able to hear myself'. At another point, when asked by Ibrahim to speak a little louder, she lashed out angrily, 'I can't speak any louder; ask Imani to sing less loudly.' Thereafter ensued a debate, after Imani had departed, amongst the rest of us and Ibrahim, about what was to be done about the 'Imani problem'. Clearly, we all felt and shared in some of Sheila's frustration. Beverly, a white woman and friend of Sheila's, who was working as assistant manager for the production, went so far as to challenge Ibrahim's casting choice. 'Why do you have Imani in this production? What is she adding to this piece? You should fire her!' Wow! None of us had quite such an extreme reaction, but resentment against what was perceived as Imani's 'hijacking' of the piece was felt and expressed by all; we were all feeling threatened by her to some extent, and resentful that Ibrahim seemed so enamoured of her as to be incapable of really 'controlling' her. Interestingly, Beverly and Sheila both, who barely knew me at this stage, thought what I was doing was 'beautiful', and that they had no difficulty with my presence at all.

How had it come about that we—the South Asian women—all 'ganged up' against the black woman, and also looked for approval for our roles (I know I did) from the white women? Ibrahim, at a later interview I conducted with him after one of the early performances, confided to me that 'as usual, the South Asian cast members gravitated toward the white presence, rather than the black one'. I have to say that that statement really took me aback, and forced me to examine anew what had really happened here, and to test, again through interviews, whether Ibrahim's perception was accurate or not. My own sense is that Ibrahim's perception was correct as far as what was happening at that earlier stage went, but that, as things settled down—which didn't happen till we actually went into performance—and after we (the South Asian women) had obviously given the matter of stage space and mise-en-scene its aesthetic and political due, our perceptions of the entire piece changed, and with it, our sympathies underwent a certain 'blackening'. Let me explain.

For example, Sunita and Ayesha both, in separate interviews with me, stated that although they had not started out thinking that way, by the end of the process, their thinking had become somewhat 'racialized'. When asked to elaborate, they each commented on the fact that Imani always spoke of Sheila as 'white', and that, though they hadn't felt it at the beginning, certainly by the time we were performing, in part due to Sheila's perceived 'professionalism', which led her to distancing herself from the actors on and off-stage, as well as through Imani's more relaxed behaviour with us, and her own racialized discourse, they had begun to see things a little differently. Beverly, through her

own 'bad behaviour' (on which I'll elaborate a little later), had further antagonized them. Sunita began by stating that:

Initially, I was disappointed that I had not been cast as Medea, or even a Medea, and I did question Ibrahim's choice of a white woman for the textual role. However, the way he explained it to me, I understood that we—as South Asian and Black female presences—would be 'interrupting' the 'white' text spoken and acted by Sheila; the aim was a disruption of Eurocentric hegemony through theatrical practice. Thus, although I initially felt bad for Sheila being 'disrupted' and disturbed by Imani's vocal interruptions, I came to see that as a necessary part of the production. Also, what happened to Sheila during the production process—her needing to wear earplugs to 'shut out' the 'noise' being created not just by Imani but also your singing, her having to adjust to our multiple presences on stage, sharing 'her' space, is, what I think, Ibrahim wanted to see happen. He wanted her to get angry, feel discombobulated! So I do think his approach to the *mise-en-scène* worked as a political strategy, but I don't think it worked on stage.

When asked why she didn't think it worked on stage, Sunita replied that she believed it was because, perhaps, Sheila's was a 'white' aesthetic, which was entirely too rigid and 'schooled', not allowing much room for improvisation and change. And also because her 'rage' at the unfamiliar situation she was in got mixed up with the rage of Medea, and she was unable to really separate the two. Interestingly, Aysha, too, felt that Sheila's Medea wasn't as successful on stage as it could have been, and she thinks it may partly have resulted from Sheila's feeling 'betrayed' by Ibrahim. Sheila herself admitted that she initially had no idea that Ibrahim was going to cast 'other women' as additional Medeas. She also claims that the *mise-en-scène*—with everything going on simultaneously in the same space—was unsettling to her as a theatrical technique, and having to see herself as part of an ensemble instead of the 'only' one also required a mental and emotional re-adjustment of her expectations. She also claims that others not showing up on time (or sometimes at all) for rehearsals became a 'terrifying' ordeal for her—because she started to wonder what the others' commitment to the play was. Ibrahim's disappearance—due to an earlier commitment in Russia—for ten days in the middle of rehearsals, was equally unsettling to her. She said that this 'terror' affected how she played her role, and she found she had to try and devise ways to deal with what we (other people) were doing and saying, trying to not take our behaviour as a 'personal betrayal'.

Her main problem, she feels, lay with wanting to 'honour the text'. To her, that meant that when she, as Medea, was 'speaking' the text, she should have been allowed to do so without the 'messing up' and 'confusion' that was created, in her opinion, by Ibrahim through this unusual *mise-en-scène*, which, of course, allowed Imani to re-create the text through her lyrics, which she kept singing the entire time Sheila was speaking. Faryal and I did not cause a similar discomfort to her; in fact, what she felt when I sang my Sufi songs, or when Faryal ended the performance with a short Punjabi lyric, was a feeling of a completely different land and space and time; I wanted more of that, as a spark to my own imagination. When you would sing, I would think immediately of a sunrise over a desert; I felt 'called' by it, and I used you for that, as a 'call' to a different and a better time and place'. By contrast, Imani's contribution felt like 'noise' to Sheila in the final analysis, and though she says she and Imani finally worked at things to overcome their mutual antagonism, she remained convinced to the end that Ibrahim, as director, ought to have used Imani's voice and talent more 'judiciously', so that it didn't feel so 'overwhelming', so that, in other words, 'the text' could be heard. Indeed, Sheila says that during early rehearsals, when Imani would either arrive late or leave early, or suddenly jump up in the middle of an interlude of improvising to 'go record' what she had just come up with 'into her answering machine'—presumably so she could remember it for next time—Sheila felt very upset by this behaviour, which she deemed both 'unprofessional' and 'controlling'. Even though she says Imani's behaviour may have been prompted by some fear or uncertainty of her own, to Sheila it felt like power-play, as though Imani were trying to make Sheila feel out of her depth; hence the resentment and anger. Yet, when asked if she felt the dynamics between herself and Imani and others to be fuelled by racial or cultural differences, Sheila denied 'thinking racially'. Says she, 'Ibrahim would point out to me that people might be doing or saying things that were racially biased, but I didn't get it.' Indeed, even the Medeas did not seem 'racially or culturally different' to Sheila, because 'Ibrahim did not explain them to me

that way'. Even though she says she did see them as inhabiting different times/histories and even cultures in the life of Medea, ultimately, she saw all the Medeas as 'one universal woman'. The fact that Jason was a black man leaving a white woman, also lessened any racial spin to the play; had he been a white man leaving a black Medea, then she might have seen it as a statement on racial issues. As it was, she saw it as a play about men leaving women, and about a woman's coming to voice, expressing her rage and resentment against a patriarchal male and society in general.

Beverly, who began as an assistant director to the play, quit the production a few weeks into the rehearsals, just around the time that Ibrahim got back from Russia. When I called her for an interview, she was cordial but made it clear that she'd quit because she found the attitudes of the director and cast 'less than professional'. By this, what both she and Sheila meant was that they were disturbed by the fact that, except for Sheila, none of the rest of us seemed to be taking our commitment to the play seriously, since we were often late for rehearsals, or sometimes didn't show up at all—this was particularly true of Imani, who did not show up for a single rehearsal during the time Ibrahim was gone. His going off was also perceived as a 'lack of professionalism'. According to Beverly 'the race issue' was a 'red herring'. It's all about a 'professional' attitude versus an amateur one—and this in turn, 'has nothing to do with money, or being paid' she said to me. The two paramount issues that led to her leaving the production were that she felt theatre requires 'total commitment, total love' and in its absence, 'people should be fired'. Clearly, that's what she felt Ibrahim should have done with Imani, who, in her opinion was being recalcitrant in every respect. Only Sheila was 'a model of professionalism', a very 'talented artist', for whom, she felt, this play would have been a great vehicle, except for the disturbing fact that Ibrahim was letting her work be 'covered over'—obviously by Imani. Why? Beverly felt strongly that if someone could not work in harmony with the rest of the cast, then that person should be let go. Like Sheila, she expressed a great love and admiration of 'the text', the written play by Muller, which 'deserved to be heard in its full force',—clearly something that wasn't happening with this production as it was being co-conceived by Shahzia Sikander and Ibrahim and directed by him, also in what she saw as an 'unprofessional' manner. Beverly did, however, express her attraction to the 'multicultural' aspects of the production—said she was interested in Asian art forms, and has had some experience with Noh and Kabuki. It was interesting to note that she said nothing about African-American art forms as 'multiculturally enriching'.

By contrasting Sheila's and Beverly's reading of the play and their perception of the roles being enacted on stage by Imani, the South Asian women, and by Sheila herself, with Sunita's and Ayesha's comments, some intriguing observations regarding cross-race relations between women can be made. Another pertinent observation that needs to be made in this regard is that Beverly's dropping out of the process was linked to another event which she did not mention during her interview with me, and which I actually hadn't known about until Sunita, and later Ayesha, pointed it out to me. Apparently, Beverly became so incensed at Ibrahim's departure in the middle of the rehearsals, and with everyone's (except Sheila's) tardiness in showing up for the rehearsals for which she was responsible while Ibrahim was gone, that, upon his return from Moscow, she refused to hand over the wedding costume Sunita was supposed to wear (and which was in actuality Ibrahim's sister's very expensive wedding outfit)—saying that she had undergone too much stress due to the unprofessional nature of this enterprise, and so needed to be recompensed for her services and her suffering; in order to ensure prompt payment, she was holding the dress hostage. Needless to say, this behaviour caused further schisms between the 'white' presence and the 'minority' and 'women of colour' contingent. Whether or not Sheila knew of this, and either aided or tried to prevent Beverly, was seen as irrelevant—the two were seen simply as representatives of the 'white' establishment trying to exercise control/power on the coloured 'others'. Other interesting observations made by Sunita and Ayesha following this debacle with Beverly, and the increasing withdrawal of Sheila into a cocoon of 'professional meditation' prior to rehearsal and performance, had to do with Ayesha's feeling more drawn and connected to the rest of the female cast, including Imani:

I felt very affirmed in my sense of being a woman, surrounded as I was by so many powerful women. Have to admit, though, that the bonding I felt did not extend to

Sheila . . . maybe at this point it was colour—the rest of us all being varying shades of brown! The fact of the matter is that Sheila distanced herself through her incredible professionalism, her discipline; which made me admire her, but which left no room for personal interaction. Whereas I ‘hung out’ with Imani, Suni, Faryal, yourself, who were more ill-disciplined, more familiar. Imani called Sheila’s attitude ‘whiteness’, but I’ve met many lazy whites, so what does that mean? Maybe if real money was involved, if this were Broadway, we’d all have been like Sheila . . .

Thus, here too, one gets a sense of how it is difficult to reduce a complicated network of reasoning to a one-dimensional racialized discourse, yet it is also difficult to rule racial factors out of our thinking completely. Finally, Sunita expressed some interesting thoughts regarding the transformation of her own feelings about her body-image. She went from thinking of herself as having an ‘inappropriate’ body, and feeling that Ibrahim did not regard her as particularly attractive, and thence, not being particularly interested in her as a female stage presence—to feeling very empowered and sexually attractive when she was forced to don a body-revealing costume for the performance. She claims she started getting valid strokes from everyone, including Ibrahim, but mostly from Imani and Ayesha, who insisted she start dressing more ‘sexily’. So, says Sunita, ‘I started coming to our performances dressed in mini-skirts, and getting a lot of compliments backstage prior to the show. Consequently, I felt great on stage, despite my initial reluctance and inhibition about revealing myself in the two-piece costume.’ She claims she got many compliments from various women, black, brown and white in the audience about her role and her costume; except for one white woman who launched into a 45-minute discourse on proper costuming and the importance of losing weight! When Sunita told her that it didn’t matter to her that she had a few extra pounds on her frame, because ‘most women in my culture have bellies’, the woman replied ‘but it’s distracting!’ Sunita felt empowered enough to ask, ‘To whom is it distracting?’

Several issues are worth comment here; the issue of self-esteem around body image, notions of ‘professionalism’ which also have to do with issues of time, turf battles, and the whole notion of ‘empowerment’ or ‘coming to voice’, which is read very differently depending upon which group of women you identify with in terms of race/ethnicity, and class. Issues of sexuality also undoubtedly got woven into this discursive framework, and in terms of this particular experience, affected the way we, as heterosexual women, identified or related with the two men we were working with, both of whom were gay and/or bisexual.

Black feminist critic Barbara Christian asserts that in America, ‘the enslaved African woman becomes the basis for the definition of our society’s Other’ (quoted in Collins 68). Patricia Hill Collins, in her groundbreaking book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, comments on the uses of such images of ‘othering’ in order to provide ideological justification for race, class and gender oppression. She explains how even when political and economic conditions that originally generated ‘Other controlling images’ disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only keep black women oppressed but are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class and gender oppression. In maintaining such a system, the status of African-American women as outsiders or strangers becomes the point from which other groups define their normality. Thus, Ruth Shays, a black inner-city resident, describes how the standpoint of a subordinate group is discredited. ‘Now to white people your coloured person is always a stranger. Not only that, we are supposed to be dumb strangers, so we can’t tell them anything!’ (Gwaltney, 1980, 29, quoted in Collins 68). Collins analyses the effects of this ‘othering’ in the following terms:

As the ‘Others’ of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging (Collins 68).

I would like to hypothesize that what was really being enacted on the Medeamaterial stage, both in rehearsal and during and after performance, was precisely this ritual of ‘belonging’ and ‘unbelonging’—and that what caused the unease and resultant tensions amongst us all was the battle to ‘define our own realities, establish our own identities, and

name our [herstor(ies)]. What started this ball rolling was the fact that the black woman amongst us—that most objectified of ‘others’—refused to play a ‘marginal’ role, one that ‘the text’, as read and appropriated by white women, had assigned to her (and to us ‘other’ brown women as well); in other words, she challenged a ‘controlling image’, one designed to ‘keep her in place’. By insisting on doing things her way, true to her own creative impulses, by refusing to acquiesce to conventional expectations of the role—expectations upheld by Sheila and Beverly—Imani, aided by Ibrahim (a South Asian, brown, gay male)—produced a certain dissonant ‘reading’ of the text which initially took us all by surprise and caused a degree of discomfort, especially since it involved, on all our parts, a yielding of turf. ‘A system of oppression,’ claims black feminist activist Pauli Murray, ‘draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness.’ Well, Imani certainly refused this role of ‘victim’, and ‘other’, and, in the process, liberated us all, to varying degrees, of course, and certainly without doing away with our resistance altogether, from thinking of ourselves only from the point of view of performers with individual egos, to seeing our role and positioning within the drama unfolding in front of us as having a much larger socio-political significance.

The process involving change in Sunita’s self-image also has ramifications regarding the ways in which cross-race alliances can be built, since her experience is similar to that of many African-American women in this country. Being judged by external standards of beauty rooted in a ‘white’ aesthetic can leave African-American women feeling ‘fat’ and ‘ugly’, especially those growing up in predominantly white middle-class neighbourhoods and attending white schools, assert Wilson and Russell, the black and white women authors of another thought-provoking book, *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between White Women and Black Women* (98). Difference in body size is another beauty issue that can divide black and white women, since a 1994 survey found that African-American women weigh, on the average, 10 pounds more than white women of the same height. Ironically, the same survey also found that more black women than white women are satisfied with their body image—a fact that reminds us that there is greater acceptance of large women in the African-American community, possibly because in traditional African societies full-bodied physiques were valued as symbols of health, wealth, desire, prosperity and fertility, a cultural ideal brought to America by slaves, which has remained intact to a large degree ever since (Wilson and Russell 97). By contrast, the prevailing white Victorian standards of attractiveness, which have been passed down to this day in terms of body image, required the ideal woman to be delicate, with an abnormally thin waist tightly corseted to keep its shape. Both these ideals were very much linked to issues of class, since black women brought over as slaves needed to continue to be big and strong if they were to survive the rigours of their lives, whereas the ‘ideal’ white woman was really a symbol of a man’s wealth—that is, her thinness and frailty were constant reminders of her need of masculine protection.

‘Instead of judging themselves, and especially each other, on matters of weight, White and Black women would do better to spend their energy fighting fat prejudice in society’, conclude Wilson and Russell in their chapter on Body Image. Collins also advocates creating an alternative feminist aesthetic that would defy ‘existing standards of ornamental beauty that objectify women and judge us by our physical appearance’. It seems to me that Imani, though herself a tall, slender woman who defies the conventional image of the obese black woman, nevertheless tuned in to the negative self-image Sunita had about her body, and proceeded to help her challenge it. She was aided in this by Ayesha, and, apparently, this positive reinforcement of Sunita from these two women helped the director, Ibrahim, to see her in a new light as well. Interestingly, Sheila—like several other folks in the audience, including my South Asian husband and the white woman who said to Sunita that she should lose some weight—expressed the view that she felt Sunita’s body-type was not suitable for the role she was playing, that of a young virgin bride. But the question then becomes, can we/shouldn’t we, challenge all such conventions so that women—and men—of all racial/ethnic/age backgrounds can feel free to play at a variety of roles both on and off-stage?

The issue of 'professionalism' was brought up several times in my conversations with Beverly and Sheila, and with the others as well; the white women felt that nobody else in the cast or crew was quite 'professional' enough, and much of this view had to do with their perception of what constitutes 'professional behaviour'—prime amongst these factors being whether folks showed up on time for rehearsals or not. Wilson and Russell, in *Divided Sisters*, write:

(White women) . . . are bothered by Black girlfriends' tendency to be late, and for failing to return phone calls promptly. Many of the white women we interviewed also reported that African-American women don't seem to think it as necessary to apologize for these lapses as a White girlfriend might. Although it is risky to make generalizations of any sort about either race, it is interesting to note that the African-American psychologist James M. Jones has posited a mode of cultural differences that may help to explain such behaviour . . . With respect to time, he feels those of European descent have, for various reasons, a more linear and rigid relationship with the clock than those of African descent, who, he claims, have a more spatial and casual relationship with the fourth dimension. This difference in relating to time is reflected in the popular African-American expression, 'being on CPT, or Coloured People's Time', as a handy excuse for tardiness in the Black community. (183)

Handy excuse or not, I think tardiness about time is something rooted in culture, and, as such, is experienced very similarly in communities of colour across the board. Thus, it became a factor linking the South Asian behaviour with the African-American, both of which were perceived as 'unprofessional' and 'rude' or 'disruptive' by the white women, when no such slights or unprofessionalism were intended. When Ibrahim had to leave for a week in the middle of rehearsals, this was seen as the last straw, a real 'personal betrayal' by both Beverly and Sheila—with Beverly actually quitting the production as a result of this 'extreme unprofessionalism'. Interestingly, we, the 'other' women—that is the South Asian and black women—were more sympathetic to the man in our midst, rather than our 'sisters', the white women. Here, then, was an issue in which racial/cultural solidarity won out over gender solidarity.

I want to now touch a little bit on the issues of class and sexuality, and how they further complicated the dynamics between us, and by extension, point to the many factors we must attend to when attempting to build cross-race coalitions in theory and in practice. Ayesha, perhaps, put her finger on the real trouble-spots when she said that she had a hard time seeing any racial dynamics being played out—as Imani kept insisting—and perhaps this was because she had come from an upper-middle-class background in Pakistan, gone straight to the elite Ivy-league Harvard for an undergraduate liberal arts education, and from there, to working for an investment firm on Wall Street which employs people of 'all races and nationalities, a proportionate number of whom are women, and we all get along; to tell the truth I've never felt discriminated against, and so have a hard time really thinking about racism'. She admitted to not knowing many black people, and remembered that the few blacks she encountered during her Harvard days did not talk about race, although they did 'pretty much hang out by themselves', and this self-segregation reinforced her feeling that people just hang out with the folks they have most in common with, and that though it may sometimes have to do with race, it has more, in her opinion, to do with similarity of class background and experience. Thus, she felt that Imani's strong feelings about race and racism, her constant reference to Sheila as the 'white' woman, her reading of Beverly's behaviour in holding Sunita's costume hostage as a 'white power tactic', were more expressions of her class background (her family is working-class, she lives in Harlem) reinforcing her sense of racial difference. Ayesha's sense of her own positioning in this discursive situation—which she felt applied more or less to all of us South Asian women—was that we were on the sidelines of the battle between Imani and Ibrahim on the one hand, and Sheila and Beverly on the other. The white women liked her well enough, and she certainly got along with both, because perhaps, she, like us, was not perceived as a 'threat' in any way, as Imani was.

Was Ayesha's reading of our positioning as South Asians correct? It certainly makes some sense, given that Faryal's, Sunita's, and my own interventions were seen as 'beautiful', 'exotic', even 'appropriate' by both Beverly and Sheila, perhaps partly because we were acting 'in our place', and partly because things Asian hold a certain appeal for the Anglo-

American imagination, like adding mango chutney to enhance the flavour of Uncle Ben's rice! The difference—and conflict—between black and white, however, occupies an altogether 'other' register of thought and feeling. Ayesha also went on to say that she felt I was articulating some race-related issues both during the process and afterwards in my interview sessions, which she felt had to do with a politics she herself did not yet understand or see. Perhaps in this, her assessment has some validity. I do believe that Sunita, Ibrahim and I were much more able and willing to see the hidden dynamics of racial politics being played out than any of the others, and that it does have to do with our perception of the prevalence of racism in America, which we feel the need to combat. However, it is not simply a question of replacing one set of prevailing or controlling images with another—black good, white bad. Certainly, issues are much more complicated than that, and I, through this experience, was forced to examine my own latent prejudices, sort out what I thought was really going on, and figure out how best I could contribute to a more productive dialogue. How did I fare?

Let me state at the outset of my conclusion, that I felt I could have done much better, if I had had the courage to initiate discussions amongst all the cast members on the things that were troubling us, but which did not get articulated except in surreptitious ways that were not helpful in building any type of consensual-coalition model. For example, when I first walked into the rehearsal space, I immediately sensed the tension between the two principal performers, Imani and Sheila. The difference in performance style was quite evident as well, and then, in the middle of their cacophony, where it did appear as though each was trying to drown out the other, I had to make my contribution heard and felt. I must confess that I was overwhelmed, and knew that my primary competition would be with Imani, since she was the other vocalist—and a damn good one! Since she was singing continuously, I began to wonder if I would/could be heard alongside. I think because all of us were to some degree feeling threatened by Imani's powerful presence, we all sided with Sheila when she expressed her tearful frustration after one of those early rehearsals. Basically, we wanted Ibrahim to 'control' Imani, put her in her place, as it were, so that she did not end up overshadowing the rest of us.

I do believe, however, that this perception of Imani and her role, as well as my own role (and that of the others) changed with time and through thought and discussion with the other South Asian women and one man. As some of my earlier descriptions of conversations with Sunita, Ibrahim and Ayesha reveal, over time we did come to see that Ibrahim's vision for this piece required dissonance, required that we all feel shook up and at odds with our customary expectations of a proper place and role. Thus, although I initially felt (as, I think, did the others, except perhaps Ibrahim), that Imani was using the 'race' argument as a convenient stick to beat the rest of us into silence, and although I haven't discounted that possibility altogether even now, I think we all came to see that Imani's contribution to this piece was not just important, but essential. The fact that Beverly, till the very end, could not see what it was that Imani 'added' to the piece, revealed that she, and to a lesser extent, Sheila, really were missing the point. Sheila, for instance, believed firmly till the end that Imani's contribution would have been much better appreciated by the audience, and that she herself would have felt much better about it, if Imani's singing could have been limited to 'set points' like mine was. Now, this is where I think the politics of race did play a part in helping me both understand and accept the delimitation of my stage role, whereas Sheila remained unable to accept the re-distribution of power between white, black and brown that was, indeed, being represented through this piece. In other words, not just I, but Sunita and Ayesha as well, came to realize both the utter necessity and the beauty of having the roles of African-American, white and South Asian women on stage evolve in the way that they did.

It is true that this 'coming around' was the outcome of serious soul-searching and thinking about what my/our role as South Asians generally, and South Asian women specifically, ought to be, as people and women of colour who are marginalized in a dominant anglocentric culture, yet whose marginalization is differently experienced and has very different historic roots from that of African Americans generally, and black women in particular. In many ways it has been easier for the white establishment in this country to



substitute South Asian women for black women when making their 'token' hires in a variety of fields, including the one I work in, academia. Thus, bell hooks is not without justification when she talks about how South Asian 'postcolonial' scholars have become 'alibis of colour' for white colleagues, who do 'not always . . . interrogate the way in which they enter a racialized hierarchy where in the eyes of whites they automatically have greater status and privilege than individuals of African descent' (hooks 94). Mindful of this recent positioning of women like myself, which, of course, is related to our social class mobility (that is to say, we already belong to a privileged class which often encourages identification with people of similar class backgrounds, who more often than not happen to be white), I recognized the need to let go of my ego, and work together with Imani and the others to create this challenging, coalitional space on stage.

Did some such space emerge, after all? Like I said before, interesting things did occur, and we all were shaken out of our usual way of doing things. I also believe that Sheila and Imani grew more trusting of each other as performances evolved from day to day. For instance, Sheila told me in her interview that at one point she and Imani decided to try and 'work things out' by just taking the time to rehearse separately with each other after the first couple of performances. She claims that as they sat in a darkened room, eyes closed, really trying to listen to what the other was saying/singing, she began to see 'where Imani was using my energy to feed what she was doing, and I began to feel that maybe I could use a phrase she had developed to help me in my visualization'. Remarkably, we all felt the change, because an overall improvement registered itself on our psyches, so that each one of us started to feel more in harmony with one other and with the piece itself. However, it is again instructive to point out the different approaches we took to this increased feeling of the work 'coming together'. Whereas Sheila began to see all the Medeas as different aspects of the eternal woman—'we were all one'—I do not believe that the rest of us saw it that way. We seemed to hang on to a sense of our uniqueness, our difference from each other, the only change being that we were able to live with those differences without feeling that any one was threatening the other. In my case, I also became increasingly comfortable about seeing my character as a contrapuntal helpmate to Imani's black Medea, yet quite aware of the 'exotic' appeal I held for Sheila, as well as for the black Jason.

Interestingly, because both the men we were working with were gay, the issue of sexual appeal, which functions as another wedge between white and black women, was largely avoided. The presence of South Asian women of colour also triangulated the issue, and indeed, if there were any feelings of sexual competitiveness, they occurred between the South Asian contingent and the African-American woman. For example, both Sunita and I felt that Ibrahim was fascinated by Imani in part because she was black and beautiful, hence 'exotic' and 'other' in ways that we were not. Another reversal of the way things usually go—with black women for the most part feeling resentful of losing 'their men' to white and brown women! Jason, on the other hand, flirted outrageously with Sunita in front of Imani and the rest of us. However, neither Ibrahim's nor his 'preference' for any of the women in the cast caused any rifts between us, since we all knew they were not 'really' interested. Also, because of the lack of overt masculinity on the part of either of these men, the play-space and the performance itself came to be seen by us as a space of female energy, where we had to resolve our issues as women, first and foremost.

Ultimately, however, the issue remains whether this experience changed our thinking about race, class, sexual and gender solidarity in any fundamental way, and equally importantly, how many of these questions and struggles were conveyed to the audience. Shazia Sikander's experience as artist-in-residence with a working-class African-American community in Houston, called 'Project Row Houses', in 1996, is instructive in its contrast. She claims that she was initially attracted to doing the Medeamaterial project with Ibrahim because of its collaborative nature, which would allow her art (or so she thought) to be translated into, or to work side-by-side with, the living, breathing, artistic medium of theatre. In some ways, she thought this experience would be an extension of her collaborative work with the Project Row House artistic community, one where she also had the opportunity to interact with and answer questions posed to her by hundreds of visitors from the community and outside who came by to see her installation over a period

of six months. Thus, for example, when asked about the 'eastern/Muslim woman behind bars' she had created as part of the installation, she felt she could really engage her audience with questions of representation, about how images get created, who by, and for what purposes, for she often let them know she herself was an 'eastern/Muslim' woman creating the 'other' exoticized and disturbing image in front of them. Unfortunately, this aspect of community interaction/influence did not occur with the *Medeamaterial* production, given the nature and duration of the performance—it was an avant-garde piece presented in a Lower East Side location for just one week. Only a self-selected audience of a certain intellectual elite came to see the performance. Furthermore, because of a tight performance schedule, we were unable to engage with the audience in any type of conversational exchange. Thus, the opportunity to really reflect on what the piece was all about, how we as actors and director had experienced/transformed Muller's text, how we had experienced our own interracial, intercultural tensions and exchanges—none of these things were ever really discussed, either between ourselves, or in a dialogue with the audiences. Perhaps this is the next step necessary to move in the direction of true collaboration/coalition-building between all of us, women and men: real, unfettered, honest dialogue. Perhaps the next time we decide to come together to perform *Medeamaterial*, I'll ask everyone to read this article, and use it as a point of departure for getting all of us to really talk and listen to each other, in the hopes of improving what we do on stage and in our lives.

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## The Many Faces of the Bahurupi

Biren Das Sharma

This photo-feature, followed by an interview with a practising Bahurupi, allows us a glimpse of this rapidly vanishing folk performance form.

'Bahurupya: a mimic, an actor, a person assuming various characters and disguises'—  
(H.H. Risley, Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Vol. 1, 1891)

By transforming oneself into 'other', by impersonating characters both real and imaginary but never beyond the imaginable, the Bahurupi (Bahurupiya) assumes an unusual cultural agency within the society.





It is an art that refuses to be totally 'performative' and yet, curiously, it remains theatrical throughout. The make-up, the dress, the characterization, promise the unfolding of a theatrical performance of some sort. But the appearance of a Bahurupi in the neighbourhood never ends with a 'show' proper; instead, he presents himself as a 'spectacle' to the curious onlooker. What the Bahurupi primarily presents is his saaj or guise, his make-up and his ability to evoke emotion and generate interest suggest his flawless control over the performative/social space.



A Bahurupi is there to be seen, laughed at and even made fun of when a particular characterization creates the space for the spectator. He may appear as a mad woman, a beggar, a cheat, a robber, a mythological demon or even a deity. His sudden appearance in a neighbourhood may startle people, his disguise may momentarily fool the unsuspected crowd. This is precisely what a Bahurupi aspires to achieve. But the spectators do not react negatively. At best, the Bahurupi's strange, make-believe otherness is a gentle cultural comment on social roles. But he is not a threat to social strata. At the same time, he is not to be confused with a mad wanderer or a cheat. Also, his self-imposed strangeness, his folly, is not a threat to our normality. His occasional impersonation of real life characters or personalities is not to deceive or cheat people. Yet, there are many instances when a Bahurupi is misunderstood and attacked. One is reminded of a specific reference in a well-known Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay novel in which Srinath Bahurupi, disguised as a tiger, was punished because of his folly. Another reference can be found in Ritwik Ghatak's film *Subarnarekha*, in which a Bahurupi dressed as Kali startled the young hero of the film. Incidents such as these are not purely fictional and may cause an outraged reaction to the Bahurupi. But the Bahurupi always talks about the importance and respectability of his work. Though it is difficult for him to articulate it, he is sure that what he does has a significance. The most talked about tale of respectability is that of a Bahurupi dressed as a district magistrate who deceived everybody and sat on the magistrate's chair. He was not punished for 'insulting' the chair but appreciated for his art. Perhaps this is as far as the Bahurupi can go—this is the kind of autonomy and respectability the Bahurupi aspires to generate. 'We are allowed to impersonate anyone' says one, 'We have permission—even the police won't touch us for our folly. We have a license to work as Bahurupis.' A Bahurupi's cultural autonomy is supposedly sacred—not to be violated at any level.





As a folk performer, the Bahurupi is not an impersonator proper. As an impersonator he rarely touches the edge of naturalism. In fact, a Bahurupi draws the attention of the public because of his non-naturalistic otherness. His unique ways of making the real/known strange puts him at the centre of attention. Thus, the Bahurupi can be seen as a reminder of a long-lost enchanted world of magic and myth which can only be imagined, not recreated.



The Bahurupi's make-up box contains a few ordinary base colours, gum, cotton, coloured paper, coloured ribbons, safety-pins, bangles, crepe, wig, spirit gum, a comb and a small mirror. In addition to these one may have a few costumes and 'false jewellery'. There are also a few hand-made 'special effect' gadgets like a false knife, a human head or a false hand. For the demon make-up the Bahurupi uses a strange mask and grotesque dress to exaggerate the demon's body. The make-up kit reminds one of that of a traditional Jatra actor, and the Bahurupi's make-up is always simple. As he puts make-up on his face, the Bahurupi looks at himself in the broken mirror. To witness his gradual transformation from self to other is an experience in itself. He looks at himself and at the same time he is looked at by others. The process of transformation is also a process of becoming, of acquiring respectability, power and reverence. He is also aware of this in his own way.







His saaj primarily ranges from deities and demons (Goddess Kali, Krishna, Ram, Ravana, demon Taraka etc.), animals (the monkey, tiger, bear etc.) to social roles (the thief, the beggar, the mad woman, the dacoit, the police, the milkmaid etc.). There are also types of saaj like Daku Gabbar Singh, inspired by characters out of popular films and Jatra.



The mirthful kid is too young to dress up all by himself and is helped by his mother. He carefully observes his own transformation. He concentrates on every little detail and is aware of the importance of his acquired role. The external transformation somehow influences his inner self and he is completely engaged in the process of becoming another.





The one who impersonates a mischievous, fake sadhu uses sun-glasses to hide his eyes. The use of the 'modern' sun-glasses not only ridicules the traditional sainthood of the sadhu, but makes it a symbol of deception and falsehood. The caricature is the result of a cultivated sense of humour and is a comment on the highly suspect role of godmen in Indian society. His performance involves no spoken words. He just wanders around, stops momentarily to mischievously fix his hidden gaze on people and makes himself look as untrustworthy and comical as possible. Then suddenly he will bless the spectator, turn around and disappear.

A Bahurupi never presents a theatrical piece or a performance proper. Only in special cases does he make use of a few lines in the form of a monologue to complete the characterization, to define it and make it comprehensible to his rural spectators. In a sense, the words uttered are also part of his guise. The monologue gives the representation a context, interprets it and situates it within the social space. A peculiar Bahurupi characterization called 'Hathat Babu' (one who has suddenly become a gentleman/babu/respectable by virtue of his wealth) presents the fake babu seated on a chair wandering in the village with a notebook and a pen in hand, inviting people at random to his daughter's marriage. The dress itself is a mockery of the freshly acquired status of babu-hood by an uncultured miser. The hat is a comment on the Babu's colonial past. The chair is almost inseparable from his self and can be seen as a symbol of his new social role. His legs, complete with new-found socks and shoes, hang and swing comically as the Bahurupi moves (they are made of straw and the performer's feet are hidden behind the chair). The Babu's feet never touch the ground—adding a further comical touch to this utterly ridiculous appearance. The brief monologue exposes the Babu's highly pretentious pride in his false selfhood. A representation such as this is definitely a result of the folk artist's power of observation and satirization of social roles. There are many tales of realistic impersonations (the fake magistrate who is about to pass judgement, the fake policeman who threatens the village rich, the fake gentleman who makes one sign documents) which have deceived people momentarily but completely. Yet all such impersonations end in laughter, in the release of mounted tension. Such impersonations are subtle comments on the underlying vulnerability of people in positions of power, on social roles and social status.





The origin of the art of Bahurupi remains unknown. Contemporary Bahurupis always talk about the fictional 'Srinath Bahurupi' (dating back only one hundred years or so) as their ancestor; and when questioned, they remain very vague about their past, about their own community and its history. It is possible that the Bahurupis are truly an 'imagined community', that they are isolated, wandering folk artists who aspire to become a community and to be respected as a sect of some sort. But the profession of Bahurupi is an old one. The Jataka tales (370 BC) refer to travelling Bahurupi-like actors; the Charja-pada (1000-1200 AD) refers to travelling actors and Abu-Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari (1551-1602), an account of emperor Akbar's rule, directly mentions the Bahurupi as an entertaining impersonator. A more recent reference mentions the art of Bahurupi as an exclusive profession of the Jatra actors who, in their free time during the day, would dress up as Bahurupis, demonstrate their art of make-up and earn a little extra. While the origin of the Bahurupi remains uncertain, observations confirm that the Bahurupi is basically a loner and a wanderer without a community. Recent settlements of the Bahurupis (such as one in the village of Bishoypur in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal) is probably the result of an attempt to preserve their cultural identity and survive as a community. After all, modernization is the 'disenchantment of the world' as Max Weber has argued, and the fast vanishing folk art forms throughout the so-called 'developing countries' confirm the threat of the inevitable displacement of the traditional/folk by the technological/modern. The Bahurupi is one of the vanishing communities of folk performers still struggling to survive in a disenchanted world.

Biren Das Sharma interviews Bahurupi Subal Das Bairagya.

BDS: You told me that you started your career as a Jatra actor. When did you join? How old were you?

SDB: I started at the age of thirteen or fourteen. I began with the village Jatra group and later worked for several amateur/semi professional Jatra troupes. In the beginning I did all kinds of female roles. When I was very young I used to get Kumari roles, but as I grew up I did badhu [wife] and mother as well.

BDS: How much did you earn in those days?

SDB: Not much. Five or six rupees per show in the beginning. Later, when I joined the Bolpur troupe, eight to ten rupees per night.

BDS: How did you learn the art of make-up?

SDB: In the beginning I depended on our make-up man, Jagadish Mandal. But my guru Dwijen Chakravarty told me that as a professional actor, I should learn the art of make-up. So I started practising. I worked for Bolpur Manasa Mata Jatra Sangha, Mahamaya Natya Sangha and Sri Durga Opera. At that time, famous actors like Rakhal Singha and Shambhu Bag were associated with Sri Durga Opera. I worked with them. I tried to join a professional Jatra troupe of Calcutta, but failed. I met some important professional actors who knew me, requested them to give me a chance, at least try me out. But no one helped me. So I continued doing female roles. The situation changed when Jyotsna Dutta, the first professional actress in Jatra, came to do the role of Sonai in the play Sonaidighi. Soon a band of actresses joined. My guru told me, 'Now that women are starting to act we will not be given female roles any more. We have to make way for them.' I asked him, 'What about us? What will happen to us?' He told me, 'You continue whatever you are doing, but ultimately you have to look for a new profession.' So I decided to leave after a career of eighteen to twenty years in Jatra.

BDS: Did you become a Bahurupi because you could not get female roles anymore?

SDB: Yes. Tastes changed with time. Women took over the female roles even in amateur Jatra. I had to look for an alternative and suddenly I remembered the character of Srinath Bahurupi from Sarat Chandra's novel. I decided to become a Bahurupi. I wanted a guru. A student of Srinath Bahurupi had actually continued the tradition of his guru. Srinath Bahurupi used to live in Barasat (24 Parganas, West Bengal) but his sons opted for government jobs and refused to work as Bahurupis. Maybe they were not talented enough. Then someone showed a lot of interest in Srinath's art, became his first disciple and later started performing. My guru Kanai Chakravarty used to tell me that his guru was that first student of Srinath Bahurupi.

BDS: Did your experience in Jatra help you in your work as a Bahurupi?

SDB: Yes, especially in make-up and in acting. More than that, after I became a Bahurupi, I tried to make this art respectable and I was successful in doing so. I also got a chance to present this art to audiences abroad. It was appreciated by all.

BDS: To what extent did your make-up and presentation differ from that of the traditional Bahurupi?

SDB: I modified the art of Bahurupi, keeping in mind that tastes have changed. The costumes I use are of better quality and finish. My make-up is not clumsy. Acting and dialogue are also important to my presentation. For example, my comic presentation Young Wife and Old Husband has the following lines:

WIFE: What kind of man are you? You just eat and sleep. You won't do any household work at all. And you always quarrel with me. Look at others. Look at Paddy's mother, Chant's mother, Tenpi's mother. They go to the cinema with their husbands. Why don't you feel like taking me to the cinema?

HUSBAND: No, dear. At this age I don't feel like indulging in such flirtation. If you want, go with your friends. I prefer to stay at home and say my prayers.

The dialogue continues in this fashion. As a Bahurupi I depend a lot on acting. For example, if I dress up as Laila-Majnu, I often enact an entire scene.

BDS: How many saaj (guises) do you have? How many roles do you play?

SDB: There are seven or eight. For example, I would start with Mahadev (Lord Shiva). Then Nari-Purus or Siva-Durga or Laila-Majnu, Kali, Raghu the Robber, Hanuman, old man (begging for money to marry off his daughter), a lame or wounded person.

BDS: What is the most important aspect of this art?

SDB: For some, it is just a profession. You dress up and knock at people's doors and you get something. But this is an art that basically entertains people. Srinath Bahurupi became famous because he was able to entertain people. However, tastes have changed. If children are afraid of you because of your make-up or acting . . . well, it is not accepted anymore. Nowadays, one must have a license to work as a Bahurupi. It is not that all the Bahurupis have got licenses. But it is better to have one, it helps. For example, we travel to different villages and in case there is an incident of theft or snatching, then the license is a proof of your identity and innocence. Because the Bahurupi is often misunderstood, regarded as a suspicious character. Our art is under a great threat. But most importantly, many Bahurupis do not take this art seriously or try to give their best.

BDS: Which is the most popular saaj?

SDB: People like the 'two guises on one body' (male/female) most. Kids like the monkey. If I dress up like a robber or a demon the parents don't like it. But things are changing now and I think we will not be acceptable unless we adapt to the changing times.

BDS: What kind of change are you talking about?

SDB: The kind of make-up and dress I have seen in my childhood has had to change. Nowadays, instead of traditional make-up material I use tube make-up (colours) which is bright and shining. The dress material I use is also bright and good quality. There was a time when I used torn saris to prepare a costume. But now I don't.

[The interviewer wishes to gratefully acknowledge the inputs of Swapan Roy, editor of Ananayudh, a theatre journal published from Suri, Birbhum; Samir Das, theatre activist, Suri; and the Bahurupis of village Bishoypur, Birbhum.]



## Extensions: A Playscript

Smita Nirula

The author, who did her MA in Theatre from the State University of New York, is a theatre critic for The Pioneer and writes on theatre for several newspapers.

### THE CAST

Woman  
Man 1  
Man 2  
Man 3

### THE SETTING

Area 1: low wooden stool for WOMAN downstage CS  
Chair 1: bare straight-backed wooden chair for MAN 1 upstage SR  
Chair 2: bare straight-backed wooden chair for MAN 2 upstage CS  
Chair 3: bare straight-backed wooden chair for MAN 3 upstage SL  
The backs of all the chairs are slatted, resembling prison bars.  
Projection of prison bars come on as necessary.  
Stage should be raked.  
It is essential for the director to remember that the WOMAN'S back is always turned to the audience, until the very end.

Lights up on WOMAN sitting on low wooden stool with back to audience. At a distance, arcing around her, are three high-backed straight wooden chairs.  
There is a long silence.

WOMAN: I know you're there. (Pause. Slow sound of one person's heavy breathing. It gets faster until it is picked up by another and then another. Reverberates around the hall. WOMAN stands, looks at three chairs in succession. Agitated. Hands over ears.) STOP! (Sudden silence. Gradual, soft build-up of breathing again. WOMAN panics. Goes to CHAIR 1. Feels the seat with her hands. Feels the air around it — front, sides, back. Nothing. Repeats on other two chairs. Nothing. Breathing has become very heavy. Hand over mouth, she backs to the stool. Sits, head in hands, very beaten.) Please? Please stop — Please. Stop. (Breathing continues. She slowly gathers herself.) That's right. Go on. Don't stop. Don't. Stop. (She gets orgasmic) Don't. Stop. Don't. Stop. Don't. Stop. Doooooon't!

Snap BLACKOUT and silence.

Male voice in the dark. MAN 1 behind CHAIR 1.

MAN 1: I won't come in. (Pause. MAN 1 walks into area CHAIR 1. Lights up dim. MAN 1 sits on chair.) If I do, I may never leave.

WOMAN is watching all this with her back to the audience.

WOMAN: Would you like a cup of coffee?

MAN 1: I'd love one, but . . .

WOMAN: But what?

MAN 1: I won't come in. (Pause) If I do, I may never leave.

(Silence)

WOMAN: Why? (Silence) Maybe you shouldn't come in.

MAN 1 (walks up to her, caressing her cheek): I love you.

WOMAN (looks up at him): I love you too.

(They kiss gently)

MAN 1: Goodnight.

WOMAN (broken): Night.

(MAN 1 walks back to fading SR spot. WOMAN gazes after him. Long silence. Male voice from CHAIR 3. Gradual fade up.)

MAN 3: What's that supposed to mean?

WOMAN (looking at him): I love you.

(Silence)

MAN 3: What's that? Candlelight and flowers? (Pause) I can do all that, but does that mean I love you?

WOMAN: No.

MAN 3: What d'you mean 'no'? What more d'you want? (WOMAN laughs softly. Suspicious) What's that supposed to mean?

WOMAN: I love you.

(Silence)

MAN 3 (accusing. Looking at CHAIR 1): He said that to you too.

WOMAN: Turn around. Go to sleep.

(Silence. Lights begin to dim.)

MAN 3 (sullenly): I guess I love you.

( Lights go to a quick BLACKOUT. WOMAN laughs softly in the dark. Lights up sharp on CHAIR 2. MAN 2 is sitting on it. WOMAN stands facing him.)

MAN 2: I know it'll be fine. I love your work!

WOMAN: But I ain't done nothin' yet!

MAN 2: I can tell.

WOMAN: What's to tell?

(Lights up on CHAIR 3.)

MAN 3: I could tell you about all the times I've thought about you.

(Lights up on CHAIR 1.)

MAN 1: I couldn't. Too many times.

MAN 2: I've never had that problem.

MAN 3: It gets difficult at times.

MAN 1: The sleepless nights . . .

WOMAN (soft): Me too. Mine too.

MAN 2: Your what?

WOMAN: My sleepless nights.

MAN 3: What would you know? The self-control I've exerted.

MAN 1: Well, I don't know—

MAN 2: What's to know?

MAN 1: The confusion. The tearing . . .

(Silence as all look towards WOMAN who says nothing.)

MAN 3: Well? Aren't you going to say something?

WOMAN: What should I say?

MAN 3: Tell me you love me.

WOMAN: I love you.

MAN 3: Tell me you won't be happy without me.

WOMAN: I'll never be in love with you.

(Stunned silence)

MAN 1: You said you wouldn't love any of us. Wouldn't care about any of us. And now?

WOMAN: I let you in.

MAN 1: What will I do without you? Please stay.

WOMAN: What for?

(Silence. WOMAN laughs bitterly. Softly.)

MAN 1: I need you. (Pause) Please keep me honest.

WOMAN: I love you. But I can't.

MAN 1: Please?

WOMAN: I will always love you.

MAN 1: So you'll stay.

WOMAN (shaking her head 'no'): You are my strength. Don't become my weakness.

MAN 2: I want to see you.

WOMAN: I'm here. You're not going anywhere.

MAN 2: I have problems. (Silence) Say something!

WOMAN: What d'you want me to say? I can't live without you? — Not true. I burn when you touch me? I hunger for you? — True.

(Silence)

MAN 2: Shall I stay?

WOMAN (shaking her head 'no'): I'll leave.

MAN 1: You'll leave.

MAN 2: You'll leave

MAN 3: You'll leave. (Pause) Will 1?

WOMAN: What's that supposed to mean?

MAN 3: That's my line!

WOMAN: You're the one who left.

MAN 3: I came back.

WOMAN: I didn't. (Pause) Please don't leave me!

MAN 3: I love you. (Silence) I don't want to care. (Silence) I'm getting too involved.

MAN 2: When I get too close, I move away.

MAN 1: I resent my time with you.

The last three are repeated over and over until the light fades out on the men. Then a little bit still in the dark. WOMAN, beaten by the waves of sound hitting her, cowers onto her stool, hands over ears, then face in hands. She slowly gets up, squares her shoulders, turns around very slowly to face the audience. She has no face — just a silver coloured, featureless mask.

Lights fade to pinpoint her face and then

BLACKOUT

## Theatre Log

Review:

Sundari: An Actor Prepares

Dr Amrita Shodhan

Sundari: An Actor Prepares deals with the life and career of Jaishankar who joined a theatre company in his early youth and enjoyed a long career (1900-1932) as the most popular actor of women's roles on the Bombay stage. The play is a complex dramatization of his autobiography. Much of the story is in his own words—Jaishankar recounting his story. However, the recounting is done by three actors, thus breaking the 'normal' boundaries of play acting.

That such a superb piece should go unreported in our media compelled me to write on the play. The other 'compulsion' was the parochial review printed by the Gujarati newspaper Mumbai Samachar of 24 September 1998. In this review, Hindi theatre is considered national and Jaishankar a regional actor. The play itself shows how such classifications are irrelevant. Jaishankar received his early training in Calcutta. He made his career in Mumbai and retired to Gujarat. His acting and his story brings to the fore questions regarding gender and identity that are very contemporary and inadequately faced even today.

The events of Jaishankar's life are distilled with great care from the lengthy autobiography. The early episodes document his moral and ethical foundations. His mentors are male as well as female. One early incident introduces the theme of gender confusion. Jaishankar remembers that his mother was waiting for his grandfather Tribhuvandas to finish his singing and come down for a meal. After a long time—during which they could hear the singing—someone comes down; it turns out that the singer was not the man but his daughter.

Then his early training in Calcutta is depicted. It touches on the technical aspects of theatre—language, make-up, dressing—and the soul of his acting—the female persona. This grows out of discussion as well as observation of one particular woman, who seems to be a young widow.

The theatre of his times was known for its

dramatic, declamatory dialogue delivery and frontal stage presentations. The acting was formal and self-consciously entertaining. Entertainment was to be bawdy and bold—larger than life—not a representation of reality.

This contemporary context is recreated for us at the start of the play by the dramatic stage set. The story begins with an elaborate set of Nal-Damayanti with a swan vehicle, a set that Jaishankar remembers in his autobiography. This set is complex, and with a bit of the old performance, it sets the stage, literally, for Jaishankar's arrival. It shows the contemporary theatre of Bhavai and the Parsi theatre of Bombay—the larger-than-life sets and characters, mythological references and formalized acting.

In this context Jaishankar's attempts to 'be' a woman on stage acquire historical significance. Jaishankar learns to act like a woman by learning how a woman thinks and feels. There is a beautiful dialogue with a woman on how she opens the cupboard to choose clothes. Jaishankar, going along with her thought processes, learns how she would open the cupboard door.

The different women characters played by the same actor confused the 'facts'—however, continuity in terms of the female teacher is maintained and the confusion blurs the individual personas in the notion of the woman teacher. It underplays—as, perhaps, Jaishankar underplays—the sexual and personal relationships.

The play leaves us wondering about his private life with women or, indeed, men. Were there affairs of the heart? What was his sexual orientation? Several delicate relationships are shown—one with the young widow during his early training, one with a male admirer. The importunate advances of a rich woman are shown. Did they come to anything?

Jaishankar's own feminine/masculine nature is shown sensitively by the different actors reciting the different lines of his dialogue. Many of his actions challenge our notions of woman/man. When one participates in his acting out of what a woman is, one is forced to think once again of issues one had taken for granted—how should a

woman behave? Must she always hang down her head? What sort of a culture would show such acting as realistic?

Hanging her head slightly sideways was Sundari's characteristic pose in plays and photographs. This is how the public recognizes her/him. This pose has echoes in contemporary art, especially that of Ravi Varma. This is quoted in the larger-than-life figures painted on the wing panels by Nilima Sheikh. By showing the artistic context and his own performance, Jaishankar's representation of women is generalized.

Yet none of the women in Jaishankar's life as shown on stage are docile, as suggested by the bent head. Sundari is directed to contrast with the strong women characters in his life, as is the artistic representation of women (quoted on the backdrops). This again questions the representation of women.

Until now we have considered how Jaishankar and the play treat the idea of woman and acting. But the question raised by the Gujarati review was, how does the playwright treat Jaishankar? Sundari's dialogues on stage are faithfully taken from Jaishankar's autobiography. This shows the utter seriousness with which Anuradha Kapur, Gitanjali Shree and their colleagues approach Jaishankar. They attempt to bring his memoirs to life authentically.

At the same time, as artists, the team is conscious of representation. They reflect on these memoirs by choosing and juxtaposing the various incidents in his life against one another. By having three actors recite Jaishankar's dialogue, they dramatize the representation rather than make it lifelike. This bringing of his voice to the fore, as narrator of his own life, radically alters one's consciousness of Jaishankar as not present but somehow more intimate in his connection to us—as an author is to the reader of his book.

A word must be said about the complex stage and its huge back-drops painted by Bhupen Khakkar, Nilima Sheikh and Satyendra. These are as integral to the play as the actors and their storytelling. Inspired largely by the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, the set-paintings provide the contemporary context—literally, the backdrop—in and against which the actor prepared his portrayal. In the context we can judge how Jaishankar was an innovator in his time.

On the whole, the play was a stimulating,

sensitive portrayal of Jaishankar Sundari's work. It brought his life alive and made it contribute to our consciousness even today as we watched the portrayal of his memoirs—his preparation, as an actor, for women's roles.

Outcaste Eternal—A journey from Kerala to Singapore

Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan

On 27 and 28 April 1999, a dance theatre production, *Outcaste Eternal* was staged in Singapore, at the Raffles Hotel. On both days, approximately 300 people saw the performance, which was an example of Indo-Singaporean collaboration. The theme was Indian, a culture-specific, period story from Kerala; it was done in Singapore, with Singaporean cast and crew. The script was prepared jointly by myself, an Indian, and Nirmala Seshadri, who is Singaporean. We jointly directed the production: I directed the theatrical aspect and Nirmala Seshadri directed and choreographed the dance. The journey from Kerala to Singapore was long and tedious, taking one year, but fascinating and exhilarating.

The dance theatre script was based on the novel, *Outcaste*, an English translation of Matampu Kurhu-kuttan's Malayalam novel, *Brasktu*. What started as a translation or transcreation from one language into another underwent yet another transformation when it was made into a dance theatre script. The meeting between the two women was an accident; Nirmala Seshadri was doing research in India on Shakti themes. Her disappointment at the disparity between the concept of women being deified as 'Shakti' and the reality of a system which oppressed and marginalized women led her to read the novel *Outcaste*. Thereafter, she sought the help of the translator to stage it as the inaugural event of a newly formed art organization, Kala Vardhini Art Centre, Singapore, of which she is the Artistic Director.

The novel is based on an actual event that took place in the early quarter of this century. It underscores the extraordinary courage of a Namboodiri Brahmin woman of Kerala, who, on the eve of her trial for infidelity in marital relations, for which she was to be outcast, turned the tables against her tormentors. She stunned them with her logical and intelligent argument, forcing them to declare as outcasts,

64 men from prominent upper caste families who had had sexual relations with her. At a time when the society was restrictive and oppressive to women, this young woman of twenty-one managed to outsmart her oppressors and bring about a sense of true justice based on gender equality.

Instead of following the structure of the novel with regard to chronological continuity and climax, the dance theatre infused dramatic suspense by beginning with the trial and then tracking back to the event that led to the trial. The stage was bare except for 2 or 3 props—a huge bronze lamp, a hanging bell and two low stools. The intention was to create maximum space for the actors to move freely, and create spaces within the text through acting. With the help of lights, the stage was partitioned into the required sections. For the trial scene the stage was partitioned by an unseen diagonal line, keeping the investigators in one section and the heroine, Paptikutty, in the other section. The idea of one woman against so many men was brought out clearly. But Paptikutty's space remained inviolate. Even though she was the outcast and alone, the actors taking the dual roles of investigators as well as the various characters in Paptikutty's tale, entered her 'sacred' space only at her bidding as more actors in her narration. The sense of a proscenium stage was thus effectively broken. In the later scenes, it helped the audience to imagine various sections of the stage or the full stage being transformed into the inner courtyard (women's quarters), the outer men's quarters or the southern section of the compound with the pond. Specific space creations in this unbounded and unlimited space became the task of the actors.

It was decided that an Indian theatre technique would be best suited to this Indian tale. As it happened, the technique adopted was the 'Theatre of Transformation', a theatre practice prevalent in Kerala in the ritualistic dance, Theyyam. The actor is persuaded to become the character for the duration of the play through certain preparatory devices such as meditation, trance and possession. The play, *Outcaste Eternal* began with the actors seated in a circle in a meditative pose, entering into their roles through repetitive chants. The only chant which is outwardly heard is that of the protagonist, Paptikutty, 'I am Paptikutty, I am Paptikutty . . .'

The dynamics of a single art form have

been amply explored and many innovations have been introduced. An extension of this logic led the directors to explore using dance as well as theatre, without wilful superimposition, artificial integration or lack of aesthetics. A seamless integration and a natural flow was sought. Dialogue and verbal narration was used to show the 'now' and the 'present' and a linkage between various dramatic acts. Dance, on the contrary, was used in the flashback to recapture the 'past' and also to create certain moods and atmospheres—emotional and social specificities. The stylistic movements and the silent miming were thus pitted against the realistic movements and the cadences of the spoken word. Minimalization and simplification of props and costumes, and reliance on the skills of the actors, were emphasized. It was truly an act of giving the stage back to the actor—none of the other elements, music, props, costumes or light, was allowed to overwhelm the actor. Their role was to complement and enhance the actor's skills and help to bring out the best in them.

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.