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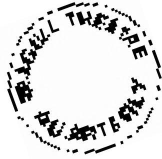

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Sunandini Banerjee
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V e e n a

Provincial elites, urban intellectuals, and a new Marathi theatre

A major problem bedevilling the task of art and cultural historians of non-Western societies is the imperative to theorize about the transition between pre-colonial expressive and performative forms and

Part of the difficulty is to distinguish the status of pre-modern forms from their representation in colonial,

the guises these forms assumed through their re-invention during the colonial period. Part of the difficulty is to distinguish the status of pre-modern forms from their representation in colonial, nationalist, and one might add, post-modern discourse. The colonial transformation on the subcontinent involved a shift from a literate and political regime, shaped around a scribal culture and oral transmission, to a world of literate politics that presumed the use of print.[1] The introduction of print and English transformed the South Asian cultural universe by redefining performative arenas, forms, and hierarchies. The cultural sphere mirrored these political and economic shifts through the new norms, agents, audiences, and patrons that now structured performance, cultural participation, and innovation. The dominant performative genres in the new Marathi theatre that emerged in the 1840s are a rich vein through which to explore the shift from a cultural order that reproduced itself mainly through oral transmission to one where modes associated with print were taken to be the norm. In a context where a hypothetically laicized vernacular culture remained one in which its claims to a generally inclusive literate audience could not be borne out, theatrical forms and other public-performative arenas were bound to enjoy a heightened significance. And yet, despite the small size of colonial reading audiences, print exerted a peculiar pressure upon artistic innovation and on the range and status of performative forms that

Veena Naregal has written on the cultural and political history of Western India (Language Politics, Elites and the Public Sphere, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001). Her current work is on contemporary media networks in Mumbai and the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement. At present she is teaching Asian Media and Cultural Studies at the

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emerged. I will use this normative shift from orality to the primacy of print culture as a point of departure from which to analyse the early forms of the Marathi theatre.

This paper will explore the varieties of Marathi theatrical practice that emerged between 1840 and 1880 in the period prior to the advent of the sangeet natak and the figure of Annasaheb Kirloskar.[2] These were the pauranik khel, 'farce' and the 'bookish' natak. The emergence of these forms will initially be discussed, against a brief account of the patronage and performative forms in the late pre-colonial period, and then, in relation to the avenues of patronage to the natakmandalis—of which Vishnudas Bhave's Sanglikar Natakmandali was the first—within the new arrangements ordained by colonial society. The concluding section of the paper will elaborate on the enterprise and innovation shown by some successful touring companies after Bhave, such as the Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali, Balwant Marathe's Nutan Sanglikar Natakmandali, and the Altekar Natakmandali. Some interesting material about the composition and internal organization of these troupes, and their methods of managing finances and resolving conflicts will also be discussed.

This period between the performance of Vishnudas Bhave's Sitaswayamvar in 1843 and Annasaheb Kirloskar's first staging of Sangeet Shakuntal in 1880 encapsulates the challenges in moulding a theatrical and performative practice that could at once claim to be 'cultivated' and popular and combine 'high' aesthetic merit with commercial viability. Resulting in near legendary status for a series of star performers who came after Annasaheb Kirloskar, the great commercial success of the sangeet natak form enabled the Kirloskar troupe to be the first Marathi theatrical company to build its own playhouse, the Kirloskar Sangeet Sabhagriha, which opened in Pune on 21 August 1909.[3] Although narratives used by Bhave and Annasaheb Kirloskar both derived from the traditional corpus of the Hindu epics and shared common elements, major differences separate the two moments. Practitioners of the sangeet natak and later literary historians were wont to see the former as a 'crude', less 'refined' and slovenly form, compared to the 'better-crafted' and apparently 'more modern' sangeet natak. This shift in taste and critical opinion was indicative of the increasing ideological influence that the new intelligentsia wielded by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In fact, its members' ability to mould the criteria of dramatic and literary taste through critical periodicals and newspapers helped establish their dominance over the sphere of 'high' culture, and this contributed significantly to their ascendancy within the public sphere. While not denying this, I propose that the success of the sangeet natak was also indicative of deeper cultural and political shifts. By the 1880s, after half a century or so of colonial rule, processes of Weberian disenchantment had clearly redefined the nature of religious experience. Under these circumstances, the appeal of forms dramatizing mythic interludes using traditionalist techniques was bound to lose some of its lustre. Instead, the sangeet natak with its offerings based on well-known stories, often from Sanskrit drama, combining heroic characters, themes of romantic love with an endless scope for the display of musical talent was more likely to fulfil the urgent need for forms that would amalgamate aspirations to 'high' taste, entertainment, and popular sentiment. The reach of the new literacy was hardly wide enough to sustain a radically novel prose drama; not surprisingly, the turning to music was such a vital element of theatrical and artistic innovation in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Before elaborating on the early efforts to forge a new theatrical Marathi practice, a brief description of the important performative genres in the pre-colonial period would be in order.

PRE-COLONIAL PERFORMATIVE GENRES

Marathi textuality, in the form of royal epigraphs and inscriptions and compositions of the mahanubhav and varkari sects, emerged during the last decades of the thirteenth century.[4] The most important performative forms in the cultural life of the Deccan have been the lavani-tamasha,[5] kirtan, and the later povadas[6] and bakhars.[7] The

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former have had a longer history of at least three centuries, during which they have undergone complex shifts in their social position and artistic status. Both the lavani and kirtan forms claim an ancestry that goes back to the popular traditions of worship of the varkari sect and the first great flourishing of vernacular textualized forms in the devotional verse of the Marathi bhakti poets between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although the two genres have evolved distinct features and thematic emphases, and despite the disrepute attached to the lavani form for its depiction of erotic and bawdy themes, these forms share an overlapping history in terms of influences, composers, artists and narrative repertoires.

The lavani and kirtan form have shown remarkable resilience in adapting to changing performative circumstances and structures of patronage in the last three centuries. Emerging largely as subaltern dissenting idioms, they were at least partially 'classicized' through patronage from wealthy and politically influential families in the Peshwa period. Indeed, the history of these forms bears witness to the complex changes that this region has witnessed, especially the changing strategies of regional political elites in their search for legitimization through patronage of popular devotional and performative forms. The permeability of the kirtan to cultural and political shifts is borne out in its 'classicization' during the Peshwa period, when kirtankars began using compositions of elite panditkavis like Vamanpandit and Moropant, whose Marathi verses abounded in the use of a 'high' Sanskritized idiom. Similarly, until the Peshwa period, the lavani form had been mainly performed by non-elite kolhatti and mahar communities, but was now taken up by well-known brahmin shahir poets like Ramjoshi and Anantphandi, and gained widespread patronage at the courts of ruling elites. Thus, unlike the situation with the adjacent languages like Kannada and Telugu, a courtly tradition of Marathi poetry was markedly visible only after the rise of Peshwa power, many years after Marathi was first used for devotional compositions.

There were clear signs of an expansion of the literary realm during the Peshwa period, seen in both the diversity of literary styles and in the increased patronage shown by the political and economic elite to practitioners of various performative idioms. Besides the emergence of these new varieties of eulogistic, heroic, and erotic performative verse forms, there is other evidence that indicates that the political elite was interested in the cultivation of literacy.[8] Performative reading and listening for edifying and/or recreational purposes was a common practice among these circles—an activity kept up even during the all-too-frequent military campaigns. The intervals between battles or the evenings were devoted to the conduct of regular court business or simply to the recitation and listening of purans and kirtans, or even to witnessing other performative genres of a more recreational nature. Similarly, detailed and meticulously maintained official records are available for this period, and yet it has to be acknowledged that

The birth of a new theatre practice in Marathi is attributed to Vishnudas Bhave, who was in the employ of the ruler of the Sangli State, Chintamanrao Appasaheb. Starting with Sitaswayamwar, in 1843, Bhave composed and

Poster for tamasha performance by Krishna Mhar and Radhya Mhar at the Grant Road New Elphinsone Theatre, Bombay, on 7 May 1899. Tickets: box–Re.1, pit–8 annas.Photograph courtesy Vhatkar N, Marathiche loknatya tamasha, kala ani sahitya, Pune 1970.

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even in elite circles the primary mode of circulation of literary and learned texts continued to be characterized by oral transmission. With the expansion of Maratha power in the eighteenth century, knowledge of Persian became a skill which was highly rated among the social accomplishments of the cultivated classes and the political elite, even while it simultaneously created a demand for the refinement of the regional vernacular. The sustained attempts to develop a 'classicized' vernacular idiom, most visible in the work of the panditkavis patronized by elite families, were one such effort.

In particular, the Marathi dramas of the Thanjavur school seemed to have had a following among the Peshwa elite.[9] The Bhonsle rulers, who reigned over Thanjavur between 1675-1799 (and continued thereafter as figureheads for another five decades under British authority) left behind a substantial corpus of dramatic and other compositions in Marathi, Telugu, and Sanskrit. These texts were to count among the antecedents of the theatrical experiments in the mid-nineteenth century, although, as noted, the colonial encounter disrupted any simple possibility of continuity between the pre-colonial vernacular realm and the new performative practices. The Marathi dance-dramas composed at the Thanjavur court included Shahajiraje's plays,[10] such as the Shreelaxmi-bhudev samvad, Harihar vilas, Shrilaxminarayan kalyan, Subhadra parinay; Ekojiraje's Shakuntal; Raja Pratapsingh's Shri kurvanji and Anusuya upakhyan; Rajkanyaparinay by a poet-scholar called Trimbak Jyotirved, and lastly Sarfojiraje's compositions, such as Ganeshleelarnav, Ganeshvijay, Devendrakurvanji, and Mohinimaheshparinay.[11] Written in the convention of courtly love stories, these plays mainly comprised narratives woven around episodes from the Hindu epics and puranic texts, especially the lives of gods or outstanding devotees, or depicting the intrigues rife in the private quarters of the palace.

Poster for a tamasha performance by a visiting troupe led by Tukuram Mhar Turewala from Kolhapur at the Grant Road New Elphinstone Theatre, Bombay, on 28 June 1898. Tickets: stalls, box, and for women–8 annas. Photograph courtesy Vhatkar N, Marathiche loknatya tamasha, kala ani

PRINCELY PATRONS, COLONIAL INTELLECTUALS, TOURING COMPANIES: THE MAKING OF A HYBRID-VERNACULAR THEATRE

The patrons for the new Marathi dramatic forms that emerged in the nineteenth century were the new intelligentsia and the erstwhile Maratha aristocracy in states like Sangli, Ichalkaranji, Miraj, and Baroda, who retained a semblance of formal autonomy from British dominion, even after the end of the peshwai in 1818. The quest for patronage has always compelled performative artists to embark on an itinerant existence to a greater or lesser degree. The early Marathi touring companies showed remarkable enterprise and astuteness in exploring remunerative and commercial possibilities amidst changing circumstances and politically uncertain times, enabling a more conventional bourgeois theatrical practice to emerge by the last decades of the nineteenth century. The ideological orientation and worldview of both these social

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groups may not have matched entirely, and yet, given the political conjuncture within colonial society, an alliance of interests between the 'sovereign' rulers of the princely states and colonial-educated intellectuals was perhaps inevitable. Performing groups could not rely on patronage from just one of the above-mentioned groups, and the following sections will highlight how right through this period, different theatre companies attempted to combine the support of princely rulers and that of the emerging intelligentsia. In responding to the disparate influences that the colonial encounter made available, the emerging trajectory of Marathi theatre showed a marked, and even, exclusive bias towards the cultural tastes and preferences of these two groups.

The birth of a new theatre practice in Marathi is attributed to Vishnudas Bhave, who was in the employ of the ruler of the Sangli State, Chintamanrao Appasaheb. Starting with Sitaswayamwar in 1843, Bhave composed and staged a series of about ten akhyanas based on episodes from the Ramayana at Sangli.[12] Vishnudas Bhave's family hailed originally from Konkan, where an ancestor served in the Peshwa armies during the late eighteenth-century expeditions to conquer Vasai. Like many other Chitpavan brahmin families from this region, Bhave's ancestors apparently migrated to Pune, the Peshwa capital, and from there to Sangli, where Vishnudas' grandfather found employment in the service of the Patwardhan family. Vishnudas' father, Amrut Bhave, supervised the maintenance of Appasaheb's infantry and cavalry, and came into contact with the British as part of his brief to observe British military arrangements at Belgaum.[13]

The Patwardhans were important jagirdars in the Maratha Empire, having secured saranjam territory from Madhavrao I in 1764.[14] After the jagir was partitioned between Chintamanrao Appasaheb and his uncle, Gangadharrao, in 1799, the former shifted residence and set up a new state with its capital at Sangli. By this time, General Wellesley's operations in the Maratha territory were well under way, during which time, Chintamanrao co-operated with the British commander to rein in some of their troublesome enemies. However, when Peshwa rule came to an end in 1818, Chintamanrao submitted only reluctantly to the terms of the agreement proposed by Elphinstone.[15] But before long, Chintamanrao had fitted himself into the role of a 'model' sardar under the new dispensation, displaying his 'enlightened' loyalty on every important occasion.[16] He evinced keen interest in the many cultural and technological innovations introduced by British rule, especially that befitting symbol of the changing times, the printing press, of which he had one installed in Sangli in 1821 (which, we are told, was mainly used to print pages of the Bhagvatpurana to be given in dakshina to brahmins, and state's official stamp paper for signing official contracts!). No doubt, this was a case of cultural pride enhanced by political subordination, but surely, at this stage, such efforts to foster innovative performative forms in the vernacular could not have come from any quarter other than the erstwhile aristocracy.[17] Anantphandi, the well-known lavanikar and shahir-kavi,[18] is said to have taken refuge at the Sangli court after the demise of the Peshwa, and it is possible that Vishnudas Bhave may even have come in contact with him.

Vishnudas' early interest in music, making images, masks, models, puppets and such like brought him to the notice of Chintamanrao. He came under patronage of the court, where he had a chance to witness many performances, including that by a troupe of Kannada bhagwat players who had visited the Sangli court in 1842. Bhave's efforts to initiate a new performative form were apparently inspired by his patron's suggestion that he improve on the dashavatari performances of this troupe.[19] Following these instructions to fashion a navin Marathi natak,[20] Bhave began his search for suitable verses from the Ramayana from local kirtankars and other performers that could be set to appropriate ragas. This was to little avail, he claimed, and eventually, he had to compose his own akhyanas, as little material that came his

way was suited to his purpose. His patron assigned him the services of a few men for his troupe, besides which Bhave sent for some young boys, procured especially from Konkan, presumably to play female roles. We are told that his efforts to set these akhyanas to music, to put together the costumes and to fashion actors' parts pleased his patron greatly. This was how the Marathi pauranik khel was born.

When Bhave's troupe staged their new production, some Sangli brahmins, resentful of their success, tried to rule that Vishnudas and his players had transgressed brahmanical codes by assuming theatrical roles.[21] Despite such hindrances, matters went well for Vishnudas and he was able to perform ten more episodes from the Ramayana for his patron in the next year. Chintamanrao was quite pleased with Bhave's efforts and apparently promised to reward him and his players with some land.[22] Unfortunately, this never came to pass and Appasaheb passed away on 17 July 1851. For Bhave, this was a severe jolt that jeopardized his career as a natakkar, forcing him to look for new avenues for patronage.

Portrait of Vishnudas Bhave (1820?–1909), the first modern Marathi pauranik natakkaar. Photograph courtesy S. N. Banahatti, Marathi Rangbhumicha Itihaas, Pune 1957.

THE LIMITS OF ROYAL PATRONAGE AND THE BIRTH OF NEW FORMS

Amidst the turmoil that followed, the caretaker installed by the British administration informed Bhave that Chintamanrao's promises could not be honoured and that it was unlikely that the patronage would continue. In lieu of this, Bhave and his troupe were offered leave from their court duties, so that they could travel with their plays and try and earn enough to settle their debts.[23] Deprived of royal patronage, Bhave had little option but to start preparing to tour. He set about composing verses to make up several narrative episodes and speeches with the help of a Sanskrit scholar, Appa Sathe, in Sangli.[24]

Thus the first touring Marathi company, the Sanglikar Natakmandali, came into being. Records suggest that Bhave's troupe initially comprised about forty-two male actors in all. Besides the Sutradhar, considered to be the most important member at this point, and the Vidhushak, the actors were divided into groups denoting the main roles in a pauranik play: the rishi party, rakshas party, dev party, stree party, and perhaps the bal party. Bhave's tours over the next few years followed a regular pattern, with the group setting out soon after the monsoon, as the festive season of Diwali neared, and returning at the onset of summer. Their first tour, begun in late 1851, took them to several large villages and the courts of the Maratha elites in the vicinity of Sangli. The troupe visited Tasgaon, Nipani, Kagwad, Mudhol as well as the courts at Miraj, Jamkhindi, Kurundwad, and Kolhapur.[25] Encouraged by the reception, their next tour extending from late 1852 to May 1853,[26] was more ambitious, taking them to Pune via Karad, Satara, Baramati, Nagar, and then onwards to Bombay. On the evidence of the available accounts, this trip was a great success. Not only was the troupe accorded a lavish ceremonial welcome by the Satara Raja,[27] but they also went on to make contact with leading intellectuals in Pune and Mumbai. Pune still did not have any public theatres, so the troupe performed in open spaces under the patronage of one or the other local notable. As elsewhere, it took a few performances for the troupe to overcome traditional upper-caste reservations about watching plays. A few performances later, the troupe's popularity grew,[28] especially as they had established contact with several important figures among the newly educated class such as Keropant Nana Chhatre, Krishnashastri Chiplunkar,[29] and Bhavalkar.[30]

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By February 1853, the group had reached Bombay. The troupe first performed a few private shows, probably at Thakurdwar and Phanaswadi, the important Hindu Marathi-speaking areas.[31] Their efforts were well rewarded and they apparently earned between Rs 150 and 200 for each show. But given that its expenses were much higher, the troupe found itself in debt.[32] This was not quite the disaster it might have been as Bhave was soon on good terms with wealthy and important men like Shankarseth, Sir Jamsethji, and Bhau Daji, all of whom were keenly interested in the Bombay theatre scene. He even accompanied them to see a 'European' natak at the Grant Road Theatre, which had been the main contemporary venue of the Bombay stage since its opening on 10 February 1846. Impressed by the arrangements, sets, and curtains, he was most keen for his group to perform there.[33] But a free slot was not available and, as the rent was too high, the group decided to perform instead at the house of the noted seth of the shimpi community,[34] Atmaram Shimpi. This was the first publicly reported performance in the capital, and was very well attended.[35] Soon after, through the efforts of his influential friends, Bhave's troupe performed for the first time at the Grant Road Theatre on 9 March 1853. An editorial of the Bombay Times proclaimed these plays to be 'of genuine native origin from the early classic drama of Hindoostan', and promised that outlines of the play had been prepared in English for those who could not follow the dialogues.[36] However, the turnout was meagre,[37] probably because theatre going was still not quite in vogue among Marathi-speaking sections. Nevertheless, the company performed five more times at the Grant Road Theatre, the last of which was on 8 April 1853.

Bhave was sufficiently encouraged by this experience to repeat the exercise the following year. His troupe was again in Bombay in 1853-54. This time, mindful of the composite audience in Bombay, the troupe decided to put up a new play, Gopichandnatak[38] in Hindustani for their performance at the Grant Road Theatre. A few rehearsals were carried out, during which the English theatre manager decided on appropriate curtains, scenes, and props to be used in the show. The idea paid off; apparently, the sale of tickets amounted to Rs. 1800.[39] The performance was an immense success, and was attended by the governor, several officials, and rich Parsis and traders. The governor and his retinue visited Bhave backstage after the show.[40] In the days after this show, Bhave and his troupe were showered with cash and lavish gifts by Gujarati seths, often at the time of the traditional arati performed at the end of these shows. These aratis routinely resulted in cash-gifts of about Rs 350–400, but interestingly, on one occasion at the end of a play depicting the victory of Ram, it seems the collections amounted to close to a thousand rupees![41] There is evidence to suggest that the famous surgeon and well-known public figure, Bhau Daji Lad,[42] managed several of the arrangements, including the printing of posters, handbills, and tickets for the troupe's performances during this trip to Bombay.[43]

Vishnudas Bhave took his troupe on at least two more tours, replacing some actors who had left with new members, whom he had to train afresh.[44] Besides the above-mentioned list, a second list with more than fifty names of actors with whom Bhave worked during these years is available.[45] In 1855 some of his leading actors broke away to form their own touring companies.[46] Finding it increasingly difficult to manage his troupe, Bhave eventually retired from his career as a theatre-man around 1862.[47] It seems at this juncture Bhave was forced to disband his troupe, after which there were at least four branches calling themselves the Sanglikar Company.[48] In any case, Bhave's experience had shown that although patronage was less than steady, there was money to be made in the professional theatre, provided that the group could resolve issues of control and organization, especially the problem of sharing profits. Bhave's style as director-manager-troupe-owner was exceedingly authoritarian and inflexible. For example, the terms of an agreement dated 31 January 1862 between Bhave and a new recruit included a bond that the latter should stay with the

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troupe for ten years, failing which he would have to pay Bhave a sum of hundred rupees.[49] For this period, the new entrant had to pledge unswerving and unquestioning loyalty and a willingness to travel wherever required. Furthermore, the terms included a strict undertaking that the member would not impart any training that he had received to anyone else; that he would not complain about roles offered, or any other matter; that all gifts and cash received in lieu of performance would be surrendered to the owner and that he would make no attempt to instigate disharmony among members! This agreement belongs to the last phase of Bhave's career in the theatre, and one may be tempted to think it is more indicative of his embittered mood at that point, than to his general demeanour towards his troupe. However, there are several other receipts that Bhave collected from troupe members at the end of earlier tours, which show that they unequivocally acceded that payments had been in accordance with the initial bond, in which they had agreed not to oppose any of Bhave's decisions.[50] Such agreements seem to have been characteristic of Bhave's approach to curbing dissidence in his troupe, an aim that he was clearly unsuccessful in realizing!

Even by the time Bhave's theatre career ended, several natakmandalis had sprung up, usually identifying themselves by the place to which most of the members belonged. Examples included the Altekar Company, the Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali, the Punekar Natakkarmandali, Tasgaonkar Natakmandali, the Kolhapurkar Natakmandali, the Sanglikar Hindu

Left: costumes of the 'stree party' (heroines) and right: the 'dev party' (gods) in a pauranik khel/natak.

The early Marathi touring companies showed remarkable enterprise and astuteness in exploring remunerative and commercial

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Natakmandali, and even some all-women troupes (managed, alas, by men).[51] Like these later well-known theatre companies (except for the women's troupes) that emerged, Bhave's troupe was predominantly comprised of brahmins. Surely this dominance is significant in the light of the already noted appropriation of non-elite cultural and performative forms by brahmin shahirs and pant kavis during the Peshwa period, and no doubt, it reinforced upper-caste control of other arenas of cultural production within colonial society.

ENTERPRISE AND INNOVATION IN THE MARATHI THEATRE

Two other performative forms gained prominence on the Marathi stage of this period: the farce and the peculiarly termed 'bookish' natak. Neither figured in the repertoire of Bhave's troupe, but along with the pauranik khel, these two forms were an important part of the fare offered by the later natakmandalis. Of the two, the Marathi farce emerged before the 'bookish' natak, originating as a non-mythic comic interlude usually performed at the end of the main pauranik khel.

The farce as a theatrical form was first popularized in the colonial setting by English amateur groups that emerged in Bombay, Pune, and other cantonment towns such as Belgaum.[52] Working with a meagre availability of scripts and histrionic talent, especially for playing female parts, and catering to a limited audience of army officials and their families, these amateurs found it difficult to embark on full-length productions. Frequently, they resorted to presenting songs, popular airs, comic interludes, parodies and farces: a routine double-bill of two farces or a melodrama combined with a farce, was the most common fare on offer.[53] However, as the Bombay newspaper editors had realized by the 1840s, a colonial theatre could hope to survive only by wooing native patrons and cultivating an audience that included local communities.[54] Such efforts to promote theatre by the English press were attacked in the missionary press, even as the latter's acknowledgement that the theatre was 'better attended than the House of God' was a sure sign of the growing popularity of theatre.[55] By the late 1840s, unlike its predecessor, the Bombay Amateur Theatre (1776-1835), the Grant Road Theatre—built on land donated by Jagannath Shankarseth and situated in the native town—was no longer the exclusive haunt of the 'high' colonial establishment and a few of their wealthy native trading associates. Comprising a motley crowd of sailors, soldiers, merchants, and 'natives', the composition of audiences clearly encouraged the urge to satirize the many ironies and paradoxes of colonial society.[56] It was not long before the farce was vernacularized and made its way into Marathi stage practice.

Records suggest that the Amarchandwadikar Hindu Natakmandali was the earliest Marathi company to adopt this practice of scheduling a double-bill that included a farce after the main performance. Their performance of a pauranik akhyana, Krishnajanam, on 19 January 1856 at the Grant Road Theatre was followed by a 'new, instructive and humorous' farce, presumably in Marathi.[57] Many other companies followed suit, appending farces that often incorporated several dialects, evidently in the effort to broaden its appeal to a multi-lingual audience. Soon, it was apparent that the term 'farce' was being used to denote any dramatic performance that did not fit into the category of pauranik khel, or alternatively, simply just followed one. 'Farce' became the general term for all plays with a non-mythic, secular content, not composed in verse.[58] These performances were often put up without the help of any written text, but that changed too. Jhansiche raniche farce, appended to the main text by the authors of Manholadak puradheeshwari laxmibaihiche natak, published in 1870, was the first printed farce using Marathi.[59] Sometimes, a farce could be a re-working of a 'bookish' play, and could even constitute a full-length performance in itself. One such was Joglekar's Narayan rao peshwey yanche mrityuncha farce, replete with spectacular 'trick' scenes, and based on Vireshwar Chatre's Narayan peshwe yanche natak, published in 1871.[60] Other popular farces included More L.L.B.

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Prahasan, Tipu sultancha farce, and Basundicha farce. Though some of these were often critical of the reformist intelligentsia, they contain valuable realistic details about the Marathi stage and social life. The genre even gave rise to a small but significant number of publishers who tried to capitalize on its popularity by printing cheap editions based on performances, and sometimes even claiming authorship of these texts![61] Given its origins in the pre-print form and alleged proximity to the humorous elements in the 'lowly' tamasha, the farce did not meet with the approval of the emerging intelligentsia. In his 'Note on the Growth of Marathi Literature' in 1898, M. G. Ranade duly acknowledged the importance of the farce and its contribution to Marathi drama.[62]

Yet, the 'bookish' natak, perhaps, represented the most significant innovation of the period, as they were the first 'original' printed texts in the history of Marathi drama. They derived their name from the fact that they were produced from pre-scripted, printed texts, authored by colonial-educated intellectuals in a deliberate attempt to create a 'mature', 'refined' and appropriately 'useful' dramatic literature in the vernacular. The first of the 'bookish' plays to be published was Kirtane's Thorale madhavrao peshwe. It made quite an impact when it was published in 1861,[63] and was almost immediately produced for the stage in 1862 by the Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali. Simultaneously, there were attempts at rendering Sanskrit and English plays in printed form in Marathi.[64] The credit for first establishing the form of the 'bookish' natak as part of Marathi theatrical practice belongs squarely to this troupe, pointing not only to the degree of enterprise shown by these natakmandalis, but also to their central role in placing the work of the newly educated class in the performative arena and giving it a public visibility. The 'bookish' natak came to represent the acme of a reformed theatrical practice, against which the other varieties, the pauranik khel and the farce were castigated as unsophisticated, slovenly, and even vulgar.[65] Despite the small size of reading audiences, the printed text came to be regarded as the norm against which all literary and performative forms were assessed. The new variety impacted on the form of the pauranik khel too; the Sutradhar's role in developing the plot was gradually curtailed, to be replaced by more elaborate dialogues. Whereas the printed forms of Bhave's akhyanas contain only the Sutradhar's verses with notes on the accompanying music, records show that from the 1860s, the later better-known troupes also maintained separate systematic manuscripts or natakpustikas containing dialogues to be spoken by actors. Clearly this was thought to aid the training of actors and improve production standards.[66] For instance, notebooks belonging to the Altekar company contain forty-four akhyanas, and a further list of thirty-five akhyanas with sections in Hindustani.[67] Similar evidence has also been found about the Nutan Sanglikarmandali, which made a name—and money—for itself through extensive tours outside the Marathi-speaking areas. Not surprisingly, the scripts found in the company's records also included thirty-two plays in Hindustani. Nevertheless, given the fluid circumstances, it seems natakmandalis tended to be quite flexible in drawing upon these varieties for their programmes, although there is room to suggest that some degree of 'specialization' was also adopted. While the pauranik khel was a feature of the repertoires of all the well-known companies of the period, it seems the celebrated Ichalkaranjikar Mandali focused mainly on staging the 'bookish' plays and Babajishastri Datar's akhyanas, whereas the successful Altekar Natakmandali built its reputation entirely around its productions of the farce and the pauranik khel, showing no inclination to venture into the 'bookish' natak.[68] In fact the company could boast of one of the earliest 'stars', if the special mention of the name of their comic actor, Gopal Date, on the publicity posters for their show at Elphinstone Theatre on 9 August 1877, is anything to go by.[69]

Of the touring companies that emerged after Bhave, the Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali and the Altekar Mandali count among the most successful. Their

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longevity and success was clearly an outcome of their sense of enterprise and ability to evolve suitable organizational practices.[70] The Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali was established by two brothers, Chimanbhat and Narayanbhat, most probably around 1850, with the help of a learned Vedic scholar, well versed in composition and music, Babaji Shastri Datar from Ichalkaranji.[71] Jolted by the declining patronage for Vedic learning, it seems, brahmin groups were quite willing to seek more unorthodox professional avenues for their literate skills. The Ichalkaranjikar company prospered on account of the dynamism of the astute Raghoba Apte, who took over as manager a few years after it came into being. It was under Raghoba's stewardship that the company diversified its traditional repertoire when it heard about Kirtane's play, probably while on a tour to Pune in May 1862.[72] They followed this by staging Kirtane's second play, Jaipal, soon after it was published in 1865. Next came Mahadevshastri's rendering of Othello. As these were unfamiliar narratives, handbills, with details of the various acts and the plot were distributed before the performance.[73] The Mandali's most successful 'bookish' productions were based on scripts that the troupe picked up during their tour of Varhad in 1877, namely Mahajani's Tara natak, a version of Shakespeare's Cymbeline and Bajaba Pradhan's Bhrantikrut chamatkar, based on The Comedy of Errors.[74] The company continued to perform traditional plays, even as they consolidated their links with the bureaucratic-professional elite emerging in Pune and other urban centres. Besides taking care to collect testimonials from highly placed government officials and native professionals, the troupe evidently valued the letters of recommendation it secured from Maratha elites and rulers of the princely states. In addition to the above-mentioned natakpustikas, the records that the troupe deposited with a sahukar included a 'certificate' dated 31 March 1878 from the Patwardhans of Kurundwad State, praising the troupe's calibre in performing the recently translated plays from English and Sanskrit.[75] A second, more elaborate testimonial, dated 28 May 1880 and signed by several highly placed officials of Baroda state, mentions several successful productions staged by the company and testifies to its role in establishing an improved taste and refined organizational practice.[76] The pragmatic dynamism that the company brought to Marathi theatre was also borne out in its internal organization. An agreement dated 24 March 1884, and signed by twenty members, gives details of the arrangements that the company followed while on tour.[77] A muktiyar panch (executive committee) of seven members was responsible for allotting work, recruiting or dismissing members if required and other decisions. All problems and conflicts were to be referred to the panch. One of the committee members was specifically entrusted with the keeping of accounts, which would be examined by the committee on a weekly basis. A specific member of the panch could alone approve and seek loans on behalf of the troupe. Similarly, another member was entrusted with returning the company properties and earnings, with a full list, to one Babasaheb Ranade of Ichalkaranji for safekeeping at the end of the tour. All earnings would be shared on the troupe's return, after the settling of any loans taken in connection with the tour. None of the members of the committee or the troupe could leave before the tour was complete, unless it was with the permission of the panch. Decisions about sharing profits would be taken by the panch only on the troupe's return, and any conflicts were to be settled by a majority vote. The agreement was deposited with the troupe's sahukar, Babasaheb Ranade, after a copy had been made for circulation among members. The difference with the terms that Vishnudas Bhave sought from his members is only too obvious, amply demonstrating that within a few decades, the natakmandalis had learnt to adapt to the changed patterns of patronage and demands of the new circumstances.

I am grateful to the organizers of the conference on 'Audiences, Patrons and Performers in the Performing Arts of Asia' held in Leiden in August 2000, and all the participants of the panel on

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'Hybrid-Popular Theatres in Asia', where an earlier version of this paper was presented. Special thanks are due to Hanne de Bruin for support, and to Kathryn Hansen for comments on an earlier draft. I would also like to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance from the Tata Trust, which made it possible for me to participate in the Leiden conference. The usual disclaimers apply.

Notes

1 There exists a rich literature on the impact of print on Western literary traditions and cultural practices. See for example, Febevre and Martin 1976; Chartier 1994 and 1988; Darnton 1979 and 1990; Eisenstein 1979. For work on the colonial context that analyses the impact of print and English upon pre-existing cultural norms and practices in different parts of the subcontinent, see cf. McDonald 1968; Cohn 1994; Chatterjee 1995; Naregal 2001).

2 There is some controversy about the date and place of Annasaheb Kirloskar's debut as dramatist and director. The first of his plays to be staged was Shankardigvijay, based on the life of Shankaracharya, which was performed by the Kolhapurkar Chittchakshuchamatakar Mandali in Belgaum. Some literary historians have argued that his troupe, called the Bharatshastrotejak Belgaonkar Mandali, staged Shakuntal in Belgaum in September 1875 before moving to Pune in 1878, where he soon established himself as a successful theatre personality. See for example, Marathe 1979. It is more common for the performance of Sangeet Shakuntal in the Anandobhav Theatre in Pune on 31 October 1880 to be taken as Kirloskar's debut and the birth of the Marathi sangeet natak. The text of Sangeet Shakuntal was published in 1881.
For a biography of Balwant Pandurang alias Annasaheb Kirloskar (1843-85), see Majumdar 1904.

3 Mazumdar 1909, 1.

4 For a detailed discussion on pre-colonial textual hierarchies, literate practices, and patronage, see Naregal 2000, 259-89.

5 The lavani and tamasha were popular performative art forms that combined music, song, and narrative and were mainly noted for their depiction of amorous themes, often combined with a sharp commentary on social relations.
Though lavani and shahiri were displaced by the loss of patronage and the new cultural norms which emerged with the onset of colonial rule, these older forms inevitably influenced the incipient forms of theatrical practice, especially the popular pauranik khel and the later sangeet natak. Although the lavani-tamasha has many regional variations, its modern core is thought to consist of the gan (Ganpati prayer), gavlan (songs based on the Radha-Krishna story), sangeet bari, vag (a dramatic interlude), rangbazi (humorous sketch), and bhedik lavani (meditative, spiritual composition). Many of these features appeared in the mid-nineteenth century: the witty dialogue in the form of vag, for instance, is said to have been an early innovation introduced by Babaji Mang and Umaji Sawlajkar in response to the new theatrical forms. Later practitioners like Bhau Phakkad, Kisan Phaguji Bansode, Amarshaikh, and Annabhau Sathe used the lavani tradition and its later variant, the Ambedkari jalsa, with great effect to mobilize support for social and political causes.
For an excellent account of the antecedents of several North Indian popular theatres such as khyal, mach, and svang in the popular forms from Maharashtra, such as lavani and the turra-kalagi, see especially the chapter 'Landscape of Pre-Modern Performance' in Hansen 1993, 56-85.

6 A form of the heroic ballad meant to commemorate the exploits of Maratha warriors and their leaders on the battlefield through recitation and performance. The genesis of the form can be traced to earlier times, but it gained a new impetus in the work of shahir poets of the eighteenth century, the best known among them being Ramjoshi

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(1762-1812), Prabhakar (c. 1755-1843), Anantphandi (1774-1819?), Parshuram (1754-1844), Honaji Bala, and Saganbhau.

7 Intended either as a report on famous Maratha military expeditions or to provide a genealogical account of Maratha heroes, the bakhars were prose narratives that shared the commemorative function of the povada. Important examples include the Sabhasadi bakhar, based on the life of Shivaji and composed in 1697; or the Panipatchi bakhar and the Bhausahebanchi kaifiyat, both accounts of the infamous Maratha defeat at Panipat in 1761.

8 See note 4.

9 Records show that manuscripts of the plays of Jagannathkavi, which depicted the love life of the gods Vishnu and Shankar, were being exchanged between two sections of the Maratha camps, headed by Gopalrao Patwardhan of Miraj and Naro Shankar Rajbahadur respectively. See correspondence between the two sardars in Sardesai 1934, Selections from the Peshwa Daftar (Bombay) 45, quoted in Bhave 1976, 81.

10 For a discussion of one Shahajiraje's Telugu plays, Satidanashuramu, see Subrahmanyam 1998, 84-91.

11 See Shende 1986, 65-70. It would be interesting to investigate affinities and dissimilarities in the treatment of narratives such as Shakuntal or Prabodh chandrodaya natak that are common to the dramatic literature produced at Thanjavur and the later nineteenth-century compositions.

12 See Bhave 1983, 290-1. Fifty-two of Bhave's akhyanas, including the above-mentioned Natykavitasangraha, were published in book form in Pune in 1885, about thirteen years after his career as dramatist and troupe manager ended.

13 See Bhave 1943, 10-6.

14 This grant apparently yielded an annual revenue of approximately twenty-five lakh of rupees to the Patwardhans, in exchange for the maintenance of eight thousand horsemen. See Limaye 1955, 298.

15 He refused to maintain a cavalry force for the British government. The ensuing negotiations saw him cede the Hubli taluka to the Company as compensation. Ibid., 299.

16 After the British take-over, it seems that the Company Government made a special effort to cultivate Chintamanrao's loyalty. Elphinstone, the first governor, presented the sardar with a copy of the Panchopkhyan, the first Marathi book printed in Mumbai. In turn, Chintamanrao reciprocated by contributing generously to Elphinstone's farewell subscription fund. Chintamanrao was also on cordial terms with Elphinstone's successor, John Malcolm. He even helped put down resistance to the consolidation of British rule, for instance, in Kittur in 1830 and also the revolt of Samangad in Kolhapur State in 1844. The Court of Directors rewarded him with a valuable sword, bestowed with great pomp by the Political Agent at a military ceremony in Belgaum in November 1846. See Parasnis 1917.

17 The royal diaries for the Sangli court are available for the period from 18 December 1846 until soon after Chintamanrao's death in July 1851. Although Bhave's first experiments pre-date this period, these diaries offer a good record of routine and recreational activities typically followed at the Sangli court. See 'Aitihasik Sankirn Sahitya', Parts 11 and 12 in Bharat Itihas Samshodak Mandal Trimasik 1967 and 1970.

18 See Banahatti 1957, 29.

19 See Bhave 1983, 290.

20 It must be remembered that this retrospective autobiographical account was composed several years after his career as a theatre man had ended, and Bhave's use of the term 'natak' could have been influenced by its prevalence at the later time. See note 66.

21 The matter was resolved when Appasaheb called for a rival sabha that dismissed this

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ruling, by citing several precedents. See Bhave 1983, 291.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 292.

24 Bhave 1943, 65.

25 Ibid., 66.

26 See receipt dated 29 May 1853 from a troupe member acceding to the distribution of profits from the recently concluded Pune-Bombay tour, printed in Banahatti 1957, 382 (Appendix 6).

27 It seems Bhave had secured warm references from the Sangli samsthan. The troupe was taken through the city in a ceremonial procession and publicly honoured. The troupe played scenes from Ravana vadh and Sulochana sati, and the posters that went up on walls to advertise the shows created as much of a stir as the shows themselves. The performance took place at one of the elite wadas of Satara. The local paper reviewed the occasion favourably. We learn that the troupe was handsomely attired, and looked quite prosperous. These observations belong to an important first-hand, contemporary account that records shifts in the early Marathi theatre, though it was first published many years later by the Rangbhumi Press in 1913. See Malshe 1975, 3-5.

28 Bhave 1943, 66.

29 Krishnashastri Chiplunkar (1824-76), a leading intellectual and scholar of his time, was born in Nasik into a Chitpavan brahmin family, but grew up in Pune. A well-known Sanskrit scholar, Krishnashastri joined the Pune Sanskrit College, and was appointed professor of Marathi when the College was re-organized in the 1840s. He composed several Marathi prose texts, including a version of Mill's work on political economy, The Arabian Nights, and a biography of Socrates. He contributed to the leading Marathi weekly published in Pune, Dnyanprakash, besides editing the anti-missionary paper, Vicharlehari, started in 1852 and later, the Shalapatrak, published by the Education Department. Krishnashastri was associated with the Dakshina Prize Committee, but he also apparently supported Phule's initiatives in starting schools for lower-caste communities. For a biographical account on Krishnashastri Chiplunkar, see Appendix 2, 'Krishnashastri Chiplunkaryanche Charitra' in Pandit 1961, 118-27.

30 Keshav Bhavalkar (1831-1902) was born into a poor brahmin family from the town of Junnar. Having trained as a schoolmaster at the Normal School in Bombay, Bhavalkar was selected to teach in the Pune English School by Dadoba Pandurang, the superintendent of Native Schools. He was entrusted with the responsibility of trying to form a branch of the anti-caste organization, Paramhansa Mandali, in Pune. Bhavalkar taught in the Government English School in Pune during the years 1849-60 and played a leading part in many of the debates of the time. See Pandit 1961.

31 Bhave 1943, 69.

32 Bhave 1983, 292.

33 Ibid.

34 The shimpis (tailors) were a well-off community with a long history of residence in Bombay. See Malabari 1910, 493-4. By the mid-nineteenth century, some enterprising shimpis— including, in all likelihood, Atmaram—had begun to publish a weekly newspaper, Shimpihitechu, to voice the interests of the community. See the report in The Bombay Telegraph and Courier of the 20 August 1855, 'We were shown . . . the first number of the Shimpihitechu . . . The tailor caste of Western India are determined to assert their title to an important place in the community . . . These tailors speak as men, and speak with a sobriety and dignity upon matters of permanent interest', quoted in Lele 1964, 130.

35 See report, 'The Hindoo Theatre' in The Bombay Times, dated 16 February 1853. The first part of the performance showed the episodes, Indrajitvadh and Sulochanansahgaman, followed by Ashwamedhyagna and Lavkushakhyana. The

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performance lasted from 7 pm to 2 am.

36 8 March 1853, The Bombay Times, reprinted in Banahatti 1957, 392 (Appendix 6). An advertisement in the same paper announced that the tickets would cost Rs 4 for Box, Rs 2 for Stalls, Rs 2 for Gallery and Re 1 for the pit.

37 Report entitled, 'Hindu Dramatic Performance', 11 March 1853, The Bombay Times, excerpted in Banahatti 1957, 396 (Appendix 6).

38 See Hansen 1993, 70-3 for an account of the great popularity of the narrative of the life of Raja Gopichand, especially in the svang theatre in North India and songs of the nath community—two forms that had a widespread appeal across the subcontinent, including Gujarat and Bombay.

39 See Bhave 1943, 70.

40 Apparently, the governor suggested that Bhave should consider visiting England with his troupe. Bhave was flattered, but set the thought aside on account of the traditional Hindu injunction against overseas travel.

41 See Bhave 1943, 71.

42 Bhau Daji Lad (1822-74) was born into a Saraswat brahmin family. He attended Elphinstone College and later Grant Medical College. He was one of the city's first medical graduates and set up an influential practice. He had close links with Jagannath Shankarseth and played an important role in setting up the Bombay Association. He was keenly interested in music and theatre. Having invested heavily in the cotton boom of the 1860s, Bhau Daji suffered serious financial setbacks when the market collapsed in 1865.

43 See letter, dated 15 March 1854, from Bhau Daji to Vishnu Bhave, after the troupe's return to Sangli, giving details of printing and other expenses, reprinted Banahatti 1957, 383 (Appendix 6).

44 There was a serious split in the group in 1855, around the time when the company usually set out on a tour. Although there are enthusiastic reports in the Dnyanprakash that speak of a Sanglikar Mandali performing in Pune in January 1856 and in the period September to November 1859, we cannot be certain if these refer to Bhave's troupe or to one of the breakaway groups.

In 1860, the group visited Shahpur and Belgaum, and probably went further south, and in February 1862, he took the troupe to Pune and Bombay for the last time. See Banahatti 1957, 109-13 (Appendix 6).

45 See Bhave 1943, 129-31 (Appendix).

46 See petition from Vishnudas to the Sangli State, dated 7 September 1855, listing the names of fourteen members of his troupe, who were proposing to set off on an independent tour without consulting him. Bhave's letter urges immediate intervention to prevent them from setting out. See Banahatti 1957, 385 (Appendix 6).

47 However, at least for some time, he seems to have nurtured the hope of being able to gather together a sufficiently large troupe to begin touring again. See letter from one Sadashiv, probably an ex-member of Bhave's troupe, sent from Konkan to Sangli, sometime in 1865. Sadashiv, politely, but firmly, rejects Bhave's suggestion that the former ought to break away from his present troupe and return to Sangli, bringing with him three or four young boys. Reprinted in Banahatti 1957, 183.

But even after his touring company closed down, he remained active, trying his hand at many things, including puppet theatre, architecture, machine design, and designing irrigation works. See Bhave 1943, 70-81 and 143 (Appendix). Vishnudas Bhave died of plague on 10 August 1909.

48 See Banahatti 1957, 182.

49 Ibid., 387-8 (Appendix 6).

50 Ibid., 381-3.

51 See Adarkar 1991, WS-87-90.

52 For an excellent account of the English stage in Bombay and its impact, see Mehta

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1960. J. Stocqueler, who alternated between journalistic and theatrical pursuits, has written avidly about the early English stage in nineteenth-century Calcutta and Bombay, see his Memoirs of a Journalist, Edinburgh, 1873.

53 Mehta 1960, 21 and 73.

54 Mr. Crockett, who acquired the Bombay Gazette in 1840, was determined to make the need for a theatre in Bombay a lively issue in his paper. Realizing that the 'native improvement' argument was most likely to strike a positive chord with the administration, he launched a concerted campaign to enlist the support of the 'great millionaires of Bombay' towards this end. See Bombay Gazette, 8 July 1840. Soon after, a petition was submitted to the government, signed by Shankarseth, Framji Cowasji and 453 others that the money derived from the sale of the Amateur Theatre be applied to erecting a new venue. Eventually, this resulted in the Grant Road Theatre. See Mehta 1960, 107 and Appendix 8.

55 Oriental Christian Spectator 17, 1846, 74, quoted in Mehta 1960, 117.

56 A report in the Oriental News commented that life in the Presidency provided ample materials for farce, quoted in Mehta 1960, 143. The local variety of pidgin English, the share mania of the 1860s, the frenzied reclamation schemes, scenes witnessed in the police courts, the antics of the newly educated class, were some of the themes reflected in the farces of the time.

57 A report in the Bombay weekly paper, Vartmandeepika, of 19 January 1856 advertising the performance gave details of the akhyan, the main attraction scheduled for that evening. It promised that in addition, after an interval of twenty minutes, a 'new and excellent' farce would definitely follow. No further details are mentioned. See Banahatti 1957, 414-416 (Appendix 9).

58 For a list of well-known Marathi farces of this period, see Kulkarni 1987.

59 'Prastavana', in Kulkarni 1987, 16-7.

60 Ibid., 21.

61 Ibid., 18.

62 Ranade 1902, 101.

63 For Kirtane's biography and the text of his best-known plays, see Kirtane and Dev 1927.

64 The translations of classical Sanskrit drama into Marathi had commenced under the patronage of Dakshina Prize Committee in Pune College. Bhaskar Palande's rendering of Kalidas' Vikram Urvashi had been serialized in the Mumbai Dnyanprasarak in 1854. Parashurampant Godbole's Venisamhar appeared in 1857, followed by Krishnashastri Rajawade's Malatimadhav in 1861. The best-known of the early published adaptations from English included Mahadev Govind Shastri Kolhatkar's rendering of Othello (same title, 1867); Kashinath Natu's Vijaysingh (1872), based on Shakespeare's Julius Caesar; Babaji Pradhan's translation of The Comedy of Errors as Bhrantikrit chamatkar (1878), and Vishnu Moreshwar's acclaimed rendering of Cymbeline as Tara natak (1879). The last two figure among the most successful productions of the Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali.

65 By the 1860s, doubts about the worth of Bhave's plays were being expressed in the columns of the Dnyanprakash, the liberal, upper-caste weekly published from Pune. See report in Dnyanprakash of 6 May 1862, which disparagingly describes Bhave's plays as one among the many dashavatari tamashas. It suggests that many of the plays currently on offer hardly deserved the elevated term of 'natak', adding that this opinion would indeed be corroborated by anyone who was acquainted with Sanskrit or English drama. Any popularity that Bhave's plays may have enjoyed is attributed to the talented actors he had, a standard of which the troupe could no longer boast.
The shift from the enthusiastic praise lavished on the troupe's performances between September and November 1859 in Pune is quite apparent.

66 Manuscript records maintained by the Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali, and deposited for safekeeping along with their profits with their sahukar, contain the texts of at least thirty-five of the akhyanas composed by Babaji Datar between 1860-1874. See Banahatti 1957, 169-71.

67 Ibid., 236

68 Ibid., 132-71 and 235-6. Although a renowned Vedic scholar, Datar's akhyanas made good use of farcical humour and comic interludes. It seems that Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali staged at least a few popular farces, including Bandarbadshahcha farce in Urdu and Damajipantancha farce. See Malshe 1986, 3.

69 See Banahatti 1957, 423 (Appendix 11).

70 Started in 1850, the Ichalkaranjikar Natakmandali lasted till about 1892, whereas the Altekar Mandali was established around 1869 and survived till about 1892. See Banahatti 1957, 139 and 231-3.

71 See above.

72 Reports in the Dnyanprakash, cited by Banahatti 1957, 200.

73 Malshe 1975, 23.

74 Banahatti 1957, 208.

75 Ibid., 417 (Appendix 10).

76 Ibid., 417-9.

77 Ibid., 433-7 (Appendix 13).

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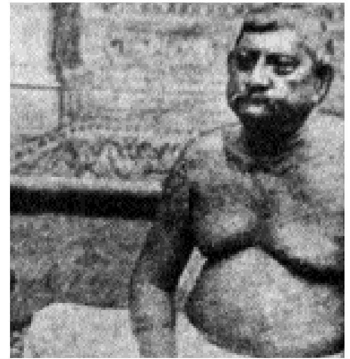
S u d i p t o

From colonial jatra to native theatre:
Hybrid aesthetics of nineteenth century Bengali



> Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different.... [M]imesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other. Creating stability from this instability is no mean task, yet all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.
>
> —Michael Taussig[1]

Hybridity registers difference and sameness, mimesis and alterity at one and the same stroke, which makes

What follows in this article is part of a much larger book project about the interface between imperialism and the Western-style, nineteenth-century Bengali theatre in colonial India—The Colonial Stage(d): Hybridity, Woman, and the Nation. Conceived as a history as well as an analytic text, this book is both a photographic and an interpretative lens. It is a study of the emergence of a national imaginary in the formation of cultural identity among the intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Bengal as reflected in their theatrical activities. In the execution of the project, I find myself in the unenviable yet intriguing situation of sharing with myself both the chair and the couch, being both the confiding patient and the prying analyst. Consequently, the progress of the book, while being linear and chronological in tracing the history moves like a train journey. And the train stops at various stations, at various given moments, during the excursion, for different intervals of time.

Given the constraints of a short article, I have chosen for this occasion one such stop on the journey, a site where the politics of imperialism, race,

Sudipto Chatterjee is a theatre director-performer-scholar and playwright, originally from Calcutta, India. He is currently Assistant Professor of Drama at Tufts University, Boston. His book The Colonial Stage(d) is soon to be

and cultural confrontation/reconciliation imbricate into the realm of theatrical mimesis. The operative notion here is that of hybridity. Hybridity registers difference and sameness, mimesis and alterity at one and the same stroke, which makes generalized theorizing about hybridity an exacting project. The creative hybridity of Western-style Bengali theatre, therefore, has to be seen against the backdrop of hybridity of the native intelligentsia whose theatre is being studied. A reckoning with this performance history, thus, would necessarily cross over into a study of the larger performance of colonial history. The big picture that helped define the emergent Western-style Bengali theatre was what has arguably been termed as the Bengal 'Renaissance' of the nineteenth century. This so-called 'renaissance' among the intelligentsia involved not only a question of cultural 'regeneration' but an idea of racial (and thereafter national) self-fashioning as well. What emerges from this encounter is a view of the larger mise en scène, the mise en (colonial) scène: Theatre of the Bengal Renaissance.

This emergent Bengali bourgeois theatre was a performance of the desires and ambitions of the class itself. It was necessarily a dramatization of the very same issues and concerns that touched and, then, represented their socio-cultural and political life. It also dramatized the conflictual, uneasy racial consanguinity of the hybrid and the highbred. The lighter skinned and/or the urban-educated Bengali community imagined itself to be of the same Aryan lineage as the colonizing British. The class wished for itself an imagined 'high breed', living in negation of the 'hybrid' reality that actually formed it. It is from this that the necessity to situate hybridity as a process emerged. A process that would negate itself even while accommodating, under the protective rhetoric of reclamation, renaissance, racial oneness, and purity. The Bengali babu—the moneyed member of the intelligentsia or 'privilegentsia'—would be Bengali and not-Bengali at the same time. We see the same happening in the realm of the theatre. The emergent Western-style hybridized theatre, too, had to be necessarily circumscribed within the framework of re-discovery, correction, and the invention of a form compatible with the colonial times. Theatre became, like many other cultural activities, a metaphor for the larger operation of negotiating the native with the colonial sensibility. Bengali theatre, too, was Bengali and not-Bengali at the same time. But it was not an open-and-shut case, since performance behoves embodiment and physical enactment on the part of the performer, just as it engages the senses of the audience—viewing, hearing, reacting palpably. This kinetic relationship established in the performance space necessitated hybridity to confront itself in the physically tangible terms of representation-within-a-representation, a play-within-a-play in the bigger mise en scène of the colonial empire, on the stages of history. The study of Bengali theatre, thus, helps us see the tensions in the project of colonization itself.

Thomas Babbington Macaulay, the early nineteenth-century colonial lawgiver, had talked about acculturating the Indians as mimic-men, creating a thousand Englands in the empire (De Bary 1958). Western-style Bengali theatre was a direct response to such ideas. In it the educated colonial subjects of the Empire had produced an indigenous, potentially anti-colonial cultural form out of mimicry. This is what Homi Bhabha has termed as the 'menace' of hybrid mimicry that complies and combats at one and the same time (Bhabha 1986,125-33).

The hybridity of the mise en scène of Bengali Renaissance, thus, was a site for negotiations and tacit arrangements between the disciplining rule of the empire and the desiring gaze of the native. It moved rapidly towards a self-fashioning of the elite and theatre had become its emblem. This rapid move forward necessitated for the Western-style theatre of the Bengali babus to relocate itself to a more democratic site—the public theatre. This allowed them to embrace a wider audience and play out the larger desires of a wider sector of the population. The expansion of Bengali theatre occurred both internally and externally. Internally, it was negotiating and situating its

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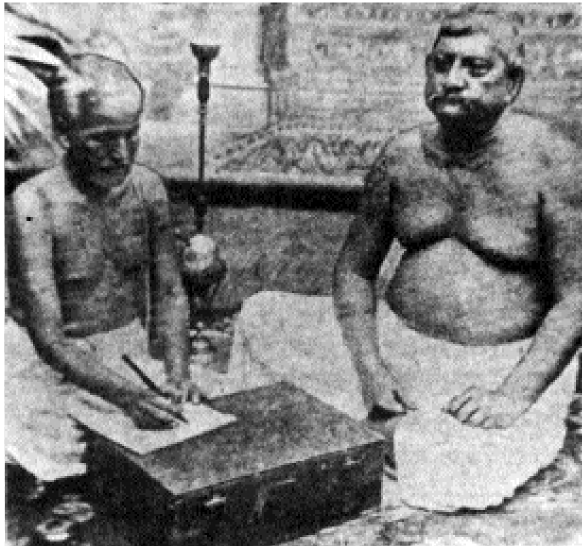
hybrid formativity within the liminal space of colonial standards and pre-existing native performance aesthetics. Externally, it was reaching out to a growing audience that was quickly cutting across classes, tastes, and desires. And in this democratic popular formation and formulation it was negotiating with hybridity at several levels that, Robert Young warns us, cannot be isolated from notions of race and miscegenation (Young 1995). Hence, problematizing the notion further, I also propose that it is impossible to see the full scope of hybridity without examining its relationship with mimicry and mimesis in being what Homi Bhabha has termed 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1986, 126). Mimesis or mimicry, like hybridity, is also a social function that simultaneously registers sameness and alterity, functioning more or less like a subset within hybridity. It performs the apparently impossible task of realizing sameness in difference by producing an excess that invariably follows mimesis, because the imitation of a human action cannot be an exact copy of the original, but always adds more by adding its own elements to it. In other words, it is not the original it portends to simulate but nonetheless relies for its very life on a continual reference to it in order to, as Michael Taussig puts it, 'maintain . . . sameness through alterity.' It is one of my endeavours to situate colonial hybridity in the excess or alterity produced by mimesis, as a site both of supplication and resistance, of Other as well as Self.

The object of this article will be to examine the formulating ingredients of the hybridity in the mimetic activity of nineteenth-century Bengali theatre. Specifically, I will look at the interaction between the popular native performance genre of the jatra in relation to the proscenium, Western-style praxis of the Bengali public theatre in the nineteenth century. With the arrival of the democratized public theatre in 1872, Bengali theatre journeyed away from the clutches of the babus to the more democratic level of the ticketed theatre which soon became professional under the leadership of the likes of Girish Chandra Ghosh.[2] What was till then a babu affair now was not an exclusive territory of the urban rich, but also that of the middle-class and expanding beyond. Alongside babu culture there were other performative traditions informing Bengali theatre. The most important among them was the jatra, a three-sided, open theatre form with audience members sitting on all three sides. The jatra performance space (rangabhumi) consisted of a square area usually covered by a canopy (sabha-mandap) covering the entire audience-performer area. This was connected by a narrow pathway (somewhat comparable to the hanamichi of kabuki or the hashigakari of noh) to the dressing room (saj ghar), which formed the back wall. The actors use the path to enter the performance space, often with great dramatic flourish. Jatra plays depended heavily on music, songs, and lyrical dialogue. The attempt was never to be realistic, but rather to respond to the myths, lores, and sentiments the masses shared and believed in. As a result, the acting was often high strung, the plays were sentimental, and the depictions of mythic figures often more true to popular sentiments than historical facts. A jatra play dealt with a very different audience and could last an entire night. Many of these elements of the jatra were abhorred by the Englishmen who saw it and this is what the babu-class came to imbibe in many respects by the end of the nineteenth century.

But the aesthetic sensibilities of the still newly rich native gentry of early nineteenth-century Calcutta, were not so different to the aesthetics of the popular performances that were the rage of the lower classes. The appropriation and adaptation of jatra came later. Even so, the British attitude towards the jatra was quite unequivocal from the beginning. An article in the Calcutta Review from early on in the nineteenth century, said of a typical jatra performance:

> It would require the pencil of a master-painter to portray the killing beauty of



Girish Ghosh, one of the first exponents of the modern Bengali stage.

> the Bengali stage. Their sooty complexions, their coal-black cheeks, their haggard eyes, their long-extended arms, their gaping mouths and their puerile attire, excite disgust. For the screeching of the night-owl, the howling of the jackals, and the barking of the dogs are harmony itself compared to their horrid yells . . .[3]

Noteworthy here are the references to complexion and anatomy. And since jatra was so despised by the British, it began to receive almost unanimous scorn from the puritanical babus, once English education had reached large sections of the intelligentsia by the middle of the nineteenth century. Compulsory English education had driven a wedge between the classes. Jatra's popularity among the lower and non-literate classes of Calcutta made it impossible for it to be acceptable to the literati. Somprak, a leading Bengali journal of Calcutta, had said the following about jatra in 1862:

> [T]his is a perversion of the ideal [theatrical forms] of the ancient times. Here there is no attention given to the differences between the appearance, costume, speech and behaviour of different characters. A man with facial hair could well play Yasodha [the mother of the god-incarnate Krishna], a fair complexioned boy could play Krishna [who is supposed to be dark], while a negro-like dark boy could very well play Radha [Krishna's lover, who is supposed to have been very fair]. The same goes with costumes. [. . .] The jatra actors know nothing about how to gesticulate while trying to express mourning, anger, or happiness. [. . .] A bunch of people in British costumes could easily appear in the middle of. . . [a popular mythological play].

Note here again the references to complexion and sub-human physical action plus their assumed inadequate representation of human emotions. Effectively, these judgements represent what Andreas Huyssen has diagnosed as modernism's 'anxiety of contamination' by mass culture (Huyssen 1988). The high culture that Orientalism had invented for the Indians conflated with nineteenth-century European aesthetic models had ordained expressions of popular culture as degenerate and licentious. They did not fit in with the emerging denotations of high Hindu culture on which the native literati had begun to pride itself. Under these circumstances, jatra could not be embraced without reconciliation. It was maladjusted to the high order of Sanskritic culture that the European Orientalist (re) discovery of India had prescribed for the native intelligentsia and that set them culturally on a par with their masters. However, the scorn was not altogether free of ambivalence (another classic hallmark of hybrid formativity); there was a consciousness that both the folk jatra and the classical

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Sanskrit theatre had similar origins. This is particularly visible in The Yatras, or the Popular Dramas of Bengal, the first English book on the form, by Nishikanta Chattopadhyay. Written in 1882, this pioneering work narrates the origin and development of the jatra based on comparisons with European folk performance traditions. In a solicitous statement early in the book, Chattopadhyay makes his position clear by marking a line of distinction between text and performance by pointing out

> . . . the interesting fact unknown to the European public that the educated classes of Bengal write and act dramas based on the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as did the Sanskrit dramatists of old, but which are, like their Sanskrit analogues, too expensive, and also too learned for the common people . . . [T]he ordinary [jatras], or the popular dramas of Bengal, are, as usual, revolting to all good tastes and sentiments, not, however, on account of the subjects they treat of (for the subjects are more or less the same, being the life of Krishna), but on account of the needless indelicacies and indecent gestures and costumes introduced by those who have the responsibility to act them . . . (Chattopadhyay 1882, 6)

The text could not go 'wrong,' since it was the same stuff that much of the Sanskrit-based babu-literature was made of. Hence, it was always already the 'performance' of it that had to be(come) reprehensible. The material itself, at least most of it, was 'right' because of its Sanskrit connections. Therefore, the 'presenters,' the 'performers' had to take the fall. The enactment was scarred, ruining what otherwise might have been an acceptable core version of the original text. The text had to be rescued and made fit for the newly emergent colonial standards.

But with the secular quality of life in Calcutta and with the traditional caste-lines fast disintegrating under the impact of colonial free enterprise, the nature of the traditional, devotional jatra itself had started to make way for more thematically generalized performances that would attract all sorts of audiences. Several professional jatra companies had emerged that found welcome consumers among the Calcutta audiences, including sections even of the babu class. This, in turn, defined popular taste and very soon secular jatra-plays became the rage of the town. The jatra companies, owned and run mostly by non-English-educated entertainers and entrepreneurs of Calcutta as well as rural areas, had little intercourse with the people involved in the theatre. But the aesthetic notions of jatra—its style of performance, the sentiments it espoused, the subjects and themes it portrayed—appealed to certain sections of the educated babu class who were not influenced by English education to the extent that they would reject jatra altogether. As a result, a large section of the babu class received these new jatra-plays well and patronized them. But the English-educated section of the babu class continued to resist and reject it vociferously, thinly veiling a deeply embedded anxiety.

In the mean time a new kind of jatra had evolved, responding to the changing tastes of the audience constituencies of the ever-burgeoning metropolitan Calcutta, made appealing by new stage devices and stock characters. A good example here would be the internal device that virtually every jatra play used as a starter: the prologue between a janitor (jamadar or methar), occasionally accompanied by his wife (the methrani), a water-seller (bhistiwala), and, a coachman (nakib) who is to drive some important noble person through the streets. The setting, consequently, was in most cases a sarkari path or state highway. The subject of the conversation, punctuated with parodic songs, was usually regarding the water-seller's refusal to work for non-payment. Even plays of very different kinds would have the same kind of prologues with slight variations. Let us look at an example from an 1880 jatra play, Sitarbanabas jatra, based on an episode from the ancient epic Ramayana. Here we have the nakib (coachman) having a conversation, in broken Hindi, with Kalua the

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janitor.

NAKIB. What now, Kalua, who will do the Master's work?
KALUA. Why me? You'll do the Master's work.
NAKIB. What, you sister-fucker! You really think I'll do that? (Beats him.)
KALUA. Ouch! What [the hell]! Why do you beat me up? What's your name?
NAKIB. My name is Bulbul Pare.
KALUA(laughs). I shit in your bhare [Bengali for clay water cup]!
NAKIB. You daughter-fucker! You making fun of me?! (Beats him)
KALUA. The bastard's beat me harsh, his hand's landed on my arse![4]

Yet, it was into this same jatra-form that Girish Ghosh and his friends, the first actors of the Bengali public theatre who steered the forming aesthetics of the Bengali stage, chose to perform when they started out. The two were very different expressive forms, marked especially by their distinctive performative circumstances rather than acting style. The proscenium stage actor who had an audience only on one side of the stage and divided his attention between two sides—his co-actor(s) and the audience—could stay in character for the most part. But the jatra actor, because of the three-sided, open performance space, had to 'show' himself to the audiences flanking the sides of the stage, in addition to reacting to his fellow performers. This prevented the jatra actor from reproducing any kind of realistic portrayal of character, thereby making the performance 'unnatural.' With the help of devices like the curtain and lights, the proscenium stage actor could 'appear' in the middle of a scene with the curtain rising or the light fading in, thus fulfilling the illusion that he had been there all along. But the jatra actor, on the other hand, had to make his entrance before a scene began in full disclosure to the audience, and even had to get up and exit after a 'stage death.' In short, the jatra form did not lend itself to stage illusion or the suspension of disbelief quite in the way in which the proscenium stage could facilitate a world of make believe. Then why was it that the pioneers of the Bengali proscenium stage chose jatra to be the mode of their first venture? Some scholars believe it was sheer economic necessity that prompted Girish and his friends to settle for jatra. The young men did not have the money to put up a Western style production with its intricate and expensive stage requirements that only the babus could provide (Chowdhury 1972, 31). Or, they may have wanted to infuse their theatre with whatever was lively and powerful in jatra—the immensely popular mythological themes, the abundance of song and dance, the declamatory style of acting that the audiences loved. At the same time, there must have been the wish to escape the control of the whimsical babus, whose sprawling mansions had no place for the riffraff of the black quarters who went to see jatra performances. Or, they may simply have wanted to attract the larger potential audience that lived beyond the world of the rich babus.

Just three years after Girish Chandra Ghosh and his friends had set up professional theatre companies, in 1875, Aryadarshan (The Aryan Vision), a leading Bengali periodical, published a long two-part article on the state of Bengali theatre. Written by an anonymous writer with the nom de plume of Shri Pu, it was a serious article that considered, legitimized, and authenticated—and thereby recommended/prescribed—Western notions of realism in theatrical representation. Shri Pu also drew a connection with the old Horatian aphorism that the theatre had to be instructive entertainment, although something similar to this effect can also be found in Bharata's Natyashastra, the ancient treatise on Sanskrit theatre. And this connection between Bharata and Horace was a happy one, indeed, for it proved yet again the great ancient connection, the glorious ancestral link between races that, by an ignorable quirk of history, were now related as master and slave. This is a good illustration of how Orientalist discoveries of the Indian past were being digested by the Bengali literati and accommodated with concomitant reverence and subversion, their contradictions notwithstanding, within a rationalization of British rule in India.[5] In the rest of his

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manifesto Shri Pu, prescribes Coleridge's Romantic notion of the 'willing suspension of disbelief' and the creation of stage illusion, the business of realism. In Shri Pu's writing we can read a neo-Augustan/early Romantic sensibility expressed as a manifesto for illusory realism leading up to the epigrammatic conclusion: 'The closer the unnatural gets to the natural, the more complete the performance' [my translation] (Shri Pu 1875, 245). To prove his point, he even cites Charles Darwin, recommending all Bengali actors read his works.

Prescribing a new hybrid aesthetics for the Bengali theatre, Shri Pu's article epitomizes the assimilative quality that marked the emerging Bengali theatre in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While asserting and inventing the new hybrid aesthetic grounds on which Bengali theatre would now operate it also spells out an anxiety that defines the formation itself —the tension that bridges mimesis and alterity, the terse and precarious bridge straddling the banks of likeness and otherness. The onus of hybridity lies, in Michael Taussig's words, in the predicament 'of being like, and of being Other' at the same time. Bengali theatre had ingested the received tradition of the native jatra through, and in spite of, colonial disavowal. Consequently, elements of the native tradition would continue to inform the hybrid formation of the new theatre despite the ostensible rejection of the jatra by the urban elite. The Sanskritic tradition had been 'invented' and tempered by Orientalism, and received through the lenses of Western theatre. And the colonial tradition of Western theatre had been reinterpreted through the alterity of native performance.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, popular and high culture had begun to interact so as to validate another kind of hybridity—the hybridity between classes. The public theatre, despite an apparent disdain for jatra, was nonetheless being influenced by it, especially by imbibing the musicality and histrionic acting style of the folk form and moulding it to fit its requirements to attract/address a larger audience. The section of the lower classes of the city, too, were now beginning to attend theatrical performances in the public theatres, especially since the latter had made the tickets affordable as part of their audience-building drive. By the mid-1870s, the Bengali public theatre of Calcutta had not only freed itself from babu-patronage, but also had an audience that was a representation in miniature of the city itself. In this the public theatre, in the composition of its audience, at least, had somewhat blurred the lines between classes. It certainly had a larger audience than the private babu-theatres of the 1850s and 1860s. It also had an audience that could rival the earlier, popular jatra at a numerical level.

But there was a new problem that the public theatres had to deal with cheaply printed dramatic texts of a poor quality, or 'pulp drama'. These plays seldom, if ever, had any life outside the printed page although they appeared in the book market with unparalleled abundance. But the volume of production did not necessarily foreclose the ideological deal the babus wanted to cut between jatra and the public theatre. The aesthetics of jatra were clearly visible even in the plays written for the public theatre by middle class or babu authors. The necessities of the comprador theatre professional did not always meet the eye of the ideologist, often forcing uneasy compromises. For example, there was much criticism made of the fecundity of songs in Bengali mythological drama which critics often felt brought it dangerously close to the devotional jatra.

Modern Bengali theatre, in its early stages, then owes itself to the tension and anxiety between different modes of cultural expressions and the relative dominance they enjoyed within the class structures in which they operated. Many of the central principles of the jatra, the territory of the lower classes, were intrinsically everything that the modern theatre, a realm of the middle and upper classes, did not support and vice versa. The onus on writer-producers like Girish Ghosh was to oscillate anxiously between several binaries: high and low art/cultures, upper and lower classes, foreign

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and indigenous forms, colonial and native norms, purity of the Self and its contamination by the Other.

On 3 October 1873, The Englishman, a Calcutta-based English newspaper, reported the 'laying [of] the foundation-stone' of a Bengali public theatre, a wooden structure modelled on the European proscenium theatres of Calcutta. The inaugural ceremony was preceded by 'a European band with flags bearing the inscription "The laying of the foundation stone of the Great National Theatre." ' (Mukherjee 1982, 40). This loftily named Bengali theatre was modelled after the Lewis' Theatre located in the 'white' quarters of Calcutta where the English community of Calcutta went for entertainment. The Lewis' Theatre of Calcutta was modelled on the Lyceum of London, which, in turn, was supposed to reflect the Hellenic Lyceum, the Lukeion, where legend has it Aristotle taught his gathering of students. The neo-Hellenic architecture of the Bengali Great National theatre, thus, twice removed from its source, had very little to do with the play, the first and last, that was to be produced there in two months —a Bengali Fairy Tale. But although the architecture of the theatre seemed literally to be at war with the content of what was staged inside, it was, nevertheless, dubbed the 'Great National Theatre'! The theatre was built literally by means of imitation. Dharmadas Sur, the architect who 'had never learnt engineering anywhere,' went to the new Lewis' Theatre in white Calcutta, bought tickets to sit in its 'pit' and estimated from that distance what amount of drape he would need for their theatre and decided to build it (Basu 1986, 82). Sur confirms this in his memoir—'We never took the help of any Englishmen or engineers, except for a few of the drop scenes which were painted by one Mr. Garrick' (Basu 1990, 36). The theatre, however, was not destined to have a long life. Its wooden walls were razed to the ground in the middle of the first performance when the gaslights, lacking chimneys, heated up and started a fire.[6]

What, we may now ask, is the connection between the architecture of the British-built Lyceum Theatre and the Bengali-built Great National Theatre? Why did the native Western-educated intelligentsia of Calcutta who built the theatre feel the urge to imitate their Western fellow citizens, while being so intent on having their own 'national' theatre? This opens up an even larger question: how are these two representations related to each other? The Great National Theatre of Bengal/India had, after all, employed 'a European band' to play up its nationalist symphony. How could a theatre identifying itself as the 'national' engage itself simultaneously in an emulation (even adoration) of the Other as well as a proclamation (even celebration) of the Self? And—since architecture has not been the subject of this article—we will ask, more specifically, how can a national Self e-merge by sub-merging its own identity? Is this an inevitable outcome of colonial hybridity?

Creativity in a colonial set-up permits—perhaps even entertains—a certain political ambiguity and ambivalence. It resists and allows at the same time. It causes a tension between form and content—of the kind that the architecture of the Great National theatre embodied. Bengali theatre was thus Bengali, not Bengali, and not not-Bengali at the same time. This was experimentation on a very large scale. An experimentation that invoked, nay, invented, otherness as self that had ingested, as I said before, the received tradition of the native jatra through, and in spite of, colonial disavowal. The elements of the native tradition continued to inform the hybrid formation despite ostensible rejection. Through various means the late-nineteenth-century public theatre of Calcutta had managed to re-nativize a form of performance, a form that could hold its own even on a proscenium stage, its audience sitting in the dark behind the invisible fourth wall in concert hall style auditoriums, through action-driven drama, realism and all its appurtenances. Hybridity had played out through a kind of mimetic reception that fashioned itself, as always, through alterity. Dislodging the stigma associated with the hybrid, it had emerged as a distinct form that could stand

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its own ground. Hybridity eschews the imagined purity of imagined Self, only to (re) site it solidly on a reckoning, often, with several Others.

What does this kind of analysis of the theatre do for us? For the Indian scholar it could offer a reckoning with our own responsibility as post-colonial subjects and how we negotiate that subjectivity with our colonial history. But as an Indian scholar working in the Western academic world, I feel it to be an imperative to address Western theatre scholars as well. Why would they need/want to know about nineteenth-century Bengali theatre and the mise en scène of colonialism? What is there of note and importance to world theatre scholarship in this intersection of post-colonial and performance studies? Why complicate/clutter the mind with notions of hybridity, and post-modernist meditations of the binary of the Self/Other split? The answer lies, perhaps, in the need to understand and revise continuously the ubiquitous function the theatre must necessarily play in a world that is shrinking under the grand logic of late transnational capitalism. The very same understanding that makes it our job to recognize the parallels between the work of Teatro Campesino of the Chicana movement and Teater Dinasti in Indonesia, or Safdar Hashmi's killing during a street performance in New Delhi or Franca Rame's rape in Italy. There is a dire need to study post-colonial drama as a site of insurgent resistance to the rampant logic of the 'new world order' culture of MTV, CNN, Coca Cola, Nike and the various satellite television channels that have invaded Indian homes over the last decade or so. This could perhaps hold the centre that Yeats had seen as falling apart under the dread footfall of the 'rough beast' slouching. Because the past is just as distant and as close as we would make it, it is in need of constant recalibration.

Dario Fo had said once of his reckoning with tradition:

> I maintain that in the theatre, the more one approaches the new by way of experimentation, the more there is a need to seek out roots in the past—above all those which are attached to the roots of the people, which derive from the people's manifestations of life and culture, . . . and which enable the expression of new research and new investigations on the basis of the 'new within the traditional' . . .[7]

Notes

1 Taussig 1993, 129.

2 Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1911) was not only one of the pioneering producers for the professional Bengali theatre, he became one of its greatest director-actors, an innovative designer, lyricist-composer and undoubtedly its first great playwright. Although a banker's son by birth from the Western-educated babu class, Ghosh's upbringing as a motherless child raised by a lower caste woman, allowed him to experience the life of lower classes. Consequently, his plays were imbued with a sense of deep social commitment that expressed itself both directly as well as metaphorically. In a career spanning over four decades, Girish wrote more than forty plays—historical, mythological, social—and innumerable essays on theatre and social issues. His figure towered over the Calcutta theatre scene in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many of the actors and actresses to come up in that period were his students. Over and above his numerous contributions to Bengali theatre, Girish also gave Bengali poetic drama the gift of a resonant stage meter, commonly known as the Gairi rhythm-scheme.

3 Publication of the paper began in 1844. Stopped and started several times. Microform version of sporadic issues located at the Bobst Library holdings, New York University, New York.

4 Chowdhury 1880, 1.

John

Use of Adversity: Embodiments of culture and crisis in the Prahlada nataka of Orissa

For Dhiren

The Prahlada nataka (or Play of Prahlada) was written in the Oriya language between 1870 and 1880 and attributed to Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray, then zamindar of Jalantara, a former princely state now located in northern Andhra Pradesh. Based, ultimately, on puranic accounts of the coming of Vishnu's Man-Lion avatar, Narasimha, in order to save devout Prahlada from the wrath of his father (the earth-conquering Daitya king, Hiranyakashipu), the Prahlada nataka is a relatively recent recasting of a very old story—one referred to approximately 2000 years ago in the epic Mahabharata.[1] While the former court at Jalantara is now in ruins, the play is currently performed by over fifty village theatre companies—mostly in the nearby Ganjam District of Orissa.[2] It is a syncretic, hybrid form of theatre, put together through a process of bricolage, in a remote court positioned in a linguistic and cultural borderland during the British Raj; a consideration of its historical development and remarkable survival may provide a useful example of how such hybrid forms are shaped and reshaped in order to translate social concerns and artistic possibilities into embodied action.

Theatre, the art of involvement and standing in, involves us most intensely and enduringly when it deals explicitly

Embodiment as a social and artistic strategy is central to this discussion. The history of the Prahlada nataka can be seen as a series of attempts to embody responses to crises: historical, cultural, personal, and creative; and these embodiments complexly use the common theatrical procedures of metaphor-making and surrogation (compare Roach 1996). While embodiment is a central, defining strategy in many performative genres, in Prahlada nataka the appropriation of ideas, icons, and spiritual entities by the human body is strikingly

John Emigh is a Professor in the Theatre, Speech, and Dance and English Departments at Brown University in Providence, RI, USA, where he has been teaching theatrical theory, history, and practice and directing theatrical productions since 1967. He has developed a particular interest in traditions of masked theatre, has studied topeng dance drama in Bali, Indonesia and performed his own hybrid versions of this tradition, and has given related workshops around the world. In addition to the masked traditions of Eastern India, he has had a particular interest in the bhands of Rajasthan and made a film on the life of the late Hajari Bhand. More recently, he worked with The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts on a set of projects related to their new

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foregrounded as the play progresses. The performance begins, away from the audience, with an elaborate puja for the disembodied mask of Narasimha that will be worn by a performer/priest at the climax of the narrative. As a good host, the performer/priest welcomes the spirit of the mask with water, food, flowers, incense, betel nut, and the light and warmth of fire. The ceremony not only focuses attention on the mask as icon and spiritual conduit, it prepares the performer/priest's body as the container necessary for the energy implicit in the mask to be channelled into vigorous physical action.

While the performer/priest wearing the Narasimha mask will (most of the time) eventually lose consciousness as his body is flooded with the energy ascribed to Narasimha, the first figure to emerge uses a far more transparent approach to the 'standing in' that characterizes theatrical embodiment. This figure, too, is an amalgam of mask and flesh, myth and man: a small boy wears the mask of Ganesha and stands in for the beloved 'elephant god', in order to grant permission for the play to proceed. This surrogate for the unlikely body of the 'Remover of Obstacles' is called forth, first in Sanskrit slokas (the language of the past and of the sacred intoned), and then in sung stanzas of Oriyan poetry (the language of the everyday world made elegant). The Gahaka (or lead singer and narrator) leads a chorus of men, many of whom have themselves been involved in these performances since boyhood:

GAHAKA. Oh Son of Parvati, who rides upon a mouse,
Who has four hands, an elephant's head, and a single tusk.
Who carries an elephant prod. Who is plump.
Whose ears are decorated with lovely flywhisks!
Carrying six types of offerings for you,
With incense, betel nut, lighted lamp, and sweet smelling flowers,
Shri Nrupakeshara Rama Krishna Vira hastens
And stands before Lord Shankara's son.
Being prayed to and honoured in so many ways,
Lord Gananatha appears before us, speaking thus:
GANESHA. Oh crown jewel of the Nataka, why do you invoke my presence?
GAHAKA. Oh Remover of Obstacles, I beseech you, let our play proceed smoothly.
GANESHA. So be it! [3]

As Ganesha is invoked, the boy actor will whirl up and down a set of steps with the elephant mask in place; however impressive this physical display may be with a good performer, the gap between the extraordinary body described and its transparently theatrical representation is obvious to all. As each major figure enters, this gap is played across in multiple ways. Each is introduced in florid verse by the Gahaka and his back-up chorus. Sometimes, the character/actor being introduced joins in the singing, helping to introduce him/herself in the third person through a conventional poetic structure known as a daru, adapted from Sanskrit practice, typical of the yakshagana style of dramatic writing, and especially associated with traditional Telugu dramatic presentations. At each entrance, the physical attributes of the newly embodied, but well-known characters are elaborately described and embellished upon, so that the character as previously enshrined in mythic imagination and the embodiment of that character as a costumed actor are juxtaposed in a way that both confirms and transcends the visible evidence:

GAHAKA. Hiranyakashipu, Lord of Danuvas,
With all his Ministers comes to Court.
Set with precious stones and gems,
His crown outshines ten million suns.
Jewel-studded earrings dangle by his cheeks.
Armlets and bangles beautify his limbs.

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> The performance begins, away from the audience, with an elaborate puja for the disembodied mask of

As he walks, the whole earth starts to tremble.
Umbrellas and fans obscure the sky.
His eyes revolve like turning wheels.
In warrior's dress, his shouts ring out.
Rama Krishna sings, and catches the moods
Swiping his sword: Is the enemy about?
GAHAKA. In brilliant attire, the warrior Hiranyakashipu, the demon king of the Three Worlds, takes his seat on the deer-skinned throne fitted with nine kinds of gems, while the gatekeeper boasts of his glories:
GATEKEEPER. Oh thou who strikes fear in the hearts of all gods and demons,
Great Five-Headed Warrior, we bow to thee.
Oh thou, whose dress is heavy with precious jewels,
Taking thy lotus feet, we bow to thee.
Bow to the one who has ended the boasting taunts of the gods.
Bow to the one who has captured the mind of Lilavati.
KING. Oh Ministers-in-Chief, and among you Trimastaka, Trilochana, Sakuni, Sambara, Satavahu, Namuchi, Praloma, and Viprachittya!
MINISTER. Great Lord! Lord God of Demons!
KING. Command the holder of the cane to be vigilant at my Lion's Gate.

This elaborate and seemingly unnecessary dramaturgy calls attention to the physical presence of the actor/ character in a way that underscores the costumed performer's standing in for the character (with sequins as 'precious gems', and one or two extras representing the vast court of 'Ministers-in-Chief') and it sets in motion a field of metaphoric resonance as mythic narrative slowly, stage by stage, gives ground to mimetic enactment.

Similarly, the physical attributes of Hiranyakshipu's wife, Lilavati, will be praised by all, introducing the (male) actor who will stand in for her.

GAHAKA.Accompanied by her ladies, the Queen of Demons comes.
Sandalpaste and camphor coat her body.
A Kusumbhara sari she wears, and her braids are carefully plaited.
A bodice compresses her bosom; a tiara frames her hair.
The bells at her waist make tinkling sounds,
While the jingling of her anklets steals away the mind.

Prahlada, the king's distressingly devout son, played by a pre-adolescent boy (or, in one company, by a talented dwarf actor), will also be introduced through elaborate dialogue that mocks the casting of horoscopes, and with songs of celebration and praise.

Shri Arjuna Satapathy of Baulagaon, Ganjam, offers a puja to Narasimha. Photograph

GAHAKA. With devotion in his heart, and singing aloud, 'Shri Hari, Hari,'
Born under fortunate stars for the benefit of the wise,
Pure and full of virtuous qualities, Prahlada enters.

Finally, and most importantly, the entrance of the man and mask comprising the figure of Narasimha 'hidden' in a pillar (usually represented by a simple straw mat or blanket) will be prepared for by a complete reorientation of the playing space, a repetition of the welcoming puja and the singing of devotional hymns of praise that celebrate the arrival of Vishnu's man-lion avatar into the everyday world of the village audience.

GAHAKA. Then the atmosphere suddenly changes.
Smoke engulfs the entire world,
And sparks rain down from the sky.
All those about now tremble with fear.
His nails are sharp and flash like lightening.
His roar is ferocious, and as for his teeth,
The sound of their incessant gnashing fills the air.
The flowing tongue undulates in utmost fury.

The leisurely enactment of these procedures creates time and place for the costumed bodies of the performers to take on the full metaphoric resonance of the characters that they stand in, while at the same time reminding the audience that the mythological domain invoked by performance can only be partially represented by the elaborated procedures of surrogation and embodiment used to place the narrative 'into play.' While this particular approach to the introduction of new characters may well be unique to Indian theatrical forms, the fascination with the procedures of 'standing in' so central to theatrical practice are not: as Bruce Wilshire notes in another context, 'Theatre, the art of involvement and standing in, involves us most intensely and enduringly when it deals explicitly with problems of standing in and involvement . . . [These problems] interest us so much because [they are] the problem[s] par excellence of our own identity as selves' (Wilshire 1982, 43).

What, then, do these particular actors embody as they stand in, however imperfectly, for familiar mythological characters? Prahlada as played by a boy actor is, most obviously, an embodiment of faith, of bhakti. Narasimha, both as the avatar of mythic narrative and in his performed life framed as trance possession, is, more literally, an embodiment of Vishnu, and therefore of the all-encompassing godhead; some in the audience will accordingly greet his appearance with hands pressed together in a sign of devotion. Historically and culturally, though, there are other ways, perhaps less obvious ones, in which surrogation and embodiment have been at issue in the performative life given this puranic story in the villages of Orissa.

Ganesha sits on the king's throne and gives his blessings. Photograph courtesy John

. . . impressive though this physical display may be with a good performer, the gap between the extraordinary body described and its

THE ORIGINS OF PRAHLADA NATAKA: ADHARMA, HINDU MYTH, AND THE BRITISH RAJ

For those living in what is now the borderland of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, the period of British rule in India was particularly devastating. With Orissa not fully conquered until 1803 and the southern regions in particular at the margins of concern of both the Madras and Calcutta Presidencies established by the British Raj in order to administer Eastern India, this area (which, once, for over a millennium, had been at the heart of bi-lingual Kalinga with its prosperous maritime economy) languished in a state of malign neglect throughout the nineteenth century. The British administrators did not begin this downward spiral; Mughal and Maratha administrations had also been guilty of considerable neglect and abuse, abetted by greed and incompetence on the part of many of the local princes. The British Raj did, however, oversee a continued descent (Jit 1984, 191-3).

The latter half of the nineteenth century especially was characterized by a series of devastating floods, famines, epidemics, and forced migrations accompanied (and sometimes caused by) political intrigue and unrest. There was a major famine accompanied by a calamitous outbreak of cholera in 1866, in which the tiny zamindari of Jalantara, under the leadership of its recently elevated raja, Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray, served as a regional relief station (Das 1985, 103; Jena 1982, 226). The population of Jalantara at the time was only 11,500 people (Das 1985, 113) and the impact upon the young zamindar of the sick and dying arriving for aid must have been strong. This tragic time was succeeded by frequent periods of shortage as rice crops were aggressively exported for greater economic gain (Das 1985, 93-113; Jit 1982, 123-93; Jena 1984, 220-31; Padhi 1992, 93-5). In 1897, these patterns of economic neglect and abuse culminated in a famine in which over fifty per cent of the people of Ganjam District died of starvation and disease—a catastrophe brought on more by greed and mismanagement than by nature's whims (Das 1985, 106-8). Throughout this half-century, the local princes were frequently in arrears in the tax collections imposed under the zamindar system, which, in theory at least, were figured on the basis of one-third of the average harvest of the past several years (Padhi 1992, 36). The effectiveness of the zamindars as heads of the body politic was further enfeebled by rampant opium addiction, winked at and sometimes encouraged by the colonial administrators. The net result (still evident in this culturally rich and materially impoverished border area) was rampant poverty, illiteracy, an abysmal infrastructure, and a seething sense that all was not well: that the world was out of joint.

In Hindu myth and philosophy, such chaotic periods are said to be characterized by adharma; that is, they are characterized by a disregard for and an active flaunting of the utopian pathways for action which, when embodied socially, are designed (however well or poorly) to maintain stable and life-affirming societal structures: dharma. As Rakesh Solomon has pointed out, after the Sepoy rebellion of 1857, the urban theatres of India frequently used story patterns from mythic narratives to reflect upon and protest about this adharmic situation (Solomon 1994). It is at precisely at this time, in the early to mid 1860s, that new versions of the story of Prahlada, Hiranyakashipu, and Narasimha began to emerge in the bhagavatar traditions of Telugu-speaking Andhra Pradesh, including (by 1880) the brahmin sustained tradition of kuchipudi.[4] In the puranic accounts, Hiranyakashipu, through mastery of his own body and the practise of severe physical austerities (tapas), has acquired a boon that makes him impervious to defeat by day or by night, on the ground or in the air, inside or outside of buildings, by man, god or beast. This seeming invulnerability emboldens him to conquer the three worlds and unleash a reign of adharma. The emergence of several new dramatic versions of the Narasimha myth in rural Eastern India at this time suggests that resonances between the adharmic situations found in puranic and mythic sources and in the rule of the seemingly unconquerable Indian Raj were found

in rural as well as urban performance venues.

In the puranic sources, Prahlada is subjected to one life-threatening punishment after another in an attempt to coerce him away from his worship of Vishnu. Narasimha—Vishnu's furious man-lion avatar—miraculously appears from a pillar to subvert the formidable boon, overthrow the demon tyrant Hiranyakashipu, and save his devout son. Performing variants of this mythic narrative may well have constituted a way to preserve hope of eventual salvation by local princes and pundits, as well as far less powerful citizens of the Raj, who felt trapped in a humiliating and sometimes cataclysmic environment. The performances of these religious dramas, then, offered an embodied narrative of endurance and eventual salvation through devotional faith, or bhakti, and a display of rage that could be regarded as cathartic.

Hiranyakashipu in his regalia. Photograph courtesy John Emigh.

Narasimha was a particularly useful vehicle for these ends, since masks of the avatar are traditionally associated with ceremonies to promote personal and communal health and peace; they have been worn in procession during cholera epidemics, and patients are sometimes treated under their protection (Arjuna Satapathy and Trigunateeta Dev, personal communication 1982, 1993). The ritual and theatrical deployment of these masks presents a powerful and arresting affirmation of the ultimate, healing power of dharmic law. Through theatrical surrogation and the metaphoric resonance it encourages, then, in the late nineteenth century the Daitya king, Hiranyakashipu, might be thought of as standing in for the more modern-day rulers of the Raj, even as he appears as a familiar character in a mythological tale of faith and salvation.

While most of the theatrical forms of the Narasimha/Prahlada myth that emerged at this time were in the Telugu language, Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray, the poetry-loving zamindar of the tiny princely state of Jalantara, commissioned a version in Oriyan, the language of his court. By local legend, the raja is reported to have seen a performance of one of the recently minted Telugu

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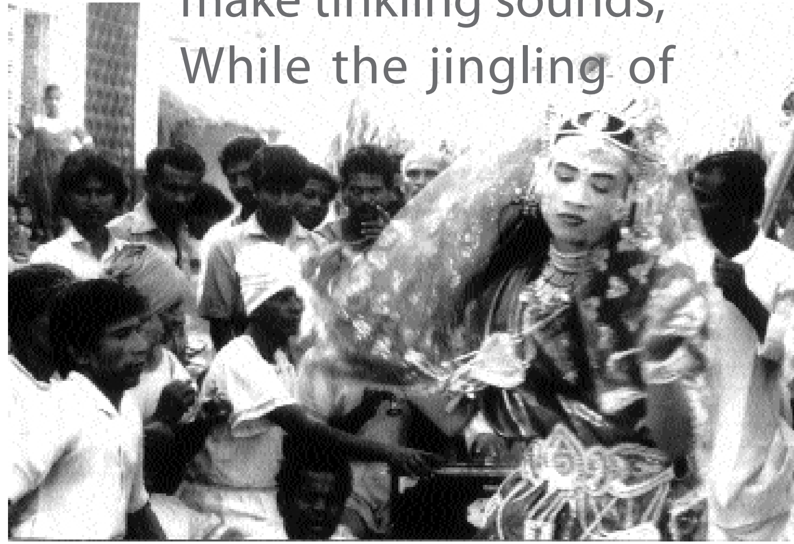
'. . . a tiara frames her hair.
The bells at her waist make tinkling sounds,
While the jingling of



Lilavati dancing as she enters. Photograph courtesy John Emigh.

versions of the Prahlada story at the residence of his close friend and neighbour, the Rani of Mandasa. With the experience of the recent famine and cholera epidemic of 1866 in mind, he became obsessed with the project of creating a unique Oriyan representation (S. N. Rajguru, Bashkar Padhi, and Guru Kaliya Kampo, personal communication 1982 and 1993-94). That he was fond of playing the role of patron to poets is clear: court officials at Parlakhemundhi and Mandasa tell of the time when his wife, a princess from the much larger zamindari of Parlakhemundhi, left him because he had sold her jewellery to pay a poet's fee (Simanchala Das and Bashkar Padhi, personal communication, 1994). There is considerable debate as to the actual authorship of the Oriyan Prahlada nataka composed in Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray's name (see Panda 1973; Pani 1983; Mahapatra 1986; Patnaik 1992). While the conventional signature lines of the resulting text attest to the zamindar's faith and patronage, the text itself was most likely written, for the most part, by the poet Goura Hari Paricha, who spent many years in residence at Mandasa, perhaps with contributions from the zamindar and from his friend, the Rani of Mandasa, herself an avid amateur poet (Panda 1973; S. N. Rajguru and Guru Kaliya Kampo, personal communication 1982 and 1994).

The theatrical and literary conventions deployed in the piece are intriguing in their diverse points of origin. One striking feature of the text that distinguishes it from the Telugu texts in use is the frequent interpolation of Sanskrit slokas. The music generally follows the ragas of the 'classical' Carnatic tradition of South India, while many of the talas are of 'folk' origin. The ranges of these ragas and talas do not correspond to those indicated in any of the known 'original' Telugu texts: contrasting the Oriyan Prahlada nataka with Prahlada charitram text used in Kuchipudi, for example, nineteen ragas are shared, thirteen appear in Prahlada nataka but not in the Prahlada charitram, and fifteen appear in the Prahlada charitram and not in the Prahlada nataka (Biswa Bihari Khadanga, personal communication 1982, 1993).

The mode of dramatic enactment seems to have had many antecedents. As performed, the play reflects the then popular tradition of suanga (or svang),

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that had come into the area from North India (Patnaik 1992, 26; Hansen 1992, 56-70). Written to last seven nights and be played by the raja's family and retinue at the Jalantara court for invited audiences, the original settings for the play seem to have featured wing and drop scenery in imitation of British practice—perhaps first introduced to the region by touring 'Parsi' troupes (Biswa Bihari Khadanga and Trigunateeta Dev, personal communication 1982-3, 1993; Hansen 1992, 79-85). The seven-night pattern of scenes, with the first night ending in Prahlada's birth, is highly reminiscent of various ramlila traditions that exist throughout Orissa, and this may well suggest one of the important contributing sources of the material in this bricolage.

A striking feature of the scenery devised for the palace was evidently a central unit with seven (now five) steps. This mancha creates an extreme version of a raja's raised dias, used to hold darshan and conduct affairs of state (one such dais is still on view at Parlakhemundhi); it also suggests a form of staging sometimes used for portrayals of Rama's climactic confrontation with Ravana in the desia nata tradition performed by Hinduized adivasi groups in the Koraput District of Orissa (desia nata guru Dhanu Dhisari, personal communication 1983). The stepped mancha used in desia nata and the Prahlada nataka suggests, in turn, a miniature version of the well-known, dramatic bank of stone steps at the ancient Koraput capital of Nandapur—steps that visitors and liegemen are said to have crawled up in order to address the king (Dhiren Dash, Dinanath Pathy, and Gopinath Panigrahi, personal communication 1983). In both Ganjam and the bordering regions of Andhra Pradesh, Rama nataka performances calling for a mancha with seven steps are still infrequently performed; the early use of a seven step stage for Prahlada nataka (one is still visible in Dhalapura) suggests the derivation of this stage from performances of the Ramayana, and the treatment of Prahlada's birth (and Lilavati's labour pains) has close textual parallels with treatments of Rama's birth in Telugu folk traditions. Given this complex theatrical and literary genealogy with its powerful set of resonances, Ravana, the proud tyrants of Nandapur, Hiranyakashipu, and British officials of the Raj all become caught up in a web of adharmic association.

The vigorous dance patterns now used to swirl up and down the steps also differ substantially from those of the Telugu bhagavatar tradition, just

Narasimha, both as the avatar of mythic narrative and in his performed life framed as trance possession, is, . . . an embodiment

Narasimha is restrained as he lunges at Hiranyakashipu.

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Prahlada sings of his devotion to Vishnu.
Photograph courtesy John Emigh.

'. . . Born under fortunate stars for the benefit of the wise,

as the costumes used are significantly different from kuchipudi dress, combining adaptations of some elements of these costumes (the 'yakshagana wings' on the shoulders, for example) with tiered skirts familiar from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Rajasthani paintings celebrating Krishna's dance with the Gopis (see Vatsyayan 1982, plates 124, 125A, 126A). Local legend maintains that Raghunath Misra, who was born in Jalantara and had gone on to write Natya manorama (a text on Carnatic dance and music) and to serve as a professor of music in Kerala, was brought back to compose the music and to stage the first performances (S. N. Rajaguru, Dhiren Dash, and Biswa Bihari Khadanga, personal communication 1982-83). The mask of Narasimha (strikingly different from those used in kuchipudi and the related bhagavata mela performances in the Thanjavur area of Tamilnadu) is said to have been inspired by a four-foot high gilded copper mask owned by the Simanchalam temple of Waltair and used processionally by priests there during the mid-May celebrations of both Narasimha and that temple's unique idol from the early nineteenth century up until ca. 1915 (M. Murthy of Simanchalam, Biswa Bihari Khadanga, and the citizens of Mandala, AP, personal communication 1983).

While many aspects about the play's origins are unclear, including the degree to which the text is a new creation or a loose translation of a no longer extant Telugu script, what strikes me in assembling the evidence available about the origins of the form are the ways in which a syncretizing of known elements was being used to create a form of theatre which, in its totality, would be entirely distinctive.[5] Kathryn Hansen similarly observes the evidence of a syncretizing process that led to the creation of the svang theatre of North India (one of the many performance genres that, as noted above, may well have influenced the Prahlada nataka of Ganjam):

> The world of North Indian theatre in the nineteenth century was criss-crossed by a number of intersecting performing practices. These practices, developed in the context of specific socio-economic conditions and the cultural systems associated with them, may be distinguished as folk, courtly, and urban. Yet the mutual exchange and imitation that occurred among them obliterated clear lines of difference. From the swirl of

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transformed tradition, the Svang theatre distilled its own singular identity (Hansen 1992, 84).

The unique blending of elements achieved at Jalantara was neither inevitable nor uncontested. Trigunateeta Dev of Chikiti told of the reaction of his own ancestor, Radhamohan Dev, to seeing Prahlada nataka performed for the first time: he found it 'too Telugu' in its mix of performative traditions, and objected to a range of choices, from the sunglasses used (then and sometimes now) by Hiranyakashipu, to the indecorous treatment of the raja's darshan and the family dynamics of Hiranyakashipu and his wife (personal communication 1993). Lanka Jagannatha shared with us the songs from an alternate Oriyan text ascribed to Rama Chandra Sura Maharaja of Tarala, written only slightly later than the Jalantara text and performed, until recently, by his family; a much simpler three-step mancha was used for less swirling movement patterns, and his singing was in the Orissan sangeet style—strikingly different from the bhagavatar and suanga traditions drawn upon by the Jalantara's king and his co-creators. As Renato Rosaldo has observed, 'in contrast to the classic view which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can more arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes crisscross from within and beyond its borders' (Rosaldo 1993, 20). In looking at hybridized genres, the role of individual and collaborative initiatives in the creative process of syncretizing is often underestimated. Jalantara's position in a remote cultural borderland made it a particularly fertile ground for agents forging new, hybrid cultural forms.

Eventually, Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray himself is said to have taken on the role of Hiranyakashipu. This is confirmed by the citizens of the nearby small village of Mandala, whose parents and grandparents have passed down stories of seeing the 'Raja nataka' perform. Recall that the drama chronicles, in song and verse, the attempts of a seemingly invulnerable demon tyrant, Hiranyakashipu, to coerce his son into abandoning his devotion to Vishnu through forced catechism, threats of death, and thirteen assaults on his life. In the end, Vishnu's man-lion avatar—embodied by an actor/priest in violent trance-possession—overcomes the seemingly impossible obstacles enshrined in law and nature to defeat and disembowel the demon tyrant, save Prahlada, and restore dharma for future generations. It may be appropriate to point out here that the Narasimha legend itself celebrates the creativity of the border: Hiranyakashipu's seemingly inviolable boon is defeated when he is ripped apart at dusk (neither night nor day), on the threshold (neither inside nor outside his home), on the lap (neither on the ground nor in the air) of a being neither man, beast, nor god, but an hybrid amalgam of all three.

If I am correct about the resonance of this story during the troubled last decades of the nineteenth century in a borderland of the British Raj, a complex chain of surrogation may be seen at work. A disembodied and unattributed poet (probably the saintly Goura Hari Paricha) stands in for a royal patron, who earns back the credit for the poet's lines through their iteration in performance, while himself standing in for the offending tyrant, Hiranyakashipu, who in turn stands in for (or is at least resonant with) the adharmic British Raj, in whose name the raja/patron/putative poet/and now actor acts as 'king.' Taken all in all, this dizzying set of surrogated identities is forged in a set of actions which are quintessentially rebellious, while at the same time serve to extol humble devotion and obedience to the will of Vishnu, who is the embodiment of macrocosmic order, or dharma.

THE DURGA DAS BROTHERS OF ICHHAPUR AND THE SPREAD OF PRAHLADA NATAKA FROM COURT TO TOWN TO VILLAGE IN GANJAM

The history of the form becomes even more intriguing in its criss-crossing of borders and subversion of categorical expectations. At the time of Prahlada nataka's composition between 1870 and 1880, there lived in Ichhapur—a depressed town now

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on the Andhra Pradesh border with Orissa—a remarkable family known as Durga Das. This family belonged to an Oriyan-speaking caste, the kondras, many of whom traditionally worked as fishermen. Though Hanuman worshippers by tradition, the family had adopted the pre-name of Durga to signal the ability to withstand and contain the potentially dangerous energy of an icon of Durga that

the family had been given. Two brothers of this family, Durga Chandra Das and Durga Dharma Das, had managed to transcend the limitations of this low status to obtain an education and performed as musicians for sakiya dancers of the Telugu bhagavatar tradition. Their children included seven 'cousin-brothers,' who functioned outside the predictable spheres of activity for the kondras—as scribes, pujaris, ayurvedic medical practitioners, tantric adepts, and, most important to this story, as musicians and dancers for Telugu harikatha and burrakatha performers. In search of an Oriyan text so that they could perform for their own community, the Durga Das family is said to have first taken up the Rama nataka; they then heard of the private performances of the recently composed Oriyan Prahlada nataka being given at the Jalantara Court (Durga Ganashyam Das, Durga Hemantha Das, and Durga Bansiya Dhora, personal communication, 1993-4).

According to Guru P. Ganga Dora of Gangapur, who heard the story from one of the grandchildren of Durga Dharma Das, Durga Bangali Das (himself an important performer, guru, and mask-maker), the cousin-brothers conspired with the fishermen in their caste to obtain the script from the rajguru at Jalantara. Each day, the fishermen would bring the best of the catch to him. This went on for several weeks, and, every time, the rajguru would ask why they were bringing him such wonderful 'free' fish, but would only receive smiling invitations to enjoy the catch of the day. Realizing that a substantial debt was being acquired, the bewildered rajguru finally insisted, 'What do you want?' The fishermen smiled back and replied, 'We want the book.' The rajguru lent them the script, and it was secretly copied and adapted by one of the cousin-brothers, Durga Dambaru Das.[6]

> Having obtained the script through guile, the cousin-brothers then started to perform an adaptation of the zamindar's play, complete with the raja's signature lines, in the Oriyan-speaking towns of Ganjam Province. Of the cousin-brothers, by one reconstruction, Durga Dambaru Das was the Gahaka (or Sutradhara), supported by Durga Iswara Das; Durga Giriwar Das played Hiranyakashipu; Durga Aghadu Das played Lilavati; Durga Sunameni Das played various character roles, Durga Gopi Das was the maskmaker and played the violin (which has since dropped out of the ensembles used), and Durga Nirakana Das played the gini (small cymbals). Children of these cousin-brothers—Durga Bangali Das, Durga Krishnan Das, and Durga Khiramani Das—took their turns as Prahlada. A friend and fellow caste member, Gangadhara Das, played the Dwari (gatekeeper). Dhanu Panda, an Oriya brahmin priest who lived with the Durga Das family and gave them lessons in Sanskrit, wore the mask of Narasimha and also first played the erudite Snakecharmer in the script (Durga Ganashyam Das and Durga Hemantha Das personal communication, 1993-4).

When the Raja heard of these performances, he was furious and summoned the performers to Jalantara to perform their version of 'his' script. Impressed by what he saw, the Raja came to take great pride in their performances, inviting the Durga Das family to perform in his own court on several occasions. In 1905, the now elderly Raja—addicted to opium and inattentive to financial affairs—was tricked out of his estate by a rival zamindar, the Raja of Vizianagaram, acting in collusion with district

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authorities. According to Bashkar Pandhi, the rival Raja, who was owed a considerable amount of money by Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray, bribed Jalantara's own officials not to tell the Raja nataka that he was in default of tax payments and that his estate was to be sold at auction; partly on the basis of his outstanding loans, he was able to claim the estate for himself. Having lost this 'little war with the raja of Vizianagaram', Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray is said to have retired to the one home in which he could feel honoured—that of his Kondra friends, the Durga Das family (Ganashyam Das, Durga Hemantha Das and other descendants, personal communication, 1993).

Lilavati pleads with Prahlada. Photograph courtesy John Emigh

By 1890, the Durga Das 'brothers' were performing Prahlada nataka professionally with the Raja nataka's permission in the larger towns of Ganjam and eventually they toured as far as Rajasthan and Rangoon (Durga Bansiya Dhora, personal communication 1994). A performance of Prahlada nataka given at the town of Parlakhemundhi sometime shortly after the turn of the century attracted the attention of Krishna Khadanga, a prosperous brahmin timber merchant from the impoverished, poetry-loving Bhanjanagar area in the mountains of Ganjam. Captivated by the music, poetry, devotional intensity, and theatricality of Prahlada nataka, he decided to import it to the villages near his home as a focus of community pride and religious expression. He hired Durga Giriwar Das, who, as usual, had portrayed Hiranyakashipu, as a guru to teach the form to the villagers, and he himself became Durga Giriwar Das's siswa, or student. After failing to take hold in either Ballipadar or Dengapadar at first, the form underwent several changes—jettisoning the British-style wing and drop scenery used first at the court and then in the urban performances, but retaining the stepped mancha. The text was also further condensed, with Narasimha's lines eliminated in favour of a stronger trance possession, and, by 1911, Prahlada nataka troupes were operating successfully in the small towns of Podampur and Nalabanta (Biswa Bihari Khadanga, personal communication, 1982-3, 1993).

It is a common motif in Hindu religion and in Sanskrit theatre to trace the transmigration of identity from body to body. This phenomenon is alluded to in the Natyasastra as a metaphor for an actor's physical and spiritual assumption of the 'character' inscribed in textual form, and it is played upon to comic effect in the prahasana (or Sanskrit farce), Bhagavatajukka (The Hermit and the Harlot). The principle of migrating identities is essential to the belief in reincarnation, to the mythic narrative of Vishnu's embodiments in a series of avatars (a meta-narrative central to Prahlada's story), and it provides the underpinnings for belief in the physical presence of the divine when the actor/priest embodying Narasimha emerges from the make-shift 'pillar' in what is frequently experienced by himself and by his audience

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as a furious trance (Emigh 1996, 56-60).

In a very concrete and more prosaic way, though, something like these migrations can also be seen to happen in the formation of the genealogy of performers that keeps alive a traditional form of theatre like Prahlada nataka. It is necessary to transmit from body to body, from guru to siswa, what Eugenio Barba has characterized as the 'extra-daily' movement patterns that characterize such forms. In this process of literal embodiment, matching kinaesthetic memories are structured in the neural pathways of succeeding generations of performers that allow for the maintenance and transference of tradition. As Barba describes this process, 'the performer, through long practice and continuous training', fixes 'an extra-daily pattern of movement that is inconsistent with the economic use of the body in everyday life' and 'develops new neuro-muscular reflexes which result in a renewed body culture, a "second nature", a consistent "fictional body"' (Barba 1995, 26). 'Prahlada' and 'Hiranyakashipu' live in these reinscribed and embodied memories and in the motions and speech acts that they make possible.

As of 1997, there were some thirty gurus sustaining over fifty active troupes in Ganjam. Some of these gurus are brahmins by traditional caste designation, a few are kshatriyas, some are artisans, some are shepherds, but most are agricultural workers. Many are illiterate, yet know the complex text in archaic Oriyan and Sanskrit by heart. I have discovered no discernible pattern as to who studies with whom. My research (which has included piecing together an incomplete performance genealogy) indicates that all of these gurus can trace their artistic lineage directly back to the tutelage of either Durga Giriwar Das, the 'original' Hiranyakashipu, or that of his brother, the play's adapter, Durga Dambaru Das.[7] I wish to pause here in order to stress that at every stage of this history of successive embodiments, people have performed contrary to expected notions of caste and status: a special irony, perhaps, since the castes themselves are described in the same Vishnu purana that serves as a source for the Prahlada nataka as deriving from the head, chest, thighs, and feet of Brahma (see Wilson 1980, 63-4). In the history of the Prahlada nataka's transmission from court to town to village—all in the service of dharma—this disassembled divine body has been reassembled in the liminal world of performance, with its own alternative laws and utopian constructions. As Guru Dukhishyam Swain of Hugalapata remarked when asked about this relative disregard for traditional caste hierarchies within the performance history of Prahlada nataka, 'when it comes to performance, that is our way.' Perhaps adharma has its advantages as well as disadvantages, or perhaps it is simply that there has long been far more room for such cultural subversion in the embodied performance of Indian cultural politics than is generally acknowledged.

Hiranyakashipu, on his throne, brings in strong men to threaten Prahlada. Note the mancha.

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Prahlada nataka not only deals with crisis in mythic terms, its enactment also lives in extremis, as though seeking crises to portray and dispel them. The usual arrangement now is for a temple committee or town council to hire two companies for a performance designated to last anywhere from ten to twenty hours. The troupes then compete, performing at the same time, in close proximity, so that the audience is forced to choose which troupe to watch; this bedi system of simultaneous rival performances is not unique to Prahlada nataka (see Hansen 1992, 66-70, 244-51), but the rigours of the form make its use particularly striking. The performances, no longer stretched over seven nights, must last through the night and are ideally performed so that Narasimha emerges at daybreak (a liminal time analogous to dusk in the story). The exhausting nature of these all-night (and sometimes all-day and all-night) performances has the effect of wearing down the mental and physical state of audiences (and actors), creating a fragile and tenuous reality.

Though many of the performers (including some of the best and most knowledgeable) are illiterate, the text of Prahlada nataka is maintained in handwritten books passed down from guru to guru (or, when appropriate, kept by a secretary of the company). It is a complex, highly poetic text, in archaic Oriyan, with several slokas to be intoned in Sanskrit. Not only must this text be mastered and then sung through the night in high, falsetto voices that can literally travel for miles, but the organizers may stop the performance at any time and call the two Hiranyakashipus or Prahladas together in order to contest the singing of especially ornate sections (often Sanskrit slokas) and to expostulate on the esoteric meaning of these passages. To fail one of these tests is to lose ground in the competition.

> Though the text is written and the writing revered, it is regularly expanded and contracted in performance, as the two teams try to stay abreast of each other. For months during our research, it confused me that leading gurus would give completely different answers about the sequence of the punishments (dandas) of Prahlada. There are thirteen dandas all together —though they are rarely all performed—and on any given night Prahlada (played by a pre-adolescent boy) may be attacked with knives, set inside a 'flaming' container, forced to drink 'poisonous' potions, tossed off a platform into the arms of mother earth, brought as a sacrifice to Chandi, tied to a tree in a forest, trampled by a mock elephant, set upon by strongmen, made to face a horrific monster summoned into being by black magic, and/or have a venomous snake draped around his shoulders. I have finally come to understand that there is no set order to the trials of Prahlada. The troupes know each other's specialities, try to find out what is being prepared, and endeavour to outdo each other in the same trials. In practice, this means that the order of the trials must be established on the spur of the moment and the links between them improvised in order to keep abreast of the opposing troupe. As Guru P. Ganga Dora puts it,
>
> The Guru wends
> As the river bends

Leading gurus and Hiranyakashipu performers I talked to—actors who may be on stage continuously for fifteen hours or more—say they prefer it when they have to scramble this way: it keeps them energized (personal communication, Gurus Simanchala Patra, Raghunath Satapathy 1993).

Sometimes, troupes go out of their way to take on real dangers in enacting these perils. Dancing up and down a five-tiered stage all night would seem dangerous enough, but I have seen strongmen break bricks over each other's heads and one actor tragically killed by a poisonous snake whose fangs had not been broken or milked. Ordinarily, the greatest risks surround the entrance of Narasimha (usually performed in frenetic trance possession by an actor/priest who has fasted the previous

day). The furious man/lion/god is restrained by ropes held by as many as twenty men and, throughout the region, stories abound—in Ganjam and in places as far removed as Kuchipudi and Melattur, where kindred forms of Telugu theatre are staged—stories about 'the time when things got out of control and Narasimha really killed/wounded/ or drove the actor playing Hiranyakashipu out of town.' Whatever the truth of these stories, their existence enhances the sense of danger and crisis attending the climactic events of the performance, as does the careful ritual treatment of the Narasimha mask.

The stress on the body, then, through physical fatigue, extreme calls on the mechanisms of attention, virtuosic displays of skill, and the deliberate introduction of physical danger, are real enough, even while set in a narrativized world of myth as embodied by citizen actors. Herbert Blau has noted that 'theatre remains the [art] form most dependent upon, fascinated with, drawn, quartered by, and fixated upon the body, its vulnerabilities, pain, and disappearance' (Blau 1992, 122). The introductory material sung by the Gahaka includes a self-admonition in Sanskrit to abandon thoughts of the body in order to accommodate those of devotion: 'Oh mind, restrain yourself from playing lustful games; engage in prayers to Lord Narasimha, who killed the demon king with his terrible claws.' In theatre, though, even devotional theatre, ironically it is only through the elaborately framed display and observation of human bodies in action that this aim can be approached. Hiranyakashipu himself has acquired his boon through mastery of his body and demonstrates this mastery as he whirls up and down the treacherous mancha. Prahlada is quick to share this mastery and, as the narrative progresses, his more fragile body is the focus of attention and abuse. A parallel with the Christian miracle plays in which future saints undergo physical abuse and achieve martyrdom suggests itself, as do performances of the martyrdom of Shi'a saints in the Iranian T'aziyeh; but there are important differences. The boy playing Prahlada undergoes exhausting and demanding physical tests, but the character 'Prahlada' is always already protected by his faith. 'The Suffering Body' of the Christian and Shi'a tradition, in which Christ's or Hussein's sufferings provide a model for the sanctity of all human suffering and mortification of the flesh as intimately linked to holiness (Bynum 1991, 3; Greenblatt 1997, 223), is never on view here, Hiranyakashipu's efforts notwithstanding. It is Hiranyakashipu, not Prahlada, whose body is rent apart, and he achieves salvation through deadly contact with a furious embodiment of godhead denied, not by sufferings in the support of the divine.

SOCIAL DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE: THE PRAHLADA NATAKA AND ORISSAN FAMILY CRISES

As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note in their studies of the relationship of metaphor to the body's experience, metaphoric resonances may shift across time (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Few in the village audiences of Ganjam today would associate a performance of Prahlada nataka with the adharmic conditions of the nineteenth century. What metaphoric resonance, then, might account for the form's current popularity? What could be the source of this resonance in lived lives?

No women perform in Prahlada nataka, yet women always form at least half of the audience and seem to enjoy the form with particular relish. When I asked women why this would be so, more than one replied that it is 'a story about a family' (1982-83, 1993, personal communication). It is notable that, in performance, the role of Lilavati (Prahlada's mother, Hiranyakashipu's wife) looms much larger than in the puranic sources or, for that matter, in the written texts used for the Prahlada nataka itself. She pleads with her son to back down in his rebellious resistance to his father's authority; she pleads with her husband to abate his anger and not destroy the family by killing their only child.

LILAVATI. Don't torment your father. Accept his advice.
Abandon these prayers to Shrihari.

I am your mother. Please, hear what I say.
Oh son, I beg you, be wise.
PRAHLADA. Have you no fear, opposing Shrihari?
KING. Stop all this chatter and fall at my feet!
Or you haven't a hope of staying alive.
PRAHLADA. Cut off my head; roll it on the ground!
I cannot abandon Hari's name.
LILAVATI. If he prays to Hari in his madness,
It does you no mortal harm.
What glory could you earn by killing a child?
It would only bring you shame.
KING. I will surely kill him if his mind's on Sowri.
Don't dare contradict my aim.

She is the designated peacemaker in a scenario that does not allow for a peaceful resolution. Sometimes, finding strength in crisis, 'she' will physically pick up her husband and remove him from their son (this draws laughter); other times, she will be tossed onto the ground from the top step of the mancha as her husband's rage grows more and more intractable (this draws tears).

These scenes, more than any others, are the ones that are repeated when a team has to stretch out its performance. They replay, in an exaggerated, nightmarish form, the most typical 'social drama ' (see Turner 1986, 105) of the modern Ganjam household: the son disobeys the father's authority and turns his back on a family's traditional life; the father is driven to punish his son out of feelings of anger and duty; as the punishments escalate, the mother is trapped between father and son as the designated peacemaker (see Freeman 1979, 144). I now believe that this ability to build mythic narrative on a recognizable (however excessive) image of the Orissan family in turmoil plays an important role in the drama's continuing popularity. It is not uncommon to see wives glancing at their husbands in knowing recognition of a too-familiar dynamic brought to its disastrous conclusion or to see small boys snuggled in their father's arms watching the nightmare unfold.

As the play is performed now, Prahlada significantly dances both in the 'hard' masculine style of his 'father' and in the 'softer' feminine style of his 'mother' (albeit reinscribed on a male body). The Natyasastra stresses that the embodiment of human behaviour is not complete without both styles: hard and soft, male and female. The play's action, as embodied in these dances, includes the gendering of Prahlada's body, conducted as a contest between his parents and their contrasting approaches to life. Prahlada plays at using his body in both the stereotyped and theatrically coded male and female ways, while rejecting important aspects of both the male and female ethoi embodied in those forms, all the while maintaining his allegiance to a godhead that is, ultimately, beyond name, body, or gender.

I have so far given scant attention to one very important character, and that is Narasimha. Though the possession of the actor/priest's body by the godhead may be and sometimes is simulated (see Emigh 1996, 59-60), I have no reason to doubt that the performer frequently passed into an alternative state of consciousness. This is how Arjuna Sataphathy, a priest who cares for and in performance wears the oldest Narasimha mask in Ganjam, describes his sensations when he begins to feel his body taken over by Narasimha's energy:

> When I first put on the mask, my legs tremble, my knees and thighs tremble, too. My body becomes very heavy and my neck and face become like fire. My eyes burn. My whole body takes on a different form that I can't describe. Once the mask is on, I lose the sense of my body. All the other members of the troupe stand by to restrain me. Sometimes, they say, twenty-five people catch hold of me, and still they can't control me (1983, personal communication).

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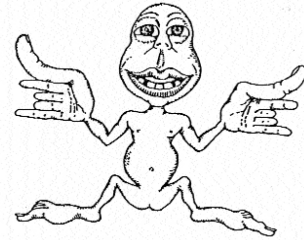
A 'homunculus' representing the relative sensitivity of the body's surface area as is mapped in the somatosensory cortex. Missing from this picture are the genitalia (which would be larger than normal in proportion to the body) and an oversized tongue. The latter is also a common feature of Narasimha masks and other apotropaic masks found in various parts of the world.



Who or what, then, is Narasimha? A god, an avatar, a specific manifestation of Vishnu's righteous wrath, a link to tribal deities, a hybrid of performer/priest/icon/and divine presence? He is all of these things, and, most particularly, as I have argued elsewhere, the trance behaviour evident in Prahlada nataka performances replicates that used in earlier performative traditions of Tantric Shaivism that depend upon the presence of masked Shakti figures (Emigh 1996, 84-95). Indeed, the desia nata repertoire includes a similar trance for Kali as she confronts Mahiravana, the Jalantara area itself has a rich Shakti tradition of Shakti masking, the Narasimha story has important analogues to the story of Darika and Kali, and the most common term for entering Narasimha's trance is Kalisi lagiba—to be touched by Kali (Dhiren Dash, personal communication, 1983). The importance of the trance possession in performance, and the potential 'wildness' of the trance, seem to have gained added significance and performative scope as the syncretic Prahlada nataka moved from court to town to village.

As David Napier was the first to point out, though, in his exaggerated leonine features— teeth bared, nostrils flared, and eyes bulging—Narasimha shares an iconographic kinship, not only with Shakti figures and the Kirtimukha icons that mark Shaivite temple doors and protect Balinese corpses on their way to the burial ground, but also with chthonic and ultimately apotropaic figures found in archaic Greece and elsewhere (Napier 1986). I would add to Napier's list demonic figures from Japan to Europe and the New World, as well as figures from New Guinea to the American Northwest. While it has been pointed out that the expressions of such figures echo the threat displays of animals of prey (Oohashi 1987), Napier goes on to remark the even more striking similarity of these figures to the 'homunculi' that Wilder Penfield made from the way in which neurons are dedicated to monitoring the body's tactile sensations and proprioceptive movement in the somatosensory and motor cortexes of the brain (Penfield and Rasmussen 1950; Emigh 1996, 70-4, 102-3).

I believe that the implication of these similarities in iconography is that these figures, before wildly divergent cultural values are overlaid (ones that may say a good bit about the way in which the body fits into the dominant cultural ethos—however contested that may be) are first and foremost images of pure, unmediated sensation. In the narrative of the Prahlada nataka and in its puranic sources, once Narasimha is introduced to the world, he threatens the stability, not just of the Daityas, but of Indra's kingdom as well, and he must be calmed by the innocent Prahlada (or, in an alternate, anti-Vaishnavite purana, contained by Shiva's power). As the performer/priest loses social consciousness, he becomes, in effect, all body. The masked figure of Narasimha, with its huge head, accentuated mouth and tongue, and (as the narrative reminds us) murderously powerful hands, is fashioned in the image of the mind's own knowledge of bodily sensation itself, monitored in what neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has called the body-minded brain (Damasio 1994). But this is simply to reverse the flow of Upanishadic wisdom that teaches that microcosm and macrocosm must embody each

other.

THREATS TO THE FORM'S SURVIVAL

New conditions in Ganjam—the increasing agricultural cycle, the declining role of barter within the economy, the economic lure of cities and foreign lands, the desire and compulsion for children to regularly attend school, and the gradual access to television—are placing new strains on the capacity of Prahlada nataka to survive. Most of the actors are paid a token fee at best and expenses have always outstripped income; gurus live in poverty and sustain the form out of religious devotion, civic pride, and the joy of virtuoso performance. Ironically, the greatest threat to the form's continuance now comes from an attribute that has given it much of its resilience in the past: its reliance on a child actor in one of the two leading roles. While this has historically provided training for actors who would go on to play Hiranyakashipu and the Gahaka and act as gurus, it is now particularly difficult to recruit boys able to play the difficult role of Prahlada. Prahlada nataka has long been rumoured to be a dying form of theatre, yet it is sustained because of the rich experience it offers to those who perform and view it. In January of 1994, two hundred and fifty gurus, leading performers, and company manages came together in the Ganjam capital of Chhatrapur under a grant from the Indian national Sangeet Natak Akademi, to devise ways to sustain the form in the future. Its surrogations are not over; its genealogy is still being created.

Any student of Indian performance is met by a striking paradox. On the one hand, there is a reverence for tradition and a rhetoric of purity that accompanies artistic practice. The inclusion of Sanskrit slokas and use of Carnatic ragas in the Prahlada nataka are symptomatic of that yearning for purity, as is the Gahaka's self-mocking calls for an attitude of chaste devotion. But this rhetoric of the chaste and pure, this regard for sastric authority, has always masked a remarkable, fecund ability to renew, to invent, and to invent especially by combining elements from disparate sources, mixing story-telling with ritual enactment, humour with devotion, philosophical concerns with physical pleasure. The result has been the generation of hundreds, perhaps thousands of specific genres, each with its own conventions, narratives, movement codes, music, costuming, approaches to acting, and patron/audience arrangements. This welter of forms, this extraordinary cultural richness, derives as much from a genius for syncretic innovation as from a valuation of tradition. Hybridization takes place in social circumstances in which interests are often at odds and power is not equally shared. In tracking performative histories in India, then, it is necessary to look both at the conditions under which hybrid forms have emerged and how they have been sustained, taking cognisance of the shifting constellations of forces involved, asking to what effect these hybrid forms first emerged, at what human and artistic cost they have been sustained, and for whose enjoyment and benefit they endure. The Prahlada nataka provides a striking example of the richness and complexity of such histories.

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Notes

1 While Rama Krishna Deva Chhotaray is the attributed author, the actual authorship is in dispute, as noted below. The versions of the Prahlada and Narasimha narrative as set down in the Mahabharata and in eighteen different puranas, as well as some prototypes for the story, are summarized by Deborah Soifer (1991, 73-111), who has drawn extensively on the work of Paul Hacker (1959). The centrality of the child Prahlada in the story emerges most strongly in the Vishnu and Bhagavata puranas. The late (seventeenth century) Vishnu keshari purana, written in Oriya by Maha Devidasa, is frequently cited by Orissans familiar with the puranic literature, and Bambar Kotana's Telugu translation of the Bhagavata purana in the seventeenth century had a great impact, but none of the puranic sources are close enough to the narrative structure of the performed text to emerge as a definitive immediate source (P. C. Misra, personal communication, 1982-83).

2 The following Prahalada nataka troupes were found (along with their gurus), or said, to be active as of January 1994 in the Ganjam District of Orissa, unless otherwise indicated. Some, of course, are more active than others. The list is still tentative and, despite attempts at accuracy, no doubt has errors.

1. Badagada #1 (Simanchala Patro)
2. Badagada #2 (Rama Chandra Badatiya)
3. Bahadaguda via Bhismagiri (Khalli Behera)
4. Ballipadar (Maheshwara Rana)
5. Bomkei (Trinath Pradhan)
6. Bhusandapala via Belaguntha (Nanda Dora)
7. Chhanameri via Digapahandi (Khalli Behera)
8. Chaudhury Tikarpada via Khariaguda (Trinath Sahu, Kasinath Sahu)

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9. Chikarada via Golanthara (Khalli Behera)
10. Dauni via Nuapada (Dasari Trinath)
11. Dekhali via Padmanabhapur (Khalli Behera)
12. Gadagovindapur via Nuapada#1 (Maheswara Rana)
13. Gadagovindapur via Nuapada#2 (Krishna Chandra Sahu, Dasa Reddy)
14. Ganganapur #1 at/PO Jhadabai, via K. S. Nagar (P. Ganga Dora)
15. Ganganapur #2 (Pahali Behera, Manglu Behera)
16. Garhagovindapur near Nuapada (Maheshwara Rana)
17. Garhagovindapur #2 (Dasa Reddy, Krishna Chandra Sahu)
18. Gaudagam via Nuapada (Lalmohan Satapathy)
19. Gazia Kamagaon at/PO Borigam via Nimakhandi (Dasari Trinath)
20. Gaunju via Gopalpur-on-Sea (Raghunath Satapathy)
21. Gopinathpur Sasan near Kullada (Maheshwara Rana, Prapulla Chandra Sathy)
22. Gothagam via Surungi (Bhalu Pradhan)
23. Hugalapata via Nimakhandi (Dukhishyam Swain, Maya Swain)
24. Humma (Simanchala Patro)
25. Indragada at/PO Vijaya Laxmi Saranpur via Bellaguntha (Rama Chandra Badatiya)
26. Jadadhara via Kullada
27. Jayantapur via Girisola (Arjun Panigrahi)
28. K. Karadakana#1 (Lalmohana Satapathy)
29. K. Karadakana#1 (Trinath Pradhan, Anchala Pradhan)
30. Kadapada via Jagannath Prasad (Trinath Pradhan, Anchala Pradhan)
31. Karachuli via Buguda (Rama Chandra Badatiya)
32. Kavi Surya Nagar (Nabaghana Parida)
33. Kelajhuri near Gaudagaon (Anchala Pradhan)
34. Khajipalisasan via Pratappur (Dasa Reddy)
35. Khanduru #1 via Polasara (Kasinath Sahu)
36. Khanduru #2 (Pitabash Tripathy)
37. Kharnipada near Nuapada #1 (Krishna Chandra Sahu)
38. Kharnipada #2 (Rama Badatiya)
39. Khajuria via Golanthara (Surendra Sasmal)
40. Khukundia at/PO K. Nuagada via Gangapur (Rama Chandra Badatiya)
41. Konochhai via Aska
42. Lembahai via Kullada (Krishna Chandra Sahu, Hari Pradhan)
43. Leakhai at/PO Kolothia via Chikiti (Krishna Chandra Sahu)
44. Mandala (AP) (Trinath Sahu)
45. Maulabhanja via Digapahandi (Rama Chandra Badatiya, Binayak Sahu)
46. Nalabanta via Aska (Trinath Pradhan, Simanchala Patro)
47. Palakasenda via Gangapur #1 (Maheswara Rana, Vijaya Kumar Rana)
48. Palakasenda via Gangapur #2 (Laxmana Swain)
49. Pannada via Bhismagiri (Trinath Pradhan, Anchala Pradhan)
50. Podampur at/PO Dasmunduli via Seragada (Nanda Dora)
51. Podampur via Badagada (Simanchala Patro)
52. Palakashenda via Gangapur (Maheshwara Rana)
53. Sana Kelajhuri via Nuapada (Trinath Pradhan, Anchala Pradhan)
54. Satapentha Gopalpur via Seragada #1 (Laxmana Swain)
55. Satapentha Gopalpur via Seragada #2 (Rama Chandra Badatiya)
56. Sidheswara via Ballipadar (Govinda Patra)
57. Sundhipali via Digapahandi (Simanchala Patro)
58. Talasingi via Padmanabhapur (Upendra Parida)
59. Titagam at/PO Solabhagapentha via Surungi (Trinath Pradhan)
60. Vijaya Laxmi Narayanpur via Nuapada (Rama Chandra Badatiya)

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Active troupes outside of Ganjam
61. Kaviti (Udankaitha), Srikakulum, Andhra Pradesh (Murali Das)
62. Mundala via Kanchili, Srikakulum, Andhra Pradesh (Trinath Sahu)
63. Tatauru at/PO Virlingi via Ichhapuram, Srikakulum, Andhra Pradesh (B. Laxmiya). Note: performs version in Telugu
Inactive troupes with masks or other related materials in Ganjam:
64. Baulagam via Ganjam (Raghunath Satapathy, Arjun Satapathy)*
65. Baulajuri at/PO Dengapadar via Dengapadar
66. Bhismagiri
67. Churungapur near Dhigapandhi
68. Dengapadar via Ballipadar
69. Dhalapura via Seragada
70. Dharakota
71. Gobara (Rama Chandra Badatiya)
72. Gudiali
73. Kaliaguda via Gobara
74. Puintala via Ganjam #1 (Ganysham Pandara, Simanchala Patro)
75. Puintala #2 (Kageshura Mahapatra)
76. Radhanagar at/PO Maulabhanja via Digapahandi
77. Sodaka at/PO Kanachai via Buguda
78. Sorisamuli via Bellaguntha (Rama Chandra Badatiya)
79. Sunathara via Bhatkumarda (Arjun Panigrahi, Trinath Pradhan)
80. Tentuapada via Chikiti (Arjun Panigrahi)
* Since reactivated

3 The translation of this and all subsequent passages from the play is by the late Dhiren Dash and myself, based upon a literal translation made by Dash in 1983 and further developed under a grant from the Asian Cultural Council in 1985. A more detailed description of the theatrics of Prahlada nataka, along with a treatment of the relationship of trance performances in Bali to those of Orissa, may be found in Emigh 1996, 35-104.

4 While statuary dating back to around the twelfth century suggests, at least to my eyes, that masks of Narasimha were being made and worn even then, and there are records of Sanskrit performances of the narrative during these times, the oldest currently performed version of the story is in the village of Mellatur, in the formerly Telugu speaking Thanjavur District of Tamilnadu. Written by Melattur Venkataram Sastri in approximately 1800, the Prahlada charitram, has become the heartpiece of the bhagavata mela nataka repertoire of Melattur. It seems to have constituted a continuation of a still older tradition in the area: a version of the Prahlada story in yakshagana style is attributed to Vijayaraghava Naik in the seventeenth century (Durga 1979, 38, 54). For more on the bhagavata mela tradition, see Raghavan 1937; Jones 1963; and Ramadhan 1979; I am indebted to S. Natarajan for his kind assistance, patience, and personal communication while I was viewing the bhagavata mela nataka in Melattur in 1983. The traditions in Thanjavur have strong historical links to the development of the brahmin bhagavatar tradition in Kuchipudi Village, located near Srikakulum (in what is now Andhra Pradesh), and are thought to be offshoots of that tradition dating back to the migration of brahmin Bhagavatars to Thanjavur after the demise of the Vijayanagara kingdom in 1565. Though it is not certain what role the Prahlada story played in the earlier kuchipudi repertoire, what is clear is that around 1880 two dramatic versions of the Prahlada and Narasimha narrative that had been written about 1865 for the popular Telugu theatre and are attributed to Vedala Tirunarayana and Tiruvalikeli Ramanaja were combined and placed into the kuchipudi repertoire

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as Prahlada charitram yakshaganamu, securing for the old story a prominent place in the ongoing repertoire. For a general survey of South Indian religious dramas see Durga 1979; for more on kuchipudi see Vatsyayan 1980, 49-64 and Ramadhan 1979; I am also indebted to several members of the Sri Siddhendra Kalakshetra, in Kuchipudi Village for their personal communications in 1982-83, and to Lalita Arudra for a translation of selections from the current text.

5 Up until the 1950s, performances of Prahlada nataka were also performed in Telugu, and I found one very remote troupe, in Tatauru near Totagaon in Andhra Pradesh, that still performs that way. Most of the gurus I talked to, though, are of the opinion that the text used there is a translation back into the Telugu language.

6 I have pieced together this narrative from interviews with family members, former court officials, and senior gurus. Another possibility exists. Durga Dambaru Das was an ayurvedic practitioner and, by the end of his life, came to be known as a Doctor to Kings (raja vaidya). While it is likely he acquired this title later, it is also possible that he traded access to the script for his services. It may also be significant to the story that, as a medical practitioner of this time period, he would have had ready access to opium; the zamindar, like many of his peers, was addicted to the substance.

7 This is an approximate genealogy of the gurus of Prahlada nataka, tracing lines of transmission from guru to siswa (place names are parentheses, alternate names in brackets):

Durga Giriwar and Durga Dambaru Das [jointly]
–Bangali Das (Hugalapata, Dehkali, Khajuria, Gazia Kamagaon, Gangapur, Gudiali)
–Khanda Khadanga (Dehkali, Bomakei)
–Jagannath Sahu (Bomakei)
–Kora Patra (Bomakei)
Simanchala Patro (Bomakei, Bharagarha, Huma, Nalabanta, Podampur via Badagada, Sundhipali) + Trinath Pradhan
–?Govinda Patra (Khajuria, Sidheswara)
–Surendra Sasmal (Khajuria)
–? Rabindra Patra (Talasinghi)
–? Krishna Kansari's father
–Rama Badatiya (Bharagarha, Khanipada, Sorisamuli)
–Pitabash Tripathy (Gohangu, Khandur)
–Binayak Sahu (Mala Bhanja)
–Krishna Kansari [Krishna Chandra Sahu] (Bellagunta, Leakhai, Garhagovindapur, Khanipada, Kesipursasan)
–Dasa Reddy (Garhagovindapur)
–?Arjuna Badatiya (Bhismagiri)

Durga Giriwar Das
–Ganashyam Badatiya (Nalabanta) :
–Kaliya Pradhan [Kaliya Kampo]
–Maheshwara Rana (Palakashenda, Ballipadar, Gopinathpur Sasan, Garhagovindapur)
–Bhima Gouda (Dehkali)
–Khali Behera (Chikarada, Dehkali, Bahadagarha) Khanipada, Chhanameri) + Iswara Pradhan?
–Ganapati Pradhan (Dehkali)
–Sahibi Bisoi (Dehkali, Gangapur)
–P. Ganga Dora (Gangapur) + Bangali Das

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–Pahalhi Behera (Gangapur)
–Manglu Behera (Gangapur)
–Dasari Trinath (Dauni, Gazia Kamagaon)
–Kesari Panda (Chaudhuri Tikapada)
–Trinath Pradhan (Nalabanta, Bomakei, Titagaon) + Kora Patra,
Laxmana Satapathy
– Anchala Pradhan (Kelejhuri)
– Trinath Sahu (Chaudhuri Tikapada, Mandala)
–Kasinath Sahu (Chaudhuri Tikapada, Khandur)
–Dukhishyam Swain (Hugalapata)
–Maya Swain (Hugalapata)
–Chaudheri Parida (Kabisuryanagar)
–Nabagana Parida (Kabisuryanagar)
–Khanu Dora (Podampur, Karadakana)
–Khanda Shivalu (Podampur)
–Nanda Kishor Shivalu (Podampur)
–Nanda Dora (Bhusandapala, Podampur)
–Laxmana Satapathy (Karadakana, Satapentha Gopalpur)

–Lalmohana Satapathy (Karadakana, Gaudagaon)
–Bhalu Pradhan (Gothagaon)
–Laxmana Swain (Satapentha Gopalpur)
–Krishna Khadanga (Lembhai)
–Biswa Bihari Khadanga (Dharakota)

DAMBARU DAS
–Iswara Pradhan (Jahkamakipali)
–Bankini Satapathy (Gaunju, Baulagaon)
–Raghunath Satapathy (Gaunju, Khajuria, Kamagaon,
Mala Bhanja) + Iswara Pradhan
–Ulla Parida (Tankachhai, Khajipalisasan)
–Ghandu Panigrahi (Baulagaon)
–Arjuna Panigrahi (Tentuapada, Sunatha)
–Govrinda Patra (Sidheswara)
–Krishna Maharana (Sidheswara)
–Trinath Das (Gazia Kamagaon)

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Hanne M.de

The history of the rural natakam or 'drama' in North Tamilnadu

This essay is an attempt to reconstruct the emergence and development into a distinct performance style of the natakam or (company) drama,[1] a contemporary popular theatre genre in the northern parts of Tamilnadu. The natakam evolved from the assimilation of local theatrical

The emergence of the modern plays and an urban-elite Tamil theatre should be seen against the background of a much wider process involving the rediscovery of the 'classical' Tamil literature and the 'modernization' and

forms and practices that had already probably come into existence around the 1880s and novel organizational and theatrical features, which seem to have been borrowed originally from touring companies that regularly visited the Madras Presidency from about the same time. Novel features that were incorporated into the emerging natakam genre were, for instance, the management of theatre companies as business enterprises, the practice of ticket sales, and the introduction of new visual stage settings and props borrowed from the nineteenth-century Victorian stage, such as the use of an elevated platform or proscenium stage, the 'drop curtain', painted back drops and wings,[2] the use of Western musical instruments, such as the harmonium and clarinet, special costumes, and the merging of a melodramatic style of acting with an indigenous performance style emphasizing the expression of emotions through music and dance. Furthermore, they included special effects and 'showmanship' in the form of electrical coloured lights, flying arrows, acrobatic feats, virtuoso dance and fight scenes and, finally, the casting of women performers in sexually provocative roles.

The birth of this novel, commercial natakam

Hanne M.de Bruin works in the fields of South Indian theatre and cultural studies. She has published a monograph on the Kattaikkuttu theatre (Kattaikkuttu, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1999)and translated an all-night kattaikkuttu play, together with her husband, P. Rajagopal. She is affiliated with the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands, and works together with her husband, P. Rajagopal, as a facilitator and producer of innovative plays for the Tamilnadu Kattaikkuttu

genre was favoured by the changing economic and social conditions in the countryside. Until about the 1880s dramatic performances had been the prerogative of a limited number of (caste) lineages, whose members held locality specific rights-cum-obligations to perform on particular occasions. In many instances, these rights entitled the holders to a fixed share of the harvest or to the agricultural produce of a piece of land or maniyam (see also the interview with P. K. Bhupati at the end of this issue). The transformation of the rural economy into a cash economy led to the gradual falling apart of these local systems of patronage which until then had provided the economic basis for rural theatrical forms, leaving many of the hereditary rural performers in an economically and socially precarious situation. It also led to a dissociation of 'traditional' or pre-modern forms of theatre from their organic embedding into the socio-economic and ritual organization of villages, and, consequently, to a degree of secularization and commercialization of the rural theatre.

In contrast to the theatre of the urban elite, which emerged around the same time (see also Baskaran in this issue), the popular natakam did not qualify as a legitimate art form in the eyes of the Tamil intelligentsia. Its lack of recognition and social prestige can be attributed to a number of factors, among them the bad reputation of the popular stage,[3] the fact that natakam catered to the 'lowly' taste of the rural masses, and prejudices against a professional involvement in the arts in general, and the involvement of women performers in dramatic performances in particular.[4] The contribution of professional rural actresses to the development of the Tamil theatre has been ignored in most of the academic literature. Acting remained taboo for 'respectable' women, especially when it was on a professional basis with the aim of providing a livelihood. Consequently, only devadasis who were already involved in rural dance performances and who were from a mixed caste descent, and marginalized women from a nomadic background entered the rural theatre as professional actresses. Even today few actresses can be found on the professional stage. The status of women performers remains low and their profession still tends to be looked upon as an immoral business.[5]

'INTERCULTURAL' CONTACTS: WESTERN EDUCATION AND TOURING COMPANIES

Theatre historians have generally assumed that the novel features and theatre practices were imported into the nineteenth century Tamil theatre through at least two different channels: firstly, Western colonial education, which stimulated the emergence of the urban-based, elite Tamil stage referred to above, and secondly, the performances by visiting touring companies.[6] Colonial education was instrumental in providing models of classical Western verse and prose plays and, through English translations, in providing access to Sanskrit models of drama.[7] During the second half of the nineteenth century the first modern Tamil plays appeared, many of them in print.[8] They were written by urban-based, upper-caste, often non-brahmin intellectuals, who had enjoyed a Western-style education. These modern plays have been hailed as a turning point in the history of the Tamil stage (Perumal 1981, 135). Their scripts and their staging (if they were meant to be performed)[9] followed newly formulated rules which set out the format and production of the plays, the duration of performances, and the decent standards of behaviour required of actors and spectators so as to raise the abysmal state of the Tamil theatre and to make it into true art. Performances took place indoors in sabhas or public halls with a proscenium stage, and were therefore sometimes referred to as sabha natakam. The intellectual exponents proudly called themselves 'amateurs' so as to demarcate their 'unselfish' involvement in the theatre from that of their professional counterparts who played for financial gain.

Many of these early Tamil plays used, for the first time in the Tamil literary history, a new dramatic format in the form of prose dialogues. Prose, in contrast to poetry set to music that was the medium of the popular stage, came to be considered a sign of

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Natakam or drama performance in Sevilimedu village (February 1998): a farmer's cart serves as proscenium stage. Photograph courtesy Hanne M.de Bruin.

The birth of this novel, commercial natakam genre was favoured by the changing

'modernity' and 'rationality'. Being closer to the language used in everyday life, prose stood also for the new 'realism' that the modern theatre strove after both with regard to the format of its plays and the acting style of the players who performed them.[10] The emphasis on the use of prose in many of the early modern Tamil plays led to the development of a specific, oratory style of Tamil prose, whose form and 'purity' were made into political issues by the incipient Dravidian movement (see below). The production of this style of prose (sometimes referred to as metaippeccu or 'stage speech') is one of the elements which found its way from the urban, intellectual stage into the popular natakam style of performance.

The emergence of the modern plays and an urban-elite Tamil theatre should be seen against the background of a much wider process involving the rediscovery of the 'classical' Tamil literature and the 'modernization' and 'Tamilization' of the regional society and regional politics. Initiated as an intellectual enterprise, the modernization-cum-Tamilization process of Tamil society later on acquired popular support and came to be known as the Dravidian movement. The early Dravidian movement emphasized the uniqueness of the Tamil language, personified as a divine mother (Tamilttay), the Tamil identity of the land (Tamilnatu or Tiravita natu) and its inhabitants, and the special quality of Tamil religiosity. It juxtaposed these to Aryan (North Indian) languages, identities, and religion (Ramaswamy 1998, 13-34 and passim). This juxtaposition permeated into the cultural and political life of the State. It led to a polarization between brahmins, who were equated with the North Indian, Aryan influence, and non-brahmins or Dravidians. In combination with a rural-urban cultural divide, the brahmin/non-brahmin (or Aryan/Dravidian) opposition created a painful rift in the Tamil field of the performing arts.[11] The effects of these oppositions continue to have their impact on the exponents and spectators of the rural theatre (e.g. de Bruin 2000a, 98-113).

Commercial touring companies from Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh

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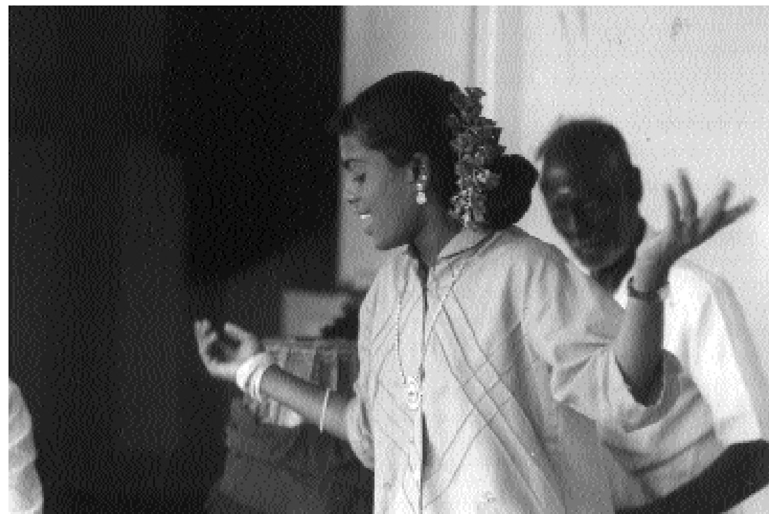
visited the larger cities of present-day Tamilnadu in between 1880 and 1935. In his history of the Kannada stage, Ranganath refers to a visit to Tamilnadu by a troupe of the playwright Krishnamacharya from Bellary in about 1883. The troupe staged plays in Telugu. The Palace Company, which was patronized by the Maharaja of Mysore, toured Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu around the turn of the century. The fact that this troupe staged public shows for which tickets were sold is evidence of its commercial nature (Ranganath 1960, 106).[12] The Gubbi Company (1884-1954) from Tumkur District in Karnataka performed in Madras in 1923. It toured Tamilnadu again in 1926, performing in Tamil and Telugu in 1932-34. The settings, scenes, and equipment made for the Gubbi Company's Golden Jubilee production of the play Kurukshetra in 1934 involved a budget of more than thirty thousand rupees (Ranganath 1960, 111).[13] In addition to companies from Karnataka and Andhra, Parsi and Marathi groups, among them the famous Sangli Dramatic Company, performed in Thanjavur and Madras. The performances by visiting companies inspired urban-based intellectuals and other theatre enthusiasts to translate the format and content of the novel plays presented by these companies into Tamil and to set up their own amateur dramatics.[14] Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar (1873-1964), an exponent of the early urban-elite Tamil theatre, mentions in one of his books on the history of the Tamil stage that the play Indra Sabha, first staged in 1889, was a Tamil version of the famous play by the same name performed by a Parsi theatre company which had visited Madras many years before (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998, 72). While the literature thus testifies to the impact of Western education and of the visiting, commercial companies on the development of the urban-elite Tamil stage, there are hardly any descriptions of the exact form of the performances by these companies, or of the local reception of these 'cross-lingual' performances and their dissemination into the rural hinterland.

In order to arrive at a more nuanced representation of the history of the modern Tamil theatre the interlinked processes of cultural contact, transmission, transformation, and 'hybridization' that were set into motion by the import of novel elements and practices at a time of economic, social, and political change and that resulted in the emergence of new forms of theatre, need to be investigated. Such an investigation is barred by the paucity of written and oral sources, in particular when their subject matter concerns the popular, rural stage that enjoyed so little social prestige. Fortunately, popular materials, such as printed chapbooks of plays, handbills, and advertisements of early performances, have been preserved and are being made accessible through the services of, for instance, the Roja Muthiah Research Library in Chennai. These unique materials remain largely unexplored, while the time to collect



A young natakam actress (M. Maheshvari) during a rehearsal at the premises of the Tamilnadu Kattaikuttu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam, a grassroots level association that promotes the interests of rural performers (November 1998). Photograph courtesy

oral accounts of those who have observed the birth of the popular, rural natakam at close quarters is running out rapidly. This essay attempts to fill in some of the details.

INTERFACE AND TRANSMISSION

While it seems likely that the touring theatre groups from outside Tamilnadu stood model for a new form of theatre and for managing theatre companies on a commercial basis, one wonders how the transmission of organizational and performance features took place, which elements were imitated, why, and by whom. Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar describes how an enterprising English-educated government official in Thanjavur, Govindasami Rao, was inspired by performances in Marathi by the visiting Sangli Dramatic Company from Pune.[15] Govindasami Rao taught a group of performers in his hometown the Tamil versions of some of the purana stories performed by the Sangli Company. Stimulated by the commercial success of these performances, Govindasami Rao formed his own theatre company, the Manamohana Nataka Sabha, and began producing his own plays in Tamil. These plays appear to have been a kind of free translation of the Marathi versions. Govindasami Rao taught the outline of these stories orally to his performers, who were expected to construct their own prose vacanams (monologues and dialogues) appropriate to the character they were to act. As songs he used existing songs in Marathi, Telugu and Tamil which had appeared in print. The Manamohana Nataka Sabha performed in Madras before it fell apart and split into several different dramatic companies (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998, 105-109). This particular company of Govindasami Rao inspired in turn Sambanda Mudaliyar, a judge by profession, who started a dramatic club, the Sukuna Vilasa Sabha, in Madras in 1891 (Perumal 1981, 148).

Local entrepreneurial actors-cum-company managers constituted their own companies, including the well-known 'Boys' Companies', which were financed from the sales of tickets. Boys' companies recruited and trained young boys to sing and portray male and female roles.[16] We do not know much about the identity of the local managers and the performers of these early companies (their caste affiliation, the place they belonged to) nor do we know whether they had already had some kind of theatre training. One of the most famous managers of a Boys' Company, and a playwright in his own right, was Tu. Ta. Sankaradas Swamigal (1867-1922). He borrowed liberally from the folk theatrical tradition using plays on well-known puranic themes that he reworked into plays featuring a more literary style. He also produced translations from English and Sanskrit drama.[17]

LOCALIZATION

The immediacy with which Tamil theatre companies sprang up and imitated the organizational style and performance format of the visiting companies is indicative of the changing demands and expectations of local audiences. Within a relatively short time, spectators developed a taste for a new form of entertainment for which they were willing to pay a price, most probably because it symbolized a form of modernity, in addition to offering access to the spectacular, the exotic, and the erotic. Furthermore, this new form of commercial entertainment, being unrelated to performance rights, must have been extremely mobile and flexible; it cut across the traditional complexes of economic, ritual, and dramatic rights and obligations, linking localities, performance occasions, and performance genres to hereditary groups of performers and, consequently, to spectator communities. The mobility of the early Tamil companies must have been intra-regional, thanks to the well-developed, colonial transport infrastructure. It must have extended to the major cities and the larger provincial towns, such as Madras, Madurai, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Trichy, Salem, Coimbatore, Vellore, and Dharmapuri, and the larger villages in the Madras Presidency.

Regional natakam companies, which, I assume, were the direct successors of the

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touring companies from outside present-day Tamilnadu, rose to success during the 1930s and 1940s. With the advent of the popular Tamil-speaking film and the increasing possibilities to view films in rural areas from about the 1950s, the popularity of these regional companies appears to have diminished. Many of the bigger companies collapsed, or were assimilated into, smaller companies with fewer performers whose action radius was much more limited and which served the demands of local audiences. Subsequently, these smaller natakam companies took on some of the characteristics of the local theatrical scene, both with regard to their styles of performance and with regard to their economic functioning. Because of this process of 'localization', the contemporary natakam in Tamilnadu shows regional variations. For instance, natakam companies no longer operate on the basis of ticket sales in my fieldwork area. Instead they have adopted the locally current system of demanding remuneration in cash for their performances. The amount of the remuneration is subject to negotiations between the company and a sponsor. The sponsor may be an entire village, a street, and sometimes also an individual. In return for an appropriate commission, local 'brokers' or 'agents' negotiate performance contracts and engage performers for a season by paying them substantial amounts of 'advance money' (de Bruin 1999, 148-9). Performances of special natakam (or 'special drama'), which is prevalent in the Madurai region, are organized differently. For a special natakam performance individual actors, actresses, and musicians are invited to work together for the occasion. The remuneration of each performer is negotiated individually, often through the intermediary services of an 'agent' or a mediating organization, and the amount depends on the name, fame, and showmanship of a special natakam performer.[18]

The figure of the middleman came to the fore with the commercialization of the rural stage. The emergence of the first commercial theatres in India must have involved the services of quite a few intermediaries who financed companies and marketed their performances using the newly available printing technology and, perhaps, the trading networks maintained by Indian businessmen.[19] After the collapse of the system of local performance rights and obligations, brokerage became an integral part of the newly emerging performance market. Contemporary rural theatre companies in my fieldwork area, irrespective of their style, performance radius or former organic embedding into the ritual and social village context, have come to depend increasingly on the services of outside financiers and other middlemen.

INTERACTION BETWEEN THE LIVE STAGE AND THE FILM

While the popular stage of the 1930s served as the model for the early Tamil films, twenty years later it was the Tamil film, and in particular its songs, acting style, and camera techniques, which were widely imitated by the rural theatre. The popularity of the film, and the film music, stimulated the emergence of a special performance genre that came to be known as 'record dance'. A record dance presentation was sometimes included as an entre-act in the performances by regular natakam companies, but it could also be an individual event. Record dance could be performed by (retired) cinema actors and actresses, but most of the time it was done by small companies of itinerant performers. A boy and a girl dressed up as the leading male and female stars of a particular film, would dance and act to film music that had been recorded on a gramophone record, or, when these became available, on a cassette tape. Their performances often appear to have been much more explicit with regard to sexually enhancing details than what was allowed on the censured silver screen. In many villages this led to the banishment of the record dance by the local police.

The medium of the film has helped to transform verbally provocative action and acting styles belonging to the rural stage into strong visual images through the use of, for instance, close-ups. The subsequent recycling of dramatic material from the film back into the live stage offered the possibility of transforming these mediated visual

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images and actions again into real embodiment. The 'live' confrontations between male and female performers (including performers impersonating female roles) in contemporary natakam performances appear to enhance the 'reality content' of the sexual and sexist innuendoes evoked by the performers and relished by the predominantly young, male audiences, in ways similar to the spectatorial pleasures generated, for instance, by the American Jerry Springer TV shows. Furthermore, actors of the live popular stage cleverly play out the links between the film and regional politics through the use of the oratory style of prose, the imitation of the mannerisms that are the trade-mark of some of the celebrities of the silver screen, and the performance of popular film songs.[20]

The early influence of the film on the live stage is demonstrated, for instance, by a handbill dated 16 April 1954 announcing the performance of Virattiyaki in Attikanur Village by the company of V.C. Sampat from (the vicinity of) Kanchipuram. In addition to the three male star performers and the company's percussionist, P. K. Bhupati, who showed the handbill to me, the pamphlet prominently displays the portraits of two young women artists. They belong to the T. P. P. Party from Salem whose women members, so it says, have performed in cinematic pictures. The pamphlet describes the performance of the two actresses accompanied by two male performers, as one of 'spectacular dance and comedy' (tancum kamikkum veku tamash) in the very popular 'cinema style'.

The play Virattiyaki features the theme of a thyagi or someone who sacrifices his own interests for the service of his country. This theme was of course popularized during India's struggle for independence, but the Dravidian movement also used it to advertise Dravidian ideals. Virattiyaki belongs to a new type of play which, in contrast to the existing mythological plays, focused on secular, social (reform) themes and catered to growing sentiments involving the formation of national and regional identities (Baskaran 1981, 29-37).[21] The contemporary rural natakam repertoire is still characterized by these two types of plays: the mythological and historical ones and the plays on secular topics, which were dubbed 'novels' in my fieldwork area (de Bruin 1999, 105).[22]

Summarizing the discussion above, I have suggested that the big regional natakam companies, which were the imitators and direct successors of the visiting commercial companies from outside present-day Tamilnadu, provided the initial interface through which many visual 'Western' stage techniques and novel ways of management were transmitted deep into the local layers of the rural stage. The popular Tamil film provided the second, successive interface, through which novel elements filtered back into the live popular stage.

The success of the new natakam companies depended on the disappearance of the traditional systems of patronage, the transformation of the rural economy into a cash economy, and the emergence of a local performance market. The contacts between the modern urban-elite Tamil theatre and the popular natakam—two hybrid varieties of theatre that emerged during the same period of time but catered to the tastes of different audiences—appear to have been minimal. The difference in social status of their exponents and the general opinion which considered popular theatre as 'degraded', 'unrefined,' and the domain of the illiterate masses, seem to lie at the heart of the rural-urban, popular-elite rift which characterizes the contemporary field of the performing arts in Tamilnadu. Yet one element did get disseminated from the elite into the popular theatre through political activities and propaganda of the Dravidian movement targeting rural audiences. This was the use of a stylized form of oratory, 'purified' Tamil public speech (metaippeccu), which continues to be a feature of the contemporary natakam.

THE RECEIVING END: THE LOCAL PERFORMANCE SCENE

To conclude this essay I would like to take a closer look at the local performance scene,

Handbill announcing the performance of Virattiyaki in Attikanur village by the company of V. C. Sampat on Friday, 16 April 1954. In addition to the names and roles of the actors, the names of the musicians, 'PKB pati' (i.e. P. K. Bhupati; see interview at end of this issue) playing tabla and dholak and K. M. Kannan playing the harmonium, are prominently displayed.

which served as the breeding ground for the emergence of the popular natakam genre in North Tamilnadu. Little is known about the local forms of theatre that were in existence during the time that novel elements and stage practices reached the Tamil countryside. It was these local forms into which the new features and practices were incorporated, or—depending on the degree of agency one wishes to attribute to the new genre—from which the incipient natakam borrowed lavishly so as to create a new, hybrid genre. While most of the local forms were eventually assimilated into the natakam, and stopped existing as independent theatres, this was not the case for all forms of theatre. The emergence of natakam appears to have been instrumental to the development of kattaikkuttu or terukkuttu as a popular theatre with a distinct style of its own.

LOCAL COMPETITORS: KATTAIKKUTTU AND NATAKAM

Kattaikkuttu is the other fully-fledged popular theatre in the rural, northern districts of Tamilnadu and the southern parts of Andhra Pradesh, which form part of the same cultural area. Though the multiple origins of kattaikkuttu are shrouded in mystery, it cannot be excluded that its formation was informed also by intercultural contacts with performance forms and practices outside the Tamil-speaking area. Here I wish to draw attention to the use of wooden ornaments or kattai, which define the visual form and performance conventions of contemporary kattaikkuttu. This ornamentation is found not only in kattaikkuttu, but also in doddata, a rural folk theatre in North Karnataka (de Bruin 1999, 93), in the early Marathi theatre, which has been heavily influenced by the theatre of North Karnataka, and in the Prahlada nataka of Orissa (see the contributions by Veena Naregal and John Emigh [who refers to the kattai shoulder ornaments as 'yakshagana wings'] in this issue, and the accompanying illustrations depicting various kattai ornaments used in different genres). Natakam distinguishes itself from kattaikkuttu because it does not use kattai ornaments, nor the stage conventions associated with this ornamentation.

Contemporary natakam and kattaikkuttu vie for the favours of the same rural audiences. As a result of their competitive relationship both genres display remarkable differences, as well as similarities, in their organizational and dramatic modus operandi, and with regard to the objectives of their shows. The interconnectedness between these two forms is characterized by the contrasting processes of continuous borrowing and imitation of each other's successful dramatic and organizational features and strategies, on the one hand, and on the other hand, attempts to demarcate one genre stylistically and functionally from the other. For

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instance, kattaikkuttu includes a category of characters known as dress vesham. Instead of the heavy kattai ornaments, these characters wear a costume referred to as tires (from the English 'dress') consisting of a tunic-like outfit with epaulettes and sometimes a sort of cape at the back. Dress vesham characters follow conventions, for instance when entering into the performance area, similar to those practised in natakam and different from those employed by kattai characters in kattaikkuttu. The 'dress' costume appears to have been borrowed directly from the natakam genre, which in turn may have copied it from costume conventions prevalent in Marathi and Parsi touring companies that were influenced by the Victorian stage. When the popularity of the natakam soared to great heights during the 1930s, kattaikkuttu performers acquainted themselves with the natakam style of performance and incorporated plays in natakam style into their repertoires (de Bruin 1999, 106). As we saw above, natakam companies abandoned the practice of sponsoring their performances through the sales of tickets. Instead, they began accepting a remuneration for a performance from the principal sponsor, which is the conventional way in which contemporary kattaikkuttu performances are being financed. In addition to the appropriation of political venues, such as the meetings of political parties, exponents of natakam have tried to lay claims to (Hindu) religious performance venues that appear to have been the domain of kattaikkuttu and other ritual village performance genres. In response to this, kattaikkuttu performers have successfully appropriated the local Mahabharata repertoire and the local Mahabharata festivals, making them into exclusive performance venues for kattaikkuttu through a strategy of emphasizing the heroic (vira) and ritual character of their performances in response to changing audience demands, but also to distinguish them from natakam performances (de Bruin 1999, 111-29, 150). Perhaps as the result of the influence of the devadasi tradition, which went into the making of the contemporary natakam, this genre allows the expression of emotions through a more feminine, lasya style of performance that is not suitable to the outspoken heroic style characteristic of kattaikkuttu.

While kattaikkuttu used to be firmly rooted in the socio-economic and ritual organization of local villages, natakam appears to have been a truly 'novel', secular genre, which developed in response to an emerging performance market out of the merger of different local and extra-local forms. Yet, the secular nature of natakam does not prevent it from being performed on occasions related to Hindu religious festivals and events. Furthermore, natakam appears to have highlighted its exogenous elements, which were probably copied from visiting theatre companies, and, at a later stage, from the popular cinema, as symbols of modernity. At the same time the incipient natakam relied on the available literary, musical, and acting skills of local exponents of other genres to create a distinct style of its own.

OTHER RURAL PERFORMANCE GENRES

Interviews with older actors, actresses, and spectators reveal that at least three different kinds of rural dramatic performances, which were in existence during the early decades of the twentieth century in addition to kattaikkuttu, went into the making of the contemporary natakam. I will discuss them one by one.

I. Tevaratiyal natakam: theatre companies of rural devadasis

My data indicate that the practice of dedicating girls to temple deities must have been widespread in the rural parts of North Tamilnadu. While the rural devadasi tradition appears to have shared features with the devadasi tradition found at the level of more orthodox Hindu temples, it also differed in some important aspects.[23] One of the principal differences concerns the fact that rural devadasis were dedicated to the service of local, ferocious village goddesses or kiramatevatas, in contrast to their 'high culture' counterparts who were dedicated to the male deities presiding in 'brahmanical' temples. Perhaps because of the different way in which sacred power or 'the divine'

was being conceptualized and handled in religious village contexts, the ferocious kiramatevatas were embodied and made fully present only during the time of their annual festivals. The rural devadasis fulfilled central roles in the complex processes of embodiment and the evocation of 'divine presence'.[24]

According to my informants, some rural devadasis

Kattai ornamentation (crown, shoulder and breast ornaments) and accompanying make-up worn by a kattai vesham (P. Rajagopal in the role of Bhima) in kattaikkuttu. Photograph

worked as full-fledged actresses, in addition to carrying out their hereditary ritual and dramatic tasks that could include dance performances or sadirkkacheris. With the help of their male relatives they ran local theatre companies of which they were the owners. Performances by these companies were known as tevaratiyal natakam.[25] Tevaratiyal natakam companies consisted of about seven to eight women performers, some of whom would perform female roles as well as male roles, and the same number of male performers who were actors or musicians. Devadasi theatre

. . . the use of wooden ornaments or kattai, which define the visual form and

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Dress vesham characters follow conventions, for instance when entering into the performance area, similar to those practised in natakam and different from those employed by kattai characters in kattaikkuttu. The 'dress' costume appears to have been borrowed directly from the natakam genre,

Dress vesham in kattaikkuttu (P. Rajagopal in the role of Krishna, Perungattur Village, July 1988). Photograph courtesy Hanne M.de Bruin.

companies which had been famous in my fieldwork area during the 1920s and 1930s were those of Padur Kamalambal (officially called the Tulukanattamman Sabha), the company of Mannur Sarada and the company of Nelli Muttunayakammal. Their repertoires consisted of mythological and historical plays, such as Vellalarajan carittiram, Nala and Damayanti, Pavazhakkodi, Valli's Marriage (Valli tirumanam), Krishna lila, Alli and Arjunan, The Marriage of Sita (Cita kalyanam), Satya and Savitri (Cattiyan Cavitiri), Siruttondar, Harichandra, and Patukai pattapishekam. Performances took place at ground level, and an elaborate use was made of Carnatic music. They were financed both through traditional forms of patronage as well as through the income derived from the sales of entry tickets. [26]

While the involvement of devadasis in sadir or dance performances is a well-known fact, the involvement of rural devadasis in the popular theatre has received little academic attention. The existence of the tevaratiyal natakam has been overlooked—or perhaps obliterated—by the historians of the Tamil theatre, probably because the devadasi practice has never been wholeheartedly accommodated into the cultural history of Tamilnadu. To admit actual involvement in the tradition, of oneself or a close relative, is to invite certain social sanctions (for instance, with regard to the marriage prospects of daughters). The suppression of the devadasi tradition symbolizes the trauma of a cultural disinheritance, not only of the devadasis and other performers whose cultural practices were appropriated, but also of the Tamil people: the image of the devadasi lives on in the collective memory and fantasy, but her persona has been removed, by general consensus or so it seems, from public vision and public debate.

The question of where the tradition of tevaratiyal natakam came from remains open to investigation. Was it somehow related to the performances by the devadasis of Agamic temples?[27] Was it an existing local musical and theatrical tradition comparable to the kattaikkuttu tradition? Was it perhaps influenced by the earliest performances by touring theatre companies and/or, as one informant suggests, touring 'music parties' consisting of trained singers and musicians who gave concerts of Carnatic music in villages and provincial towns?[28]

Whatever its origin, the tevaratiyal natakam must have been a boon to rural devadasis in search for a sustainable livelihood at a time when the devadasi practice was under fire. Ironically, it was the emerging commercial nature of these theatrical performances, which appears to have made them socially more acceptable than the performance by the devadasis of their traditional ritual and dramatic tasks. My devadasi informants stated that already during the 1920s and 1930s the tevaratiyal natakam enjoyed a slightly higher social status than the rural sadir. By this time the anti-Nautch movement was at its height, making it increasingly problematic for trained devadasis to perform their obligatory ritual tasks, to sing and to dance. When their position finally become socially unacceptable, the rural devadasis quit the professions, gave up their rights and began to hide their identities as professional performers. In the rural areas this happened long after the Devadasi Act, which legally forbade the dedication of girls to deities and their involvement in public performances, came into force in 1947.[29]

As a result of the Devadasi Act and the social stigma that came to be attached to their persona and their public performances, women performers from a devadasi background were effectively excluded from the rural stage. However, some of their male relatives stayed on in the performance profession, especially when they lacked other financial means to support themselves. These male performers were taken on as actors or musicians in local and regional commercial natakam companies owned and run by male performers. Even though some of these companies were contemporaneous with the tevaratiyal natakam companies, most of them came to the fore only after the disappearance of the popular tevaratiyal natakam.

II. Theatre companies of male performers

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In addition to the regional natakam companies, which were the direct successors of the touring companies visiting the Madras Presidency, at that time there already seem to have been local theatre companies using a musical performance style that were owned and run by hereditary male performers. These performers were bound by local rights-cum-obligations to perform.

The roots of these early local companies again lie entirely in the dark.[30] One informant, who belongs to the caste of Telugu vannars (washermen), traces the involvement of his family in the rural theatre back to five generations.[31] He thinks that some of his predecessors may have performed in kattaikkuttu, before switching to the novel natakam style. The lack of commercial competitiveness between companies functioning under local patronage arrangements may have helped to sustain the diffuseness of local performance styles. The exclusivity of the personalized performance rights and their connection to particular localities guaranteed the continuity of existing stylistic schools (panis) or 'traditions' and linked these to local spectator-communities.

This situation changed with increased mobility and the emergence of a local performance market that, after a period of uneasy co-existence, finally replaced the local system of performance rights-cum-obligations. The relatively closed local performance traditions opened themselves up to newcomers. Performance as a profession was no longer the prerogative of particular castes.[32] Spectators-cum-patrons were free to engage companies of their own preference. They became more critical in their appreciation of the nature, quality, and audience appeal of performances. As a result, the competition between theatre groups and between dramatic genres increased.

The fight for the patronage of local audiences forced theatre companies to become more competitive and more attuned to the demand and supply forces of the performance market. One way to promote themselves and gain the favour of local audiences was to emphasize their special, most attractive stylistic characteristics. The gendered performances of the secular natakam stressed their potential of (limited) access to 'modernity' and to a form of sexually stimulating entertainment. The 'novels' lent themselves to the incorporation of social and political messages. However, most of the novels soon lost their social engagement. Their once 'social' themes were reduced to hilarious and provocative situations of love and lust between socially unequal partners. Others were matched with mythological elements to be assimilated into a new hybrid form of 'religious' natakam plays, a cross-breed between a mythological story featuring, for instance, an ideal Hindu woman turning into a vengeful Goddess who restores dharma, and a sexually provocative novel.

The potential of natakam performances as a powerful propaganda instrument was exploited by the Dravidian movement, which acted as a modern patron and sponsored performances during its political meetings. In turn, natakam performers, inspired by the political programme or stimulated by modest financial gain, helped to propagate political views through 'special' songs, slogans, and prose dialogues in the typical style of official 'staged' speech (metaippeccu) (see interview with P. K. Bhupati in this issue).

III. Itinerant performers

Finally, a third group of performers, which contributed to the development of the contemporary natakam genre, formed part of the rural dramatic scene. These were itinerant male and female performers, who referred to themselves in interviews as natakakkarar or 'performers (makers) of natakam'. Some of them may have been involved in small, travelling circuses. Others may have been employed in touring commercial natakam companies.

Interviews with some of the contemporary women performers belonging to this group indicate that, like the devadasis, the natakakkarar are one of the unrecognized

Because the acting profession was closed to any woman wishing to call herself 'respectable', the convention of

Male actor impersonating a female role in a contemporary natakam performance, Sevilimedu Village, February 1998. Photograph

'open' categories of Tamil society. Their alliances are often not legitimized through official marriage. They are highly pragmatic in nature and uninfluenced by caste barriers. Alliances often involve fellow natakakkarar or persons picked up from villages where a company has halted to perform. All interviewees said to be somehow related by blood to each other. Polygamic relationships, both on the side of men and women, appear to have been, and still are, common.

Informants mentioned a variety of castes to which their predecessors were believed to have belonged: well-established castes, such as gounder (vanniyar), chettiar, 'muslim', tevar (kallar), brahmin, and narikkuravar (gypsies), as well as typically nomadic groups, such as dommara, nokkar, jati pillai, and putupputuppai. Members of the latter groups were traditionally involved in circus-type acts, including juggling, acrobatics, tightrope dancing and, according to the same informant-performers, fortune telling, begging, stealing, and prostitution. More recently, some of the natakakkarar have become involved in performances of record dance and in what seems to be its contemporary successor, the commercial karakattam—originally a folk-dance in which women dancers balance decorated pots on top of their heads.

While the devadasis and the exponents of the local male natakam and kattaikkuttu companies in my fieldwork area were firmly established into the village society and enjoyed local, social support, these itinerant performers live at the fringes of the established caste society. They settle temporarily in villages where they stay in vacant or rented houses. Village people continue to be apprehensive about their life-styles and virtues; conflicts between members of the local village society and these marginalized, nomad performers appear to be pivotal in perpetuating their mobility and their position as outcastes. It is members of this group of itinerant performers who have most recently entered the regular, established natakam companies. In hindsight it appears that women belonging to these nomadic groups have filled some of the vacancies left in the rural ritual stage as the result of the disappearance of the rural devadasis. Occasionally, I heard stories about actresses who were asked to carry

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out diparadhana (or arati), upon the conclusion of their performance. Diparadhana or the circling of lights in front of the deity was a task that was the traditional prerogative of the village devadasis. However, whereas the rural devadasis had earlier been the owners of theatre companies, most contemporary actresses have come to occupy subordinate positions in natakam companies owned and managed by men. In addition to providing an income to support their children, born from unstable marriages and affairs, women from these nomadic groups appear to consider the acting profession and the relationships they engage in with actors and well-settled male villagers as one of the possible ways for them to gain entrance into Tamilnadu's modern caste society, that is, to acquire a permanent address and a caste identity for their children.

Some of the contemporary natakam companies in my fieldwork area employ one or two actresses in an otherwise male company. The principal task of these rural women performers appears to be to enhance the 'male consumability' of the performances in which they take part. Many women performers in contemporary natakam companies run by men felt that they were not allotted roles that matched their professional expertise and experience.[33] On the contrary, they said that as professional actresses they were made to act as the principal crowd-pullers in the natakam performances. According to everybody's accounts, these performances thrive on vulgar jokes displayed verbally and in real 'flesh and blood' and the reproduction of songs from the highly politicized Tamil film.

The entrance of women on the public, commercial stage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be seen as a conscious attempt to experiment with a more 'realistic' portrayal of the sexes on stage. In addition, it opened up a new opportunity to exploit the sexual component potentially embedded into performer-spectator relationships. The presence of 'real women' on the stage offered the possibility to play out gendered sexual innuendoes differently and perhaps more directly than what could be allowed in everyday life. This had its impact on audience expectations, the composition of audiences, the performer-spectator relationships, and the viewing of the novel natakam performances.[34] Because the acting profession was closed to any woman wishing to call herself 'respectable', the convention of men impersonating female roles remained widespread, too. Consequently, actresses and female impersonators worked next to each other, with the result that some companies, even today, have an all-male cast while others employ (a few) women performers. It seems likely that the appearance of actresses on the public stage led to an increased competition for the leading female roles in a play (and in a company), and for the commercial gains which were to be had from playing these roles. This appears to have contributed to the perfection of the practice of female impersonation. Rather than diminishing the realism of the portrayal of women characters, female impersonators strove, and strive, to appear so 'natural' on stage that they cannot be distinguished from real women (see also Hansen 1998, 2296 with regard to the Parsi theatre). Spectators can choose between performances featuring actresses or female impersonators. This choice creates additional forms of spectatorial pleasure, which involve the playing out of staged and real sexual identities of the performers in relation to their spectators, and which allows for the generation of both hetero- and homo-eroticism.

Possibly, it was the lack of rootedness of the touring theatres and their performers in the local society, which offered a new scope to explore and imaginatively depict gender relationships playing out fantasies of shared intimacy between a performer of a female role and an individual male spectator. The commercial nature of these companies, their temporary presence at a particular location, and perhaps also the distance created between the performers and the spectators through the novel device of an (elevated) stage, appear to have supported a greater range of freedom between,

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on the one hand, the liberties performers were prepared to take on stage in response to audience expectations and, on the other hand, the social sanctions which the local society was prepared to impose on performances. Even today a part of the success of natakam performances rests on this dynamism, which exploits the potential of the stage for cross-gender voyeurism, eroticism, and sexual innuendoes of both a delicate and a vulgar nature.

CONCLUSION

Precariously situated within the pragmatics of rural life, the political and devotional ideologies of different (political) parties and interest groups, and the novel attractions of middle-class life-styles promoted through the medium of the popular Tamil cinema and, more recently, the commercial cable television channels, the rural stage has adapted itself with amazing dexterity to changing economic and social circumstances. It has succeeded in retaining, and at times, regaining, its popularity, though it has never received wholehearted respect and recognition. When asked about the condition of the rural, popular natakam, contemporary respondents, including performers, rural spectators, and representatives of the urban intelligentsia, evoked almost without exception the theatrical past. They reiterated the negative judgement of their intellectual predecessors, saying that the popular stage had lost its allure (cir kettuppoccu).[35] The deterioration of the stage, whether real or imagined, implies the existence of a better, more glorious and 'authentic' form of theatre located in a 'mythical' past (Clifford 1986, 110-14).[36] As Ashis Nandy has suggested, the imagination of the past as a 'paradise lost' may be one of the strategies used to cope with the anxieties created by modernity (Nandy 1998, 1-18). In our case, this strategy has been adopted, not only by the members of the middle class(es) to cope with rapid change and multiple identities, but also by rural spectators and hereditary, rural performers who fear losing their tradition and their livelihood.

Parallel to an 'officially' advocated aversion, the contemporary popular natakam elicits a particular kind of appreciation and hidden pleasure. The ambiguous feelings evoked by this 'modern', hybrid theatre genre appear to be a persistent characteristic of the popular Tamil theatre: perhaps, they are the most important signs of its viability and resilience in modern times.

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Notes

1 Natakam is the Tamil form of the Sanskrit word nataka, 'play'; drama or tirama is the Tamilized form of the English word 'drama'.

2 According to Vasant Shantaram Desai the drop curtain began to be used in the Marathi theatre as early as 1865 and painted scenes from 1873 onwards (Desai in The Marathi Theatre, 1843-1960, 1961, 9).

3 On the bad reputation of the popular stage see, for instance, de Bruin 1999, 94-6; de Bruin 2000a, 103-104; Gopalratnam 1956 (1981), 119-124; Perumal 1981, 138-9; Seizer 1997, 66-67.

4 The 'anti-Nautch' movement agitated against the dedication of girls to temple deities and against their professional involvement in dance performances. This social reform movement was initiated at the end of the nineteenth century. It reached its top momentum during the 1920s and 1930s. The movement was fed by the personal and political interests of several different groups and left an unfavourable impression of these professional women performers on the popular mind.

The stigma that came to be attached to the profession of the devadasi, and to a professional involvement in the arts in general, appears to have effected, in a lesser degree, the standing of other professional exponents of the popular stage, too, irrespective of whether they were men or women and irrespective of the kind of dramatic performances in which they were engaged.

5 Recently, organizations such as the Tamilnadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam in Kanchipuram and Voicing Silence in Chennai, have undertaken efforts to identify professional women performers in Tamilnadu and to trace the history of their professional and personal lives (e.g. Amaithi Arasu et al. 1997; de Bruin and Rajagopal 2001). The Tamilnadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam has trained a group of twelve professional natakam actresses in kattaikkuttu in 1996, therewith opening up this male performance tradition to women performers.

6 These touring companies may have adopted, directly or indirectly, novel elements from Western theatre companies, especially English ones, which visited the British colonies (see Introduction, note 1). The process of cultural exchange appears to have been reciprocal to some extent: the Bala Manohara Sabha, a 'Boys' company' from Tamilnadu run by Krishanacami Pavalar, paid a visit to England in 1924 (Perumal 1981, 144); furthermore, the hybrid performances in Europe by the dancer Uday Shankar and his 'Hindustan Dance Company', which fitted well into the exotic picture of an imagined Orient, received great audience appreciation (personal communication Joan L. Erdman, Edinburgh, 7 September 2000).

7 Hansen 1992, 39; Perumal 1981, 135-51; Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature 1990, 495-7.

8 The ownership of printing presses by Indians was legalized in 1835 (Ramaswamy 1998, 11–12).

9 In his English introduction to the Tamil verse play, Manonmaniyam (1891), which he labels a novel play (navina natakam), P. Sundaram Pillai writes, that 'the play here submitted, it is needless to say, is meant for the study room and not the stage, and it is therefore written in the literary and not altogether the colloquial dialect' (Sundaram Pillai 1891 (1970), 19). Manonmaniyam was an adaptation of The Secret Way, one of Lord Lytton's Lost Tales of Miletus.

10 On the emotional connotations attributed to Tamil prose and poetry, see Ramaswamy 1998, 83; on the history of styles of acting in the 'modern' Indian theatre, see Kapoor 1996, 43-9; the early modern, elite Tamil stage shares its desire for 'realism' with the early modern, elite (Western-style) Bengali theatre (see also Chatterjee in this issue).

11 The rural-urban divide contrasts, for instance, the 'irrationality' of village customs and rituals (in particular the pantheon of 'low status', non-brahmin village deities and the practices of blood-sacrifices and of self-torture by religious devotees) with the rational practices of the 'modern' (Western-style) educated, urban intellectuals.

12 This company had its roots in the Yakshagana troupe of the royal palace in Mysore. Its performances appear to have been influenced also by the Sangli Company and the Victoria Parsi Company from Maharashtra. Both these companies visited Mysore in the years 1876-78, where they impressed the audience with dazzling costumes, settings, and curtains (Ranganath 1960, 103).

13 In addition, there was an intensive exchange between the Kannada and Marathi theatre (Ranganath 1960, 79-84 and passim; personal communication Veena Naregal) and between the Kannada and the Telugu stage (Ranganath 1960, 89), while groups from Tamilnadu performed in Karnataka (Ranganath 1960, 93, 116).

14 Perumal 1981, 137, 139, 147; Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998, 72, 96. Plays from the 'world dramatic literature' by authors such as Shakespeare, Molière, and Kalidasa, reached the Tamil-speaking areas through the touring companies. In other instances they were translated and adapted to the Tamil context by representatives of the Tamil intelligentsia.

15 Note the historical relationship through the Maratha court between Thanjavur and

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Maharashtra, also pointed out by Veena Naregal.

16 Perumal 1981, 149; Ranganath 1960, 110; also Baskaran in this issue.

17 Perumal 1981, 141; Sankaradas Swamigal 1963, introduction to the play Abhimanyu Sundari originally written in 1919.

18 Seizer 1997, 65; Mu. Ramaswamy, personal communication, 23 August 2000.

19 On these Indian merchant networks see, for instance, Markovits 1999, 883-911.

20 See also Baskaran in this issue. Members of fan clubs of popular film stars often request contemporary natakam actors and actresses to perform one of their hero's latest film songs (see on these fan clubs and their political connections, for instance, Dickey 1993, 148-72; also Pandian 1992 passim on the links between film and politics).

21 Popular 'social' themes were widow remarriage, prostitution (often involving the character of a devadasi), alcoholism, and the dowry issue.

22 The forerunner of this new class of 'novels' was the play Tampaccari vilasam, one of the first plays on a social theme using the Western convention of a division into acts and scenes. It was written by Kasi Visuvanata Mudaliyar and staged for the first time in 1857 (Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature 1990, 494). Tampaccari vilasam features the popular theme re-used in later plays and films, such as Rattakannir (1954), of the moral conflict between a dandy husband, his prostitute (devadasi) mistress, and the dandy's traditional wife.

23 Though the links between the Agamic and village traditions have been signalled (see, for instance, the ground-breaking work on the devadasi tradition by Kersenboom 1987, 50-61), it has been the performance praxis and repertoires of the devadasis attached to Agamic temples or royal courts, which have been investigated by Indologists, anthropologists and others, and which have shaped the debate on the devadasis and the transformation and appropriation of their artistic practices. The politicization of the devadasi issue and its impact on the dance and its traditional exponents have been described, for instance, by Allen 1997; Anandhi 1991; Gaston 1997; Kersenboom 1990; Meduri 1988; and Srinivasan 1985. In spite of the smear campaign against devadasis, their image appears to have fired the popular imagination. The characters of the devadasi and of the 'Madam' (taykkizhavi) feature in novels, dance ballets, plays, and films in Tamil and in other Indian languages.

24 The impact of this finding on our perception of the devadasis and their artistic and ritual tradition forms part of my work in progress (e.g. de Bruin forthcoming).

25 See also the interview with P. K. Bhupati in this issue; de Bruin and Rajagopal 2001; de Bruin forthcoming.

26 Depending on the local custom, some performances of tevaratiyal natakam appear to have taken place on the basis of ticket sales, while the remuneration of other performances followed the established custom of paying a kattalai (or kattalu) or a fixed, token remuneration, supplemented by payments in kind (rice, a goat, a bed sheet, a cloth). The kattalai payment belonged to the system of local performance rights-cum-obligations. In the course of time, it appears to have been dissociated from the specific performance rights and to have been applied to all kind of village performances. The kattalai remuneration followed the trends of the market economy, albeit perhaps too slowly to survive: in the course of time the amount of the kattalai gradually increased to be replaced, finally, by a negotiated cash remuneration or ampakam (see also interview with P. K. Bhupati in this issue).

27 For example, the performance of Kamakkuttu mentioned by Saskia Kersenboom (Kersenboom 1987, 135). Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar mentions in his Natakattamil that dasis from the Ekambaram Temple in Kanchipuram, a town which lies in the centre of my fieldwork area, used to perform plays during festivals (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1998, 67-8).

28 Personal communication P. K. Bhupati, 31 October 1998; see also the interview with P. K. Bhupati in this issue.

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29 One of my resource persons clung on to her rights until 1973; she must have been one of the last practising devadasis (de Bruin and Rajagopal 2001: interview with M. Dhanammal; de Bruin forthcoming).

30 The repertoire of these local companies appears to have been much the same as that of the companies of the devadasis. It included plays on puranic and epic themes, in particular also the Ramayana, and, as far as I know, it did not include any 'novels'.

31 Personal communication Nallalam S. Krishnan, who is a female impersonator and harmonium-player in a natakam company, 24 September 1998.

32 Some of these newcomers set a new trend by using kattaikkuttu, its Mahabharata story repertoire, and its martial style of acting to promote their caste identity (de Bruin 1999, 151-4).

33 Personal communication M. Shanmugavalli, M. Chandrakumari, S. Usharani, and R. Andal.

34 Also Richmond et al. 1990, 273; Hansen 1992, 7; Seizer 1997, 62-90 for a fascinating analysis of the reception of vulgar jokes in the special natakam genre by male and female spectators.

35 See interview with P. K. Bhupati. On the possible reasons cited by performer-informants for this deterioration, see de Bruin 2000b.

36 The reception of the contemporary popular stage by the intelligentsia is influenced by their expectations about 'what the ideal theatre should look like'. These expectations are based on conventions or 'rules' laid down, for instance, in the Natyasastra of Bharata (A.D. 150 to A.D. 350), an early Indian treatise on dramaturgy that has been made into a normative model for the theatre (on the influence of the 'theatrical past' on the contemporary reception of theatrical performances see also Carlson 1989, 83).

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S. Theodore

Persistence of conventions: 'company drama' and the Tamil cinema

By the dawn of the twentieth century the so-called 'company drama' had emerged as an important form of mass entertainment in South India. I will argue here that the company drama provided the model for the early Tamil cinema. Many of the conventions

In addition to introducing the proscenium stage and the backdrops, the new drama companies demonstrated for the first time that the performance of drama shows could

of the Tamil cinema, including its politicization, can be traced back to the days of the company drama. Furthermore, I will argue that the persistence of these conventions has hampered, and continues to hamper, the growth of the Tamil cinema.

Sundararaj Theodore Baskaran has a master's degree in history. He worked in the Tamilnadu Archives in Chennai and later entered the Indian Postal Service. He was a Senior Associate of the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore and a member of the Advisory Board for the National Film Archives in Pune. He has written extensively on the Indian cinema and on painting. His book The Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema (Madras: East West Books, 1996) won the Golden Lotus Award from the President of India as the Best Book of the Year on Cinema. He is the Director of the Roja

THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE TAMIL CINEMA: THE COMPANY DRAMA

Before the advent of the cinema in South India, drama companies operating in the Madras Presidency dominated the realm of popular entertainment. Then only a few decades old, they were a comparatively new cultural phenomenon in South India. Prior to the emergence of the company drama a form of popular theatre existed, but it was in a disorganized and impoverished state as a result of lack of patronage.

The formation of organized, travelling theatre companies began after a few Parsi and Marathi theatre groups had toured the Presidency. The latter companies were founded by some wealthy Parsi businessmen from Bombay. These companies borrowed the convention of the proscenium stage, the drop curtain, painted backdrops, and other technical and ornamental accessories that went with the modern stage, from the British theatre tradition. Even in Britain, the proscenium stage was a relatively new phenomenon associated with the development of the Victorian drama. It was introduced into India

soon after its appearance in Britain, where it was adopted by the Parsi and Marathi theatre companies. Newcomers to the field of theatre in Maharashtra brought with them elements from the local folk theatre, such as a back-stage singer and comical interludes. These elements, too, were incorporated into the performances by the newly formed Marathi and Parsi theatre troupes. These troupes performed in a style which historians of the stage have referred to as 'company drama'.

We learn that in the 1870s, the Helen Theatrical Company and the Baliwala Theatres from the Bombay Presidency camped in Madras where they staged drama shows (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1933, 80). The harmonium, an instrument of European origin, was introduced into South India through the Parsi theatre. It became an important component of stage music, and the symbol of the company drama. In addition to introducing the proscenium stage and the backdrop, the new drama companies demonstrated for the first time that the performance of drama shows could be a sound commercial proposition and could be run as a business. The sales of admission tickets provided this form of entertainment with a reasonably sound commercial base.

In the Madras Presidency a few local entrepreneurs, musicians, and entertainers established drama companies. Madurai became the headquarters for these groups, operating in the Tamil-speaking area. A number of dramatic artists joined these companies, which ensured them a livelihood. The kingpin in a company was the vathiyar, literally the 'teacher'. He wrote songs, composed music, trained the artists in singing, and directed the play. The stories that were performed were usually episodes from the epics, mythological stories, and legends. Many of them were available in print. The plays themselves were mere packages of songs; music was the main element of a drama show.

T. R. Govindasamy Rao, a clerk in a police station in Thanjavur, founded one of the earliest drama companies in Tamilnadu. He had watched the Maharashtra Sangli Company stage plays in the Thanjavur palace. This inspired him to form his own troupe modelled on a pattern similar to that of the Marathi troupe. He founded the Original Manamohana Nataka Company and resigned from his job when the company's plays became a commercial success. The troupe moved to Madras in 1880 and performed in the Sengangadai Theatre in the city. Rao travelled with his troupe to other towns, such as Tiruchi and Tirunelveli, and started a new theatre movement.[1] After a few years, several artists trained in this company left to form their own companies. Soon a number of companies were operating in the Madras Presidency, at times travelling as far as Rangoon and Jaffna. A drama company was a veritable theatre family. The vathiyar, the actors, and the musicians lived together and travelled from town to town. A troupe stayed in a place for one month or longer to perform. Watching company dramas became a popular pastime for the public. Permanent drama halls were built in many towns.

Soon variations of these companies began to appear. 'Boys' companies' or drama troupes composed of young boys were formed. Boys below the age of twelve, whose voices had not yet broken, were recruited by these companies. Many leading lights of the Tamil cinema were schooled in these boys' companies. In 1910, Sankara Das Swamigal, a playwright and a vathiyar, formed one of the earliest boys' companies, the Samarasa Sanmarga Sabha. There were also all-women drama companies, though very few. 'Special drama' was yet another form to evolve out of the company drama ambience. Musical plays composed by vathiyars such as Sarabam Muthusamy Kavirayar and Sankaradas Swamigal were published; thus, a corpus of drama songs was built up over time. Many artists were well versed in these songs; some had specialized in specific roles and knew the songs associated with these characters. An organizer wishing to put on a performance could hire, even for a day, a few artists specialized in the performance of the songs of specific characters of the play he chose to have performed. Artists from different places would be invited and the performance

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would be put on without any rehearsals. The playbills announcing the drama made it clear that the minor artists of the play would perform extempore. The key to the popularity of these artists among the audience lay in their ability to extemporize entertainingly and cleverly.

The printing press facilitated the spread of the company drama culture. Songs were brought out in book form. Bills bearing details of a play were printed and distributed. From 1886 there was a steady stream of publications of Tamil drama songs and scripts. From 1873 to 1900, at least two hundred and eighty-six plays were published.[2] In the 1910s, there was even a Tamil magazine, Nadagabimani, which was exclusively devoted to the subject of drama. The arrival of the gramophone was yet another major factor in the strengthening of the vibrant tradition of popular theatre. Some of the earliest material to be recorded for the gramophone was drama music. Many well-known actors from the drama companies, including Rukmini Bala, S. G. Kittappa, T. M. Kadar Badsha, and S. V. Subbaiya Bhagavathar, recorded songs on discs. The songs recorded for gramophone were also printed and published as songbooks (Gramaphone sangeetha kalanjiyam, 1931). Complete dramas, recorded on five or six 75-rpm plates, were packed in an aluminium case and sold as 'drama sets'.

The advent of electricity by the turn of the century provided a fillip to the growth of the company drama culture. Though most of the companies used only gaslights, some well-run troupes had access to electricity. Venkatesh Chakravarthy suggests that the rectangular proscenium stage, lit by footlights that created a wall of light between the audience and the performers, anticipated the frame of the film.[3]

Congress leader S. Sathyamurty in the role of a king in a sabha drama. Photograph courtesy Theodore

THE 'SABHA DRAMA'

The performances by Marathi and Parsi theatre companies in Chennai influenced yet another segment of the society: the English educated. Plays staged by the Original Parsi Victorian Theatrical Troupe of Bombay, inspired G. C. V Srinivasachari, a schoolteacher, to establish The Madras Oriental Dramatic Company in 1875. This company performed plays translated from Sanskrit literature. In 1880 Srinivasachari produced Shakuntala in a Tamil translation, in which he himself played a role. The then Governor, the Duke of Buckingham, attended the play. A later Governor of Madras, Sir Grand Duff, became a patron of this troupe.[4]

Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar, a member of the judicial service, formed an amateur dramatic club in Madras, the Suguna Vilasa Sabha, in 1891. This club attracted theatre aficionados from the upper strata of society. Political leaders, like S. Sathyamurthi, who was to become the president of the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce, C. P. Ramasamy Ayyer, the mayor of Madras and later the Diwan of Travancore, and R. K. Shanmugam Chettiar, who was to become the first finance minister of independent India, were part of this

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group. The Emmanuel Drama Club founded in Madras was modelled on the Suguna Vilas Sabha (Sambanda Mudaliyar 1932, 23).

Involvement in the theatre came to be considered by the elite to be a fit engagement for persons with a Western education. Drama troupes, such as the Suguna Vilas Sabha, catered to this need. Soon similar companies appeared in smaller towns, too, among them the Sudharsana Sabha of Thanjavur and the Rasiga Ranjani Sabha of Tiruchi. These clubs or sabhas were amateur outfits whose members joined them for the love of theatre, not to make a living. In contrast to the commercial companies, performances by these clubs were much fewer and were restricted to a few towns. The plays staged by these elite associations were mostly Tamil versions of the works of Kalidasa and Shakespeare. Unlike the company dramas, the emphasis was placed on spoken prose rather than songs and music (see also de Bruin in this issue). While the company dramas were looked down upon as plebeian entertainment and were ignored by magazines and dailies, the sabhas commanded respect. British civil servants often lent them their support and, because well-known individuals participated in the performances, these were reviewed by journals. The British Government awarded Sambanda Mudaliyar the title Rao Bahadur, a gesture considered a reward for loyalty. At a later point in time, when the company drama became politicized and lent support to the nationalist cause, the sabhas remained apolitical and confined themselves to non-controversial plays. With the appearance of these elite theatre groups, two distinct performance styles evolved; one staged by the sabhas and the other, the company drama, by commercial theatre companies.

SILENT CINEMA IN SOUTH INDIA

Therefore a vigorous theatre tradition already existed by the time the silent cinema made its entry. When pioneers, like Nataraja Mudaliyar and Prakasa, began to make films in Madras in 1916, the company drama dominated the field of popular entertainment. In South India, about one hundred and twenty-four silent films were made from 1916 to 1934. As long as the cinema remained silent, drama artists ignored it. Firstly, employment in the drama companies was secure and the income was steady. Secondly, drama artists were mostly singers and the makers of the silent films needed stuntmen and action-oriented performers, not singers. Nataraja Mudaliyar found it difficult to get actors to work in his films, particularly women. Though we know very little about the silent era, it is clear that there was not much interaction between the stage and the screen during this period.[5] Moreover, there were only forty-three cinemas in the whole of Madras Presidency, many of which screened only foreign films. On the other hand, there were at least sixty-four well-established commercial drama companies during this period, which travelled the different parts of the Presidency.[6]

THE APPEARANCE OF THE TALKIES AND THE EXODUS FROM THE STAGE

When sound was added to the film, the scene changed dramatically. Silent films produced in Madras had to compete with films from the West and from Bombay. However, in the talkie era language ensured a safe market for Tamil films. The production of talkies picked up: while only one single film was produced in 1931, three years later as many as fourteen Tamil talkies were made. Soon it became clear that there was money in the business of cinema. A rush from the stage into the studios ensued. The exodus swelled after 1934, when sound studios were set up in Madras. Among the vathiyars who migrated to the studios were Baskara Das, Bhoomi Balagadas, and Udumalai Narayana Kavi. They brought the drama format into the cinema, complete with its accompanying musical style and manner of acting. They also brought with them their repertoire of plays and a corpus of songs that could be drawn upon.

Another compelling factor behind the migration of artists from the stage to the

studios was the adverse impact of the growth of the talkies on the drama companies. In 1935, after sound studios had been opened in Madras, thirty-five films were made. One after another, the drama companies had to fold up; artists and other workers had perforce to move into the glittering world of the cinema. Drama halls were converted into cinema halls. During the Second World War the production of films dwindled from thirty-nine in 1940 to only ten in 1944. During this period there were some signs of a revival of the drama companies, but this trend did not last long. Film production picked up soon after the war came to an end. However, certain well-managed companies, such as the Bala Shanmugananda Sabha of the TKS Brothers, the Bala Meena Ranjani Sangeetha Sabha of Nawab Rajamanikam, and the Devi Nataka Sabha of S. D. Sundaram, lasted long into the talkie era.

Sarvotham Badami, who directed the second Tamil talkie, Galavarishi (1932), has described the making of the early Tamil talkies. The film producer chose a particular play of a drama company, usually one that had proved to be popular. He hired the troupe, including its musicians and the vathiyar, to perform that particular play. During the first five years of the talkie era, these drama groups were taken to Bombay, Kholapur, Pune, or Calcutta where the film was shot. A proscenium stage was constructed with backdrops handpainted on canvas and flats; the camera was placed in front; the play was enacted; and the film was shot, head on. Almost the entire film was shot from a single camera position because side angle shots would go beyond the stage with the result that the studio would enter the field of vision of the camera.[7] The shots lasted for long stretches and whatever movement there was, had to be within the frame, i.e. the stage.

These early films were exact reproductions of the plays; they were simply photographed company dramas. In fact, some films opened with the shot of the curtain going up. Like the company dramas, many early films had alternative titles, such as Vedavathi or the Birth of Sita (Vedavathi alladhu Sita jananam), which is the title of a film made in 1941. All the sixty-one films that were made in the first five years of the Tamil talkie were reproductions of successful plays staged by drama companies; and they were exact duplications of the stage show. The handbills of the films, too, were printed and distributed following the model of the drama notices. This practice continued up to the late 1950s. A few drama companies transformed themselves into film-producing units under the same banner. Some of the characteristics of the Tamil cinema, which I will discuss below, have their origins in this period.

It did not take long for the other genre of theatre, the city-based sabha productions, to find its way into the film. The Suguna Vilas Sabha founded by Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar set the model. In plays by this company, spoken words and acting were the main elements; music was not emphasized. Mudaliyar, who had written nearly sixty plays by the advent of the talkies, was also lured into the world of the cinema; he directed a few films, such as Sathi Sulochana (1934), and acted in some. The record of his experiences in cinema clearly shows that as far as he was concerned, cinema was photographed drama (Sambanda Mudaliyar, 1938). There is no indication that he understood the nature of the cinema and its aesthetic potential. Tamil films based on his plays, like Manohara (1954), continued to appear until the mid-1950s.

THE TWO STREAMS IN TAMIL CINEMA

By the end of the first decade after its introduction, the Tamil cinema received a new and significant strain of influence, which changed the style of films. This influence can be largely attributed to the arrival in Madras of three filmmakers trained in Hollywood: Ellis R. Duncan, M. L. Tandon, and Michael Omalev. Duncan came to Madras to sell cinema equipment and stayed on for seventeen years, leaving his distinct mark on the history of the Tamil cinema. Beginning with Sathi Leelavathy (1936) he made ten films. Tandon, who had been at the University of California, Los Angeles, made films such as Manimekalai (1940) and Arundhadhi (1943). Omalev made Modern Youth (Navayuvan,

1938) with the legendary singer V. V. Sadagopan in the lead; some of the sequences were shot in London, using the facility at Marylebone Studios.[8]

Of the work of the three, I have managed to see only the films made by Duncan.[9] It is evident that he made a deliberate break with the company drama format in which the Tamil cinema seemed to have become stuck. He reduced the number of songs from thirty or forty to a mere six or eight, gave importance to the spoken word rather than to songs, and resorted more to outdoor locales. The story telling followed the narrative style of Hollywood. The last film Duncan made was Ponmudi (1950).

There is plenty of evidence to show that other Madras-based filmmakers were influenced by the Hollywood style, too. K. Ramnoth was certainly one among them, as becomes clear in his film, The Plight of the Poor (Ezhai padum padu, 1950). The shot compositions, lighting techniques, the use of ambient sounds and narration through visuals, reflected the Hollywood influence. This film, a high watermark of the Tamil cinema, was an adaptation of Victor Hugo's Les Misérables. Similarly, the works of T. R. Sundaram, founder of Modern Theatres in Salem and director of many films, also reveal the influence of Hollywood. Sundaram had studied engineering in Britain and had been exposed to outside influences. Subsequently, two distinct streams emerged in the Tamil cinema, the Hollywood style and the company drama format, which continued to exist throughout the 1940s and the early 1950s. However, the Hollywood narrative style, seems to have petered out along the way, while the company drama format persisted over the years.

An important reason why the Hollywood style did not last was the steady entry of new filmmakers into the world of films from the drama companies. They brought along with them the company drama idiom. A. P. Nagarajan and K. S. Gopalakrishnan are examples of this development. The former started as a vathiyar in a drama company. He entered the world of film as a dialogue-writer. After a few films, Nagarajan founded a production company along with V. K. Ramasamy, another stage actor, and made his debut as a director with Good Alliance (Nalla idathu sambandham, 1958). Soon he had a series of mythological and religious movies to his credit. A large number of old stagehands featured in his films, intensifying the 'staginess' of his work. Politically he identified himself with the Tamil nationalist Thamizharasu Party and edited its mouthpiece, a journal called Saatai or Whip. He was active until the late 1970s. Gopalakrishnan, schooled in the famous Nawab Rajamanikam Drama Company, entered the world of films as a dialogue writer and soon began directing films. He became a successful director in the sixties, who started with stories set in contemporary times but who later switched to mythological stories. These two filmmakers retained in their films strong features of the stage, including the painted backdrop, which reinforced the photographed company drama format. There was a great reluctance on their part to leave the studio.

THE STAGE, THE SCREEN, AND THE DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

In the 1940s, the Dravida Kazhagam began using the stage to serve its political agenda. Party conferences invariably featured plays for which an admission fee was charged. This trend began with the play Iraniyan alladhu inayatra veeran. The format of these plays was determined by their propagandistic objective: they were didactic in nature and the spoken word dominated.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the successor of the Dravida Kazhagam, was formed in 1949. This political party made its entry into the world of the film with Nallathambi (1949), a film whose script had been written by its founder C. N. Annadurai, later the first DMK Chief Minister. Nallathambi was based on the Hollywood film Mr. Deeds Goes to Town. Originally it was performed as a popular drama. Later another successful play by C. N. Annadurai, Servant Maid (Velaikkari, 1950), followed by On One Night (Or Iravu, 1949), were made into films. The radical rhetoric of political playwrights, such as Annadurai, was well received by the audience with the result that

a number of dialogue writers from the Dravidian movement found their way into the Tamil cinema.

M. Karunanidhi, who would be another DMK chief minister, started his career as a dialogue writer with the film The Goddess (Parasakthi, 1952). Udumalai Narayana Kavi, a vathiyar from the stage and a Dravidian movement sympathizer, began as a songwriter and was much sought after as a lyricist far into the 1970s. He represented the voice of the Dravidian ideology in the Tamil cinema. Songwriters of drama companies, who subscribed to the ideology of the Dravidian movement, were also active in Tamil films. Many of the films associated with the Dravidian movement were originally stage dramas.

Propagandists of the Dravidian movement used oratory in their mass contact programmes and honed public speaking into a fine art. This element of propaganda was brought into the films, too. Long monologues, often alliterative, found a special place in the sound track and became an integral part of the entertainment offering. From the point of view of the cinema, this accentuated the dimension of direct address and restricted the mobility of the camera. Long monologues inevitably kept the camera stationary, while the shots remained frontal. Because of the dominance of the spoken word, the visual properties of the film remained neglected and underdeveloped.

The importance given to the dialogue writer did not change the basic nature of a Tamil film. It only made it easier for other streams from the stage to join the film. In later decades artists from amateur companies operating in Madras moved easily into the world of cinema. Some of the major figures of amateur drama groups operating mainly in Madras, such as K. Balachandar (Ragini Recreations), Cho Ramaswamy (Viveka Fine Arts), Mouli, S. V. Sekhar (Nadakapriya), and Visu (Viswashanthi), entered the film as dialogue writers, and went on to become directors. They produced successful films apparently without feeling any compulsion to change their style or format to suit the screen. Their perspective remained quite theatrical and their presence in the Tamil cinema reinforced the characteristics derived from the stage tradition. The works of these directors emphasized the art of the actor rather than that of the filmmaker. To them the screen meant no more than the stage, and there is plenty of evidence, for instance in their use of frontal shots and verbal narration, to show that they had no grasp of the different laws governing the cinematic medium. It is these conventions, which dominate the Tamil cinema even today, that have throttled the growth of a cinematic language.

POLITICIZATION OF THE TAMIL CINEMA

The politicization of the Tamil film and its connection with the world of politics is one of the principal legacies of the stage. During the struggle for freedom, the wave of anger that swept through the nation after the Jallianwallabagh massacre in 1919, the Khilafat agitation, and the Non-co-operation movement led to the politicization of the performances by drama companies. It began with the appearance of songs supporting the nationalist cause. The first to take this step was M. G. Bairava Sundaram Pillai, a songwriter and an actor. Pillai sang on stage a song celebrating the arrival of Gandhi on the political scene:

> There is the khaddar flagship,
> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
> The flagship of India.

The new style quickly caught on and key figures from the world of the company drama, such as Baskara Das and Bhoomi Balagadas, soon built up a formidable corpus of patriotic songs referring to historic events like the execution of Bhagat Singh and The Round Table Conference. These songs were used as instruments of political propaganda also independently of the stage, for instance in railway stations, on

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Duncan on the sets of Meera (1945) in Madras with heroine M. S. Subbulakshmi and her husband Sadasivam. Photograph courtesy The Hensley Collection, University of Chicago.

By the end of the first decade after its introduction, the Tamil cinema received a new and significant strain of influence, which changed the style of films. This influence can be largely

political platforms, and in schools. In a predominantly illiterate society, this aural medium became a powerful tool for political education. S. S. Viswanatha Das, a popular stage artist, was arrested and imprisoned for singing a patriotic song on the stage. In spite of efforts by the colonial administration to suppress such expressions of nationalism, for instance through issuing the Dramatic Performances Act of 1879, the use of songs for political mobilization persisted because it was difficult to control the use of these songs. There are instances of gramophone discs that were proscribed. Some drama companies played safe and announced in their handbills that banned songs would not be sung. But on stage they would use symbols, such as the charka (a spindle for handspinning advocated and used by Gandhi), the Congress flag, and the Gandhi cap. In response, the colonial administration would invoke the Dramatic Performances Act against such plays.

In the next phase, plays on nationalistic themes were written and staged. The key figure in initiating this trend was T. P. Krishnaswami Pavalar, who managed a drama company called Bala Manohara Sabha. This company staged plays in the popular Royal Theatre, near Salt Quarters in Madras. In 1922 Pavalar came up with a play titled The Triumph of Khaddar (Kadarin vetri) in which symbols like khaddar (homespun and hand-woven cloth, a nationalist symbol) and the charka were used. In this play all the characters wore khaddar and there was a scene in which a member of the Justice Party (a party which was ideologically opposed to the Congress), depicted as a noble, argues with a nationalist about the point of using khaddar. The play's favourable reception encouraged other playwrights to stage patriotic plays. Plays supporting the Gandhian ideals of anti-untouchability, temperance, and temple entry were staged. In 1934 Gandhi visited the Variety Hall, a drama house in Coimbatore, where the Madurai Devi Bala Vinodha Sabha was performing the play Nandanar, a story about a Harijan farmhand. On the day of Gandhi's visit to the theatre the entrance fees were donated to the Harijan Fund (Ramaswamy 1969, 730).

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More and more drama companies came under the influence of nationalistic ideas and soon many stage artists began taking part in direct action, like picketing in front of toddy shops or burning foreign textiles. S. V. Vasudevan Nair, a backstage singer, was a committee member of the Vaikam temple entry agitation in 1924. He was imprisoned for six months for his involvement in the agitation. M. V. Mani, M. R. Santhanalakshmi, and B. R. Subbiah Pillai picketed in front of toddy shops and were jailed. K. S. Ananthanarayanan of Arya Gana Sabha sang on political platforms. S. Satyamurthy, a Congress luminary and himself an amateur actor, encouraged the interaction between artists from the entertainment world and the nationalist movement. The interaction of the drama companies with the nationalistic struggle, in the form of propaganda through performances and direct action by the artists, charged the whole realm of the company drama with political activism.

In 1928 the Tamizhnadu Nadigar Sangam (Association of Actors of Tamil Nadu) was formed in Madurai, which was the headquarters of the company drama, with the aim of guiding the political involvement of the stage artists. Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajagopalachari visited the office of the association. The Sangam prepared a list of volunteers for each political event, for instance, for picketing. A number of artists courted arrest.[10] The police often harassed the drama contractors and created hurdles to prevent the staging of nationalist plays. The whole community of company drama artists found themselves involved in one way or the other in the freedom struggle.

The politicization of the entertainers from the world of the stage had a totally different outcome as well. Despised by society, the artists had been marginalized from all aspects of life. Some leading figures from the company dramas, such as T. K. Shanmugam, have described the humiliation meted out to drama actors and their isolation from the main society in their biographies. When they moved into a new town, they could not rent a house in a respectable locality and often had to lodge in the periphery. By entering the political arena, they suddenly gained in status. They found themselves at the centre of politics and came to enjoy a respectability they had not experienced before. They sat on political platforms along with well-known political leaders. Political activism was a route to respectability, something for which they had been yearning all these years. This was certainly an added incentive to enter politics.

When the artists from the stage moved into the film studios in the 1930s, they brought with them their political ideology, their involvement in the political activism of the Congress, propaganda methods and of course a corpus of political songs. Even in the very first Tamil film, Kalidas (1931), which is a mythological story, there is a song praising the ideals of Gandhi and the charka. The politicization of the Tamil cinema gradually intensified. Stories on contemporary themes, 'socials' as they came to be referred to, were made. These films incorporated Gandhian ideals, such as temperance and rural uplift. A typical example of this genre was The Two Brothers (Iru Sagodharargal) (1936), which first had been performed as a popular play.

General elections to the state legislature in the Madras Presidency were announced in the wake of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms in 1937. It was then that film artists entered the field of electoral politics. The artists, who now held a secure place in filmdom, took active part in the election campaign. Their earlier experience of political activism served them well. M. V. Mani appeared on political platforms along with Rajagopalachari and Chidambaranathan. He later went on to play the lead role in the film The Soldier of Madurai (Madurai veeran, 1938). K. B. Sundarambal, a star of the stage and later of the screen, campaigned for the Congress. Gramophone discs with propaganda songs performed by the luminaries of the screen, including K. B. Sundarambal, were released. All these artists had acquired fame and popularity as film personalities and they used their charisma for the cause of nationalism. The interaction between the stage, the film, and politics culminated in K. B. Sundarambal's occupation of a Congress seat in the Madras legislature in 1951, thus setting an example for quite

a few future film artists who later were to enter the legislature, too.

Once the Congress government came to power and ruled for two years from 1937 to 1939 with Rajagopalachari as the Prime Minister of Madras Presidency, film censorship almost disappeared. Overtly propagandist films, supporting the nationalistic struggle, could be made, utilizing the newly found freedom. One such film that was made during the Congress interregnum was Motherland (Mathrubhoomi, 1939), an allegory set against the background of Alexander's invasion of India. As independence became even more tangible, it almost became mandatory for every film to have patriotic songs and depict symbols of nationalism.

After independence, the film actors as a community that first had backed the cause of the Congress, moved on to support the Dravidian movement. The practice of utilizing the popularity of film artists among the masses to gather political support continued in a much more intense form after the inception of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949. It was in this year that the first film scripted by the founder of the DMK, C. N. Annadurai, was released. Film stars of that period, such as K. R. Ramasamy, N. S. Krishnan, S. S. Rajendran, and later M. G. Ramachandran, who all had their own drama troupes, lent their support to the movement and helped with its programme of political mobilization. In the process the phenomenon of the filmstar-politician emerged and cinema became a powerful factor in the social and political scenario of Tamilnadu, in a manner that is unparalleled elsewhere in the world. This situation continues to this day.

FEATURES OF THE COMPANY DRAMA IN THE TAMIL FILM

The leading film artists of the thirties, M. V. Mani, Kothamanagalam Srinivasan, Samanna, P. S. Govindan, all had a background in the company drama. They brought to the screen the performance style and mannerisms of the stage. Stylized acting, exaggerated body movements, and voices trained to project without amplification were all part of their training. The actors of the early years of the Tamil cinema determined the style of acting of the later years. Their postures and gestures remained stylized, as on the stage. There was no attempt to modify the acting style to suit the cinema. They merely continued to act in front of the camera. This style of acting became an integral part of the Tamil screen convention. On the screen the gestures and postures of stylized acting acquired conventionalized meanings. Latter day artists, even those who did not have a stage background, have followed the stylized manner of acting of their predecessors and these conventions still continue today.

When the main actors in a stage drama had to change their costumes or when the stage settings had to be altered in a company drama, comedians would appear in the front of the stage and fill in the time with a comedy routine. These humorous interludes had no connection with the main narrative, but were nevertheless accepted and even anticipated by the audience as a part of the entertainment package. The film adopted this stage characteristic too. In the cinema it acquired the form of separate humorous sequences, which were referred to as the 'comedy track' and which had most of the time no connection with or relevance to the main story. In time, these interludes gained their own independent value and their sound tracks were released as audiocassettes.

The repertoires of the company drama contained for the most part mythological stories familiar to the audience. For instance, when an old man appeared before the heroine, Valli, as she is driving away the birds in a cornfield, the audience would know that he is Lord Murugan in disguise. Therefore, when such episodes were filmed, the filmmaker did not have the burden of telling this part of the story cinematically. This retarded the growth of a cinematic vocabulary. There was little attempt to realize fully the specific possibilities of the cinema as a visual medium.

Until the middle of the 1970s, forty years after the arrival of the first Tamil talkies,

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artists trained in the methods of the drama companies dominated the Tamil cinema. In the first decade, K. P. Kesavan, in the second P. U. Chinnappa and M. K. Thiagaraja Bhagavathar had a background in theatre. The same was the case with the actresses. Early stars such as K. B. Sundarambal and T. R. Rajakumari came from the stage. In the fifties we see the rise of M. G. Ramachandran (who later became Chief Minister of Tamilnadu) and of Shivaji Ganesan, whose dazzling film careers lasted well into the late seventies. At the height of their stardom, these two actors controlled every aspect of their films: the style they enforced was basically that of stage, what they had learnt in their formative years while performing in boys' companies. The most enduring actress of the Tamil screen, Manorama, who has acted in more than a thousand films in a career spanning over more than forty years, was schooled in a drama company. A number of supporting actors, such as V. K. Ramasamy and O. A. K. Thevar, were from drama companies. In their magazine interviews, they spoke about their work in terms of stage acting, with the only difference that they were acting in front of the camera in the case of the cinema. In the drama halls, most of which did not have amplification, artists had to speak their lines in a loud tone, which put expression and intonation into a second place. They found this habit difficult to change even after making their debut in films. Acting remained stylized and characters devolved into stereotypes.

The actors retained the character of their place-bound theatrical mannerisms and did not use the freedom offered by the film medium. There is no evidence to show that they recognized the difference in relationship to place and to the audience that is inherent to the divergent nature of the theatre medium and the film medium. The expressive potential of the camera, in terms of mobility, different angles and lighting, was not realized. Cinema was not identified as a separate art form, with its own grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Film acting came to be judged by standards of the theatre. In fact, C. N. Annadurai went on record as saying that drama and film were two sides of the same coin. Even today, a similar attitude persists among many filmmakers, artists, and writers.

What follows is a discussion of some of the features and conventions carried over from the stage into the cinema in greater detail.

(i) SONGS

A legacy of the company drama is the emphasis on songs. In early Tamil films, there were as many songs as there were in a company drama. The Wedding of Srinivasa (Srinivasakalyanam, 1934), the first Tamil film to be made in Madras, had fifty songs. Though the number of songs

In the wake of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms, general elections to the state legislature in the Madras Presidency were

M. M. Chidambaranathan & M. A. Rajamani
in "Madhurai Veeran"
Produced by Raju Films and Rajah Talkies
PUBLISHED BY R. ETHIRAJIAH & SONS, P. T., MADRAS
The Indian Star Artists Picture Series No. R. E. 338
(Copyright Strictly Reserved)

M. M. Chidambaranathan who organized Salt Sathyagraha in Madras in 1931, as the hero in the film Madurai veeran (1938). Photograph

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in each film has been reduced in the course of time, their importance as an essential element of a film remains as it is. A character often broke into song when the scene became emotionally intense. Traditionally, a song was used to underline the emotional significance of a scene in the company drama. This convention was carried over to the films. Today, songs are central to the entertainment offering of a Tamil film and a separate industry as large as the film industry has developed around the recording of film songs.

The practice of filling up the sound track with various musical scores has its origin in the drama companies, too. With the introduction of sound into the Tamil film, the musicians of the company drama exchanged the pit orchestra position in a drama hall for that of the film studios. They brought with them the practice of playing music continuously as long as the play was on and often used this background music to heighten the impact of the narrative. This practice continues in the Tamil cinema, under the name 're-recording'. Silence is rarely used as a component in the sound track. When the filmmaker is unable to create the desired impact visually, he resorts to background music. For instance, when a character walks in the dark, scary music will be inserted in the sound track. Instead of visuals, the filmmaker attempts to achieve the desired effect by using appropriate music.

(ii) FRONTALITY AND DIRECT ADDRESS

Since the late 1970s, particularly with the arrival of Bharathiraja, who made his debut with the film At the Age of Sixteen (16 Vayathinile, 1977), and Balu Mahendra with his Enduring Patterns (Azhiyatha kolangal, 1979), more scenes shot at outdoor locations have been included in films. Yet most films continue to remain at the level of photographed drama. This is particularly evident in the case of interior sequences, where the shots are frontal and the characters look into the camera addressing the

Example of frontality from film Raja Magudam (1960). Left to right: Sattanpillai Venkatraman, Kuladeivam Rajagopal, S. V. Sahasranamam, N. T. Ramarao and Kannambal, all theatre actors. Photograph courtesy Roja Muthiah Research

Yet most films continue to remain at the level of photographed drama. This is particularly evident in the case of interior sequences, where the shots are frontal and the characters look into the camera addressing the

audience directly while delivering their lines. For them, the camera represents the audience of the drama house. They still follow the grammar and the syntax of the theatre, not that of the cinema. Furthermore, much of the story telling is achieved through verbal narration, not through visual imagery.

The sets closely resemble the proscenium stage. Characters enter the scene from the side of the frame; they say their lines and they often exit through the side of the frame. Most of the shots are frontal shots and mid shots, creating a claustrophobic stage effect. The theatrical perspective of the cinema is also evident in the lack of depth. Deep focus is rarely used. In certain situations, a lone character resorts to soliloquy to explain his or her situation. This is reminiscent of the drama convention where a character on stage addresses the audience directly.

(iii) COSTUMES

The costumes of the mythological characters, gods, and nobles in the company drama were greatly influenced by the way they were depicted in the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma. By the time the nineteenth century drew to its close, many of his paintings had been published in magazines and calendars and the drama companies, both in Bombay and Madras presidencies, were influenced by them. This influence was carried over to the cinema. In the film Mahadevi (1957), a story set in the Chola period, nobles in the royal court are shown sporting Marathi turbans and shervanis. There is no attempt to recreate the period ambience, for instance, with the help of what is depicted in the sculptures and murals of Tamilnadu. Instead, Marathi drama company costumes and costumes based on Ravi Varma's paintings continued to be used in period films, even as late as the 1980s.

(iv) THE INTERVAL

The interval is an integral part of film shows in India. This, too, is a legacy of the company drama. The plays were long. At times they lasted until the early hours of the morning. Therefore, a long intermission was a necessary part of the performance. During the interval period, the audience could enjoy refreshments while the stagehands changed the setting. This convention was followed in the film shows. The interval became an integral part of the film screenings in cinema houses. The artificial division of a film into two parts so as to allow time for an interval, affected the structure of the film. The interval interrupted the filmic narrative. Therefore, the first half of the film was filled with songs and dance; the story was narrated mainly in the second half, culminating into the mandatory climactic scene. A whole range of commercial enterprises developed around the interval, such as the teashop, the pan-and-cigarette shop and a series of slide-based advertisements that were shown in the second half of the interval. Consequently, the interval as a feature of a film screening came to stay.

(v) THE APATHY OF THE ELITE TOWARDS THE CINEMA

Traditionally, entertainers in India were looked down upon by the rest of the society. The numerous Tamil proverbs denigrating drama artists are a reflection of this attitude. In contemporary accounts of drama companies in Madras, the degrading conditions under which the artists worked and lived are described (Shanmugam 1973, 33). Temporary drama sheds were located either at the periphery of the town or in slum areas. As mentioned earlier, actors found it difficult to rent houses. The stigma attached to theatre artists was transferred to artists working in the cinema until, much later, when big money endowed the profession with a certain respectability. Witness after witness in the Cinematographic Enquiry Committee of 1927 testified that cinema was entertainment for the lower strata of society (Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28, 470). Both the government and the educated classes adopted a condescending view of cinema. This elitist aversion still persists, in many ramified forms. Cinema as a subject is not taken seriously in academia and cultural studies have

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not found a place at universities. Only a few independent research institutions offer a facility for these disciplines. Consequently, film criticism and film appreciation remain at a primitive level; and a critical cinema audience has not yet been cultivated.

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this article would seem to show that the carry-over of features and conventions from the stage into the film has prevented the growth and further development of the Tamil cinema. The persistence of these features and conventions in the film has retarded the realization of the special properties of the cinematic medium, in particular. Tamil cinema, burdened by its heavy theatrical excess baggage, finds it difficult to cut the umbilical cord and acquire an idiom of its own. Consequently, the potential of the cinematic medium remains stunted. The possibilities of the camera have not been exploited to the full. The emphasis on songs and on the aural element in films has been at the expense of the development of the visual dimension of the cinema. Filmmakers have not sufficiently recognized the fact that the two art forms, drama and cinema, have different relationships to the place of performance and to the audience because they were still immersed in the company drama ambience.

The arrival on the scene of filmmakers and cinematographers professionally qualified at film institutes has not made much of a difference. Even though there have been valiant attempts to develop a cinematic language for the Tamil film, for instance by Rudraiya in That is the Way She is (Aval appadithan, 1978) and by Santosh Sivan in Terrorist (1999), their efforts have not had an impact on the film culture as a whole. As a consequence, many of the characteristics of the drama continue to persist as cinematic conventions in the Tamil film.

Notes:

1 Nadigan kural (Madras), July 1957, 39. G. Subramania Ayyer of the Tamil daily Swadesamithran hailed T. R. Govindasamy Rao (1848-1920) as the father of South Indian drama.

2 Perumal 1979, see Appendix I for a list of such published material.

3 Venkatesh Chakravarthy, film theorist, personal communication, 21 February 2001.

4 Guy, Randor, 1991, 'G.C.V. Srinivasachari', Dinamani kadir (Tamil weekly), Madras, 24 November 1991.

5 Earlier attempts in cinematography, prior to those of Nataraja Mudaliyar, were also quite independent of the world of drama companies. In 1911, Marudappa Moopanar of Thanjavur travelled to England, where he made some films of actual events, including one covering the coronation of King George V in London in November 1911. These films were screened in Chennai and Thanjavur. In addition to Marudappa Moopanar, there were a few other pioneers. See the chapter on the silent cinema in Baskaran 1981, 67-94.

6 Padmanabhan 2000, see the list of drama companies from page 219 onwards.

7 Interview with Sarvotham Badami, Bangalore, The Hindu, 20 July 1990.

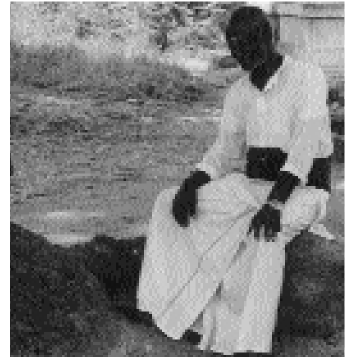
8 There was also an Italian director on the scene, T. Marconi. He directed a Tamil film titled The Deliverance (Vimosanam) in 1940. This film is not available. When the Gemini Studio was set up, Marconi became its first manager.

9 Duncan introduced some innovative methods to improve the quality of filmmaking. To facilitate the mobility of the camera, he introduced wooden tracks on which he mounted the camera so that it could move. These came to be known as 'Duncan tracks'. Similarly, to diffuse the light in close-up shots, he used a net which is still called 'Duncan net'. See Guy 1997, 164-171.

10 Actress M. R. Kamalaveni was imprisoned for six months. M. M. Chidambaranathan,

Interview with P. K. Bhupathi

22 January, 1999



P. K. Bhupati is a retired mrdangam player who has performed in commercial natakam or drama companies in Tamilnadu. These companies were the successors of the theatre companies run by the

There are still people in the south who teach this dance, but in our area there is no one left, not in a radius of fifty or hundred

devadasis and their male relatives.

His mother, P. R. Kamalambal, or Kamalamma as she was popularly known, was a rural devadasi of Padur Village. She had been dedicated to the village Goddess Unjiyammal in whose name she held a kuttadi maniyam. To enjoy the agricultural produce of the maniyam-land, she had to carry out several different services. These services included the performance of special songs and dance or sadirkkacheris at the time of the procession of the Goddess through the village. In addition to being a dancer, Kamalambal was a fully-fledged actress involved in the theatre of the devadasis, the tevaratiyal natakam. She ran her own theatre company and retired from active performing life around 1942.

P. Rajagopal is a professional kattaikkuttu actor, playwright, and director. He is the co-founder and president of the Tamilnadu

RAJAGOPAL. What kind of Goddess is Unjiyammal?

BHUPATI. A very powerful one.

RAJAGOPAL. Did you hold the maniyam in her name?

BHUPATI. Our maniyam was for Unjiyammal. Because her temple was inaccessible, we performed all our services in front of the temple of the Goddess Paintiyamman.

RAJAGOPAL. What exactly did you do?

BHUPATI. We would act out plays and sing songs called lali, mankalam, and eccarikkai during the procession of the Goddess through the village. We would receive a customary remuneration for

this and enjoy our maniyam. We'd also perform light-offerings.

RAJAGOPAL. Why was there a custom like this?

BHUPATI. In those days we had been granted a maniyam. We lived on the income obtained from the produce of this land. In return, we performed the customary services for the deity. But the situation changed. So we gave up that profession and relinquished our maniyam.

RAJAGOPAL. Was your mother, Kamalamma, married to the Goddess?

BHUPATI. I don't know. I was very young. But people say that she was married to the deity.

RAJAGOPAL. How could she be married to a female deity?

BHUPATI. That is what they did in those days. These women were called Tevaratiyal—devadasis. They were supposed to serve the Goddess.

RAJAGOPAL. Did these women perform also sadirkkacheris, in addition to playing in the theatre?

BHUPATI. Initially yes. They used to go in front of the Goddess and dance during religious festivals. When there were no festivals they would act in plays. My mother owned the Padur Kamalambal Company. It was made up of both men and women performers. Sadir was performed during the deity's procession. When the procession came to a halt at a central place they would dance. They would sing a lali, mankalam, and eccarikkai in front of the deity's temple, before the Goddess was lifted from her chariot.

RAJAGOPAL. Can you sing an eccarikkai?

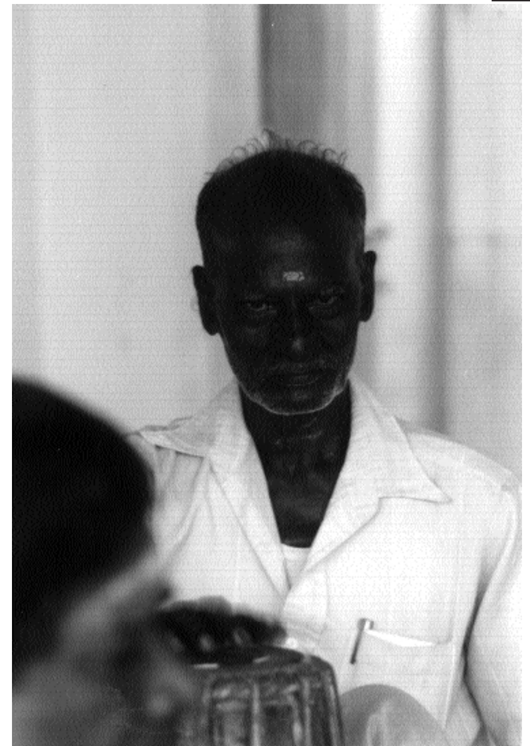
BHUPATI. Kali, Kaumari,
eminent Goddess whom I behold,
Nili, who lives at Kailasa,
protect the village of Nimili.

This is an eccarikkai. A lali goes as follows:

Beautiful one, Awesome one,
Wielder of the trident, Wife of Siva holding a skull,
Luminous and Subtle one,
Magic woman, be content!

When the Goddess had arrived in front of the temple there would be a sadirkkacheri by women dancers. A man or a woman would play the hand-cymbals and recite rhythmical syllables. . . tam ti ta tai, tadai tam ti ta tai . . . Someone else would play the mrdangam. And you had songs that went with it:

What wrong is there
were you to embrace me
to fulfil my desires?
Come, Nataraja of Tillai,
engrossed in puja,
and satisfy my desires.



P. K. Bhupathi in 1999. Photograph courtesy Hanne M.de Bruin.

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This is how the songs would run, covering the whole gamut from straightforward desire to spiritual love. These were meaningful songs. The dance teachers lived in Venkachery. There are still people in the south who teach this dance, but in our area there is no one left, not in a radius of fifty or hundred miles. There's no one left to dance, or to teach. It has died out. What was once called sadirkkacheri is now known as bharata natyam. They would teach by beating a wood block, then by bells, and finally they would teach the actual beats of the feet. This is how people like my mother were taught.

RAJAGOPAL. Who was the nattuvanar?

BHUPATI. The hand-cymbal player. He would direct the performance. He was the teacher.

RAJAGOPAL. So you had a woman to dance, a man to play the mrdangam . . .

BHUPATI. . . the nattuvanar, and a chorus of two singers, for it was difficult for the dancer to sing and dance without a break. Nattuvankam means that the teacher would demonstrate the dance and the dancers would imitate him. During the actual performance the woman would dance and the person called nattuvanar would direct her.

RAJAGOPAL. Why did this art disappear?

BHUPATI. Nobody made use of it, so it died out. The hereditary performers gave it up. Women chose to study and found paid jobs. They all dispersed.

RAJAGOPAL. What about bharata natyam in Madras?

BHUPATI. Teachers imported from the south teach it. The students are schoolchildren, children of lawyers, from rich families, brahmins. In Kanchipuram, too, there lived a teacher, R. P. R. Govindasamy. He was a mrdangam player and belonged to a lineage of nattuvanars. Now there's only this boy, Ekambaram, left. He's also a mrdangam player.

RAJAGOPAL. Why do brahmins pick it up easily?

BHUPATI. This art comes to them naturally. The hereditary performers have discarded it. And the connoisseurs have died. Nowadays, those without insight sit in the front rows while knowledgeable persons can be found near a tea stall, excusing themselves saying that they feel cold.

RAJAGOPAL. When did your mother stop performing?

BHUPATI. About sixty years ago. She stopped after I joined the profession. I am now almost seventy-six. She left when I was about fifteen or twenty.

RAJAGOPAL. What happened to your maniyam?

BHUPATI. These maniyams became a source of trouble. Our village was divided into two or three parts. Each of these demanded a performance. They would pay one varan or three-and-a-half rupees, a bed sheet, and some rice for a performance. As prosperity became more widespread the remuneration for performances increased from twenty-five to about two hundred rupees. We kept telling them that the amount offered was not enough to engage performers. The income wasn't worth the trouble. So we relinquished the maniyams. Village society had changed too. It had lost its magnanimity. That's why we gave up our claims.

RAJAGOPAL. How did you learn to play mrdangam?

BHUPATI. It's hereditary. My grandfather and my maternal uncle were both mrdangam players. I was sent to school but I didn't like it. One day at school during the lunch break some kids got onto the wooden benches and began to act. I began to drum on a bench. I got very interested in drumming. At home there was a mrdangam hanging from a nail in the wall. I started to play on it. My Uncle Balaraman was at home. He was a natakam artist and a scholar. He asked me whether I shouldn't be studying at school. He called my mother, his sister, and asked her about it. I told him that I wanted to become a mrdangam player. The next day he wrote out an exercise on the drum for me.

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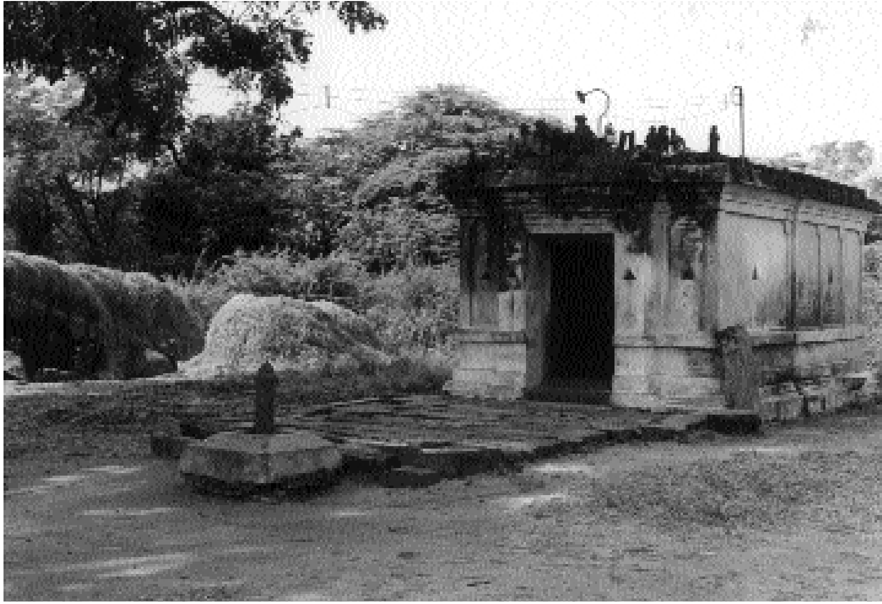
‘We would act out plays and sing songs called lali, mankalam, and eccarikkai during the



The temple of the Goddess Paintiyamman in Padur Village in front of which the devadasis performed. Photograph courtesy Hanne M.de Bruin.

When I was about sixteen or seventeen, one day I went to Tittalam Village where we had a maniyam. I had been asked to collect some coarse wheat. Just then a group of musicians, including two brahmin ladies, had arrived there from Utteramerur. The group’s mrdangam player had not turned up. I must have been about fourteen or fifteen . . . still wearing shorts, anyway. So they called me, bought me a proper veshti, and made me perform that night. Ranganathan Mudaliyar and others had come to hear me play. I didn’t know much. I could just follow the singers, but not recognize the intricacies of the music. The head of the group, Srinivasan Ragavacharya, promised to teach me. The harmonium player told me he’d adjust his performance to mine. So I joined them.

The singers were two sisters. They were very good. Sometimes they would teach me the ragas, the notes, and the rhythmical elaborations. They would tell me beforehand which songs they were going to sing, such as Thyagaraja kirttanais. Gradually I learned.

Thereafter I went to Vayalakkavur where a performance by my mother’s company was about to take place. The elders of the village put on the play Harichandra. My uncle was still angry with me because I had run away from home. That night my mother played the role of Chandramati. When I heard her sing the song ‘Come, Apple-of-my-eye’ [sung by Chandramati when she sees her dead son, HMB], I was overcome by emotion. My mother sang and I accompanied her. Then I decided I couldn’t do that again: either she or I had to stop. The next morning I told her my decision. She quit. I went on to play in several small natakam companies, and then in the bigger ones in Salem, Madurai.

RAJAGOPAL. What was the name of your mother’s company?

BHUPATI. Padur Kamalambal Company or Talukanattamma Sabha.

RAJAGOPAL. Who was its head?

BHUPATI. My mother. My father and uncle would help her, but the company was hers.

RAJAGOPAL. How many performers were there?

BHUPATI. Six or seven women . . . and the same number of men. In total sixteen or seventeen people, including the cooks.

RAJAGOPAL. Were there other companies similar to your mother’s?

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BHUPATI. There was Muttunayakamma's company. And Mannur Sarada's company. The performers were all products of my mother's company. Padur Kamalamma's was the most important company in the region.

RAJAGOPAL. Were all the members hereditary performers?

BHUPATI. Yes.

RAJAGOPAL. On what kind of occasions were the devadasi natakams performed?

BHUPATI. On the occasion of religious festivals. Festivals for village Goddesses, such as Mariyamman, Paintiyamman, and Tulukanattamman.

RAJAGOPAL. What kinds of plays were performed?

BHUPATI. Purana stories, such as Ciruttontar, Cakkupai carittiram, Ramadas, Ramayanam, Harichandra, Pavazhakkodi, Alli Arjuna, Kovalan. Those were the kind of plays they would do. You didn't have the 'novels' they perform nowadays. It was a big sensation to see a 'novel' play!

RAJAGOPAL. How were artists paid? With a cash remuneration or from sales of tickets?

BHUPATI. They would get three-and-a-half rupees. This token remuneration was called a kattalai. And they got a bed sheet, a cloth, rice. When the kattalai exceeded ten rupees they began to pay them in cash. Ten rupees were three varans—they reckoned in varans then.

RAJAGOPAL. What exactly is a kattalai? Did it exist only in villages where you had a maniyam?

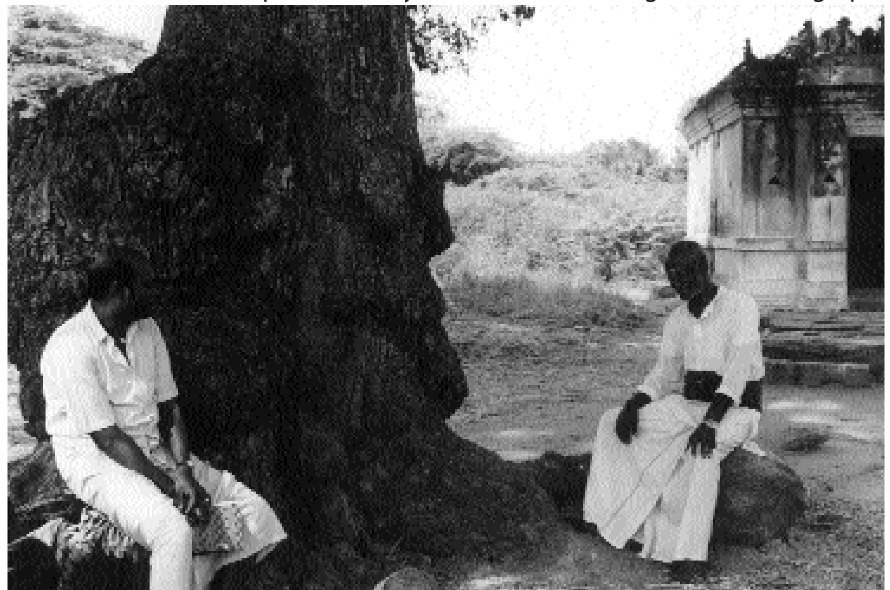
BHUPATI. No, it existed in all villages. The kattalai was one varan. As time went by it became two varans, a billy goat, a bed sheet, and some rice. The collection of these items would keep us in a village for four or five days. When incomes increased performers refused to perform for a token amount. Villages began to pay in cash … fifty or hundred rupees. The amount increased to five hundred, thousand. But by that time most of us had left the profession. We've also performed on the basis of ticket sales.

RAJAGOPAL. Who were the audience—the rasikars?

BHUPATI. Older people would sit in the front rows, notable people who knew how to relish the music. Those who didn't know how to appreciate it were to be found near the tea stall. But they would tell us what to perform!

RAJAGOPAL. What did the rasikars appreciate?

Getting ready for the interview (P. K. Bhupathi on the right and P. Rajagopal on the left) with the temple of Paintiyamman in the background. Photograph



'One day at school during the lunch break some kids got onto the wooden

BHUPATI. Ah . . . then there was a good appreciation of the art. The singers and musicians were really good. Now you don't have that kind of connoisseur anymore.

RAJAGOPAL. What about comedy and politics in the plays?

BHUPATI. Politics had already infiltrated the performances by then. The Congress Party had been founded and the Self-Respect Movement of Periyar. We used to sing anti-religious songs.

RAJAGOPAL. Such as?

BHUPATI. You behold and adorn these Gods,
but aren't they all made of stone?

I've forgotten the rest. It's almost sixty-five years ago. You'd also have Congress songs:

Spin your yarn
on the hand-spinning wheel.

After I joined the drama I sang anti-Congress songs and other 'special songs':

Realize that body and life are inseparable.
We can run, sing and dance only because of our daily rice.
That's why they say that the farmer protects our lives.
Neither silver coins nor gold can satisfy our hunger.
So can't you see the connection between the land
and the family, villager, Tamilian?
We can't live without farmers to plough and harvest.

RAJAGOPAL. What about comedy?

BHUPATI. It was there, performed by the appropriate characters.

RAJAGOPAL. Was there respect for women performers?

BHUPATI. They were well respected. Unlike today they were well received and given all facilities in villages.

RAJAGOPAL. What happened to the devadasi performers after their companies dissolved?

BHUPATI. Each of them went back to his or her original profession—weavers to weaving, those who had had a cycle repair shop to pumping up tyres. I didn't know any other job so I stayed on in the theatre. Those who had some money are now well off. But poor performers like me hang on trying to make a living. When I was young I played in big companies in Salem and Coimbatore. In our area I've played in the companies of Palli Doraisami, Senkadu Ayil Ramakrishnan, and Cheyyar Prakasam.

RAJAGOPAL. All these companies developed after the disappearance of the women's companies?

BHUPATI. Yes.

RAJAGOPAL. Who are today's rasikars? What do they enjoy?

BHUPATI. They enjoy whatever is being offered. It's a different kind of enjoyment.

RAJAGOPAL. What about comedy?

BHUPATI. It's a product of its own time.

RAJAGOPAL. And politics?

BHUPATI. It's an integral part of performances. The audience requests 'party songs'. When you sing them it may lead to a fight. If one person demands a song in the name of a particular party, someone else will demand one in the name of the opposition party. Some performers avoid these songs. Others sing them to earn a name and money. I used to sing a lot of DMK songs. I've been beaten up for it! I've had to hide myself in cornfields. If you sang songs like 'Co, Co, Congress Cowards', they'd throw stones at you.

RAJAGOPAL. Songs like what?

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BHUPATI. Don't be shy, women,
listen to the crimes
committed earlier
by these shameless Gods.

Some would throw stones. Others would pay you for it. We sang these songs for the money: 'Not bad what the drummer sings. Give him ten rupees!' Ten rupees in those days are worth hundred rupees now. I earned seven rupees a night!

RAJAGOPAL. What do you think of the present state of the natakam?

BHUPATI. What's left is deteriorating instead of developing. Respect is waning. After the advent of the cinema, drama has lost much of its allure. That's why I slowly dissociated myself from it. Now I teach bhajana songs and purana plays in villages.

RAJAGOPAL. How would you like the drama to be?

BHUPATI. As it was earlier—more devotional. Where do they create an atmosphere of bhakti nowadays? [recites] 'Siva and Murukan, you give us worldly joy and spiritual bliss . . .' Today's mrdangam players don't know how to perform this song. They did in those days. Now they ask me to teach it to them. [tries the mrdangam and starts singing]

Don't be egoistical saying 'I'.
Don't harbour thoughts like 'only me'.
I swear this in the name of the Supreme God:
Don't be arrogant.
For a good tone, experience, and eloquence
are of no benefit when you are an egoist.
Learning, worldly fame, and devotion for the Trinity
will be destroyed by egoism.
Therefore, don't harbour the idea of 'only me'.
Don't be egoistic.

Edited and translated into English by Hanne M. de Bruin.

This interview with P. K. Bhupati has been recorded on video. The video document (119 mins) with the title 'In Their Own Words: The Unheard History of the Rural Tamil Stage as Told by Four of its Professional Exponents', produced by Hanne M. de Bruin and P. Rajagopal includes three more interviews with M. Dhanammal, a former rural Devadasi, M. Shanmugavalli, a contemporary natakam actress, and P. Rajagopal who is an exponent of the kattaikkuttu tradition. Copies of the video can be obtained from the International Institute for Asian Studies, P. O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, the Netherlands (email: iias@let.leidenuniv.nl fax: 0031-71-527 4126) or from the authors (email: kattaiku@vsnl.com).

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New

New Indian Playwrights
Madhavi
—Bhisham Sahni
Translated from the Hindi by Alok Bhalla
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The Storyteller in Madhavi recounts an ancient tale from the Mahabharata. Munikumar Galav must fulfil his promise to his guru, Vishwamitra. This is his Duty. Yayati the king-turned-ashamite gives away his daughter Madhavi to Galav in an act of generosity; this is his Duty. And in between these fixed notions of male pride and honour lives Madhavi, treated as a mere pawn in the world of masculine action. Blessed with the ability to regain her youth and virginity at will, and the promise that she will mother great kings, she is a vauable asset to the men who use and control her. Till she walks out on them all, denying them the final satisfaction of controlling her will.

Bhisham Sahni is a leading writer in Hindi. He has been Editor of the literary magazine Nai Kahaniyan. Amongst his major works, the novel Tamas dealing with the Partition experience, won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975.

Alok Bhalla is a senior literary editor, currently teaching at CIEFL, Hyderabad.

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