

# The 'Inexhaustible Work of Criticism in Action': Street Theatre of the Left

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## I

During the past few decades the theatre . . . has made enormous sacrifices in its efforts to help solve social problems . . . And it has paid for such services to society by sacrificing virtually every element of poetry.

*Bertolt Brecht (1994: 12)*

And the dwarfs who came on-stage and spoke everyday street-language drove poetry out of the theatre. The bourgeois does not understand poetry and is, therefore, suspicious of it. In his concept of realism, only the mundane slang of the market-place has any relevance. Market-place or stock exchange.

*Utpal Dutt (1988: 32)*

Consider the following: in 1996, for the second year running, the Department of Family Welfare, Ministry of Health, issued an advertisement in a national daily inviting 'sealed quotations from reputed parties in the profession, for organising street plays during India International Trade Fair.' Mark the operative words: 'quotation', 'profession'—theatre has entered the market, you can buy and sell it, just like office furniture.

This is what capitalism does, it turns everything into a commodity, it expands the market, everything comes under the sway of capital. And capital moves surreptitiously, insidiously, to engulf, by and by, the entire range of human activity, including art. Thus, film production becomes an industry and the art gallery turns into a supermarket. And what happens to street theatre?

In response to its advertisement in 1995, the Ministry had received about a dozen quotations. Far from being 'reputed parties', most of the applicant groups were simply hastily assembled collections of individuals out to make a quick buck. There was one exception, however. This was a group which has been doing proscenium theatre of some quality over the last few years. Like other similar groups in Delhi, this one, too, has had to face tremendous odds to simply survive; it is understandable, therefore, that it should be on the lookout for funds. As it happened, this group was eventually selected by the Ministry, and it decided to perform the Jana Natya Manch street play *Aurat* (woman).

What was performed, reportedly, was a completely mutilated version of the play. The problem was not per se the changes in the script: Jana Natya Manch's *Aurat* (not to be confused with other street plays bearing the same name) has been performed by literally scores of groups all over India, and even in Pakistan and Bangladesh, by adapting the text to local contexts. In the version done for the Health Ministry, however, the radical thrust of *Aurat* was itself completely missing. The concerned group had made large-scale changes in the text, to purge it of anything that came even remotely close to radical, left-wing politics. And these changes were made by the group at its own initiative: self-censorship preceded official sanction. This, of course, had to happen. *Aurat* is a revolutionary play and the state does not finance revolution. Interestingly, the first casualty in the text was the wonderful poem 'I am a Woman' by the Iranian revolutionary Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooii, martyred in the struggle against the Shah. *Aurat* opens with this poem, adapted and translated by Safdar Hashmi:

I am a woman . . .  
A Worker whose hands turn  
The great machines of the factory . . .  
A woman for whom  
In your shameless vocabulary

There is no word  
Which can describe her significance.  
A woman in whose chest  
Is hidden a heart  
Full of festering wounds of wrath,  
In whose eyes dance  
The red shadows of liberty.  
A woman,  
Whose hands have learnt,  
Through years of toil,  
How to raise the red flag.

All this, and more, was cut out. Quite literally, then, theatre had sacrificed poetry upon entering the market.

But perhaps there is more to this story. Several ministries and other bodies commission works of art; Doordarshan and NFDC ask for proposals; the Akademis which administer culture give away awards and grants. The Health Ministry, however, specifically asked for quotations. Why? Every art, upon entering the market, becomes commodified, but is still perceived more or less as art. Street theatre, on the other hand, undergoes a fundamental transformation: it turns into advertising. It does not advertise consumer products—though, reportedly, in Nepal even that has happened—it advertises social messages. There are many, many groups which produce this kind of ‘theatre’ and they sell a variety of messages: family planning, hygiene, protection against AIDS, the evils of drink and even, I’m told, how to cross a road. Not all work for the government; many work for NGOs and often NGOs themselves undertake such social advertising.

Such ‘plays’ are sometimes done with the best of intentions, but more often with just philanthropical smugness, and almost always there is money to be made (an acquaintance of mine, year before last, made a lakh-and-a-half, after paying his actors and other expenses, in three months flat), money that often comes from foreign sources. I admit that I have not seen an enormous amount of this kind of work; but I have seen some and know about more: and I am yet to see a single ‘play’ of this kind that stands on its own as theatre. There is no dramatic tension, only the most tired cliches, and loads of boredom. It simply isn’t theatre: it’s advertising, plain and simple, and bad advertising at that.

(I am excluding from this discussion those NGOs which work within the women’s movement. One reason for this is that *STQ* has already devoted one issue to it—No. 9, April 1996. The other, more important, reason is that the plays produced by them do not fall within the category of street-theatre-as-advertising. Very often, these plays do reflect the lived experience of the movement, and often their central concern is to empower the activist herself by encouraging her to play out the oppressions that define her life. This kind of work constitutes a separate stream within Indian street theatre and deserves separate analysis: of its theatrical merits or otherwise, its theoretical basis, its role within the larger women’s movement, its aesthetic choices and strategies, its conditions of production, its sources of finance, its efficacy, and so on. A truly critical analysis of this kind has not yet, at least to my knowledge, been done. It needs to be done, and by someone within the movement.)

The literacy movement has had a curious, mixed impact on street theatre. On the positive side, literally hundreds of street plays have emerged from the literacy movement, involving thousands of young people in some kind of theatrical activity. Also, these plays have undoubtedly helped in some manner to mobilize local communities for literacy. On the negative side, however, the overwhelming majority of such plays have been quite terrible. I have myself read about 150 plays collected by the National Literacy Mission. The best among these were to be published and the selection was to be done by a panel of street theatre persons. There was not even one play that could be published without major reworking: they simply had no drama. Anyone who has read or seen literacy plays would agree that most plays are sermonizing and dull. It is somehow presumed that talking to illiterates means talking to ignorant fools—which is the general problem street theatre faces—and such talking becomes talking down. Most plays put forward a narrow, merely utilitarian view of literacy (‘If you know how to read you will not board the wrong bus, you can write your own letters, shopkeepers will not short-change you,’ and so on), instead of seeing literacy as a window to the world, as empowerment, as a weapon of struggle. Such plays are, then, merely ‘devices’ of ‘communication’, not theatre.

Much like school textbooks, they are lifeless, boring: as if learning cannot, should not, be fun. And audiences, therefore, regard them as objects of deference, not sites of engagement—to be received in solemn, temple-like silence, and then . . . forgotten! Faced with this deference, actors begin to imagine that their plays have had tremendous ‘impact’ (whatever that means), their ‘message’ has gone home, even, in extreme cases, that their plays have brought about literacy; the real participation of the entire community, the mass movement on the ground, the months of hard work by dedicated volunteers, all this is conveniently forgotten. I am not trying to run down the literacy movement. On the contrary, I am arguing that the literacy movement is a part of the larger struggle against exploitation of various kinds, and if street theatre does not recognize this, it comes perilously close to sermonizing at best, advertising at worst. In fact, this would be true not just for literacy plays, but street theatre as a whole.

This has had a disastrous result: not only does advertising pass off as theatre, the feeling has grown that all street theatre is advertising, social or political.

Street theatre of the Left is not advertising. [By Left, throughout this article, is meant the official Left.] It may be of uneven quality, it may at times be marked by proselytizing zeal, it may not always be aesthetically rich, but it is not advertising.

So what is ‘street theatre of the Left’?

## II

(The political theatre refuses) to accept the bourgeois interpretation of the neutrality of art. As the theatre is an important instrument in the working class struggle for freedom, the stage must reflect the purpose and life of the proletariat fighting for a new order in the world.

*Erwin Piscator (Van Erven, 1988: 9)*

Contemporary Indian street theatre has been drawing in equal measure from our folk and classical drama as well as from western drama . . . (It is) a twentieth century phenomenon, born of the specific needs of the working people living under capitalist and feudal exploitation.

(Street theatre) is basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilise them behind fighting organisations.

*Safdar Hashmi (1989a: 11-12)*

It was, perhaps, inevitable. The Soviet Revolution of 1917 inaugurated a new epoch in world history by founding the first socialist state, an epoch heralded during the previous century by the theoretical and practical-political work of the fathers of scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. This new epoch needed new ways of not only comprehending the world, but also of expressing new reality, for those who were creating this new reality had new dreams and new fears. The world was changing, and changing rapidly, and the arts were in a ferment. Cubism was incorporating multiple vantage points into a single frame besides questioning the pride of place held by oil on canvas as *the* material of art by using newspapers, rope, cloth, etc.; the Bauhaus was obliterating the boundary between art and design, between aesthetics and function; the Dadaists were going a step further by seeking to demolish art itself with that delightfully irreverent, scatological slogan, ‘Art is Shit’; cinema, itself an infant art, was being put to new and revolutionary use by Eisenstein.

The ‘proclamation’ that I’m going to make a movie on Marx’s *Das Kapital* is not a publicity stunt. I believe that the films of the future will be found going in this direction (or else they’ll be filming things like *The Idea of Christianity* from the bourgeois point of view!)—(*Leyda and Voynow, 1985: 35*).

While Eisenstein was creating films of the future, his friend and collaborator Vsevolod Meyerhold was creating a theatre of the future, a theatre of revolution: mounted on a grand scale, this theatre played for those classes who were changing the world, a theatre that broke bourgeois conventions of aesthetics. Meyerhold’s productions for the Soviet October Theatre introduced many innovations: he projected captions on to a screen on stage, and used ramps and platforms

in Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Mystery Bouffe* in 1919; in 1923 his production of *The Earth in Turmoil* used iron scaffolding, cars and machine guns, and ended with a stirring rendition of the workers' anthem, *Internationale*; the following year, in *Give Us Europe*, he increased the number of projection screens to three, and used commentary and quotations from Lenin and Trotsky.

Around the same time, developments in the revolutionary theatre of Germany, centred around the figures of Brecht and Piscator, were pointing in a similar direction. What began there as agitprop during and after the First World War, grew into full-fledged political theatre, massive in ambition, scope and ingenuity, by the end of the twenties. This political theatre, too, introduced several innovations: Piscator used slide projections, moving images from film, animated cartoons, audio recordings from political speeches, newspaper headlines, a double treadmill stage, and so on. Piscator was to say later that similar aims led the Soviet and German political theatres to similar solutions, at the same time. He is right, for neither theatre knew about the other for some time—the first photographs of Meyerhold's work were published in Germany only in 1927.

It is this tradition of theatre that street theatre of the Left inherits; in particular, three of its defining characteristics. First, the political theatre of the post-Soviet Revolution era reinstated theatre where it belonged: among the people. In other words, it was reappropriating for theatre its popular roots—as in, say, the Dionysian festivals of ancient Greece, or the massive carnivals of medieval Europe, or even Shakespeare's theatre of Elizabethan England. What was new, of course, was that now the term 'people' had quite a specific meaning, a meaning defined in Marxist theory in class terms: the 'people' now meant all those classes, sections and groups which rallied around the urban and rural proletariat to effect a revolutionary capture of state power. It is in this rather precise, Marxist sense that the term 'people' will be used henceforth. Second, this theatre sought to create an aesthetic all its own and rejected, increasingly, nearly all the most fundamental bases of bourgeois aesthetics. The innovations of Meyerhold and Piscator are not empty 'gimmicks': they are efforts to redefine the very notion of what constitutes 'art'. Third, theatre now had to play a critical role in society, because the people, towards whom this theatre was partisan, were themselves looking at society very, very critically. The novelty of this enterprise did not go unnoticed. *The Rote Fahne* (*Red Flag*) of 12 April 1921, reviewing Piscator's production of Franz Jung's *Die Kanaker* (with Piscator playing Lenin), noted that

What is basically new about this theatre is the curious way in which reality and the play merge into one another. You often don't know whether you are in a theatre or in a public meeting, you feel you ought to intervene and help, or say something . . . (You feel) that the spectator is involved in the play, that everything that is going on on the stage concerns him.—(*Piscator*, 1963: 54)

With the *Red Flag*, then, we are already in Brecht land. But Brecht deserves separate consideration, and we shall take that up in a later section. Suffice it to note here that the concerns that animated the post-Soviet Revolution political theatre were similar, though not identical, to the concerns that led to the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association in 1943. IPTA hoped to organize 'a people's theatre movement throughout the whole of India as the means of revitalizing the stage and the traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organiser of our people's struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice' (Pradhan, 1979: 130).

Street theatre of the Left traces its lineage back to IPTA, and the IPTA legacy is alive in each and every Left street theatre group today. In some cases, this link is direct, visible: Jana Natya Manch literally grew out of IPTA in Delhi in the early 1970s. In others, the IPTA influence is more subterranean, but present nevertheless, as, for instance, in Samudaya[Karnataka]. IPTA itself, today, is no longer the force it was in the 1940s, though a lot more is happening under the IPTA banner than many imagine; many of its units are very active, indeed, vibrant, and many new units have sprung up in the last few years, especially during IPTA's golden jubilee celebrations. Whether through its own units or through other groups, the radical legacy of IPTA—its emphasis on theatre for the people; its efforts to revitalize wherever possible the 'traditional arts'; its efforts to build a people's theatre movement under the political guidance, at least initially, of the (then undivided) Communist Party—this radical legacy continues to inspire street theatre of the Left today.

In fact, the very idea of street theatre comes from IPTA. Whether IPTA did any street theatre in the 1940s, I do not know. The accounts I have heard are imprecise. But it was certainly done in

the 1950s. Utpal Dutt, who spent a very brief time in IPTA remembers: 'In the IPTA we introduced the street-corner play during the 1952 elections. And before that, in 1951, during the *bandimukti andolan* (movement for the release of political prisoners), we organised street-corner plays—that was the first time' (1984: 25). The play, Rustom Bharucha informs us (1983: 57) was *Chargesheet*, and the idea came from Panu Pal. Apparently, one day Panu Pal interrupted an IPTA rehearsal and urged those present to do a quick, short, improvised play on the imprisonment of Communist leaders. The very next day, at 5 p.m., *Chargesheet* was performed in Hazra Park for an audience of thousands of workers. It was then performed many times—we do not know how many—from Jalpaiguri to Canning in open spaces and, most frequently, on trucks. The *Chargesheet* experience left an impact on the young Utpal Dutt: he was obviously impressed by the robust, rough theatricality of the *pathanatika* (street play), its immediacy and its political sharpness. Utpal Dutt continued doing street plays, especially during election campaigns, nearly till the end of his life.

It is difficult for me to talk about Utpal Dutt's street plays, for I never saw any. The accounts I have read and heard are not quite clear. Reading Bharucha, one would imagine these plays to range from 'short' to 'three-hour' plays, and although he discusses in detail the text of some (notably *Din Badaler Pala*), it is difficult to visualize how they were done, i.e. how, precisely, were they different from his open-air proscenium productions. Bharucha only tells us that 'street-corner plays . . . did not need elaborate productions' (1983: 69). Other, more informal accounts of people who saw some of these plays suggest that there wasn't much difference in terms of form, apart from a lack of stage effects: a wall or cloth served as backdrop, the audience was placed primarily on one side of the 'stage' (which may or may not be elevated), the actors entered and exited as if from wings. Clearly, then, while Utpal Dutt realized the agitational potential of street theatre with the insight of the pioneer that he was, he does not seem to have seriously attempted developing the dramaturgy of this infant form.

Street theatre as we know it today was (re)born in 1978 and this time the pioneers were Jana Natya Manch in north India and Samudaya in south India. Through the 1950s, 60s and up to the mid-70s, barring Utpal Dutt's occasional forays on to the street, there is virtually no evidence of street theatre being done in India. [See 'Street Theatre in Bengal' in this issue for another view of this.] What accounts for this gap of 25 years between the early IPTA street plays and the development of the form in the late 1970s? And why was modern street theatre born precisely in the year 1978?

One reason for the gap is, of course, inscribed in the very nature of street theatre. You could call this an irony, as Bharucha does, but to me it seems perfectly logical that radical, oppositional theatre flourishes precisely during, or in response to, repression: this is the reason for the sporadic, broken history of street theatre. Through the 1950s and 60s, the political climate in India prevented street theatre from flourishing. The hopes of revolution fueled by the RIN Mutiny and the mass strikes of 1946 gave way, fairly rapidly, to the monumental grief of Partition and the hope—not of revolution, but hope nevertheless—accompanying Independence, hope that was not snuffed out when Nehru's tanks rolled into Telengana. That the young nation had booked a tryst with destiny seemed a reasonable enough proposition, as did the assumption that a government with a popular mandate would rule in the people's interest. This rosy-eyed dream of a nation striding along towards freedom, secularism, and socialism was increasingly dented and bruised over the next three decades, but what shattered it was the Emergency of 1975-77, preceded by semi-fascist terror in West Bengal. The fragile basis of Indian democracy came sharply into focus and many watched with shock and horror the ease with which democracy slid into authoritarianism. The street theatre of our times is the direct result of the repression of the 1970s. And the fact that it was a response, most immediately, to the Emergency, explains the timing: 1978, the year following the Emergency.

But another factor must have been present as well: street theatre must have been the result of the theatrical ferment of the 1960s and the 70s, the decades when amateur, experimental theatre appeared in nearly all major Indian languages. Political themes now began to be articulated on the stage in novel, often startling ways. Even a totally random selection—say, Badal Sircar's *Ebang Indrajit*, Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, Govind Deshpande's *Uddhwasta Dharmashala*, and so on—would be enough to indicate the diversity of routes through which politics entered the theatre, self-consciously, as politics. In a tantalizingly brief article, Safdar Hashmi (1989b) hints at the connection between these developments and the birth of

modern street theatre. Elucidating the exact nature of this inter-connection is a task for future research. I suspect that in Samudaya the link would be easier to grasp: Prasanna, who was directing many Samudaya plays, was fresh out of the National School of Drama, and people like B. V. Karanth and M. S. Sathyu were creatively involved in many Samudaya productions. In the case of Jana Natya Manch (henceforth Janam), the influence of the developments of the so-called mainstream theatre were probably less obvious. Janam began doing street theatre far less self-consciously.

This is how it happened. A bunch of young Students' Federation of India (SFI) activists had revived the Delhi unit of IPTA, dormant since the late 1950s, in 1970-71, and began doing large, proscenium plays in the open for mass audiences of thousands. At this stage, 'we knew absolutely nothing of theatre. We just wanted to make revolutionary theatre which would . . . inspire the workers. . . Our theatrical consciousness was very rudimentary' (Safdar Hashmi, 1989a: 150). The break with IPTA occurred in late 1972, partly for ideological reasons (on the question of the attitude to be adopted vis-a-vis the Congress (I)) and partly for extraneous reasons (vested interests inside IPTA had converted the office, located on prime land, into a commercial enterprise and naturally resented the young men and women who wished to do theatre there). Thrown out of IPTA, these young women and men formed Janam in March 1973 and continued doing the kind of theatre they had been doing in IPTA: plays like Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena's *Bakri*. These were large productions performed for huge audiences on stages erected in the open in and around Delhi.

In the summer of 1975, there was a tentative brush with street theatre, the significance of which was realized only three years later. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, indicted by the Allahabad High Court for using unfair means to win the election, refused to step down and appealed to the Supreme Court instead. Before the apex court could decide the matter, Janam had prepared a short skit called *Kursi, Kursi, Kursi* (chair or seat). It was performed once or twice, maybe more, but soon the Emergency was clamped down. The play folded up. And even earlier, in 1972, when Safdar was still in IPTA, he and a friend had done a short, 10-minute play called *The Nixon-Kissinger Dialogue* on Vietnam and had performed it at a demonstration outside the USIS office. 'It was a very crude kind of play but it was the first street play we did', Safdar was to say later (1989a: 156). And *Kursi*, too, 'was a very unconscious exercise. We hadn't thought at all about the special kind of acting required to make it most effective (or about) positioning, voice projection, etc. We just did it' (*ibid*: 157).

After the Emergency was lifted, it became impossible to do large plays: 'We discovered that the trade unions . . . were no longer in a position to bear the expenses of even 500 or 700 rupees for a performance. . . . during the Emergency they had been totally destroyed, you see. They needed our theatre in their reorganisation efforts but they had no funds' (*ibid*: 159). A new kind of theatre was now needed, but no one knew what kind. 'All we knew was that we wanted a play that was (a) inexpensive (b) mobile and portable (and) (c) effective' (*ibid*: 160). They read dozens of plays, but none satisfied them. Someone remembered the *Kursi* experience. Janam decided to write their own plays. The first of these was *Machine*, a short, 13-minute play with a cast of six, acted in a circle with the audience on all sides, first performed on 15 October 1978. Janam's modern street theatre was born. Safdar records how the idea of *Machine* emerged.

There is a chemical factory . . . called Herig-India. The workers there didn't have a union. They had two very ordinary demands. . . They wanted a place where they could park their bicycles and . . . a canteen where they could get a cup of tea . . . The management wasn't willing even to grant these demands . . . The workers went on strike and the guards opened fire, killing 6 workers. So this old Communist leader told me about this incident . . . and he said, 'Why don't you write a play about it?' (*ibid*: 159).

The initial draft of *Machine* was written by Safdar and Rakesh Saxena, and was finalized on the floor, where everyone present contributed. The author of *Machine*, as of all subsequent plays, is Janam, not Safdar: I stress this point only because many believe otherwise. Safdar was a superb writer, and often his contribution to a script was the single largest, but he was never the sole author.

*Machine* is an abstract play, in a way. The machine, created very simply by human figures, is the symbolic representation of capitalism. The worker, the capitalist and the security officer are all parts of the machine; they are complementary parts of a system founded upon the exploitation

of one by the other; their co-existence, then, is unequal. As the Sutradhar puts it:

They stay together, they work together. Owner and worker, goon and victim. And more: mill and grain, lord and serf. Always together, forever together!

(You have only my word for it, but in the original Hindustani, this not only rhymes, but also sounds wonderful; but more on that in a moment.) But of course the permanence of togetherness is illusory: an exploitative system breeds within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The machine breaks down and comes to a grinding halt—the workers have revolted. Put in this manner, the play sounds trite. It isn't. Safdar remembers how *Machine* was an incredible success.



*Machine*, 1979.

After we sang the final song, the trade union delegates . . . lifted us on their shoulders. We became heroes . . . the next day we performed at the Boat Club for about 1,60,000 workers. So you see, our street theatre began very gloriously . . . A lot of people tape-recorded the play . . . A month after the rally we started getting reports from all around the country that people were performing *Machine* . . . They had . . . reconstructed it in their own languages (*Ibid*: 162).

Ten years and a thousand shows (I mean this literally) later, Safdar still could not explain the success of *Machine*. Or so he thought: 'The workers absolutely love this play. I still do not understand (why), for it's so simple . . . It is schematic, except that the dialogues are interesting. Everywhere they loved it, though . . . Perhaps it is something . . . abstract that appeals to them' (*ibid*: 162-63). But Safdar has explained, here, the success of *Machine*: first, because of its not just 'interesting', but stylized, lyrical, near-poetic prose; second,

because it captures in its abstraction a very real, living truth and trusts its audiences to make the connection between the abstraction and reality; third, because abstraction and brevity lend it a certain simplicity, without rendering it simplistic (we shall return to this notion of the 'simple').

What *Machine* did, then, was to encapsulate the basic framework of Janam's future work; or, if you will, it indicated the terrain over which Janam's street theatre has traversed to date: in the moment of its birth, street theatre allied itself with the people, the revolutionary classes in particular; it signalled the involvement of its audiences in the creative process itself (remember, the idea for *Machine* came from a trade unionist); it placed poetry in the foreground; it laid stress on theatrical innovation; and it inspired several others to take up street theatre.

Not that Safdar and his comrades—Rakesh Saxena, N. K. Sharma, Subhash Tyagi, Manish Manocha, Moloyashree Hashmi, Rathin Das, Aruna Sharma, and others—realized all this then. What they had created was not based on any model they had seen or heard about, it was a practical response to a concrete problem. Safdar had read Brecht extensively and so, probably, had N. K., but there was no street theatre there. Safdar and N. K. had read Piscator pretty well, and had heard of El Teatro Campesino, but probably just about. Augusto Boal was not even a familiar name—his *Theatre of the Oppressed* was published in the UK only in 1979, and reached Janam much, much later. Badal Sircar's Third Theatre was no influence: when *Machine* was first done, Janam knew nothing of it. And they hadn't heard of Samudaya's first street play *Belchi*, but saw it fairly soon, when it was performed on the first anniversary of street theatre, October 1979, by a group of JNU students, in Hindi translation.

That first year saw an incredible burst of creativity, unsurpassed since, even by Janam, easily the most prolific street theatre group in India. Within a fortnight after *Machine* opened, Janam had written and rehearsed *Gaon se Shahr Tak*, an interesting, but moderately successful play on a dispossessed peasant becoming an industrial worker. The end of the year saw *Hatyare*, a sensitive, probing play on the recent riots in Aligarh. In February 1979, a real quickie on the fare hike by the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC), written, rehearsed, and out on the streets in five hours flat: this was *DTC ki Dhandhali*, and logged 48 shows in four days. The following month, Janam prepared *Aurat*, the most successful and popular street play to date. Janam still performs it, and has done about 2000 shows over 18 years; also, as I said earlier, it has been translated and performed in virtually every Indian language. Soon after came *Teen Crore*, on unemployment. This didn't really work, but became the basis for *Raja ka Baja*, which was done the following year and became a roaring success. In the meanwhile, in December 1979, the first election play, *Aya Chunao*, was performed extensively in Haryana.

Seven plays, then, in fourteen months, totalling about 500 shows. The rate of fresh output declined a bit after that, but not the rate of performance: Janam did 2000 shows in the first four years. Safdar—'We just kept going because the people gave us so much energy' (ibid:167). Yet, what is striking, in retrospect, is not so much the mind-boggling figures of that first year—for Janam has averaged a little over a show a day for 19 years now and has produced 47 street plays—but the sheer diversity of output. Each of these seven plays of the first year is distinct in style and, even when not successful, well-crafted: not a moment is wasted, the action is tight, the language has a flow, the dialogues are easy on the tongue (and ear), the humour sharp but never unnecessary, the characters delineated with minimum effort (a turn of phrase here, a piece of costume there), the songs lyrical yet forceful. And hardly ever is a successful strategy repeated. Look, for instance, at how four important elements are used: language, narrative, songs, and humour. *Machine's* prose is stylized, rhyming; *Hatyare* uses stylization without rhyme; the *Aurat* scenes use realistic dialogue; in *DTC*, the manager gives a garbled, nonsensical speech. *Gaon se Shahr Tak* tells a single story; *Teen Crore* tells three stories; *Aurat* shows vignettes of several; *Hatyare* is near documentary; *Aya Chunao* is episodic; *DTC* is none of these, but it works nevertheless. *Machine* ends with the Internationale; *DTC* ends with a very different kind of song; the *Aurat* songs are interventionist, they make a comment; the songs of *Gaon* have a more narrative function; *Hatyare* has no songs at all. In *Machine*, humour is created with words; in *Aurat* more with action; *DTC* is funny because nonsensical; *Aya Chunao* is biting satire; *Hatyare* works precisely because it is not funny. And through all this, the plays are politically very sharp, clear-headed: no sentimental mush here, no bemoaning, no wallowing in self-pity and confusion; instead, there is intervention and comment, a will to change the world—rather, to help those who are changing the world. And lastly, there is no sermonizing—the plays take a clear stand on issues, they are partisan, without imposing themselves on you. All this, as I said, in one year. And if I extend this year just three more months, it would include *Samrath ko Nahin Dosh Gosain* (March 1980) on the price rise, a hugely popular play with a *Madaari* (street magician), *Jamura* (his





boy) and a *Ration ka Bora* (sack of grain and other necessities distributed via the rationing system) as central characters, a play performed by nearly every street theatre group in north India, and one that begot countless imitations on countless issues. Those, surely, were the salad days.

And salad days they were for Samudaya as well, the pioneers of street theatre south of the Vindhyas. Formed in 1975 in Bangalore, Samudaya, a group, rapidly became Samudaya, the movement. It expanded spectacularly. By 1979, Samudaya had units in Mysore, Mangalore, Udipi, Dharwar, Raichur and Shimoga, besides the one in Bangalore. By 1982, it had 18 units all over Karnataka. Samudaya's first production was K. V. Narayan's *Hutava Badidare*, an adaptation



*Samrath ko Nahin Dosh Gosain* , 1982. Photo: Rathin Das.

of Samsa's *Vigada Vikramaraya*, directed by Prasanna, with music by B. V. Karanth. This was followed soon after by *Paata Ondu* (Lesson 1) and *Paata Yeradu* (Lesson 2), two short (didactic?) plays directed by Prasanna. Significantly, in the second of the two *Paatas*, the actors were the residents of Bangalore slums. Prasanna also directed two Brecht plays, *Mother* and *Galileo*. For the former, the CPI and CPI(M) helped to sell tickets. For the latter, a small portable stage was designed, facilitating more performances in the open, outside auditoria. In the meanwhile, Samudaya had also started film societies and a library movement, besides publishing pamphlets and booklets on political and cultural issues, along with revolutionary songs and poetry.

The first street play by Samudaya is *Belchi*, based on the ghastly burning of Harijan agricultural labourers in May 1977 in Bihar. *Belchi* was first performed in 1978 and Samudaya

still performs it, having done about 2500 shows. The parallels with *Machine* are striking: both were prepared in the same year, both were based on real-life killings, both allied themselves with the revolutionary classes—*Machine* with the urban proletariat and *Belchi* with the rural—both are theatrically innovative, using a degree of stylization, both were responses to the Emergency in some way, both were very soon widely translated and performed all over the country. As with Meyerhold and Piscator, here, too, similar aims led to similar solutions at precisely the same time.

*Belchi* was written by Krishnaswamy and had songs by the Dalit poet Siddalingaiah. Narendar Pani (1979: 48-9) tells us that it was performed extensively in slum areas, and the actors were also drawn from these slums. Pani mentions two more street plays: *May Day*, written by Krishnaswamy close on the heels of *Belchi*, and *Struggle*, a docu-drama on a strike in a Bangalore factory, dramatized by the striking workers themselves under the direction of Laxmi Chandrashekhar and M. C. Anand. Rati Bartholomew (1983) mentions a few more: *Chasnala*, on the mine workers who had tragically died in Dhanbad in 1975; *Pathre Sangappa*, the dramatization of the brutal murder of a Harijan bonded labourer by his master in the Shimoga district of Karnataka; *Belevaduru*, on superstition and godmen; *Bharata Darshana*, on the Tarkunde Commission's Report on police killings in Andhra Pradesh; and *Jeethadahatti Ranga*, on bonded labourers. It is unclear from Bartholomew's account whether all these were produced by only the Bangalore unit or by several units. Either way, we still have eight plays in the Samudaya repertory by October 1979, that is, within the first year of street theatre—a staggering achievement by any standards. I wish I could discuss these plays but I have not seen any of them, nor do I have access to scripts.

Samudaya, as I said, became a movement fairly rapidly. Not a movement of artists and intellectuals alone, but a people's movement. This is seen, most spectacularly, in the jathas that Samudaya has organized periodically, and still does—I believe they are planning one for 1998. The first of these jathas was held between 15 October (a delicious coincidence—the very date on which Janam began doing street theatre the previous year!) and 15 November, 1979. Bartholomew reports: 'The purpose was twofold; to get to know people at (the) grassroots level, to learn, experience and evaluate the scene at first hand, and to use theatre as an instrument of education, as an attack on feudal and semi-feudal values' (1983:19). The money required for the venture was raised by the sale of 20,000 greeting cards made by artists, and through individual donations. The jatha consisted of two groups. One, with 30 permanent members, started from the northern end of the state, Bidar, and the other, with 50, from the southern end, the Kolar gold mines, finally converging at Dharwar. Overall, they covered 17 of the 19 Karnataka districts, performing 450 shows, singing countless songs, selling literature, and conducting discussions with audiences, who also provided local hospitality. The second jatha, from 15 to 31 January 1981, was of shorter duration but more intensive and decentralized. There were 10 groups this time, with 20 to 25 permanent members, who started from 10 different towns and ended in 10 others—there was no central convergence at the end. In the first jatha, they had travelled in vans; this time they used bicycles.

Even from the very sketchy description I have offered, the significance of Samudaya's work should be obvious: it is the first major, and largely successful effort to build a truly people-oriented, democratic, secular, mass cultural movement since the IPTA days. It not only took progressive, even revolutionary culture to the people, it drew the people themselves into the act of creating and nourishing this culture. The jathas are, of course, spectacular instances of this. But even the process whereby the street play *Struggle* was created amplifies what I said: the striking workers themselves dramatized their struggle. (How one wishes Pani had spent some time describing how this was done!) Is this Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre of a kind? Yes and no. Yes, because the concerns of both are similar; no, because Samudaya were led to it by the logic of their own experience; they were not trying to put into action any theory they had learnt elsewhere; their inspiration was not Boal, their inspiration was the people and their very real struggle. I do not mean by this that theories learnt elsewhere, from books, are useless. On the contrary: the following section is devoted, in the main, to Brecht. My emphasis lies elsewhere: the creative wellspring of any Left cultural movement is the people and their struggle to change the world; so long as this link is alive and vibrant, the cultural movement will never be short on creativity and innovation.

The expansion of Samudaya's activities—from a single unit to a state-wide network of units,

from initially doing only proscenium theatre to doing street theatre as well, from theatre to other arts, from single instances of creative collaborations with the people to massive, state-wide jathas—this expansion was made possible by the theoretical understanding we have outlined above.

But let us return to street theatre. Samudaya's initiation to the form was not entirely unaided. Samudaya invited Badal Sircar and Satabdi for a performance; Badal Sircar later also conducted a two-week workshop in Kumbulgod for Samudaya actors. Samudaya's street theatre was directly inspired by the Third Theatre. Pani, in fact, writing in 1979, never uses the term 'street theatre'; he calls it 'the technique of Third Theatre'. Bartholomew, however, reporting on Samudaya's jathas in 1983, prefers 'street theatre', the term Samudaya itself began to use. Why was one term discarded for the other? This is a question not of nomenclature or semantics alone, it signals a theoretical and ideological difference. To appreciate this, we must briefly consider the nature of the voyages in theatre undertaken by Badal Sircar.

Much has been written on the Third Theatre, including by Badal Sircar himself. I do not wish to repeat that, or to outline Badal Sircar's career graph. I will only make three points here. One, it is unfortunate that over the years the Left and Badal Sircar have shared an uneasy, even hostile relationship. In part, of course, the political atmosphere in Bengal is responsible for this: 1967-77 was a turbulent decade; passions everywhere, but especially in Left circles, ran high, opinions were being polarized, positions hardened. If Utpal Dutt's remarks on the third theatre appear rather vituperative today—even after concession is made for his robust style—it should be recalled that they were the products of a time when, for the Left, anyone who was not an ally was an enemy: and for good reason, because Left cadres were being shot like dogs on the streets. And even though, to his credit, Badal Sircar himself never responded to Utpal Dutt's diatribes in kind, some of his over-zealous followers did. Over the years, the attitude of mutual suspicion has come to stay. This is unfortunate because, and this is the second point, Badal Sircar has made a tremendous contribution to Indian theatre by taking quality theatre to non-proscenium spaces. His efforts with Satabdi have not only enriched our understanding of the formal aspects of performing in open spaces, he has also disseminated his learning widely, via the numerous workshops he has conducted all over the country; workshops which, as in the case of Samudaya, have inspired even street theatre groups of the Left.

Yet Badal Sircar—and this is the third point—is not a part of the Left in a very fundamental sense: a certain kind of political ambivalence is inscribed into his plays and his dramaturgy itself. Badal Sircar's theatre tends to elevate the natural cynicism of the middle classes into a political philosophy, preventing it from becoming a truly people's theatre—'people' in the Marxist sense of the term. I am not accusing Badal Sircar of political dishonesty. On the contrary: I realize that his theatre is scrupulously honest to the middle-class view of life, including, at times, to the middle-class aversion to politics. Early in his career, Badal Sircar had created Indrajit, who walks

between the rails of the railway lines . . . I look back—the iron rails meet in a point faraway. I look ahead—the same two iron rails meet in a point far away . . . What's there in the past is in the future as well . . . I used to hope for the arrival of the train . . . But nothing happens, because no train runs on those rails.

Much has changed in Badal Sircar's theatre since these lines were written; I am aware of that. But this aspect, privileging the middle-class point of view—partly cynical, partly angry, partly indecisive, partly humanist—has not entirely disappeared:

But should we make a play on the Santhal revolt of 1855-56, taking roles of Santhals and the oppressors? The answer was—no. Then what? We shall show it from *our* point of view, that is, the point of view of a contemporary person belonging to the city-bred, educated middle class community. Why? Because we want to link that revolt to the present-day reality. (*Badal Sircar, 1993:37*).

The easy equation, here, of a middle-class point of view with 'present-day reality' will not have gone unnoticed.

Be that as it may. The point to note is that street theatre and the Third Theatre emerged concurrently, and contributed significantly to what Safdar called the democratization of Indian theatre—i.e., the theatre's efforts to grapple with politics and political themes, its efforts to reflect the concerns of larger and larger sections of the population, its efforts to reach out to newer and newer audiences.

Before we end this section with a very brief outline of the street theatre scene today, let us make a few general points about the discussion so far. One, modern Indian street theatre, in the moment of its birth, was identical with street theatre of the Left (Janam and Samudaya, two pioneers, are both unambiguously on the Left); others took to it much later. Two, precisely because street theatre was, in the moment of its birth, street theatre of the Left, it had no grandiose illusions about its ability to affect social change on its own; it saw itself as a part, a small part, of a much, much wider social and political movement. Three, street theatre did not arise in opposition to proscenium theatre. Samudaya, for instance, kept doing proscenium theatre even after it began street theatre; if Janam could not continue doing proscenium theatre, it was for a practical reason—the lack of resources—not an ideological one. Four, even so, street theatre is a distinct form of theatrical representation with an aesthetic all its own; as much skill and craft goes into the making of a street play as in any other form—or ought to, at any rate. Five, while street theatre uses some elements of the traditional ('folk') theatre, it is not 'folk' theatre in modern garb, since its ideological and theoretical basis is completely different. And six, it could be argued that in theory and inspiration, street theatre draws most of all upon the post-1917 political theatre, especially upon Brecht.

From here on, my discussion takes into account only street theatre of the Left. After its emergence in its modern, post-1978 avatar, street theatre of the Left has grown substantially, at least in volume. The first major spurt occurred in the early 1980s, when street theatre groups sprang up all over India. In several cases, progressive writers inspired the birth of street theatre groups—reminiscent of IPTA growing out of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in the 1940s. Many journals also published street plays, helping their wide dissemination. The street play special issue of *Uttarardh* (a Hindi journal devoted to progressive writing, brought out from Mathura by Savyasachi) published, in 1983, 23 street plays (including 7 by Janam, 5 by Asgar Wajahat, 2 by Gursharan Singh and one by Samudaya), 4 didactic plays by Brecht, and 9 other short plays—this single issue, nearly 450 pages thick, inspired more Hindi street theatre than anyone can imagine. *Uttarardh* has continued to publish street plays regularly since; its contribution to the growth of this form cannot be overstated. Janam's contribution, too, is more than significant: its plays have reached every nook and corner of the country—initially through journals like *Uttarardh* and through photostats of handwritten scripts, and later in book form—and remain the most widely translated and performed street plays to date. Janam's inspirational role is also seen in the fact that there are literally dozens of street theatre groups who call themselves Jana Natya Manch, even though Janam has never had a single branch or unit outside Delhi—often, Janam has come to know about yet another Jana Natya Manch being formed, only months after, or even years after, the event. Several others, needing to call themselves by a name, took on the name of IPTA. Beyond a point, however, these names are not important: what is important is that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young and not-so-young people felt the need to do theatre amongst, for, and of the people and street theatre became their natural vehicle.

The second major spurt in street theatre activity was not a spurt, it was an explosion. This occurred in response to the attack on Janam by Congress (I)-supported goons at Sahibabad on 1 January 1989, and the death of Safdar Hashmi as a result of this attack the following day. Janam was performing its play *Halla Bol*, a play on a recent 7-day industrial strike led by CITU; *Halla Bol*, then, talked of a very specific situation (nearly) unique to Delhi. Yet, after the attack and Safdar's murder, *Halla Bol* became a rallying cry; it was performed by hundreds of old and new groups in several languages. Doing the play became, by itself, a means of expressing anger, an emblem of protest, a gesture of resistance; the fact that *Halla Bol* is also quite a delightful, innovative play was nearly incidental. The attack on Janam and Safdar's murder provoked nation-wide (and international) protest; street theatre, naturally, was at the very centre of these protests. One cannot think of very many districts in India where at least one new street theatre group was not born in those early weeks of 1989; many, many dormant groups also reactivated themselves. Thus, when artists decided to observe 12 April, Safdar's birthday, as National Street Theatre Day, the response was staggering: 30,000 performances were done on that day in 1989. Rather, this was the figure compiled in Delhi, after recovering specific information: there were many more performances, though no one knows how many.

Not all the groups formed then are active today. Some have simply ceased to exist. Many more observe 1 January and 12 April in their towns and villages, but are more or less dormant otherwise. Only a handful—Janam, Samudaya, Andhra Praja Natya Mandali, Chennai Kalai

Kuzhu, and perhaps one or two more—are consistently active 365 days a year.

The map of street theatre of the Left today looks somewhat as follows (keeping in mind that I am operating on the basis of severely inadequate information and make no claims to definitiveness).

In the Kashmir valley, the rise of militancy has effectively barred most political activity, let alone street theatre, for a decade now. In Jammu, a few groups used to exist once; none, I suspect, is active today barring IPTA (Jammu) which does theatre off and on.

In Punjab, on the other hand, militancy never managed to kill street theatre. The credit for this largely goes to the grand old man of Punjabi theatre, Gursharan Singh. His personal courage is awesome. Despite being on the terrorist hit-list, he had dared to keep his group alive and active. Rarely does a year pass without at least a couple of new street plays being written and produced by Gursharan Singh—plays that are done by groups all over the Hindi belt. He has inspired at least a few hundred young people to perform in the face of death; his inspiration extends far beyond the borders of Punjab. Many other groups also exist and they are active with a varying consistency. Some of these perform 'action songs' more than plays—this peculiar term denotes in Punjab fiery, passionate songs accompanied by 'action': pumping of fists, mostly, but also some vigorous movement. Audiences seem to love it. I guess it is the exuberance of the whole thing that makes it attractive.

In neighbouring Haryana, Jatan Natak Manch was till recently the only consistent group. Initially, Jatan performed only Janam plays, but later they also evolved some of their own. As in Punjab, street theatre in Haryana has also used local forms. Jatan is dormant at the moment and efforts are on to revive it.

The national capital's street theatre scene is dominated by Janam, which produces 3 or 4 new plays and averages about 250-300 performances every year. Since 1988, it has revived its proscenium theatre activity. It holds regular workshops, talks, and discussions, brings out a quarterly—*Nukkad Janam Samvad*—and organizes the prestigious Safdar Hashmi Memorial Lecture. In its silver jubilee year currently, it hopes to organize a jatha of artists in working class areas.

Janam had company for some time in Theatre Union, with which Rati Bartholomew, Manohar Khushlani, Anuradha Kapur and Maya Rao were associated. Theatre Union didn't produce too many plays, but the ones they did were simply superb. Their finest production was *Toba Tek Singh*, based on a story by Saadat Hasan Manto. The central image, of a 'mad' man dying like a dog in the no-man's-land between India and Pakistan, a man simply unable to comprehend what was being partitioned, is amongst the most haunting I have seen created on the street. Theatre Union productions would be remembered for their vivaciousness, their creative use of objects like cloth, sticks, umbrellas, etc., their interplay of rhyme and dialogue, and the overall economy of gesture they achieved. It is indeed sad that the group folded up.

Then there is Nishant, led by Shamsul Islam. This group has been active for nearly two decades now. I have, however, seen far too little of this work to offer comment. Ahwan Natya Manch, formed about four years ago, has been active off and on, mostly performing Janam plays.

In Rajasthan there were a number of Jana Natya Manch: the one in Bikaner is active, Alwar and Ganganagar are not, and I'm not certain of Kota. All of them did Janam plays. There are also some units of IPTA, but I'm not sure of details.

In UP, Jana Natya Manch, Allahabad, is very active. So is IPTA (Agra). Kalam Natya Manch in Lucknow is not as active now as it used to be, but remains an important group because they evolved their own plays (besides doing Janam plays) and were very creative. Their use of local forms of song was especially striking. Vihaan of Banaras and Abhas of Ranchi are active on and off; I am not certain of Ekjut (Kanpur). Besides Agra, IPTA units exist in several other towns of Uttar Pradesh as well.

In Madhya Pradesh, there are many units of IPTA, and several Jana Natya Manch. Of the latter, I know that Raipur is active (they've also produced their own scripts) but Jabalpur is not; about the rest, I have no information. There used to be a group called Sarthak Sankalp as well.

There are any number of groups in West Bengal which are very active, apart, of course, from the state-wide network of IPTA units. Many of these groups have evolved their own scripts. 1 January and 12 April are observed in nearly every town of some size. Most of these groups are fairly close to the Left parties, but some are not: Jana Sanskriti, for instance, which has about 12 units in the state doing 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (for more details, see STQ no. 2).

In neighbouring Bihar, IPTA (Patna) is amongst the best-known IPTA units in India, and arguably the most creative. Led by the Akhtar brothers, Parwez, Tanvir and Javed, IPTA (Patna) has a number of proscenium productions of the very highest quality to its credit. The same goes for street plays—their production of Brecht's *Exception and the Rule* must rank among the finest—but they do not do street theatre any longer. Their place on the street has been taken by Prerna, which has done a number of Janam plays. Apart from these, there are a number of IPTA units and Jana Natya Manchs. About the groups close to the various factions of the CPI(ML) and IPF in Bihar, I know virtually nothing, apart from the fact that they exist.

For the rest of the eastern region, I have no information.

On the other side of India, in Mumbai, there is Jaagar, which has been active for a number of years now. Jaagar has evolved its own scripts, some of which are very good. IPTA (Mumbai) has done mostly proscenium plays, but IPTA (Maharashtra) has done some street plays as well. There are also a number of other groups which activate themselves sporadically. In Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Garage Theatre has done some very good work; Hasmukh Baradi has also written street plays.

If you wish to see some of the best street theatre being produced today, the four southern states are the places to go to. It is in south India, more than anywhere else, that street theatre has become a truly people's movement. There are literally hundreds of groups active here, and some of them are producing really excellent work. We have already talked about Samudaya; although in recent years Samudaya's street theatre output has declined, it has not dried up and what it does produce is still superb. In Tamil Nadu, there is Chennai Kalai Kuzhu, led by Pralayan, which celebrated its twelfth anniversary earlier this year. Their plays use a lot of colour and are marked by delightful slapstick as well as moments of sheer poignancy. Chennai Kalai Kuzhu has inspired a number of groups in Tamil Nadu to take up street theatre; I do not have the space here to even list them. Suffice it to say that street theatre in Tamil Nadu is alive and vibrant. And there is even more street theatre being produced in Andhra Pradesh, perhaps the maximum in India. Here, the Andhra Praja Natya Mandali's work has been outstanding, indeed, spectacular. Like Samudaya, but more so, APNM is a movement with units all over the state, right down to the village level. In 1988, their units numbered about 60; I would not be surprised if that figure has crossed the century mark by now. Initially, they didn't do very much street theatre; they sang, danced and worked with traditional forms of theatre without, however, making a fetish of it. They sang of the glorious peasant struggle of Telangana, of the struggle against colonialism and the Nizam, of the plight of peasants today, and so on. Since Safdar's murder, they have taken to street theatre in a big way, and have produced scores of original scripts. Since a number of their units are from villages, the rural roots of their theatre are natural: often, their plays exude an earthiness, they are humorous, the actors dance well, but often they don't dance, they just walk—and how gracefully! And, accompanied by their wonderfully resonant drums, they sing—they all sing, and they all sing divinely. Lastly, in Kerala, the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) did a lot of street theatre in the 1980s as part of the popular science and literacy movements. But the KSSP is not a theatre group, and I don't think they do much of it now. There are, however, a number of groups working in tandem with the progressive writers' movement, and other groups as well, and I believe they are doing very vibrant theatre.

This, then, is the rough (and incomplete) picture of street theatre of the Left in India today. As will be noticed, I have excluded from this discussion women's groups, since their work constitutes a distinct stream. Also excluded are groups active in the literacy movement. Overall, then, it would be perhaps true to say that street theatre activity of the Left reached a peak in the first half of 1989, as a reaction to the attack on Janam and Safdar's murder. It has declined somewhat since, but has nevertheless increased if compared to the level in 1988.

However, even now, the central question we began with, what is street theatre of the Left, remains only partly answered. Perhaps, then, we need to pose the question more precisely: what is it in the theatrical aspect of the street theatre of the Left that makes it street theatre of the Left?

### III

The Communist Hero appears as a superhuman Captain Marvel without a blemish in his character, advocating war or peace according to the current Party-Line . . . and one comes to the conclusion: this man is not even subject to sexual desires, or a cough or cold. He does not even fart. He is, therefore, a walking tribute to the

bourgeois society which has produced such perfections.

*Utpal Dutt (Bharucha 1983: 59)*

If, on the contrary, the theatre's object is . . . to set in motion the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness's mythical world, then the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator—incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself, this distance achieved, this inexhaustible work of criticism in action; the play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life.

*Louis Althusser (1986:151)*

We have all seen them, haven't we, street plays telling us we are oppressed, exploited, enchained, showing us our corrupt, cruel and wicked rulers, plays that wave the magic wand, the Red Flag, that simply *eliminates* oppression—plays that are so bad as to leave us untouched, bored, but are deadlier still if cleverly done: for then, they are soporific, they make us *believe*, rather than make us *doubt*. And some of us have also, let's face it, *produced* them: as Janam, including myself, did, in the year of Our Lord 1994, a play called *Ai Khak Nashinon Uth Baitho*, promising salvation after the day of reckoning by the simple expedient of replacing analysis with sloganeering, a play that had none of the passion of the song by Faiz Ahmed Faiz from which it drew its title, a play that the audiences consigned, quite rightly, in Marx's eloquent phrase, to the gnawing criticism of mice. Such plays cannot be called plays in the first place, but even if they are, they are not plays of the *Left* for a number of reasons, the first and foremost amongst which is that they do nothing to help the Left movement; on the contrary, they harm the movement by preventing the audiences from thinking, from asking questions.

Such plays are produced, I think, because of a fundamental misconception: the alleged dichotomy between politics and art. The debate over which of the two, politics or art, is primary, has recurred again and again in Left circles—recall the famous, impassioned exchanges between the artists and the commissars in IPTA in the 1940s—and this debate has been the bane of the Left cultural movement, for it is as puerile, idiotic and unclinicable as the question about the chicken and the egg. Is there a way out of the impasse?

To begin with, we have to pose the problem correctly. We take help here from Walter Benjamin:

. . . you know how unfruitful this debate has been. For the fact is that this debate has never got beyond a boring 'on-the-one-hand', 'on-the-other-hand': *On the one hand* one must demand the right tendency (or commitment) from a writer's work, *on the other hand* one is entitled to expect his work to be of a high quality. This formula is, of course, unsatisfactory so long as we have not understood the precise nature of the relationship which exists between the two factors, commitment and quality. One can declare that a work which exhibits the right tendency need show no further quality. Or one can decree that a work which exhibits the right tendency must, of necessity, show every other quality as well. (1977: 86).

And when does street theatre show 'every other quality'? When it is well-scripted, directed, acted, designed, and so on, of course. But these are not disparate, discrete elements that, if present, automatically ensure theatre of high artistic quality. All these elements are intrinsic to the purposes theatre is to serve. And street theatre of the Left must serve at least two purposes: it must entertain, for class society robs the people of every means of robust, healthy entertainment; and it must simplify phenomena of society for the people to change that very society. I do not wish to be misunderstood on this second point. I'm using the term 'simplify' in a quite specific sense, and that sense is the very opposite of simplistic. Let me explain with an example. The relationship between the mass, the distance, and the gravitational force of bodies is simple enough for a schoolchild to comprehend: and this simple formula helps us understand phenomena as complex as billions of stars constituting one galaxy and hurtling through space. Just as science simplifies phenomena of nature for our comprehension, street theatre of the Left must simplify phenomena of society and subject them to people's criticism. (It is in this sense that the notion of simplicity appears in Brecht: see, for instance, 1979: 148.) This naturally requires



# STUDY FILLS D-TRIP

These students are busy with their studies and their D-trip.



These are Craig's best friends.

artistic resources of the very highest quality. I'm speaking, in this section, specifically about street theatre, but I do believe that this discussion would apply to any cultural activity of the Left.

In theatre, what does it mean to 'simplify' phenomena of society? This means, essentially, that it is not enough for (street) theatre of the Left to merely depict reality 'as it is' or 'as it appears', its task is to uncover reality, layer by layer, till we arrive at the deepest contradictions of class society, to lay bare these contradictions so that the people can commence the 'inexhaustible work of criticism in action.' And to be able to uncover reality and lay bare its contradictions, we must turn to Bertolt Brecht and access the revolutionary potential of his dramaturgy. And why this potential is revolutionary becomes clear only once we understand that Brecht's dramaturgy is based upon the Marxist notion of history. And to understand that, we must turn to Karl Marx himself.

What is history? is then the question. At the cost of very crude generalization, one could say that in medieval times, it suited the ruling classes and the agents of god to argue that history is what God wills; God is the maker of history. When the bourgeoisie rose to prominence and sought to displace the feudal ruling classes, it had to enlist the lower classes in this enterprise and to do that, the bourgeoisie began to argue that history is not what God wills, history is what Man wills; Man is the maker of history. (That this Man turned out to be white and male, is another story altogether.)

For the bourgeoisie to argue this was only natural. 'There is every good reason for the bourgeoisie to ascribe *supernatural creative power* to labour', i.e. to human labour, says Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Why? Because the bourgeois wants man to assume that he alone is the source of wealth, that he alone creates all that enables man to live, and thereby, make history. By doing this, the bourgeois takes away attention from nature, 'the primary source of all instruments and objects of nature'—and nature is owned by the bourgeois. In other words, the bourgeois does not want the worker to ever question the material conditions within which production takes place, the production relations wherein the bourgeois owns the instruments of production and the worker owns 'no property other than his labour power', forcing him to seek the bourgeoisie's 'permission to work and hence their permission to live' (Marx, 1974: 341). If, then, a man requires another man's permission even to live, he clearly does not make history.

What, then, is history? Marx and Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.' Barring the prehistory of society, classes have stood 'in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes' (1973, I: 108-09). Of course, classes are made up of real, living, flesh-and-blood men and women—not Man of bourgeois abstraction—and to that extent human agency is also important. But this human agency is not 'free', as Marx points out in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (1973, I: 398).

It is this, specifically Marxist, notion of history—history, a result of the class struggle in which real men and women take part—that Brecht depicts with unprecedented complexity on the stage. In fact, his dramaturgy is premised upon the Marxist notion of history. To explain what I mean, I will make three inter-related points.

One, that Brecht has been reduced almost completely to his famous 'effects', alienation in particular. This effectively deradicalizes Brecht, for the so-called Brechtian effects are not central to the revolutionary potential of his dramaturgy. This does not mean that they are not important, only that they are not central. Two, that it is not possible to delink the revolutionary potential of Brecht's dramaturgy, from the larger revolutionary project of Communist politics. That is why Brecht offers us a revolutionary potential in theatre; this potential can be realized in concrete terms only when the theatre acts in conjunction with the revolutionary forces in society. And three, that the revolutionary potential of Brecht's dramaturgy lies in the fact that he displaces, as Raymond Williams has shown (1976), the coordinates of the society-individual relationship postulated in the works of the great realist dramatists of an earlier generation, Ibsen and Chekhov. The great realist drama depicts the cruel, inhuman world within which the lone, isolated individual suffers. Hidden beneath the dark depths of this individual's character are virtues that are, in fact, the essence of the individual; virtues that would burst forth, or at least come to the surface if only the world within which the individual suffers were not cruel and

inhuman. In other words, while bourgeois society is criticized for its cruelty and inhumanity which suppresses Man's essential, innate, dormant virtues, these virtues are themselves also the product of the same bourgeois society. Nora revolts against an oppressive world; her revolt signals potential liberation within that same world. Contrast this with *Mother Courage*; in order to live, she has to be relentlessly pragmatic, relentlessly strong, relentlessly courageous; her very courage kills, one by one, relentlessly, the children she has given birth to. History is the product of class struggle, class struggle is the product of contradiction, and the supreme contradiction of class society is that life has to be destroyed to perpetuate life. This inevitability is not metaphysical: there is no impersonal God which decrees that Life and Death are complementary adjuncts. This inevitability is the hard, cold, purely pragmatic inevitability of class society. And within class society, there is no escape from it. Mother Courage has to 'pull the wagon alone', but pull on she must, for

The spring is come! Christian revive!  
The snowdrifts melt, the dead lie dead!  
And if by chance you're still alive  
It's time to rise and shake a leg.

Brecht, then, is profoundly pessimistic. But his pessimism is a revolutionary pessimism, reminiscent of Romain Rolland's dictum, adopted by Gramsci: 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.' This dictum is inscribed, so to speak, in Brecht's dramaturgy itself: the broken, sporadic, staccato narrative, a narrative that does not allow for 'realistic growth', a narrative not content with 'depicting' reality, but one that uncovers reality to lay bare its contradictions. Such a narrative is central to Brecht's dramaturgy. The truly revolutionary potential of Brecht's dramaturgy, then, lies precisely in this: it brings us face to face with the contradictions that define class society, contradictions that are altogether too terrible, too horrifying to be allowed to exist—and yet, since these contradictions define class society, there is no escape from them within class society. And if there is no escape within class society, there is certainly no escape within the theatre of this society; Brecht's dramaturgy can realize its revolutionary potential only outside the theatre, by turning, as Althusser puts it, the new spectator into an actor who completes the performance, but in life.

A slavish imitation of Brechtian 'effects' gets us nowhere; in fact, slavery is profoundly anti-Brechtian. To play a truly historic role, street theatre of the Left will have to access the revolutionary potential of Brecht's dramaturgy, and in accessing it, radicalize it as well. For, if the revolutionary movements of each century have radicalized the revolutionary traditions of every preceding century, the revolutionary dramaturgy of the coming century will have to radicalize the dramaturgical traditions of the century now rapidly coming to an end. This is the historic role that street theatre of the Left has to will itself to play. Whether it can do so is at present anybody's guess.

*Note:*

*This article began as an expanded version of an article that appeared in Seminar, July 1997, till, that is, it took on a life of its own. In any case, Vibodh Parthasarathi had read that shorter article and offered comments; I thank him. Rati Bartholomew was generous with ideas and material, especially on Samudaya: a very special thanks to her. My comrades in Janam may not agree always with what I've written, but these ideas have developed through discussions and work with them; Moloyashree Hashmi has, in particular, contributed far, far more to this article than she can ever imagine. But I shall not thank them: one does not thank comrades.*

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(I have not added or deleted emphases from any of the quotes.)

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*Due to an unfortunate oversight, the caption for the lower photograph on p.119 of the previous issue (nos. 14/15) on theatre in Manipur, was omitted. It should have read: 'A scene from Manjagi Kangthol (Manja's Bed) by Panthoibi Natya Mandir, directed by Rajendra.'*

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## Editorial

'When the telephone rang, I was alive in the moment, I had orange all over, the peaceful light running orange before my windows was my philosophical joy, I was humid, my skin young, sweet, under the ever first rays of the fruit, the hour stayed still, I held it back in perpetual and tender excitement . . . when was I living, far from the cars, the lorries, the cannons, nearby the origin, under high yellow shadows, where was I living, in the first garden, surrounded by tender woods of voices—when the telephone pounced? When I didn't fear not being frightened, mistrustful, enraged? Far from the castles, the tanks, the battlements, armed only with tenderness. The telephone stamped, in my blessed myopia I saw it as it is in reality when it spurs on, covered with white armor, shield, helmet, hauberk all of one grey, loud as Alerion.

' . . . The storm of the world rang. I had to let go of the orange to come back . . .

' . . . We lovers of origin, we're not afraid to return. There is a memory in our forgetfulness. The telephone was crying. It was Renata's anxiety:

"And Iran?"

One thing is not to forget the orange. Another to save oneself in the orange. But it's another thing to not forget Iran.

"And Iran? What were you doing?"

"I was learning the thing."

"While the orient was decaying, millions of veiled oranges trampled upon, precipitated into entirely modern prisons?"

"I was at the school of sources, in inner Brazil, a woman was teaching me slowness."

"And Iran? You were forgetting?"

'There is a time for listening to the vibrations that things produce in detaching themselves from the nothing-being to which our blindness relegates them, there is a time for letting things struggling with indifference give themselves to be heard. There is a time for the heart-rending call of an Iran. One doesn't resound without the other' (Hélène Cixous).

And there, poised on the ridge, between the dark loamy ferment of creative growth and the hard sun of material reality, is Pralayan's voice saying, 'The process is very important . . . how we make a play . . .' and 'without the commitment, without politics oriented toward the people, you can't stay in street theatre'. And Sudhanva Deshpande passionately insisting on poetry in theatre of the Left; and Mala Hashmi explaining how drama has to be created and crafted, even on the streets, even when the message, the political communication, is primary. This tumultuous space of questioning, of precarious balance between creative fulfilment and political purpose, between inward and outward, between the orange and Iran, is the space criss-crossed in this issue. By those who walk the tightrope. Over and over again.

'One doesn't resound without the other.'

Anjum Katyal

The quote from Hélène Cixous is from 'To Live the Orange' (*The Hélène Cixous Reader*, Routledge, 1994).

## Woman (Aurat)

Jana Natya Manch

Created in March 1979, this is one of Janam's most successful plays. It was created during a break in the Conference of the Women Workers of North India. This play has had more than 2500 shows, and has probably been translated into almost all Indian languages. It has also been produced in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The opening sequence begins with a poem, 'I'm a Woman', adapted by Safdar Hashmi from Keshav Malik's English translation of Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooii's poem. She was a teacher, a revolutionary, shot dead in May 1973 by Iran's imperial forces.

*A circular acting area. Choreographed into a circle with hands on each other's shoulders, six actors enter from one side. In the middle is an actress. They all stop when they reach the centre. They all turn together to face the audience and then sit down. The actress is seen standing in the middle.*

ACTRESS: I am a mother  
I'm a sister  
A daughter  
A faithful spouse  
A woman.

ACTOR 1: A woman, who, from the beginning,  
With bare feet,  
Has run over the scorching sands of the deserts

ACTRESS: I'm from the distant villages of the north . . .

ACTOR 2: A woman, who from the beginning,  
Has worked to the limits of her power  
In the paddy fields and tea gardens.

ACTRESS: Who along with my skinny cow  
In the threshing field, from dawn to dusk,  
Has felt the weight of pain.

ACTOR 3: A woman who gives birth to her babe  
In the mountains,  
Loses her goat in the expanse of the plains  
To sit, mourning.

ACTRESS: I'm a woman

ACTOR 4: A worker whose hands turn  
The great machinery of the factory  
Which each day tear to bits my strength  
In the treads of the wheels  
In front of my eyes  
A woman from whose life's blood  
The carcass of the blood-sucker bloats  
And from the loss of whose blood  
The profit of the capitalist increases.

ACTRESS: A woman for whom, in your shameless vocabulary

ACTOR 5: There is no word  
Which can describe her significance.

Your vocabulary speaks only of the woman  
Whose hands are unsoiled  
Whose body is supple  
Whose skin is soft  
And hair perfumed.

ACTRESS: I'm that woman

ACTOR 6: Whose hands have been wounded  
By the sharp blades of pain's knives  
Whose body has been broken

By your endless, humiliating and back-breaking labour.

A woman whose skin is like a desert

And whose hair smells of factory smoke

ACTRESS: But I am an independent woman

*She steps outside the circle and goes forward with her fists up in the air. The rest of the actors also move forward a step on their knees, fists held high.*

ACTOR 1: Who with her male comrades  
Walks shoulder to shoulder  
To cross the fields.

ACTOR 2: A woman who has created  
The powerful muscles of workers  
And the strong hands of peasants.

*The rest of the actors sit as they are; the actress delivers the following dialogue zigzagging among them*

ACTRESS: I am myself a worker  
I am myself a peasant, too.  
My heart is a study in pain  
The fire of hatred burns in my veins  
And you shamelessly claim  
That my hunger is an illusion  
And my nakedness all make believe!  
I am a woman for whom in your shameless vocabulary  
There is noword  
Which can describe her significance.

*The rest of the actors change direction to sit in a circle facing each other*

ACTOR 5: A woman in whose chest  
Is hidden a heart  
Full of festering wounds of wrath.

ACTOR 4: In whose eyes  
Dance the red shadows  
Of liberty.

ACTRESS: A woman,  
Whose hands have learnt,  
Through years of toil,  
How to raise the red flag.

*Picks up the red flag*



## Theatrescapes

Samik Bandyopadhyay

What marks the street theatre off from the more conventionally determined forms of theatre is its discovery and deployment of space for every performance. The politics of the space is played out in terms of a usually clearly-defined purpose, a certain attitude/approach to the audience (communicative, solidarity-building, manipulative, propagandist, celebratory, etc.), and a social/political locus. The folk traditions of the street theatre in Bengal (as documented by Bireshwar Bandyopadhyay)—both in its rural and urban folk settings—have been generally celebratory, carnivalesque experiences, using the body of the performer more as a distorting mirror than as representation or embodiment, and verse as means of transmission and holding/carrying (in memory). The strength and weakness of these forms, performed in ‘stations’, have lain in their seasonality, the strict associations these forms have maintained with religious or semi-religious occasions, if not ceremonies; with Shiva more often than not serving as a Lord of Misrule (as in the *gambhira* in Maldah, or in several *gajan*-related forms or performances), and providing a kind of sanction/sanctity to the irreverent criticism directed against corrupt individuals and institutions alike.

The *gambhira* became visible and familiar to urban practitioners of theatre and political activists looking for performative forms available for agitprop exploitation in the mid-40s and early 50s, first through the IPTA’s discovery/exposure of the form, and then on the platforms offered by the peace movement. But the folk form that offered more grist was the *kabigaan* or *kabir ladaï* (‘the song of the poets’ or ‘the battle of the poets’), also brought to view by the IPTA. As a matter of fact, of the five folk poets whose biographies Sudhi Pradhan compiled in *Kayekjan Lokkabi*, a 1945 publication made by the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association, Calcutta, most of the poets are *kabiwalahs*, who carry on debates in verse on a makeshift platform with an audience seated around it. Of the legendary masters who dominated the scene till the early 60s, I never had the opportunity of listening to Ramesh Shil, but Sheikh Gomhani Dewan and Lambodar Chakrabarty I have heard more than once. In the ‘battles of the poets’ the rival poet-singers would assume the cases (more than the roles) of Ravana against Rama, Duryodhana against Yudhishtira, Karna against Arjuna, the Worker against the Merchant, Saraswati against Lakshmi, the Rich Man against the Jobless, Youth against Age, the Old against the New, and even *Purushakar* against *Niyati*, the arguments and rebuttals delivered in witty verse, sung out in fullthroated freedom, with a chorus of singers repeating the punchline as a refrain, shrewdly allowing the debater poet respite to ‘compose’ his next piece of argument! While the *gambhira* and the Calcutta *sawng* took recourse to the safety of the masks and foolery and ceremony, the *kabigaan* centered on critique as argument, giving the lie to all those facile anti-Enlightenment theorizations of reason as an essentially Western/urban importation into a more pre-rational rural/folk culture! More than the sheer thrill of the quick repartee or retort, what enlivened the encounter was the wide range of references to instances in the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavata* and the fresh interpretations or readings that the *kabiwalahs* brought to them.

In the 50s or early 60s when I heard my first *kabigaans*, I could read a natural continuity between the political address by Communist leaders like Bhowani Sen, Somenath Lahiri or Bankim Mukherjee and the debates in verse by Sheikh Gomhani or Lambodar Chakrabarty—in the richness of the references to the scriptures and folk memories and history as part of a common storehouse of information in stock that the speakers and poets shared with the audience. The texts were not cut-and-dried political analyses; nor were they proclamatory assertions by figures flaunting their individualities. Bijan Bhattacharya alone of the IPTA dramatists of the 40s and 50s brought to his texts the ambience of an idiom loaded with mythology, both institutionalized and folk, and history and the folk imagination, whereas most of his contemporaries in the left cultural movement (I wouldn’t call it a Marxist cultural movement, as Sudhi Pradhan calls it, for the Marxist component was too tenuous in the movement) were more concerned with putting across the political line with an appropriate selection of information. Naturally, the question of a street theatre was not on the cards. Some of the productions did circulate in the rural areas, performed on makeshift stages, but there was no

conscious endeavour to change or reconstruct the proscenium performances into street performances. There is documentary evidence to suggest that further performances of the highly lauded production of *Nabanna* were not possible only because one of the directors—not unjustly, because that is how the production had been conceived—insisted that the production could not be presented except on a stage with a revolving disc!<sup>1</sup>

It was only when the Communist Party was banned in 1948, along with all its allied—or ‘front’, as they were called—cultural outfits (including the IPTA), that the proscenium plays were driven underground—and to the streets. The heroic history of an IPTA performing ‘underground’ to audiences prepared to share, with the performers, the risk of a police attack and prepared to give them necessary protection, has gone underground, with one of those customary rewritings of history that the Communists have traditionally indulged in—for even as the politics of the late 50s came to be stigmatized as ‘left adventurism’, its cultural manifestations, to were conveniently written off as embarrassing.

Karuna Bandyopadhyay recalls, in a personal note (written for me, and unpublished): ‘I recall an evening in the Rammohan Library Hall, where we were putting on make-up and getting ready for the performance, and the audience had also assembled, when news came that the police were coming to stop the performance and arrest us. We left by the rear door, while Amar (Mukherjee) went on singing to keep the audience in their seats and to ensure that they did not panic.’ The usual theatres and auditoriums were not available for the IPTA performances, and under the compulsion of an Emergency—not described as such, but no less severe and repressive and murderous than Indira Gandhi’s—the IPTA groups, with actors and actresses and singers like Kali Banerjee, Karuna Bandyopadhyay, Indira Kabiraj, Sadhana Roy Chaudhury, Reba Roy Chaudhury, Salil Choudhury, Amarendra Mukherjee, Gaurishankar Mukherjee, Bhupati Nandy, performed in the streets. Karuna Bandyopadhyay tells me, ‘There would be our men waiting at the mouth of the lane, ready to come rushing and alert us at the first signs of a police raid. We had to change the rehearsal site too, and it took people time to assemble at the site, for the location would be kept a secret till the last moment.’

At the same time, Karuna Bandyopadhyay admitted, ‘I don’t recall any case where we had any opportunity of direct interaction with the audience. The plays in which we spoke of the political prisoners drew the greatest response. Sympathetic spectators obviously took risks to come to these performances. We went into the villages too, where we performed in makeshift pandals.’

Incidentally, the two plays in which she had acted in those ‘banned’ days were both by Salil Chaudhury—*Sanket* and *Janantike*. There were obviously several such groups in action in the period.

Once the Communist Party came out of the ban and surfaced to fight the elections of 1952, the non-professional/non-commercial theatre scene was totally different from what it had been when the Party was banned. Bohurupee, the Little Theatre Group, and the Calcutta Theatre had already come into existence, under the directorial leadership of Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, and Bijan Bhattacharya, respectively. Theatre—of the erstwhile left variety—had set itself more aesthetic terms, at least for the time being, with Bohurupee declaring its aim as ‘to do good plays well!’ The Communist Party was reshaping itself to play a more liberal, sanitized parliamentary game, and the cultural compulsions of the 40s were no longer there. The style of the political address soon changed—to the more formal, individualistic, factual, superficial manner of Jyoti Basu! More than ideology or the larger historical-cultural appeal of the earlier leaders, it was now a more bureaucratic, strategic playing for immediate reaction—and votes. Street theatre, too, underwent a transformation, with its scope/appeal limited to immediate issues. The first products of the new street theatre were geared to a particular strike or a particular by-election—and would be followed by a whole tradition of election plays, which in the 80s would come to exploit the ‘star’ presences of actors and actresses, for whom performing in one of these election plays would be tantamount to taking a position in support of the political forces in power, seeking a return to power and assured of it anyway—and more often than not expecting benefits/returns for their involvement/commitment! And the Left power structure, too, in its turn, would feel obliged to make compensations in time. Commitment thus turns into a dubious proposition as far as the street theatre goes—with its possibilities as a carrier of information and ideological messages, and as a persistent conscientizer going by default, and the Party content with the limited view of election-‘winners’.

The ideological positions/perspectives were clearer and better defined in the 50's, when the Communist Party (still the undivided CPI) had just come to disavow what it called its 'left-wing deviation' (and what Utpal Dutt describes as one of those 'brief periods of aberration, in a long history of the Party's tolerance, patience, criticism and guidance'), and the 'street-corner play' came into being in West Bengal (Dutt, in his *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*, Calcutta, 1982, calls Panu Pal its 'creator').

As Dutt records the history, 'Panu Pal had organized a special squad to do street-corner plays and the first play, *Chargesheet*, was about the hundreds of Communist Leaders then in prison without trial, and, of course, I volunteered to join. The play, lasting about an hour, was taken to working-class slums and remote villages, and its direct analysis of political issues was a revelation to me. I have since written and played two dozen such plays, even developing them to full three hour performances and have revelled in them as an artist, not only as a political being. Critics there are who have contemptuously spurned these efforts as crude political propaganda and have written exclusively on my naiveté. I wonder how a theatre man can be entirely devoid of naiveté, of conviction, of zeal, and still survive . . . I am partisan, not neutral, and I believe in political struggle . . . I was determined to use the street-corner play, yes, for direct Party propaganda . . . Panu Pal and I, infected by the real IPTA's concern for the people's political struggle, prepared the second street-corner play, and descended on the suburb of Maheshtala, where the people are mostly tailors with a sprinkling of workers from the Bata Shoe factory nearby. The occasion was a by-election there . . . We lived there with the tailors for two months, playing five to six times a day at every corner of the constituency, from the gates of the Bata factory, to the courtyard of a dark house where wives of Muslim tailors, who were in purdah, could watch the play from behind curtains. The exhilaration of direct political theatre naturally cannot be conveyed to one who is apolitical, therefore apathetic to the misery of the masses. But those who understand that life is greater than art, that the real starvation and the real heroism of the masses are greater drama than imaginary ones, will understand me when I say that that stint at Maheshtala changed me completely, from an alienated, lonesome intellectual to a person, a living man, a part of a struggling mass.'

Dutt's recollections of his early work in the 50s and 60s with 'street-corner theatre,' as he calls it, relate to 'a street-corner agitprop play called *The New Mad Tyrant (Naya Tughlaq)*,' protesting against 'the infamous attempt by the ruling class to merge Bengal and Bihar into one State'; a play for 'this by-election at Entally, Calcutta, where a tycoon of a stevedore was challenged by a humble trade-unionist'; an agitprop play called *The Special Train*, in defence of 'the striking workers of the Hindusthan Automobile Factory at Uttarpara, near Calcutta, where the Congress government had sent a special train full of blacklegs. The owner of the factory, G. D. Birla, one of the biggest businessmen of the country, had only to command and the entire government machinery began grinding against the strikers . . . While exposing this brazen alliance between big capital and the state, we tried to raise as much money as we could for the strike fund. The play also gave us the opportunity to become intimate with heavy-industrial workers and to learn at first hand why it is precisely they who will lead the revolution.' The street play serving the needs of a particular movement/agitation transformed itself into the election play in a really significant manner with *Din Badaler Pala* (Song of Changing Times) in 1967. Dutt describes it as 'my attempt to turn the street-corner play into a full-length (nearly three hours) dramatic work . . . in the format of courtroom drama: a young communist is accused of murdering a police officer during the food riots; witnesses tutored by the police include a Congress boss, a lady leader of the rightist CPI, a government bureaucrat and a petty landlord, all united to railroad the accused to the gallows; while the defence counsel tears them to pieces, he also analyses the causes and effects of the India-China border conflict, and of the recent food movement. The audience's conviction that the communist is perfectly innocent is suddenly shattered at the end, when under cross-examination by the Prosecutor, he confesses to the murder and adds, 'Yes, I killed him and I am proud of it. Such policemen should be shot like mad dogs.' This, theatrically speaking, had invariably a double effect: shock at the realization that the boy had been legally guilty all along, and thrill at the challenge to the state machinery.'

The format of the courtroom drama, and a massive accumulation of facts, both economic and political, loaded with dates and statistics, remained Dutt's favourite strategy for his campaign plays in the 'street' style, e.g. in *Moyna Tadanta* (Post Mortem, 1968), *Kalo Haath* (Black Hands, 1980). In the last election campaign in which I took some active interest, that of 1982, the Left

Front, holding more political rallies than the big leaders could tackle, left quite a few of these entirely to the street theatre bands, with one or two cultural celebrities thrown in for additional glamour.

But even as the Left Front in West Bengal settled down to a long, safe innings, the street theatre of protest, traditionally aligned to the official Left, now in power, receded to the routine jamboree around election time. An alternative Left, as residue of the Naxalite protest of the late 60s, broke into a variant of the street theatre, spatially differentiating itself from the street theatre by locating itself in a park, a surrounded space, a room, and by divesting itself of the authoritarian raised platform to allow for a greater closeness and sharing with the audience. With protest transformed and ensconced as authority, an alternative left critique was called for; and maybe more than the critique, a space for dialogue.

When Badal Sircar began working towards what he initially called 'The Third Theatre' (and later renamed 'Free Theatre,' in both the senses of free, viz. available/accessible free of cost, and free from obligations/constraints/pressures), he was not exploring the possibilities of a body theatre or physical theatre per se, though that is how his work in theatre has been popularly (and, more often than not, mischievously) characterized. Dialogue within the group, between the text and the group, between the text and the body, were all necessary preliminaries to the dialogue between the performance and the audience, to the opening up of a space, critical and questioning, more questioning than critical, more democratic than the dominating/dominant histrionics and rhetoric of the agitprop street theatre. In February 1972, when Satabdi took up *Spartacus*, Sircar put the script 'to the Group. The Group confronted the script, tried it, tested it, accepted, enriched, rejected, and gradually began to build a structure that was much more than the written script.'<sup>2</sup>

The first space—not in the street, but in a closed room—that Satabdi chose, was 'a room of 850 sq. ft. area on the second floor of the Academy of Fine Arts for three consecutive days of the week—Sunday, Monday and Tuesday . . . The room would accommodate 60 to 75 spectators, depending on the play presented. We named the theatre "Angan-mancha", which roughly means Space Theatre.'

A few months after Badal Sircar's new theatre had come into being, he 'became aware of a free open air theatre at Surendranath Park (formerly Curzon Park) in the centre of the city. A theatre group named Silhouette had initiated this movement. They performed every Saturday afternoon. It was an absolutely open theatre, without any stage, curtains, dressing room or sets, and the performance was in daylight. As such, it was a very important event in the Third Theatre movement. We invited them to perform at Angan-mancha, and we were invited by them to perform at the park.'

Bir Sen, with his Silhouette, provided the model—as far as the script went—for several works in theatre that followed, including Sircar's own post-*Spartacus* works for the Angan-mancha, and Probir Guha's work in his Living Theatre phase. What he offered was a collage of short scenes, moving between realistic slices of life and the farcic, exposing/attacking the operation of power through a wide range of institutional manifestations, educational-academic, religious, social-conventional, and state-administrative. The scenes, excellently executed, added up to a critique of the status quo laid out by the dominating power structure.

Bir Sen and Silhouette had moved away from the established conventions of the political street theatre, which in West Bengal, at least, had been too closely tied to the official Communist Parties. With a more multi-pronged critique, they were locating themselves in a non-aligned left. When Satabdi came in contact with Silhouette, Sircar was already aware of the differences in positioning between the two groups: 'In many ways *Spartacus* differed from the plays which were being performed at that park at that time. It was more complex and sophisticated in structure and seemed to need an intimate atmosphere, as was obtained at Angan-mancha. This made me somewhat doubtful about its acceptance by the audience of the open air theatre, which at that time was composed mostly of casual visitors to the park, gathering around the theatre out of curiosity.'

But Sircar would later accept that he 'was proved to be wrong . . . More than 500 people were there, and we realized that quite a few of them were not as casual as we thought. Slowly but surely a serious and regular theatre audience was developing at Surendranath Park.'

Regular performances on a fixed day of the week, as instituted/organized by Silhouette, had contributed to the development of 'a serious and regular theatre audience'. With a 'regular'

audience and the possibility of this audience growing with the regulars bringing in others to add to the ranks, there had also evolved the possibility of a community prepared to join in/enter a continuing dialogue—a better, more democratic and more activist offer than that of the conventional street theatre, which, with all its propagandist vitriol, would remain sporadic and occasional, and hence less effective when measured in terms of a political culture as an evolving phenomenon.

The topicality of the conventional political street theatre and the regularity of what may be described as the limited open theatre of conscientization represent sharply divergent theatrical-political positions; the former holding/controlling leadership for a single left-wing political party or group; the latter risking and opening up a more directly democratic and participatory political space, and thus allowing for development, enrichment and maturation of the project of the left. When a group, like, say, Probir Guha's Khardah outfit, the erstwhile Living Theatre, abandons its regular Friday performances in the school hall at Khardah, 20 km from Calcutta, it amounts to a withdrawal from activism to experimentation. Space and time options, as they go with street theatre and its several variants, spell political positions.

When Sircar and six groups committed to his philosophy of The Third Theatre undertook a three day *parikrama* in March 1986, covering eight villages with eight performances, each performance featuring two to three plays and several suites of songs, it meant yet another mode of negotiation in terms of space and time. Sircar's own poetic account of the experience follows, in translation:

Aliens in our own houses. The year nineteen hundred and eighty-six.  
Rehearsal. Cigarettes. Exhaustion. Bouts of coughing.  
Despairing of any change for the better,  
Despairing of the present.

A visit to the villages in the midst of this.  
Afternoons charged with the *Chaitra* sun, or  
Maybe the moon just beyond fullness flooding the plain,  
Or the sparkling heavenly bodies glued to the canopy of the sky  
Smiling mischievously, facetiously in sheer mockery.

Clothes dripping with sweat, feet dipping step by step into dusty roads,  
The sheer thrill of laughter, jokes, tales and songs  
Till you come to one of the halts—  
Darga, Molladanga, Sutiya, Chorghat,  
South Kanchdaha, Kapileshwarpur.

Different names. Villages far apart. The music of the open skies,  
The touch of a light breeze, or maybe a flash of green in the leaves,  
An ageing plant.

A clump of bamboos, a thatched roof, a mud hut,  
A cattle cart, without the cattle, its legs upthrust like a mosquito's,  
A husking mill,  
An oven with a glow in the courtyard, flaunting a pot.  
Quick! Rush! The bamboos, the screens, the jute sheet,  
Voices rumbling over  
amplifiers hanging from ropes flung across  
the aged branches of two trees.

Villagers, listen to us, gentle folk!  
There's entertainment for you at such and such a field.  
Churned out of the whole village, the children come,  
In their torn pants and frocks,  
Numberless little beings, parents with babes in their arms,  
The peasants gather, bare bodies, bare feet, bare bellies,

One by one. Hands beat on the drums.  
Minds dance to the music of the songs,  
and then the give and take of the play.

Campaign. Travelling. Seventy, Seventy-five.  
Roving tramps, yet domesticated. Gaps and fissures,  
And yet smooth. Poisons linger, and yet  
Being itself seems washed clean with the dust from the roads  
Over the three days, day by day,  
And the end of fever,  
With the pouring sweat.

Three days. Two nights. Then?  
We come back. Aliens in our homes.  
Last March—nineteen hundred and eighty-six.<sup>3</sup>

A documentation of the 'tour' through the villages (*Parikrama*, Calcutta, 1986) records a lot of the passion that went into and sustained it—motivated by the desire to 'listen to and see how eighty per cent of the people live, speak and sing . . . For the final measure of our culture lies in its relevance to their struggle for existence', as one of the participants put it.

The street theatre needs to go through a continuous self-questioning in the form of variations and extensions in the technique, text, space and timing to test and discover its efficacy in a project of conscientization.

*Notes:*

1. Cf. 'Comrade Sambhu Mitra would not agree to stage *Nabanna* on fixed type of boards. He insisted on the revolving type of stage as otherwise, he feared, it would not be possible for us to maintain the tempo of the drama. The result was, we had to suspend all activities. For months we remained idle, did almost nothing except putting up a few shows of *Nabanna* in the mofussil towns.' 'Crisis in Bengal IPTA': Report by Charuprakash Ghose, Cell Secretary, IPTA, 18 August 1946, in Sudhi Pradhan (ed.), *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents*, volume 1, second edition, Calcutta, 1985.
2. Badal Sircar, *The Third Theatre*, Calcutta 1978. All the following quotations are from this monograph that Sircar, who published it himself, described as 'an account' of his work on a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship on a project entitled 'Workshop for a Theatre of Synthesis as a Rural-Urban Link'. As he explains in his introduction, 'This is *not* a project taken up specifically for the purpose and the period of the fellowship. The project began before I got the Fellowship, and will continue as long as I retain an interest in theatre . . . This is a theatre project, and as such it necessarily involves a strong human factor. Therefore in this project the constants are few and the variables are many. Such a project is more empirical than analytical, which means the employment of a trial-and-error method and not the use of clear-cut formulae.'
3. Translation mine.

## Street Theatre in Bengal: A Glimpse

Bulbuli Biswas and Paramita Banerjee

Street theatre—the term immediately brings a certain picture to our minds. A group of people doing theatre in a park or on a street corner. They wear no make-up; are clad in ordinary, everyday clothes—maybe just a little something to make these clothes look different. No stage, no sets, no lights; only a storyline and the responsibility to make that story credible through their acting. Inevitably, a clearcut message will surface through the narrative.

This is generally what we understand by street theatre today. In our country, it has a long history. Today we are all familiar with this form of theatre practice being used extensively to project political ideals before people and for election campaigns. But this genre of theatre also has a history of cultural development through the generations. Street theatre with an aim other than spreading left messages evolved in Bengal before the 50s, with the objective of a love for, and responsibility towards, the spread of good art. Girishankar was putting up plays regularly in 1948-49 at various places, like the steps of the Calcutta University Senate House, Sraddhananda Park, or the Sealdah Railway Station. He took to the street theatre form since he lacked the funds to rent halls to put up shows, but felt it necessary to carry on producing good theatre. The group collected donations after the show. One of his most remarkable plays is *Cherag Bibir Hat* (The Weekly Market of Cherag Bibi).<sup>1</sup>

Even today, street theatre—if we use the term simply to refer to the kind of theatre that is done away from the proscenium, using no sets, props, lights and costumes—continues to represent different kinds of theatre. Without going into the details of the various trends in this kind of theatre today, we'd like to simply state here that this article will be devoted mostly to political street theatre. To be more specific, this is the kind of street theatre that has developed with the express desire of reaching leftist political ideals to the people at large. It would be contextual here to quote Rabindra Bhattacharya<sup>2</sup> when he was interviewed for this issue: 'There can be no street theatre without political consciousness. Street theatre also must focus on contemporary issues only, so that passing people can immediately identify the content as something that concerns them and thus enter the play. It is essential to assume in street theatre that people don't have time, that we do not have an audience ready to be engaged in any time-consuming, profound thinking. It is the play's responsibility to make them think and look for solutions.' Professor Satyajit Chowdhury<sup>3</sup> echoed the same thoughts when he said: 'There can be no street theatre without political commitment. The focus in street theatre is on presenting some specific theme. When that theme can be linked properly with people's problems in a street play, that play can be called successful.' The point that we seek to make through quoting these scholars is that street theatre, in common parlance, has become synonymous with non-proscenium plays containing a definite political message. While there is nothing to stop the right from using this performance form to spread its own messages, historically political street theatre has evolved out of leftist practice, out of protest movements led by the Left, to be more specific.

Poster plays, Third Theatre, alternative theatre, are all terms that have been used at different points of time to refer to this performance form; though, over the years, conceptual differences have crept in. The term 'poster play' is virtually out of use, probably because it came to designate something derogatory—something that is almost theatre, but not quite; also because today it has become essential to differentiate this form of theatre from the sponsored 'advertisement play' that Sudhanva Deshpande talks about elsewhere in this issue. Third Theatre has almost become a trade name for Badal Sircar's tradition of non-proscenium plays, though he himself now prefers using the term 'free theatre'. 'Alternative theatre' has become the phrase commonly used to refer to the theatre activities of various groups born out of the Badal Sircar experience, now experimenting with evolving their own forms—generally taking elements from folk performative forms and the martial arts.

Since theatre is very much a living art form, theatre thoughts are also as changing and as variable as life itself—depending upon time and society. Bengali theatre is certainly no exception to this rule. Here also, theatre is running its own course, deriving its materials from the society in which it thrives, from the lives and living conditions of people, from their memories and dreams.

However, what happened in Bengal is that the kind of theatre that directly weaves dreams of social change into its narrative started moving away from the proscenium. It is impossible to answer in simple terms whether or not the theatre philosophy that caused this shift had its roots in the soil or was derived from foreign sources. Opinions differ in this regard. It was certainly possible for street theatre to evolve from *bolan*, *Krishnajatra*, *gambhira* and similar forms of courtyard plays that have been prevalent for ages. Professor Satyajit Chowdhury feels that the cultural activists who took to street theatre after the IPTA era might not have consciously thought of using these forms, but it is quite probable that they were impressed by their tremendous mass appeal. He mentioned Tarapada Lahiri, who went around villages in the 1950s with a troupe of 4-5 persons, doing performances modelled on the *gambhira* form. Dr Darshan Chowdhury and Jyotsnamoy Ghosh,<sup>4</sup> on the other hand, feel that street theatre in Bengal has never used the elements of the folk forms that are usable in street theatre. The latter specifically said, 'None of our leftist street theatre activists have ever bothered to use our various indigenous folk forms. It was the model of the Bolshevik cultural squads that inspired them. In their attempt to take the cultural offensive, they've spread this model even to our villages and the influence continues till date. In that sense, leftist street theatre in Bengal has moved away from the roots, not grown out of them.'

Deliberate attempts at using theatre as a means of propagating political ideals by politico-cultural activists were probably made first in the late 1930s. The 1930s were significant in all aspects—social, political, cultural. On the one hand, India was then being rocked by waves of mass struggle. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia had moved many a heart here; Communist ideology had started flowing like a thin stream alongside the ideals of freedom. On the other hand, the imminence of a second world war loomed large over the entire globe. Hitler assumed power in Germany in 1933; on 10 May that year Berlin witnessed the infamous Nazi festival of fire where books by almost all the world-famous writers and thinkers were burnt. While the whole of Europe was cowering under the uncontrolled empire-lust of Hitler and Mussolini, Romain Rolland, Maxim Gorky and Henri Barbusse gave a call to all progressive writers and artists to actively join the resistance struggle. The first international Anti-Fascist Conference of artists, writers and intellectuals was held in Paris on 21 June, 1935. This conference had far-reaching effects on leftist cultural movements in India. It was under the direct influence of this Conference that on 10 April, 1936 the All India Progressive Writers Association (PWA) was formed with Munshi Premchand as the President. The formation of the PWA was possible because of the active efforts of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and other Marxist intellectuals. The liberal outlook of the likes of Sajjad Zaheer and Hirendra Nath Mukherjee drew into the PWA many artists and writers who had democratic sentiments, though they were not Marxists.

In fact, during 1932-35 talented Indian youths like Mulk Raj Anand, Sajjad Zaheer, Hirendra Nath Mukherjee, Bhavani Bhattacharya, Iqbal Singh, Raja Rao, Muhammad Ashraf and others had come in contact with Marxist ideals and started dreaming about a progressive literary and cultural movement. The first step towards implementing that dream on Indian soil was the formation of the PWA. The PWA succeeded in linking an international ideology with the ground realities here, and inspired many young people with the vision of people's liberation through a revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Stories of how the Russian revolutionaries had formed a cultural front, how they'd permeated every remote corner of the country with small squads to propagate revolutionary ideals among all and sundry, spread like wildfire in India, especially in Bengal. Russian artists had already demonstrated how effectively theatre could be used as a weapon in popular struggles, and Bengal now wanted to use it in its own anti-imperialist struggle. Needless to say, such theatre was mostly street theatre, as the objective of reaching the masses would be defeated otherwise. It is interesting to note that in 1932 Tagore wrote his last play *Kaler Jatra* (The March of Time) which he later changed to *Rather Rashi* (The Chariot Rope). He didn't want any stage settings or props for this play; all he wanted was a rope.<sup>6</sup> The scenes are all set on streets—it is flexible enough to be enacted in the street theatre form. It is perhaps strange that no theatre group has so far ventured to present this play in the street theatre format.

Anyway, coming back to the question of leftist street theatre, Dayal Kumar of the Hooghly district squad remembers that in 1938 the Student Federation (SF) built up an adult education brigade to spread the message of class struggle among rural masses, and songs and street drama



were chosen as the medium. Cultural squads were formed accordingly and work began in earnest, especially in the districts of Hooghly, 24 Parganas and Bardhaman. Dayal Kumar wrote two plays, *Muktir Abhijan* (March for Freedom) and *Alor Pathe* (Towards Light) specifically for this purpose. The Hooghly district squad used to present the first one, while the Bardhaman district squad put up the second one.

These theatre activities of the Student Federation continued well into the 40s, when encouraging an anti-Japan mentality became the primary concern. *Japanke Rukhte Hobe* (Japan Must be Stopped), a play written by the poet Sukanta Bhattacharya when he was 16/17, was handed over to the Students' Federation by his brother Ashok Bhattacharya and performed in the University Institute Hall on 7 July 1942. This play was subsequently performed both in proscenium and street theatre forms. *Rajbandir Mukti Chai* (We Demand the Release of Political Prisoners) and *Pratirodh* (Resistance) were written around the same time and performed by the SF in many different towns and villages of present Bangladesh in a month-long programme from 6 June to 5 July, 1942. In the open session of the SF's fourth conference in Barishal, Purnendu Ghosh's *Patengar Pratishodh* (Patenga's Revenge) and Subodh Ghosh's *Karnaphulir Dak* (The Call of Karnaphuli) were presented. The latter became very popular and was performed many times.

However, what had started primarily through the zeal of students must have gradually gained recognition as an effective means of political communication within the Party also, for *Janajuddha*, the organ of the Communist Party in Bengal, announced an award of Rs 10 for writing poster plays. Later the amount was increased to Rs 30. Two of the criteria specified were: a) these plays had to be fit for open-air presentation, and b) costumes had to be simple. Inspiring anti-Japan feelings was specified as the theme. Banaspati Gupta's *Deshrakshar Dak* (Call to Protect the Country) won the first prize in 1942. In 1943, Manikuntala Sen and Kanak Mukherjee jointly wrote two street plays—*Food Queue* and *Atmarakshar Dak* (Call for Self Defence) against the famine and the Second World War respectively. These plays were performed by the Mahila Samiti.<sup>7</sup>

In the mean time, Chinmohan Sehanabish, Nikhil Chakraborty, Jolly Kaul, Subrato Banerjee, Debkumar Bose, Sujata and Supriya Mukherjee and some other students of the Calcutta University formed an organization called the Youth Cultural Institute (YCI) in 1940. This body initiated a systematic cultural programme in the form of regular discussions, debates, enactments, poster exhibitions and songs. Later the IPTA was started with these same ideals, to develop a mass cultural movement across Bengal. This multidimensional cultural awakening opened new horizons in the Bengali theatre world, where the masses became stars for the first time in the theatre history of this region. Directed by the likes of Bijan Bhattacharya and Sombhu Mitra and enriched by the committed acting of many talented artists, plays like *Agun* (Fire), *Jabanbandi* (Testimony), *Nabanna* (The Harvest Festival), based on ordinary peoples' lives, had a tremendous impact on the popular psyche. That is how theatre expanded from the cities to a much wider audience.<sup>8</sup>

During the Second World War, IPTA activists formed small squads to spread out into villages. Subhas Mukhopadhyay, the poet, singers Benoy Roy and Debabrata Biswas, actors Tripti Mitra, Sova Sen, Gangapada Basu and many other gifted performers were part of such squads. The performances they presented on different street and market corners or other suitable spots in villages never had a stage, microphones or lights. It might be debated whether the presentations they made—with songs, poems and brief enactments—can be called street theatre proper, but these presentations certainly had a lot of theatrical elements. They all told stories of resistance and struggle; of the hopes, aspirations, dreams, frustrations and protests of workers, peasants and other toiling masses. All such efforts were inevitably inspired by the sincere wish to spread the leftist ideology among the masses.

Logically speaking, the golden era of street theatre in Bengal should have been 1948-51, when the Communist Party was banned and even IPTA had to function underground. Street theatre was the only form that could be effectively used under the circumstances, and it must have been. Unfortunately, however, no official documentation of IPTA activities in Bengal mentions anything from this period, since the then Party line was subsequently renounced as erroneous. As the veterans of those years leave this world one by one, those memories are also being slowly but steadily wiped out.<sup>9</sup>

There is definite information, however, on street theatre activities after 1952; and Purnendu Shekhar Pal Chaudhury (1919-95), better known as Panu Pal, can most definitely be named as a

pioneer in this field. The first ever street theatre squad of the IPTA was formed under his leadership in 1951 and their first presentation was *Chargesheet* written by Umanath Bhattacharya.<sup>10</sup> Panu wrote his first street play *Vote-er Bhet* (The Gift of the Vote) before the 1952 general elections. It was performed in innumerable election rallies in support of the then undivided Communist Party. The cast included Utpal Dutt, Ritwik Ghatak, Umanath Bhattacharya and Panu himself. Panu Pal wrote 18 other street plays subsequently,<sup>11</sup> which included dramatized presentations of various Tagore songs and of Sukanta Bhattacharya's poem *Harijan* (Untouchables). He also directed the presentation of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Jabanbandi* in the street theatre format. In a letter to the Minister of Housing<sup>12</sup>, Panu Pal himself mentioned *Sauren Mastarer Sangsar* (Sauren Master's Family, 1953), *Kato Dhane Kato Chal* (Literally, How Much Rice from How Much Paddy, implying a proper knowledge of what comes out of what, 1959), *Bhat* (Rice, 1959), *Jadi Amra Mantri Hoi* (If We Become Ministers, 1962) and *Nishir Dak* (The Irresistible Call, 1967) as some of his more successful street plays.

Utpal Dutt appeared on the street theatre scene in 1952 and his street plays are remembered particularly for the humour that he built into them. However, it was mostly at election times that his productions would be available. The trend of using street theatre as a means of election campaigning gained strength in the IPTA from the 50s. Many plays by different IPTA activists were performed throughout the 50s and the 60s at every election.<sup>13</sup>

Before the 1950s, however, this country had been through its partition-bruised independence. Millions of refugees, rampant unemployment, increasing black marketing and the dark shadows of famine, characterized this newly gained freedom in the 50s. It was thus natural that in this decade leftist struggles started erupting once more—this independence had not liberated the common people of India; they needed to be given the minimum rights for survival. People started voicing their demands for food and kerosene. In 1962, writers Debesh Roy and Surajit Basu formed a street theatre group to tour villages with a play written by the latter. One-act play competitions started in West Bengal around 1965-66. Chinsurah was a venue for a fairly extensive competition. The suburban groups that participated in these competitions were mostly street theatre groups. Towards the end of 1966, some artists connected with the Minerva Theatre in Calcutta put up regular street plays in the College Street area of Calcutta.<sup>14</sup> Sporadic protest movements across Bengal finally erupted into a strong popular struggle in 1966-67. The State assumed a terrorist role. Police firings killed Ananda Hait of Krishnanagar in the Nadia district and young Nurul of Swarupnagar in the Basirhat area of North 24 Parganas. These two incidents generated two street plays—*Rakta Diye Lekha* (Written with Blood) and *Nurul Marey Na* (Nurul Never Dies), both by Shyamaltanu Dasgupta. He was the actor-director of a theatre group called Young Men's Cultural Association. *Nurul Marey Na* was first presented on the municipality ground of Naihati, a Calcutta suburb. Later it had many shows in Basirhat (Nurul's home area) and other villages and suburbs. The passionate presentation of this play, combined with the desolation and protest built into the script, managed to move audiences everywhere. Shyamal later wrote two more street plays: *Vote Diyona* (Do Not Vote) in 1977 and *Dunkel Prastab* (Dunkel Draft) in 1993.<sup>15</sup> Ananda Hait's murder inspired Utpal Dutt to present a street play at the hospital crossing of Krishnanagar. He had earlier done a street play called *Special Train* based on the Hind Motors workers' strike. Later this play was used in different places for the election campaign also.

After the 1967 elections, the CPI and CPI(M) joined the government in West Bengal as part of the United Front. Soon after, there was an incident; an incident which would trigger off a reaction that would rock the 1970s and mark this decade as a blood-stained chapter in the history of West Bengal. This was the Naxalbari peasant uprising on 23 May 1967.

The CPI(M) suffered another split due to the Naxalbari uprising. The CPI (ML) was formed and the followers of this second line came to be known as the Naxalites. West Bengal had been swept by popular movements since 1967. The 70s witnessed one stream of communist revolutionaries who dreamed of turning this into the decade of liberation; a dream that didn't allow for parliamentary politics within the bounds of the present Constitution; that needed bloody armed struggle. Another wing of communist activists propagated the slogans of a people's democratic revolution, not by rejecting the Constitution, but by utilizing it. Confusion was inevitable in the midst of such contrary trends within the left movement. State terrorism in the form of unprecedented repression combined with infighting to make this decade a nightmare of police atrocities and political murders. West Bengal was in the grip of a political earthquake;

thousands of youths alive with the dream of a Red India were being transformed into corpses everyday. Amal Roy wrote the street play *Lash Bipani* (The Corpse Shop) at this time. Unit Theatre, a group based in the suburb Uttarpara, produced this play first. Later the North Calcutta Cultural Commune (NCCC) enacted this play many times in the city and villages to tremendous popular response. Ignited by the Naxalbari ideal, Kamallesh Sen started touring different villages of South 24 Parganas with a street theatre team in 1968. Most of his plays were based on the theme of jotedar oppression and peasant protest.<sup>16</sup>

Towards the end of 1970, four young people took to the road to transmit the message of revolutionary politics among the masses. Kajal Sarkar and Benu Dattagupta were the initiators of this venture. They started their journey from Calcutta, performing all along the way, with the plan of touring the whole of India. All they had was the basic structure of a play. The language changed with the region; the content also changed frequently to accommodate local issues and incidents. They managed to cross Bihar and Orissa into Madhya Pradesh, but were finally arrested in Bhilai. This touring theatre venture died there. What followed was a long term in jail that crippled Srilekha Roy, an actress in this team, through torture.<sup>17</sup>

In 1971-72, the play *Lal Lanthan* (Red Lantern), based on the Chinese revolution, became quite famous. This used to be performed both as a street play and in the proscenium. Alok Raychowdhury, who scripted this play, wrote another street play in support of mutilating statues. That was also enacted in different street and market corners.<sup>18</sup>

Badal Sircar stepped into the arena of non-proscenium plays in 1972. His plays started gaining popularity, especially among students. The novel presentation style of body theatre was not the only element that generated this popularity; powerful themes and the ability to correctly read the pulse of the moment, combined with the artistic expertise of his team, were equally strong reasons. Plays like *Bhoma* and *Sukhapathya Bharater Itihas* (A Pleasurable History of India) were created in this period. However, it needs to be mentioned here that Badal Sircar had an agenda quite different from that of primarily agitprop street theatre. He was much more interested in developing a regular community of viewers with whom it would be possible to evolve a sustained communication.

Rabindra Bhattacharya, playwright of the Naihati-based theatre group Jatrik, started doing street plays in 1973-74. He has written some 15 street plays and toured parts of West Bengal and Bihar with his own street theatre team to present them. His plays were often used for election campaigns, or presented in support of various workers' strikes, like the rail strike of 1974.<sup>19</sup>

Calcutta's Curzon Park became the centre of street theatre activities during the 70s.<sup>20</sup> Badal Sircar's idea of developing a sustained audience is what motivated the theatre group Silhouette to start acting here at a fixed time every Saturday. Gradually, other groups also joined in, and of the 25-30 groups that performed there, Silhouette, Pathikrit, Runner and Sangshaptak were the most popular. Police intervention failed to curtail these theatre activities. Till the declaration of Emergency in June 1975 made it physically impossible to keep it up, these weekly street theatre shows continued unabated. It needs to be noted here that police attacks on these shows were neither unexpected nor unusual. So the audience that gathered there every Saturday—mostly office commuters and students—came to see these plays at quite a risk and it is remarkable that the performances actually did create a strongly committed audience who never failed to turn up.

The 70s may be termed a decade of theatre movement in Bengal, among other things. Alternative theatre crystallized into a definite movement during this decade. Because theatre is such a directly life-oriented art form, turmoils of everyday living get reflected intimately in this form, mirroring the frustrations and dreams of ordinary people. During the 70s, the frustrations were over the existing social situation and the dreams were of revolutionary social change. Whether or not the street theatre activists of this decade were members of a wing of the Communist Party, their plays were uniformly influenced by leftist ideology, depicting the distress and aspirations of the times. Most of them were powerful critiques of the contemporary administrative system and State structure. Naturally the State didn't look kindly upon these theatre activists; repression and police torture was the fate of many. In 1972, Ashis Chatterjee of Theatre Unit died of police bullets while acting in *Lash Bipani*. Police atrocities killed Prabir Datta, another street theatre activist, at Curzon Park in Calcutta in 1974, while Silhouette's play *Takhan Se Ek Itihas* (He Was History Then) was being presented on 20 July, then observed as the anti-imperialist day. A few other instances will indicate the kind of violence that theatre activists of the 70s had to face:

Dronacharya Ghosh, playwright and director, killed by the police in jail.  
Kamalesh Sen, playwright and director, imprisoned and tortured in police lock up.  
Bir Sen, director and actor of *Silhouette*, jailed without trial for three years.  
Kajal Sarkar, playwright and director, tortured and jailed.  
Benu Datta, actor and theatre activist, tortured and jailed.  
Srilekha Roy, actress and theatre activist, jailed and crippled through torture by the police.  
Shyamaltanu Dasgupta, playwright and director, beaten up and tortured several times by goons of rival political parties.<sup>21</sup>

Many theatre workers suffered other forms of torture. Trying to evaluate the price they paid in their personal lives would start a different story altogether.

It was this kind of State and inter-party terrorism, and its reflection in plays, that turned the 70s into the decade of street theatre in West Bengal. For the theatre workers of this period, political commitment and commitment to theatre didn't mean different things. Dreams of revolutionary social change were fused equally into both these commitments and the veering from the proscenium towards street theatre was but one aspect of rejecting the prevalent norms and values. The need was to reach the rank and file at close quarters with Marxist messages of class struggle and change, and street theatre as a distinctive art form was born in Bengal out of this need. That is why many of the street plays of this decade could so powerfully touch people's hearts. Prashanto Chattopadhyay reminisces: 'The street theatre activists of the 70s worked with a tremendous passion—a sincere passion to reach the people. How much they succeeded is a different, controversial story, but as a regular audience of those plays I can certainly say that they always got their audiences involved; today people watch street plays with a lot more apathy—if they do at all.'<sup>22</sup> Alok Chattopadhyay echoed the same sentiments: 'Back in the 70s, street plays were done with a lot of risk—even at the risk of their lives—by people who sincerely believed in Revolution, with a view to reaching their ideals to the people. Today neither such ideals nor such commitment can be noted any more.'

As pointed out earlier, street plays in Bengal have a history of growing out of leftist protest movements. The commitment of the performers to the faith they sought to communicate has always been the strength of street theatre here—be it during the sporadic activities of the 1930s and 40s, or the turbulent 50s, or the frenzied 70s. It is also, perhaps, natural that this surge in street theatre activities died a natural death in the 80s here, only to be continued in the form of uninspiring election plays during election campaigns. This, perhaps, is the inevitable result of there being virtually no Left-led protest movements in the province—barring the ruling Left Front's cries against the injustice of the Centre as long as a Congress government held sway there. Now even that is gone! The history of street theatre in other states of India is bound to be very different, as the Left in opposition is a very different proposition. Bengal today is unique in this aspect—here the Left is in power, not in opposition, and Bengal's tradition of protest movements inspired and led by leftists has been totally coopted into uncritical support for the ruling Left in the absence of any strong, organized Marxist opposition within or without the Left Front. In a state where the ruling Left has even abandoned its one-time slogan 'Long Live the People's Democratic Revolution', and where those on the left of these establishment leftists have degenerated into virtual non-existence, street theatre as an organ of protest can hardly be expected to survive. The temptation to end with a quote by Panu Pal, respected as the pioneer of street theatre here by all later activists, is too strong to resist: 'The Communist Party had some honest, self-sacrificing leaders who rightly felt that an overhaul of the economic structure alone cannot change a society and its people; and if the people do not change, a changed society cannot be sustained. The truth of this kind of thinking stands vindicated today. But, unfortunately, a band of people, committed to banking on their vested interests, came to leadership in the Party. They would never give priority to culture. For them all that the cultural programme was expected to offer was a play eulogizing the Party after the speeches were over in an election rally . . . When they came into the government, they went in for multi-million rupee extravaganzas like Hope '86 and Ganga-Padma Festivals, and new theatres like Nandan and Girish Mancha, all in Calcutta, and for the delectation of the urban upper middle classes alone. Have they taken any cultural initiative for the toiling masses of the villages?'<sup>23</sup>

*Notes and references:*

*All the interviews quoted from were conducted by Bulbuli Biswas.*

1. This information is from interviews with Dr Darshan Chowdhury and Shyamaltanu Dasgupta. Dr Chowdhury (b. 1942) is a Reader in the Department of Bengali, Kalyani University. He is a renowned theatre researcher with many publications including *Unish Shataker Natya Bishoy* (theatre themes of the 19th century), Pustak Bipani, Calcutta and *Gana Natya Andolan* (people's theatre movement) published by Anustup, Calcutta. Shyamaltanu Dasgupta is an actor, director and playwright, other details about whom appear elsewhere in this article.
2. Rabindra Bhattacharya (b. 1934) has been a playwright, actor and director since 1950. Now he heads his own theatre group, Jatrik. He has written innumerable one-act plays, among which 120 have been published so far. He's also an active member of the CPI(M) and currently the Chairman of Naihati Municipality.
3. Professor Satyajit Chowdhury (b.1936) retired as professor of Bengali, Rishi Bankim Chandra College. The author of many books and publications, he is a respected and wellknown researcher and critique in the field of aesthetics and cultural studies. He made this point during the interview.
4. Once a CPI(ML) activist, Jyotsnamoy Ghosh is the author of many short stories and plays. He keeps in regular touch with many suburban and rural theatre groups.
5. Dhananjay Das: Introduction to *Marxbadi Sahitya Bitarka*, vol. I, Prima Publications, Calcutta, 1995.
6. Rabindranath Tagore: Introduction to 'Kaler Jatra', *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. XI, Visva Bharati Granthan Bibhag, Calcutta, 1990.
7. All the details furnished about street theatre activities in the period between 1938 and 1943 are from Seema Sarkar's *Pather Natak* (Theatre of the Streets), forthcoming from Proma, Calcutta.
8. Ibid. Also see Sudhi Pradhan: *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*, vols. I-III, Navana, Calcutta.
9. Samik Bandyopadhyay, theatre critic and scholar, contributed this point. See his 'Theatrescapes' in this issue for a discussion on this period.
10. Seema Sarkar, op. cit.
11. Sova Sen: 'In Memoriam: Panu Pal', *Ranga Varta*, Volume 1, Number 1 (59), January 1997, Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta, p. 16.
12. This was a letter of appeal written for the allotment of a government flat in his name, written in January 1994, when he was extremely unwell. Samik Bandyopadhyay kindly showed us a photocopy of this letter from his personal collection.
13. Seema Sarkar, op. cit. This book includes a list of 61 street plays performed in the period 1949-69.
14. Interviews with Jyotsnamoy Ghosh and Satyajit Chowdhury.
15. Interviews with Shyamaltanu Dasgupta and Jyotsnamoy Ghosh.
16. Interviews with Prashanto Chattopadhyay and Alok Chattopadhyay. Once a CPI (ML) activist, Prashanto Chattopadhyay is a theatre activist and the editor of *Kaladhvani*, a prestigious little magazine. He played a major role in the formulation of Nandikar's performance programme with street children and was the research coordinator in the Halla theatre project. Alok Chattopadhyay is an economist renowned as a theatre enthusiast and critic. He has made a documentary video film on theatre activities in Balurghat, West Bengal.
17. As above and also interview with Jyotsnamoy Ghosh.
18. Interviews with Jyotsnamoy Ghosh and Shyamaltanu Dasgupta.
19. Interview with Rabindra Bhattacharya.
20. Interviews with Alok Chattopadhyay and Dr Darshan Chowdhury.
21. Shampa Mitra: 'Sabuj Ghaser Niche Ajo Rakter Dag', *Kaladhvani*, January 1997 issue, Calcutta, p 37; interviews Prashanto Chattopadhyay and Alok Chattopadhyay.
22. Interview with Prashanto Chattopadhyay.
23. *Ranga Varta*, op.cit., p 13.

## Nurul Doesn't Die

Shyamaltanu Dasgupta

*The first character proceeds towards the acting space from among the audience.*

1. Hey Mr, what are you all going to do here?
2. *(From the acting space)* Put up a play.
1. What play?
2. A poster play, *Nurul Doesn't Die*.
1. Nurul of Swarupnagar?
2. Nurul of the whole country.
1. What do you mean?
2. Nurul belongs to the whole country today; the whole country belongs to Nurul.

*Terrible screams are heard at a distance.*

1. What's that? Who's howling like that?

*The second character runs from the acting space through the audience towards the first.*

2. Firing again!
1. Where? *(Both enter the acting place)*
2. First in Basirhat. Then all over the country.
1. But why?
2. They wanted to eat.
1. What's wrong with wanting to eat?
2. It's the wish to live—that's what is wrong.
1. People won't want to live?
2. No. They'll get bullets if they do.
1. But bullets are machines of death.
2. You need food to live and bullets are needed to block the means of living. We want to live, they want to kill us.
1. That's not fair at all.
2. But that's politics.
1. I don't agree.
2. Beware!
1. Why? Beware of what?
2. Machines of death.
1. Let them come, I'm not afraid. How is it possible that I won't ask for food when my young brothers and sisters, my children, are all facing a slow death from starvation right in front of my eyes?
2. You are talking politics. Beware! They are waiting with their machines of death ready; they can silence you any minute.
1. Let them, I don't care. That little boy Nurul only asked for food, all he wanted was to live. And they've choked his voice forever. But have they really succeeded? Nurul keeps shouting in a thousand different voices, in everybody's voice—'Give us food. Let us live.'
2. Don't say any more.
1. Why not?
2. What will the play speak about if you say it all?
1. What do you mean?
2. The poster play only says all that you're saying.
1. Oh, the play hasn't started yet! Right, I just came up from among the audience.
2. But your words tally exactly with what the play has to say.
1. But that's only natural. The playwright speaks on our behalf, voicing all that we have to say.
2. See . . .
1. There's a man coming.

2. Who's he?

1. Nurul's father.

2. Come, let's see the play.

1. Yeah, let's do that (*both exit*).

*Nurul's father enters from the audience.*

FATHER: Early in the morning my son left home in search of some rice, and he isn't back yet! Brothers and friends, have any of you seen my Nurul? (*Enters the acting space*) He told me, 'Wait, baba, I'll go to them and request them to reduce the price. I'll get some rice.' It's nearly evening now and still he hasn't returned. Where am I supposed to look for him? Oh Nurul, N-u-r-u-l . . . Have any of you seen my Nurul? Just tell me, where should I look for him? Nurul, oh Nurul, where are you, my son? (*Slogans can be heard off stage: Supply food at affordable prices. Give us food to survive.*) There—lots of people marching past. Let me try and decipher if Nurul's voice can be heard. (*Tries to listen carefully*) Alas! All the voices sound like Nurul's. Where's my son gone? Nurul, oh N-u-r-u-l . . .

*The first person enters from the audience.*

1. Chacha, oh chacha, wretched news! Nurul has been shot, chacha.

FATHER: What do you mean? Who would shoot my Nurul?

1. The police.

FATHER: But why? My Nurul is no robber; why did the police shoot him, then? Oh my son, my Nurul! (*Breaks down crying.*)

1. Don't cry, chacha. None of us will cry.

FATHER: He left saying that he'd reduce the price of rice and get us some. In the morning he got a kg of rice from somewhere and said, 'Feed my younger brothers and sisters. I'm going with them for more rice.' Oh my Nurul, the apple of my eye!

1. Don't cry, chacha.

FATHER: Take me to my Nurul. I want to go to him.

1. You can't go there, chacha.

FATHER: But why?

1. The police won't allow you. They'll kill you if you try.

FATHER: Let them. Let them kill me. Let them kill us instead of our young children. Oh my Nurul, my son! (*weeps*)

1. Don't cry, chacha, none of us will cry. We'll avenge his blood.

FATHER: My Nurul hadn't done anything wrong. Why did they take his life, then? (*keeps weeping*).

1. One day the accounts of these tears will be settled, chacha.

FATHER: Nurul was a good student in school. Everyone used to say, Nurul will become Nazrul Islam when he grows up. Alas! My Nurul won't grow up to be Nazrul any more.

1. Chacha, please don't cry. None of us will cry. None of us. We'll definitely avenge his blood.

FATHER: But will you be able to bring my Nurul back?

1. No, nobody can bring Nurul back. They've killed Nurul. But we are here in thousands, lakhs—they can't kill us all. Many of us will survive and we'll avenge his blood some day. That's why we won't cry. We'll keep the fire of revenge burning in our hearts. On the day that their funeral pyre bursts into flames, that's when we'll cry for young Nurul. Their ruthless hands have killed this future Nazrul. We'll all shed tears for Nurul together.

FATHER: What am I going to tell Nurul's mother when I return home? Tell me, what am I to tell her? How am I to deliver the news of her son's death? They've silenced his little heart forever with bullets. Just tell me, if you can, what I'm to tell her. She's waiting with a dish of rice, scanning the roads for Nurul. Tell me what to say to her. Tell me. Why are you keeping quiet? I'll tell her, 'Give me that dish of rice; I'll eat it up, for your Nurul will never come back to eat it.'

1. No, no, chacha, you mustn't cry.

FATHER: My heart is burning like hell itself; when am I to cry, then?

1. Don't cry, chacha.

FATHER: I mustn't cry?

1. No.

*The second man enters shouting.*

2. Chacha, Nurul isn't dead!

FATHER: Not dead?

1. Nurul isn't dead! (*enthused*) Chacha!

2. No, no, chacha, Nurul isn't dead.

1. So the bullets didn't hit him?

2. Yes, they did.

FATHER: He didn't fall face down on the road?

2. Yes, he did.

1. Then?

2. Nurul isn't dead.

1. But we heard that the bullets killed Nurul!

2. You heard wrong.

FATHER: My Nurul isn't dead, he's alive! Ahh—what a relief! Where *is* he, my Nurul? I'll take him home this instant. His mother's waiting for him.

2. They aimed and fired at him. He fell face down on the road. His little heart hammered once or twice and then was quiet forever. We all wailed loudly. The headmaster of the school screamed in grief for the best boy of his school. We also wept. The whole of Basirhat and Swarupnagar wept. We adorned his dead body with flowers and then . . .

1. So Nurul died a martyr. Then why are you saying that he isn't dead?

2. No, he isn't dead.

1. Grief has turned you insane.

FATHER: Where is Nurul?

2. Nurul is alive.

1. What do you mean?

2. We covered his dead body with flowers. Thousands of voices rang out with the slogan, 'Long Live Martyr Nurul!' Then slowly we proceeded with his body towards Nurul's home.

FATHER: Is my son at home, then?

2. Yes chacha, he's at home.

1. What happened next?

2. Slowly we reached his home. We were all crying. We were bathing his body with our tears. Suddenly we all saw in great surprise—there, in the half-light, half-shadows we saw, Nurul was sitting up and saying, 'Wipe your tears. I'm not dead. Who are they to kill me? I'm there in every home of Bengal today. Today, every Bengali is a Nurul. I'm not dead; they can't kill me.'

1. Then?

2. We all shouted, 'Long live martyr Nurul!'

FATHER: Nurul's immortal. Nurul lives beyond his death. Look, there are so many Nuruls in front of me! Nurul isn't dead. You'll find him in every Bengali home today. Nurul lives. He'll continue to live.

1. Does your playwright have no sense of logic?

2. Why?

1. First the playwright said that Nurul was dead. Then he said that Nurul was alive despite the bullets.

2. Yes, he says that Nurul lives in every Bengali home today. That young boy of Swarupnagar called Nurul is certainly dead. But in all the homes of India there are thousands of Nuruls today. They don't die. Struggles don't die. Hunger doesn't die. The dream of a better life doesn't die. That's why Nurul doesn't die. When they snatch away the food that could satisfy our hunger, we'll demand it back. We'll demand it back in thousands of voices, rocking the sky and shaking the earth. That's when Nurul will live again. That's why Nurul can't die.

1. What does Nurul mean then?

2. Nurul means the struggle for existence. Nurul means the dream of a better life. Nurul means life itself.

*Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee*



## ‘Street Theatre is here and now’— A Panel Discussion

*This discussion on street theatre was held for STQ in Delhi, in November 1996. The participants were as follows:*

**Javed Mallick**, who chaired, is a theatre critic and scholar; he teaches at Khalsa College, Delhi University.

**Moloyashree Hashmi** is the convenor of Janam, and an active street theatre person.

**Rati Bartholomew**, a theatre person, was associated with the Delhi-based street theatre group, Theatre Union.

**Ranjini Mazumdar** is a filmmaker, a member of the collective Mediastorm, who has acted in street plays with Buland Natya Manch.

**Brijesh Sharma**, actor, writer, poet, is a member of Janam.

**Sudhanva Deshpande**, actor and director, is a member of Janam.

**JAVED:** Shall we begin by discussing the question of the definition of the street theatre as a form? Can it be defined entirely in terms of its technical features? Or should we also include the element of politics and ideological orientation as its defining characteristic?

I have in mind a quotation from Safdar where he says: ‘Anybody who has watched a street theatre performance would characterize it as a militant protest theatre of a political nature, very often with a topical force.’ Now, this view seems to make the question of politics central to the concept of street theatre.

Somewhere, Safdar also talks about the relationship between the street theatre and the proscenium theatre and how the two are not mutually antagonistic. Now, I agree that the relationship between the two need not be viewed in antagonistic terms. But there are crucial differences between the two, which must be acknowledged.

To begin with, the very idea of the street theatre is a radical one, in the sense that it brings the performance out of the restrictive formal and social conventions of the proscenium theatre and back to where the theatre originally belonged: in the midst of the people, the community. For example, proscenium theatre takes place in enclosed, especially designed spaces and at especially designated time-slots. The high rent of these places and the cost of various other technical requirements makes it an expensive exercise. This in turn imposes certain other restrictions, I suppose, on the theatre group’s choice of plays. I am aware that there have been significant trends during this century to push these restrictions further away. But, far or near, the restrictions are there, nonetheless.

Even more significant is the fact that the proscenium theatre restricts the nature of admission of its audience by reserving the rights of admission to only those who can pay. Furthermore, through various architectural, technical and artistic conventions, it tends to construct its audience into a collection of separate individuals and not a community. There is no bonding of the spectators into a community with shared problems and concerns. All this makes it essentially a theatre of the middle class.

The street theatre, in contrast to this, can take place anywhere, at any time. It goes out to where the people live and work. It exercises no direct control over the nature of its audience. The show is for anybody and everybody who may care to watch it, although the play itself may be addressed to some specific social group such as workers, peasants, women, children, and so on. People may or may not contribute to the collection that is made at the end of the show. Also, there is no fixed amount to be contributed; people pay whatever they feel like or can. Symbolically, doesn’t this have the effect of empowering the people, of giving them the choice? And doesn’t this make street theatre a people’s theatre? ‘People’ not in the liberal, homogenizing sense but in the Marxist, class-based sense in which Brecht used it.

Yet another question is: while there can be no doubt that street theatre is a theatre for the people, is it also a theatre by the people?

**RATI:** You have raised so many questions that we should take them up one by one!

**JAVED:** Okay. In terms of its form, street theatre is quite a radical departure from the middle-class theatre. That’s one aspect, but if we go on from there we get to another thing . . . where the same form is used for all kinds of purposes. For example, street theatre was perhaps also used by the Bajrang Dal and VHP people during the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid agitation. It has certainly been used by the government to propagate its own programmes and policies. So the same form can be used for pro-establishment

purposes as well. The reason why I am raising the question of definition is that it is important in writing the history of street theatre. Usually we take the history back to the early Soviet times and Weimar Germany. But if you define it purely in technical terms, then you can perhaps go further back, to the middle ages, when performances took place in streets, fairgrounds and the village square.

**MOLOYASHREE:** The way street theatre emerged, not just in our country but also in other countries—I think one of its important characteristics was its quality of protest and its anti-establishment stance, not in an ambiguous way but very clearly so. Within that, there may be various shades of opinions. The point that you raised, about street theatre being done by groups like Bajrang Dal and the government for policies like health, population etc.—not very much of that kind of theatre lasts. It is not consistently continuous, like the street theatre of protest which all of us here are concerned about and in some way involved with. Any kind of theatrical activity interests an audience, but it does not always leave an impact, because somewhere it is ramming something down their throat. There may be interest at the spoof level, but no lasting impact. Primarily, I think that people, i.e. the audience, do not connect with it.

**BRIJESH:** How do we characterize those many, many street plays which don't attempt to analyse but are still anti-establishment? They, too, have not lasted, perhaps. Is politics the defining criteria?

**MOLOYASHREE:** I think both are.

**RATI:** I would agree more with what Mala [Moloyashree] was saying, that the modern street theatre that we are talking about, which most of us have practised, is something that has now been appropriated by the government. A family planning programme I saw by the Madhya Pradesh government—to a great extent it was shoved down people's throats. They were doing it in a folk style but they were saying family planning *karna hai, yeh achchha hai, woh achchha hai* [you must adopt family planning, this is right, that is right] not analysing the people's own problems or the issues. It is shoved down—so what is the impact? You go for entertainment, you see it and you walk out—an evening's entertainment. That's it. But the kind of street theatre we are talking about is militant, it protests, is political and is concerned. There is a follow-up always—some organization will follow it up, even if you don't. If Bajrang Dal has appropriated it now . . . I have not seen any, I don't know if any of you have.

**ALL:** No.

**RATI:** So I don't know what they are trying to do.

**MOLOYASHREE:** The BJP had done a play about 5 years ago, during an election, but I did not see it.

**BRIJESH:** In Lucknow, during the recent elections, they used it extensively.

**RANJINI:** I would like to respond to what Brijesh said about separating content from form. Street theatre has perhaps become just a form today. I think that all forms have a life of their own. For example, the debate between Brecht and others reflected the crisis of forms that had been appropriated by the fascists. Realism as a style was attacked by Brecht because it had lost its critical edge after the fascists appropriated it. No form in any of the arts can be eternal. Forms cannot transcend the boundaries of historical movements. While street theatre has played a very important role in this country, its appropriation by various political forces has ultimately turned it into just a 'technique'. That danger needs to be recognized.

Politically, also, there is a vacuum today. It would be incorrect to say that street theatre has been appropriated only because it has become an empty form. Today we are living in a situation where forms are far more nebulous, since their relationship to the discourse of politics has changed. In terms of some of the discussions between street and proscenium theatre, as Javed said, street theatre comes out to the people and is therefore a more democratic form. The same was once said about the relationship between film and painting. Paintings were displayed in the museum and people had to travel distances to get access to them. Cinema in that sense changed everything. Mechanical reproduction brought the image to us. Yet the history of cinema is a story of intense conflicts on the role, value and ideology of the image in our society. Therefore street theatre should not be seen only as a form for political communication, but a form whose ability to articulate contradictory ideological positions has made it imperative for us to recognize its historical limitation today.

**JAVED:** I understand that what all of you have been saying is that the *form* of street theatre can be appropriated for purposes other than political protest and agitation, as has been done by the Nazis and our own right-wing political parties. But they have always been ineffective, whereas the radical left-wing theatre has been much more effective. The street theatre movement has been built mainly by them for left-wing political causes to represent left-wing political thinking. Why is that—why is the appropriation

always so ineffective, is there something inscribed, written into the form itself? It's certainly more democratic, for instance.

RATI: But if fascist parties and the Nazis have used it, then it is democratic for them—

JAVED: My question is, why do we want to keep it only for ourselves and regard the rest as appropriation and distortion? What is the justification? There is their incompetence, but that does not answer the question.

RATI: Perhaps because it originated in left-wing politics? Its origin was not in right-wing politics.

JAVED: Also, the left has used it in a more sustained manner. That also ties up with what Mala was saying about the other usage of this form, that it does not last too long.

MOLOYASHREE: Just to add to this, I think that in the kind of street theatre we are talking about—there the audience makes a deeper connection. Plays which are done by left-wing groups—even when shoddily done—have something in them. Perhaps the intention of the actors, some little kernel within the idea of the play—it gets across. The audience feels 'that is mine' or 'me' and connects with it. That may answer the question you raised.

JAVED: It is the politics of the form, actually. This desire to identify with the ordinary people, the toiling masses, to reach out to them. These are the qualities that I think the right-wing or pro-government groups cannot manage, because they are usually government-sponsored and even many NGOs get funding from all kinds of sources. It's a kind of job for them. They think it's an effective way, and it has become fashionable. Otherwise I don't think they have that political motivation which should underlie one's use of the form.

RATI: I differ with you there. I won't agree about all NGOs, because I have seen them and done workshops with some of them. They get money and are employed, but the people who do the theatre are not professionals, they are doing it because they are politically motivated to do certain things, take up themes, form a group and do the play in different areas. They are not going to take up revolutionary themes, but they will take up themes, say, on gender questions. A lot of women's theatre has come up through NGOs and I find a tremendously sincere and convinced approach. They may be paid workers, but they are doing it because they believe in it and they have come into theatre because they are convinced that through this medium they will be able to say what they want to. Mainly with women, I have found that there is a sincerity of workers and a conviction too, being paid has not always made them careless. Now, there are groups which are politically motivated and yet do plays shoddily. They may connect but there is an attitude of superiority, that we know better—most people who are practising street theatre are from the middle class; and that brings us to the question of theatre of the people and by the people. Being middle class, quite often we have this attitude that we are better—better read, knowing theories better. We should guard against that kind of attitude. It is there in some NGOs and also among some political groups.

RANJINI: That contradiction is part of the politics of street theatre. If you are taking politics to the people, you subconsciously assume a position of dominance in the communication process. This is built into the style of street theatre. You are essentially carrying a message. The space for dialogic interaction is only a matter of strategy.

RATI: But your attitude will matter.

RANJINI: Yes, depending on how participatory you are. But ultimately it is political theatre and therefore a position of dominance is difficult to get out of.

RATI: What I am talking of is the attitude, an attitude that is anti-democratic, not just an attitude to the people, but also to the form. Taking it seriously.

JAVED: One of the main strengths of Safdar's work in this area was that he recognized that it is an art form and its artistic qualities have to be emphasized. So that brings in the question of aesthetics, which is usually neglected in many street theatre groups. I have known groups that use form merely as a peg to hang a message on, nothing more. That makes their performances so trite and lifeless that the purpose itself is defeated.

MOLOYASHREE: Often, street theatre is considered an easy kind of theatre, perhaps rightly so. It is something which does not require very much by way of arranging resources. But often, it becomes just far too easy—street theatre means two people just standing and talking, or three people running around, or five people doing some movement, or singing a couple of songs, and that's theatre. The qualities of

what makes theatre are lost in the process. There's this attitude to their own work, that anything is acceptable.

**BRIJESH:** Actually, the question of aesthetics is also a question of political understanding. One does street theatre primarily for two or three reasons. Taking your politics to the people is one of the main things. Also, the fact that one is interacting with the people and trying to mould the prevailing aesthetics being given to them from all other media. That also becomes a part of your work in street theatre, a part of your politics. To my mind, the concept of aesthetics cannot be delinked from politics; both are interlinked.

**JAVED:** Actually, aesthetics and politics are never delinked even in proscenium theatre, politics is written very much into the style and form of proscenium theatre.

**RATI:** But taking it easy has happened even in proscenium theatre. In the naturalistic theatre anyone can be an actor—move around, light a cigarette, sit on a chair, say your lines and you are an actor. Similarly, in street theatre, I agree with Mala, it is considered easy. Though it is much more difficult than stage theatre. Thousands of eyes are staring at you, while you are out in the open, not surrounded by protective darkness. There is no passive audience. There is an active audience, street noises you have to fight against, say your lines, project your voice, it's not easy, but there is this notion that it is easy because we have a message. Reductionist methods are employed. Because we have a message, anything goes.

**JAVED:** Mala is an actress who has worked in both. What do you think?

**MOLOYASHREE:** I think that basically the same skills of acting are used in both—voice, body movement, using space. All are equally needed in both. Anyone who is formally trained can go into either form, with some adjustments.

**JAVED:** But doesn't that person need a special something? Because you are competing with a whole range of rival or alternate attentions. People have to go shopping, to work, or there is noise or hustle, and you are in that context trying to establish yourself, and attract and hold their attention. Doesn't that require a special something?

**MOLOYASHREE:** Yes it does, a slightly different skill. What I began by saying was that certain basic theatre skills are common to both, and that's important. Many street theatre groups tend to forget or overlook that. A very, very important aspect of street theatre is that anyone watching it is doing so voluntarily. So instead of going shopping, that person has chosen to stand here and watch the play. So this person has already walked two steps with the performer. Now it is up to the performer to take the audience the remaining distance. That is where doing good theatre is important. Once a person has stopped to watch, the play has to also say something, it must catch the audience's attention, not merely through a slick performance—though that, too, is important—but the structure of the play, its drama, its theatricality, is important. To take an example, our play *Aurat* is a fine play. I have seen it performed by a number of groups. Even groups which did not give very good performances still managed to hold the people's attention. Another of our plays was successful when we did it, but when someone else did it, the audience walked away in five minutes. Yet, when *Aurat* is done even shoddily, the audiences don't move. So there is something special in *Aurat*, its theatricality and the content makes people want to watch it.

At the same time, I do agree that as a performer I am competing with the noise and distractions around me. When someone stops to watch, half the competition goes. Performing in such close proximity to the audience creates a connection. I feel it every time I perform. There is a bond. It's not just that I perform well and the audience responds and so I perform better. Even when I do just an ordinary show, there is this deep bond, this connection. In terms of the technical aspects of street theatre acting, the voice has to be used more cleverly as compared to proscenium plays. The pitch is important because there is so much noise around; even if it is subdued, it is there. To be heard over the traffic, the shopkeepers, and the kids who are creating a racket—to be heard at all—seems nearly impossible. But I find that the audience ignores this noise and listens to the performer. So two different kinds of sounds are what people listen to, they shut out one kind and listen to the other. When we began doing street theatre, we were trying to raise our pitch and bring in as much modulation as possible. After many years of performing I found I was able to use the bass levels far better than I had ever thought I could. Sheer practice for years gave a certain quality to my voice. Sometimes everyone is talking at a high pitch and that is very monotonous, so a lower level helps. Voice is a very important tool.

**JAVED:** What about body movement?

**MOLOYASHREE:** Yes, body movements in any theatre are larger than life. In street theatre, it has to be a little more than that. Apart from that, the space is different from the proscenium stage. Here the audience is all

around you, but on the proscenium it is one sided or at best three sided. So there is a difference that creates certain restraints and also creates a scope for more creative exploration. This is one of the areas I feel that we have not explored enough. Voice has been used, music, dialogues, etc. have been used differently, to highlight points or create moments of drama. Also silence. On the street there is so much noise around, one would think you cannot use silence, but you can. It must come at the right point. In one of our plays, *Artanaad*, a play against child sexual abuse, there are three or four points in the play where silence has been used effectively for say fifteen or twenty seconds—and that's a long time. When we began doing street theatre, we were not sure if we could use silence. Then, in *Aurat*, in the last scene, silence worked very well. Slowly, as we understood the mechanics, we have used it more and more effectively.

**BRIJESH:** I'd just like to add that the act of going to an area and performing there generates a fair amount of goodwill. Often you go to an area and people on their own tell you where to perform. So the rival attentions are there but there is also this eagerness for street theatre performances.

**SUDHANVA:** On acting in street theatre—in rehearsal, you prepare a standard composition, in terms of the expressions, pitch, pace, movements of the actor. Once you take that 'standard composition' out into the streets, a lot of variation has to necessarily come in. This may be a distinctive trait that a street theatre actor has to cultivate. Sometimes you start a performance and it's going well, but suddenly in the middle something completely extraneous happens—say a hundred yards away a mother is beating her child or an accident takes place—and immediately the attention of the audience is diverted to the drama in real life. And even if there is no disturbance, each space is so different from all others—the size and shape of the acting area, the level of noise, the light, the visual setting, the size of the crowd: all this varies enormously. It is because of such factors that there has to be continuous improvisation on the standard composition. You have to decide where to play at a faster pace or slower pace, where to hold the silence, be more vigorous, heighten the pitch and so on. These are things that are not taught and cannot be taught, either, but are skills that the actor has to use. Such improvisation happens much more in street theatre than on stage. There, the improvisations on the standard compositions are not that great, from show to show.

**RATI:** The actor actually acquires that skill—as you keep doing it, you keep acquiring the skill. It is something that comes.

**JAVED:** It is not taught in a classroom, but it is definitely learnt.

**RATI:** Acting can not be learnt only in a classroom. Even the proscenium theatre has to improvise, someone may forget a line, but the possibility or conditions of street theatre are such that it is inevitable to improvise. You have to overcome the other disturbances.

**MOLOYASHREE:** If the standard composition that Sudhanva talked about is well prepared, then the improvisations are learnt faster, confidently and effectively. This preparation of the standard composition is important. If that is good, then you have a strong base to build upon.

**BRIJESH:** Actually, you prepare where there is no noise, and then go out. I have seen that it is usually after 10–15 shows that a play comes into its own. Sometimes what we have prepared in rehearsal just does not work outside, and we start doing something else.

**RATI:** Yes, one changes when one sees that something has not worked. If a part did not communicate well, even if the audience does not tell you, there is an electricity between the audience and the performers and you keep changing as you go along. So the rehearsal is only a preparation.

**JAVED:** How is writing for street theatre different from writing for proscenium?

**BRIJESH:** Actually, I can only explain how Janam creates a play. The last three plays were done in a totally different method from what we did earlier. Earlier we would take a topic and hold discussions, and after discussion someone would write a draft and then we'd discuss it again. But in the last three plays we have done improvisations. This has affected characterization. Take the stereotyped characters of street plays. The moment a policeman comes in, you know what to expect. These kind of stock characters were being used a lot in street theatre. If you take the policeman of *Halla Bol*, you'll find that the general portrayal is the same as any other policeman, but his character has shades. Characterization has to be there. If one looks at our latest plays, the method of involving everybody makes it more democratic. It also brings in inputs from actors of various social backgrounds. You have already collected a drama of social milieu; from there you select and choose. That gives you a lot of scope in creating a play, something that wasn't there initially. Creating a play like this for street theatre is a much better idea than one person

writing it. This works better.

**RATI:** Even when one person wrote it, you did have discussions; and everyone's ideas were incorporated. It's just that someone who was able to write was penning them. In Theatre Union we did not work like that, but I don't see any harm in that. What does happen is that the personal experiences and ideas of different people do come in. I have noticed a difference in Janam's latest plays. *Rahul Boxer*, for example. There was subtlety in it, the theme was different. You brought in a subtlety of approach from the personal experiences of these boys, what they felt, the relationships, how a child behaves towards the mother, how the mother dominates, these things are very real. My eight-year-old grandchild said, 'I don't like that woman, she goes on and on.' It was like her mother telling her 'do this', 'do that'. The play brought in a different level of understanding. This takes me back to the point Javed raised initially about characterization and subtlety—can you put them in a street play? Of course you can.

**JAVED:** I feel that in street theatre there is no scope for convoluted, complex, very subtle development of any situation or character because of the conditions in which it takes place. It has to be brisk; you have to use stock types. Of course, you can make it feel fresh instead of clichéd. In the kind of street theatre where, even with the right kind of politics, the form is just used for propaganda, and artistic qualities are neglected, it becomes clichéd and the message comes across very poorly and loses its impact.

**RATI:** It can happen in any art form, a bad film, a bad painting, a bad anything.

**JAVED:** The very aesthetics of street theatre . . . it's emblematic, isn't it? . . . So the scope for subtlety is circumscribed to begin with.

**RATI:** If you are thinking of a bourgeois kind of theatre, emphasizing the self and agony and all that, that is not there, true. But naturally each art form has its own parameters and therefore to compare . . . Proscenium theatre has its own kind of subtlety, it can make you cry, laugh etc. You cannot say that street theatre is just reductionism. Take *Rahul Boxer*—there is a total involvement of somebody who wants to do well, but what are the means that he is going to adopt? There are other problems that he faces, and they come through in half an hour.

**RANJINI:** First of all let me state that I personally believe in the active use of stereotypes. What happens in street theatre is that it has to be short and can only rely on the surface level impression of the actor. It can't really deal with the internal thoughts of the actor. In film or proscenium theatre one can have flashbacks, people talking to themselves, fantasy sequences aided with music and lighting. But street theatre is a particular kind of public performance that has to face the pressures of social taboos. Film and literature, for example, allow one to enter the realm of fantasy and desire and these aspects are essential for any art form. But for street theatre it is important to mediate social taboos because you are performing live in front of an unknown public, and you can't suddenly change your clothes or discuss private feelings in public. Any art form acquires a richer, more complex and rounded character if it is able to mediate both the public and the private world of human existence. Yet this mediation is possible only through a conflict with the discourse of social morality. And this is a conflict that street theatre has to be cautious about because of its status as public performance. In my opinion, film and literature are two forms that can transcend the boundaries of social taboos because the act of seeing or reading can be as anonymous as the act of creation.

**JAVED:** I agree with you, but besides the physical and social conditions that you pointed out, which require street theatre to make use of stereotypes, it necessarily needs to simplify matters in the short space of time and attention span. The politics of street theatre also requires that, because we are talking of larger issues—class and gender and so on. There you can't go into detailed and complex analysis; analysis of operations of power, for example. You can show power, oppression, authority and so on through emblematic representations and, I think, street theatre glories in that kind of representation.

**RANJINI:** See, Rati, the multi-layered structure of power or the way gender oppression actually takes place, you can show it in one way or the other. But you can't really bring out all the forces that work to oppress women, in forty minutes.

**BRIJESH:** I don't think any form can do it.

**RANJINI:** That's right, but it's more difficult for street theatre.

**SUDHANVA:** We need to define some things more clearly. What subtleties and complexities are we talking about? As Rati earlier said, it's true that street theatre has to bring out, talk about or depict its own kind of subtleties. But why must I know the internal thoughts of a character? They are not important to me at one level. The question really is: Is street theatre as a form capable of showing the extremely complex and

subtle nature of various kinds of problems and oppression that people face?

MOLOYASHREE: It is.

SUDHANVA: Look, we are just about starting out in terms of our practice. Rati talked of *Rahul Boxer* and it is true that there one has been able to bring in far more complexity than in the street theatre that one saw in the 70s or 80s. I don't think that even in their formal aspects, plays like *Rahul Boxer* or *Artanaad* were even imaginable in the late 70s. I'm not trying to decry that kind of street theatre—some of it is brilliant—but while we keep doing it, there is need also for a fresh approach. Now we have at least begun to say, 'Let's try'. In *Rahul Boxer* you even have the psychological make-up of the character. At the personal level, psychology or internal thoughts don't excite me. What does excite me is how much can I simplify the complexities of our real life, in street theatre. I am using the word simplify, not in the sense of simplistic, but in the way, say, science can simplify a phenomenon of nature for us to understand and deal with it. Complexities and subtleties are by themselves no virtues, and unless you are able to actually make sense of complexities, and thereby make choices, what is the point? I am not saying clearcut choices are possible in all cases. At the same time, if we exist in a complex world, it is our job as artists/activists to simplify without being simplistic.

JAVED: I fully agree with you that it is necessary to simplify in street theatre, because when you use complexities in proscenium theatre, it is also, indirectly, an exercise of power. Only those who know about it get into it. Ordinary people have no access to it. But there are two things to guard against. One, the danger of over-simplification, and two, that of distortion. You can simplify but should not distort. What happens in proscenium theatre is that they actually don't even show you the entire complexity. They show you something and say that actually there is lots underneath it that we can't show you or put on paper or stage. And street theatre cannot resort to that strategy because it has to, in that short span of time, clearly state what it wants to with utmost clarity. What I liked about *Rahul Boxer*, by the way, besides the subtlety and complexity, was that it had a flow. Usually I have seen plays, even one or two by Janam, which are static. They are like a series of cutouts, like comic strips. Here there is a continuous flow leading to the end/conclusion that is gripping and keeps it from seeming tired or producing a feeling of *deja-vu*.

RANJINI: I just want to react to Sudhanva's point about not being interested in internal thoughts. It's all very well to make that statement, and we have repeated that statement for years and finally come to the conclusion that there is a very real aspect of people's personal lives which needs to be taken far more seriously. When a person comes to see your play, you see one side of that person and respond to only that. But unless you are able to relate to the other side of your audience, you won't have the desired impact. Audiences create their own meanings based on a side of their personality that is invisible to the performer. And it's this invisible space that one needs to engage with.

By internal thoughts and fantasies, I don't mean just sitting down and fantasizing about life in a bourgeois sort of way. I don't even like to use that word because I feel all individuals, from any class background, have a side that you don't see in public life. And unless we relate to this hidden side, we can only have a theatre of 'reason'. In order to communicate, it is important to understand that sphere of human existence which constantly questions your sense of 'reason'.

SUDHANVA: Let me clarify. When one says one is not interested in the internal thoughts of a character, one is making the statement in a certain context. I was reading Brecht, who puts it very well. He says that every time you think that every aspect of any character is exhausted, you find new aspects being brought to the stage. Brecht is, of course, being sarcastic, but he's right: There is a celebration of the internal, of the psyche, that has happened in mainstream proscenium theatre, which is all I am reacting against.

RANJINI: Yeah, that's fine because you have said that there is a celebration of the psyche in proscenium and there is a celebration of the public in street theatre. What I am saying is that there has to be a way of combining the two. Is that possible in street theatre?

RATI: How do you think it can be done?

RANJINI: I don't think it can.

JAVED: Street theatre is not about individuals, it is about social issues, problems and groups. I may have a problem with my wife, but that's not an issue unless it can be put in the context of gender relations, which then becomes a larger question and my personal psychology or my wife's psychology, my emotional state or her's, don't really matter that much.

RATI: That's what I am saying, but then how do you address Brecht? In Brecht do you find that the individual problem is being discussed, or social relations?

JAVED: The individual problems of the character are being put in larger social, political contexts, in Brecht's *Mother Courage*, for instance.

RATI: So that's what street theatre is trying to do also, in a shorter time, to a different audience.

SUDHANVA: Javed mentioned Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Every time she loses a child, it's not as if her agony is unreal, or that Brecht is asking us not to take cognizance of the agony or not to feel sympathy. These are not watertight compartments. It is true that if you are going to tell a story you have to do it through characters and if you have human characters they will have individual characteristics and also their emotions and feelings. The question is: How are they being used? As an end in itself, or are you using all that to tell a larger story or, as Javed said, to make comments? If that is being done, then there is nothing wrong with emotions per se, internal thoughts and all that. I think that some of the street theatre that we have seen has been able to do it very effectively. For instance, the street version of *The Exception and The Rule* by IPTA, Patna. Wonderful performance, marvellous script. There was no way you could not think of the master and the servant as being individuals, who had their own motives, thoughts, emotions, and yet, in the end, it was all being used to tell a larger story, to make a comment. That's the context in which one is talking of emotions and internal thoughts.

JAVED: In *Rahul Boxer* the characters are individuals but they are also stereotypes of their class etc. In *Mother Courage* you do get all that emotional feeling, sympathy etc. The Mother is suffering and that should not blind you to the contradictions—she is suffering due to a historical context, because she made wrong choices. Sympathizing with her is one thing, but identifying is another, and being blind and accepting her fate as yours should certainly not happen.

RANJINI: But you cannot always control the way the audience responds . . .

JAVED: Look, you are not always fighting against the enemies of the people, you are also fighting against attitudes and standard responses. I know that many people respond to *Mother Courage* only as a tragedy. So you can't control the way an audience responds. But you can try. There are standard attitudes and these are internalized. But Brecht was writing against the grain. He was fighting to change these attitudes. He may not always have succeeded, but he tried. He wanted people to look at the world differently. He was saying, 'Look, what you have internalized, what you have been taught all this while, is not necessarily correct.'

RANJINI: Let me be the devil's advocate. Brecht was a great playwright with several wellknown and undoubtedly brilliant plays to his credit. But there is a rather serious problem with his understanding of the audience. He assumed a rational spectator. Audiences can be complicated. Maybe it is time for us to ask, 'Why haven't we succeeded with all our plays in all these years of performance?' In rational terms, we feel we are doing the right thing, yet we know that we don't succeed because we are fighting something that is not tangible. We are fighting the mind. We need to take cognizance of the fact that the audience is extremely complex.

JAVED: Success or the lack of it depends on a whole lot of factors. After all, one performance cannot change society. But don't you think we should move onto something else now?

MOLOYASHREE: Can I talk of stereotypes? When street theatre began about 20 years ago, the use of stereotypes was the easier option. But even within that, there has been the effort to go beyond it. I am not saying stereotypes don't have a role to play. I think they do, as Ranjini pointed out. At the same time, there is no *one* single way of doing it. Somehow, I have got the impression that people here are saying that moving away from stereotypes and doing a *Rahul Boxer* kind of a play is the only alternative; it is not. There would be several other alternatives. One has to make this very conscious shift from one way of thinking to another. But even while using stereotypes, there have been plays, including some done by Janam, which have gone beyond stereotypes. It may not be an entire play, but certain characters stand out, those who have broken the stereotypical image, and they are real characters, with all kinds of feelings, which may not be entirely evident. *Mahanagar* by Chennai Kalai Kuzhu of Madras, has a lot of stock characters. But one character, that of a woman, begins as a stock character, but isn't. It has lots of explorations. I feel that for Janam, it is now time, after the last 3-4 plays, to move into something new. That is the kind of versatility of thought that we need to push ourselves towards, and hope that lots of other groups will also do it in a bigger way.

BRIJESH: But it is only in the last 3 plays that complex things have been explored by Janam. 3 plays in a vast ocean.

MOLOYASHREE: I don't think we can say that these are the only three plays where subtle and complex



things are explored. Not at all. Subtle and complex things have been explored from the beginning, with different levels of success. Here we are talking of characters, I don't think we are talking about not exploring complexities.

JAVED: I don't think he meant that, he meant characters.

MOLOYASHREE: The problem arises when complex thoughts are not explored. When what is being said can be summed up in one line and that's it. When there are no levels in the play, no layering.

JAVED: What you say is very interesting, it gives a character more depth and yet there is a limit. Street theatre can go only thus far and no further because certain stereotypicalities will creep in. Street theatre, because of its very nature, the conditions in which it is performed, and its politics, cannot do away with stereotypes. It cannot become a theatre that takes up a question and explores all its complexities. It's not possible. We have to simplify without turning the simplification into a caricature, without distorting reality.

MOLOYASHREE: I do agree, but if we begin with this, that certain things are ruled out in street theatre because of its very nature, then I think we are being too hasty . . .

JAVED: My problem is that I think the underlying idea is that these complexities are virtues in themselves.

MOLOYASHREE: Not at all.

JAVED: We don't need complexities. Life as it is, as people live, is complicated enough. The business of street theatre, particularly of the political kind, is to put things with such clarity, that it helps people to think more clearly.

BRIJESH: That brings us to the question of why we do street theatre—what Ranjini was saying about not exploring the other aspect of the audience . . . then we are not being effective in our purpose.

RANJINI: I believe that we don't succeed all the time and this realization has not come out of the blue, but out of being part of a movement.

JAVED: The proscenium theatre, which glories in complexities of all kinds and psychic depths, how far do you think it has succeeded?

RANJINI: I am not a fan of proscenium theatre. But what I am saying is that street theatre does not always succeed, because, perhaps, it assumes a consciousness of the audience. Unless we are ready to negotiate that other side of the audience which we don't know or want to know, we won't even understand our own selves. I feel that we must rethink the whole form of street theatre because it cannot explore an issue from various vantage points. Today if we don't have a different exploratory style that engages with multiple points of views, the audiences will reject it. They need to be given choices.

BRIJESH: That's where I feel that when you make this statement that street theatre cannot explore an issue from various vantage points, I can't agree. I think you are basing it on some kind of street theatre that you have seen. I feel it *has* the scope. How to achieve it is something we are trying. We have taken only a few steps, but it can be done and a theatre of reason does not pre-suppose no emotion.

SUDHANVA: A couple of points. One, frankly, is that I again don't quite see any merit in exploring things from various points of view, per se. Look, when I go out with a street play, and perform in front of an audience, I am already competing with rival modes of thought in society. If the play is taking a clearcut and concrete position against dominant modes of thought, then it is not absolutely necessary for the performer to provide the other points of view. The audience already has those other points of view. Two, what do we mean when we talk of the 'success' of street theatre? It seems to me, Ranjini, that you are thinking of street theatre succeeding on its own.

RANJINI: No, I am not.

SUDHANVA: Precisely. It cannot. I would much rather see street theatre, in Safdar's words, as a theatre that tries to mobilize certain sections and classes behind organizations that are fighting in their interests. Also, it seeks to open up certain questions for debate and discussion. Even this cannot happen hundred per cent, every time. But beyond that I don't see what any art form can do, let alone street theatre.

RATI: So street theatre is there to create a climate for debate and thinking. It may or may not succeed in doing this every time. Depends on the audience you are playing to. Take a whole lot of convinced audiences—there is no point in playing to them. There is a certain target audience. In some audiences, new notions have set in and generated the possibility of mobilization, debate, a new thinking can start. That is what we should hope for. Theatre cannot bring about social change, that is for the organizations to

do.

RANJINI: I agree with that.

JAVED: The success of street theatre cannot be measured in a short span of time. Not by one individual performance or a series of 10 or 15 or 20 performances. Street theatre takes up the fight for mobilization for or against ideas, ideologies, models of thought, institutions, policies etc. Now, that makes it necessary for street theatre to become part of a larger movement, directly or indirectly, e.g. Janam or other left-wing groups connected with a political formation. There are also women's groups. All this has helped in a significant manner. It cannot be measured because we don't have the tools to actually quantify their contribution, but they have made a significant contribution in changing the atmosphere, mobilizing people and bringing about a certain level of consciousness. The battle is still on, we have not won it, and all is not hunky dory with women's issues in India. But you cannot say that it has not been successful. The movement has been strengthened. Don't you agree?

RANJINI: I think we are arguing at cross-purposes. I will give you another example. All of us here have in mind the audience out there, who have to be changed; and we know how to do it by simplifying our message. Broadly speaking, we want to bring about a kind of consciousness. But if you look at folk traditions and folk songs, from areas where no political groups have ever been active, they have their own ways of introducing notions of resistance to certain dominant forms of oppression. People have done studies on how Mirabai's bhajans have been sung by lowercaste groups in Rajasthan. They constructed a people's Mira where no political group actually played a role. Now, is it important to take into account how people are also expressing their resistance to certain kinds of oppression that they face? In street theatre, and I know I am going to anger everyone here, there is a certain way in which we become the vanguard, and in that sense we do not dialogue with the audience at all. I think it is important to relate to all those other ways of resisting also, and today it's even more important.

RATI: This brings us to the question of the attitude to the audience, the relation to the audience.

MOLOYASHREE: Now that Ranjini's point is clarified, certainly it is something we should be aware of—and if we are aware of it then it will become part of our creative expression. It is true that there is no audience 'out there' whom we are trying to show the path to. Not at all. But at the same time we are not going on purposelessly. We are giving yet another way of looking at things, and it is upto the audience to decide if they want it or not. I cannot theorize this, it is very experiential, but in all the performances that I have directly participated in or watched, even of shoddy theatre, somewhere the audiences have an opinion which may or may not be expressed. I think good street theatre does disturb people at some level—not a negative disturbance, but it moves them, shakes them up. Sometimes they even come and argue with us. That's what Rati said, it opens up debate.

There is one more change that is taking place, and that is within the performers. When they are doing a play, however mechanically, they are doing it. Somewhere they have to think about it. Very often it is genuinely participatory and sometimes not so participatory, but inside the actors' minds that kind of questioning, reasoning, does happen and that is important.

JAVED: Essentially, there are two aspects to how a performance group might approach its audience. One is that of collaboration and participation, to make the experience as collaborative as possible. The second is to take the audience on, as the audience also has within itself certain contradictions, certain ways of thinking that you are fighting against. So you take those on and enter into a debate with them. I don't know, maybe those who practice it can talk about it. Is it possible to stop the performance and discuss, and then proceed? That would mean that the basic text should be capable of modification and the performers should be skilful enough to modify it.

MOLOYASHREE: As Ranjini said, about popular forms of resistance—

RANJINI: Javed, what I am saying is that street theatre of the strictly political kind has a process of abstraction. You are trying to reach a goal through a story. You want to draw connections. Now, when people express resistance through local songs, folk music, you may not see these connections. The fight for *swaraj* in Chauri Chaura may mean just fighting the local *darogah*, may have nothing to do with the wider anti-British struggle. People resist at every level, it's not just a question of incorporating that. I am not saying that folk traditions can achieve everything. They have their own limitations.

JAVED: But street theatre does try, like *Rahul Boxer*—a boy who wants to become the champion boxer by hook or by crook, but he cannot . . . that is his way of expressing himself and the circumstances that are restricting him, confining him.

RANJINI: Yeah, fine, but when you want to build this total picture, then some local forms of resistance and

simple forms of resistance may seem counter-productive to the overall structure and that contradiction will always be there.

**SUDHANVA:** Perhaps we are getting mixed up. I have not watched a lot of street theatre produced in rural areas, but I am hundred per cent certain that where the traditions are alive, they find their way into street theatre. I think Janam is a bad example to take; we are entirely Delhi based, an urban group. When we take a street play to a working-class area, we keep in mind the culture of the working class and so therefore we have to take cognizance of the Shahrukh Khans in those areas. That's the kind of thing we have to deal with.

**RANJINI:** That's what I am saying. You have to deal with it to fight it—is that what you are saying?

**SUDHANVA:** At one level to fight it and at one level to make use of it.

**RANJINI:** To make use of it, because identification with popular icons can also be a form of resistance. It happens in cinema all the time.

**JAVED:** I am not certain of this at all. In any movie, in the end the good guy wins and the bad guy is defeated, but the entire duration of the movie is devoted to glorifying the bad guy: the luxury he enjoys, he has the most beautiful women, great houses, fancy cars. That's what the audience sees all the time. It's a vicarious kind of dream fulfilment. There is not much resistance . . . ultimately, it conforms, it does not resist.

**SUDHANVA:** Personally, I go along with Javed. But the point that I was making was that any street theatre group which operates in large towns, and works amongst working class youth, women or children, will simply have to take as its base the cultural world of its own audience, be it serials or Hindi cinema. That is what you have to deal with. Try doing a play which uses a form from somewhere in the interior of Bihar or Maharashtra or Rajasthan, I am not certain how much of it will make sense in the deep interior villages.

**MOLOYASHREE:** Not even in northern India.

**JAVED:** Good street theatre, really creative street theatre, would use people's culture and its forms—yet I am not as starry-eyed about folk forms as you are, Ranjini. I do not have that romantic a notion. All these little folk songs and symbolic gestures did not come to any practical end. They produced no practical change in the condition of women, oppressed classes or whatever. What we are talking of here in the context of modern life, modern politics, is the question of trying to come up with a practical programme to change the social order, to change the order of relationships, the power structure in terms of gender and class, etc. And that kind of theatre will necessarily do much more than a folk song or folk culture.

**RANJINI:** We don't know, it's not well documented, we don't have that history. In my experience of travelling all over India, it's not as if people have not been fighting. People have struggled through their music, through folk traditions and whatever is available to them. They may not follow the same notions of struggle as we do here, but, it's not as if their notions are invalid. I think this is important, otherwise we will become very violent about their forms. For instance, on a trip to Bastar, we saw this one woman, Mitki Bai, who had a very religious notion about how she would fight the local government's barricading of forests. She talks about a dream that becomes a symbol of resistance. In her dream someone told her to save the local forest. Mitki Bai becomes an iconic figure for all the other women, who organize themselves, and manage to stop the local government from barricading the forest. To us it is irrational, but she managed. People do express resistance in their own ways.

**MOLOYASHREE:** One cannot negate this continuous form of resistance. That's from where people draw strength and hope.

**RATI:** Another example is the Chipko movement. We cannot negate them, as Mala says, and say that they have not changed society.

**JAVED:** There may be some instances, but even then, folk forms which symbolically express something which is anti-establishment are, it seems to me, an expression of wishful thinking; their desire for change is not a programme for change, not practical steps which need to be taken. How exactly to mobilize the kind of change you need, that kind of historical perspective is not there.

**RANJINI:** I think the problem here is that for us history becomes history when it is recorded. But what about the vast category called local history? A history that has not been documented, a history that is changing our perceptions about the past and the present. The Chipko movement, for example, was a small movement in one part of India. The movement may have lost its edge, but its impact was clear from the ways in which official policies on environment were forced to change. A movement in one place

can have tremendous impact elsewhere. The Soviet Revolution or the war in Vietnam are examples of recorded history. Yet even here one can see how perceptions change outside the geographical boundaries of 'events' in history. While Vietnam did not march towards a radically changed society, their ability to fight the US made the West think twice before intervening in the Third World. Historical perspective can never be a universal category. Perspectives are partial, broken and sometimes confusing and contradictory. Yet this is what makes history so fascinating.

JAVED: I am confused because you talked of folk culture and in the same breath of the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

RANJINI: Javed, don't misquote!

JAVED: I am talking about my own confusion. So how can I misquote? I am quoting my own mind. Chipko is one practical form—they clung to trees and prevented people from cutting them down. Vietnam is also a practical example and so is the Soviet Revolution. Earlier you were talking of folk song —

RANJINI: Linked to local forms of resistance. I am not saying that Vietnam is folk resistance. The example of Mira bhajans is different.

JAVED: That answers it, doesn't it? As Sudhanva said some time ago, any good or enlightened street theatre group will build upon the cultural traditions of the area and its forms of expression.

SUDHANVA: And precisely because they are local, they cannot be transported elsewhere. I cannot use those forms in Delhi . . .

RANJINI: I am not putting one form against another.

RATI: All Ranjini wanted to do was bring out that there are other forms of resistance as well.

JAVED: Shall we go on? The question of gender and communalism are two major questions which have confronted us in India. How are they negotiated in street theatre, particularly by the politically committed groups like Janam? Because these issues cut across class boundaries. For example, when you are doing a working class play about economic policies or industrial problems, you have a specific audience in mind—the working class. But these very people are the instrument through which patriarchal ideologies are perpetuated. So the second part of the approach that I had mentioned, taking them on, how can that be done? Where you don't see them only as collaborators but also as people with whom you are fighting, maybe in their interest or in the interest of another group.

SUDHANVA: I think these two issues perhaps need to be thought about separately, because the question of gender, of women's rights and empowerment, has been dealt with far more effectively in street theatre than the question of communalism. There are a number of instances where plays have been able to deal with the question of gender inequality and oppression in a far more complex and comprehensive manner.

MOLOYASHREE: In a variety of ways, I think.

SUDHANVA: The same thing has not happened in relation to the question of communalism. And there the point that G. P. Deshpande often makes is absolutely bang on. The way in which even the political theatre of the left was talking of the question of communalism in the 1940s has remained largely unchanged right down till the 1990s, despite the fact that the phenomenon of communalism has changed tremendously. That, I think, has not been assimilated in our practice. On the other hand, on the question of gender, there are plays which are extremely complex. *Aurat* is a classic example of the ways in which you can look at the question, and, in a remarkably short span of time, actually suggest several kinds of realities which coexist even in the urban context. That, I think, is the strength of *Aurat*. There are, as I said, enough of such examples from all over India, especially from the late 70s to the early 80s.

RATI: Early 80s, actually. From the 80s onwards lots of women's groups and organizations have taken a number of approaches. In Tamil Nadu, there has recently been a play on female infanticide. Dowry plays have been created and performed all over, plays on other problems regarding women have been taken up by all women's organizations and even NGOs—like the right to property, divorce, education, etc.

MOLOYASHREE: The gender issue has really been dealt with in a big way and what comes to my mind is the kind of debate that it has raised in the audience. When we do *Aurat*, it generates a lot of debate and discussion, even among those people who are overall appreciative. A lot of people also get angry, and that's good. On the other hand, in plays against communalism that kind of debate has not come up. People agree and say, '*Bura hai, mil kar rahna chahiye*' (It's bad, we should live in harmony). No one is

going to say—we are communal. On the gender issue they will take up cudgels in their own ways. Either by actually talking or writing, or from the way they respond when we perform. So, obviously one has gone into women's issues and its various aspects far more successfully. It may not be enough, but a lot has been achieved.

**BRIJESH:** Actually, on the question of communalism, what has been done most of the time, is the *Sarv Dharm Sadbhava* (tolerance to all faiths) kind of thing, or a straightjacketed class phenomenon. This is seen in most of the writing, not just in street theatre.

**JAVED:** I agree. This *Sarv Dharm Sadbhava* is the culprit—that's why G. P. Deshpande keeps talking about it. We have never taken religion on. Of course we should live together, but religion is patriarchal, pro-establishment, oppressive, and all religions are like that. Unfortunately, we don't have the guts to come out openly and say this, even the Communists now don't say that they are atheists, which they are. This is a kind of appeasement. We are scared. Religiosity is different from communalism, but every religion has prejudices about other religions. Communalism is a politics which capitalizes on that. So a religious person needs to take only one short step to become communal.

**SUDHANVA:** I agree with you about religious prejudices feeding communalism. But equally, you don't have to be religious to be communal. After all, how religious was Jinnah? Or Advani? Or Thackeray? I think the larger problem is not our unwillingness to say that we don't want religion, but to be able to separate the surface manifestation of communalism from its deeper mechanics. All along we have only been saying that all religions should coexist in peace, but big deal! In the end that's not why people go out and kill each other. The fact, for instance, that the most modern metropolitan city in the country, Bombay, has had the worst communal riots since independence—it's amazing. So why does that happen? We have to take cognizance of the fact that the Shiv Sena actually operates like an industrial enterprise. Their job is to produce death and hatred and they are going about it in a very, very systematic manner. It actually runs like a bloody factory. Has there been any effort on our part to take cognizance of this fact? I think the moment we start doing that, the way in which we look at the problem will change. It will not be a play any more that will simply say *Hindu Muslim Bhai Bhai* (Hindus and Muslims are brothers). One has to, for instance, look at the land Mafia in Bombay, the very real role that they have played . . . or, say, the intersection between globalization and communalism—how has that worked itself out; and so on.

**JAVED:** There have been street plays which have dealt with the economics of communal politics . . .

**SUDHANVA:** What I am saying is that either we have had plays, as Brijesh said, which say *Hindu Muslim Bhai Bhai* or plays that say, 'Look, your real interests are these and these guys from outside are splitting you'. If you reduce any phenomenon to a conspiracy and leave it at that, it will necessarily be a highly simplistic and distorted representation of reality.

**MOLOYASHREE:** Perhaps that's why there are very few street plays dealing with communalism which don't have stereotypes.

**JAVED:** Of course, the issue also lends itself to stereotyping. The problem is that our approach is still that we are sermonizing. We need something harder than that.

**MOLOYASHREE:** You know why we are sermonizing? Because we are afraid. There is a fear that if we do something beyond that, then, after all, death may be the result. Riots are so real.

**BRIJESH:** I remember one occasion when Janam decided not to take a play out—it wasn't a very good play either . . . it was an instant reaction to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, just two or three days after the event. But we felt it may create problems, because there was tension in the city.

**RATI:** A similar thing happened after the Sikh riots. When Theatre Union decided to do something, we decided it could not be anything to do with Sikhs. It took us one year to find out what to do, we just did not know how to tackle it. Let's face the fact that we are scared what the reaction might be. So we took a partition story, Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*.

**JAVED:** Fear is not only for ourselves or our personal safety but that of provoking further riots, a risk no sane person would like to take.

**SUDHANVA:** It's good that you mentioned *Toba Tek Singh*, because to my mind, really, that's one of the notable exceptions to the kind of fare that is being dished out on communalism.

**RATI:** Remember, *Toba* was written by a great writer and we had the basic text. It took us a whole year to decide on how to present it. It's through analogy that we did it, finally . . . doing it more directly was scary . . .

SUDHANVA: But your play did not lack in power, it did move.

RATI: The end, I remember, did not work in the first version, so we changed portions of it.

SUDHANVA: It seems to me that in *Toba* what worked was that you were not saying *Hindu Muslim Bhai Bhai*. That was not the focus of the play. The play was questioning and that worked. Very little of that kind of effort has been made, unfortunately.

JAVED: Street theatre has a long way to go towards tackling communalism. The last point I would like to raise is in the context of the world order. Besides the death of the Soviet Bloc and so on. There is also increased de-territorization of production of material as well as cultural production, and of its distribution. In that kind of context, how does street theatre, which is local and topical, cope? Are there new challenges, like the proliferation of new images, etc?

SUDHANVA: I think street theatre works because it does not clone anything else. In the context of the very real and rapid proliferation of images, of noises, and of media, the fact that street theatre is here and now, it's live, that's the only way it survives.

JAVED: But at the same time, one of the things that is happening as a result of globalization is that culture is getting homogenized increasingly, things are becoming more and more homogenized. Cinema did it first, now TV is doing it. So in that context, the audience and their ways of thinking may also have been influenced and so street theatre has to face that. For example, how the audience sees you; not very perceptibly perhaps, but somewhere the new situation may have changed how the audience looks at theatre.

RATI: That's true for proscenium theatre also. Cinema has had an effect, TV too, and still people are flocking to see theatre. And people do come to see street theatre—as we have seen from personal experience. They come not just for an evening's outing—but stay on to question, to discuss too.

MOLOYASHREE: Theatre has its own space and attraction and it will continue to have that for a number of reasons. In the context of everything being homogenized, the fact that street theatre is being done in different regions, differently, that is its strength.

JAVED: Probably the live contact, the immediacy, the directness of street theatre, is more appealing. It seeks and constructs its own audience, whereas the electronic media penetrates people's houses, bedrooms, and forces them to watch it.

SUDHANVA: I think there is also a larger, ideological battle to be fought. With the increasing globalization of culture, while cultural production and dissemination are being homogenized, the spectator is increasingly being turned into an individual . . .

JAVED: A highly passive individual, a couch potato, who has no initiative or power to intervene . . .

SUDHANVA: Absolutely. Street theatre or any other form can face this problem only by asserting a different kind of collectivity, and by trying to mobilize its audience into that collectivity. A collectivity which will have to oppose not only consumerism but also, in the end, capitalism itself. It's only with that kind of theoretical framework that you can begin to face the problem, otherwise what will you do? There is no other option—you cannot simply say that we don't want anything non-Indian because it is alien. After all, we are drawing upon many alien and foreign things, and anyway, what is this 'Indian-ness'?

RANJINI: That leads to a different kind of nationalism which is very dangerous and that is what the Right is doing all the time now.

SUDHANVA: Sure! So therefore you have to assert that we oppose it not because it is a question of foreignness or something being alien, but because it is anti-people.

BRIJESH: The Right is also using the same kind of thing. After all, what you get on the various TV channels is either religious serials or other Bollywood-type serials. It is not as if the Right is opposing globalization.

SUDHANVA: Absolutely! Bal Thackeray actually feels proud that Michael Jackson presented him a bloody hat! Globalization is a right-wing phenomenon, the new name for imperialism. At the cultural level, the consumeristic fight has to be inevitably at the level of values and ideologies. If they are asserting certain kinds of ideologies and values which are highly individualistic and capitalistic, in the end it leaves you with no choice, you have got to be on the left, you *have* to oppose imperialism which, as we all know, is the highest stage of capitalism.

JAVED: What about the documentation of street theatre? Is that being done?

MOLOYASHREE: I think we should, and at one level it is being done, scripts are being written down.

RATI: Much later, though.

MOLOYASHREE: Not always. Sometimes scripts are written as the play evolves. What is not being done at all, I think, is to have sessions like this within groups. So they can talk about forms they have evolved, their experiences. The third kind of documentation is tricky: to document performances on film or on video. That has to be done with care because you can't lose the form. It must look like street theatre. It involves a lot of money and people like Ranjini who have done street theatre, and are film makers, can help.

RATI: I feel that one of the dangers is that once you document a script, it gets fixed. You make changes and the changes don't come into it, the script has already gone out. I agree with what GPD [G. P. Deshpande] said, when ten years of street theatre by Janam was being celebrated, that something you did 5 or 10 years ago, if you are still doing it, then something is wrong. You yourself said that our approach to communalism is still the same as 40 to 50 years ago. Therefore, once you have fixed something, it's fixed and does not change. It is given out, so it is of that time. The essence of street theatre is that it must flow on, must change, as social forces change and don't stay still. If my approach to the women's question is still that of 25 years ago then we will never move. So how do we deal with that?

SUDHANVA: That is not such a big problem. Our experience has been that our plays have been done all over the place and everyone seems to do it their own way. They change lines, they change entire scenes, sometimes groups do Janam plays only in name, everything is totally changed.

MOLOYASHREE: Change is fine but not distortion, change is inbuilt in any creative expression.

RATI: It is personal experiences that have to be exchanged, and that we don't have. In February 1983, there was this street theatre festival cum workshop in Bhopal with Prasanna, Tripurari and Bansi in charge. A number of groups came, we talked about the contradictions between proscenium and street theatre.

Safdar 'voiced' the view that some felt that proscenium and street theatre were opposed to each other. His own view was that there is no contradiction between street and proscenium theatre and that they just have different ways of communicating. Proscenium theatre can also be political and revolutionary.

JAVED: Janam used to organize Chauraha . . .

MOLOYASHREE: No, Sahmat used to organize Chauraha. What Janam has done, though it's a small thing, is that we have a magazine, *Nukkad Janam Samvad*. What we have in mind is to create a platform where groups could share their experiences. Everybody wants to, but no one gets down to it. Documentation will lead to debate.

JAVED: I don't think a directory of street theatre groups in India exists, does it, Mala?

MOLOYASHREE: It is very difficult, we are still trying to collate it.

RATI: We did that during the first Chauraha.

MOLOYASHREE: But that's all changed. Groups are born and die. We went to Jullandhar yesterday and heard of 6 more groups which may not be active all the time, but they are doing something.

RATI: So new groups are coming up.

JAVED: Has this *Nukkad Janam Samvad* helped?

MOLOYASHREE: In many ways, yes. When we talk about it, we give one copy and that makes an impact. It's a beginning only, but I hope it makes people feel 'Oh! It's there; so we can do something as well'.

JAVED: Your mailing list itself can become a directory.

MOLOYASHREE: It is, in one way, but very incomplete. I know of many more groups but do not have addresses, so I send it here and there. We have to pursue it patiently.

JAVED: Is there a greater turnover of members in street theatre groups than other theatre groups?

MOLOYASHREE: There is a turnover, but I don't think it is more than in other theatre groups.

SUDHANVA: In larger towns, with more work in the electronic media, the turnover of actors in theatre groups as a whole may well have increased. Look at Janam, we have a core of 12-15 people who are there and that has remained unchanged over the last few years, but people have come and joined . . .

MOLOYASHREE: While they are there, they are very active but they also go away. Of course, there are also people who are only partly active.

**BRIJESH:** That also leads to a problem, in the sense that there are not too many groups who have been doing street theatre for a long time, that leads to problems of form, problems of street theatre not being tackled fully.

**MOLOYASHREE:** What Brijesh is saying does happen, coming to grips with the form is difficult. The consistency with which Janam works, there are only a handful of groups like that in the country.

**RATI:** That's true; in fact, Janam is the most consistent group in the country. I cannot think of any other that can match this consistency . . .

**JAVED:** And over a long period of time! Right, then, any other point that someone wishes to raise?

**RATI:** Not really, why don't you conclude the session?

**JAVED:** It's not a formal meeting . . .

**RANJINI:** But you must conclude on an optimistic note. Isn't that how it is done—street theatre will live on and so on?

**JAVED:** And as long as it lives on, we shall continue having long discussions about it!

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'Drama has to be created and crafted, even on the streets.'

MOLOYASHREE HASHMI, actress and convenor of Jana Natya Manch, in conversation with ANJUM KATYAL, New Delhi, March 9, 1997. SUDHANVA DESHPANDE, fellow Janam member, who was present, also participated, and his interjections appear within parentheses.

'A sense of hectic activity . . .'

My first memory of theatre is a scene from *Angaar* (an Utpal Dutt production) which I'd seen when I was a very young child in Calcutta on holiday. I'm very happy that I started my theatre experience with good theatre. I still remember how larger than life the impact was; it was like something had entered into me. I feel the impression more than I visualize it.



Mala Hashmi in *Aurat*, 1989.

I didn't become involved with theatre till much later. In between, my mother was fairly active in the Delhi chapter of the IPTA in the 50s and the early 60s. Aparna Roy. I don't think she was a great actress or anything, but she was involved—that is what I remember most. Involved and committed and constant in her work with IPTA. I would go with her on weekends and holidays and in the evenings, and I think that I was the only child in Delhi who had this wonderful opportunity of being with theatre people while they were creating good stuff. I did nothing, I just hung around. So I had a sense of what goes on in rehearsals. That's part of my upbringing—it's there.

What struck me most then, is that there were different things happening which were somehow fused into one compact whole that made sense of all these different things. There would be some dancing going on, a bit of music in one corner, someone would just be teasing the daylights out of me, someone else would be learning lines or maybe two people would be saying lines to each other. Slowly all that would come together and take shape. It's not that I have memories one after the other in sequence, because I wasn't there all the time. On some trips I did accompany them, like I remember I'd gone to Agra. I remember the trip but I don't remember the performance there. I remember other performances. What I could sense most is that there was a feeling of togetherness—and creativity—a word that, of course, I'm using now, at that time I didn't know it existed. I just knew that things were happening. That is what I have—a sense of hectic activity.

When IPTA became defunct in Delhi it was as if something ended in my life. It was there and then it just wasn't there . . . I was like 10 or 12 . . . no, 10. 1963—when everything folded up. I may be wrong with the exact year, but it was thereabouts. After that I did not watch or participate in any kind of theatre except the things in school. Incidentally, even when I was associated with IPTA because of my mother, I hadn't actually seen a lot of plays by other groups. I saw all that much later, when IPTA was revived and reactivated by a group of young members from the SFI. They contacted some of the old members and my mother was also contacted, so that she started going again. She didn't do much acting in the second phase of her association with the IPTA, but she was there.

I went there one day to meet her and I liked what I saw and I just started going. Nobody asked me; my mother hadn't invited me, nor did she prevent me, I just went. In those early days in IPTA, we were mostly doing a lot of choral singing. This was around 1971-72. There were lots of young people and singing was the most important thing that was happening there. We were also doing plays, but the bigger plays were done when I wasn't there. We were doing shorter plays, like we did *Durbar* by Kantimohan and *Kanoon ki Aka—Exception and the Rule* in its Hindi version, and *Kimlish*, of course—the old favourite, *Kimlish*. In fact, rehearsals for *Kimlish* were going on when I entered IPTA. I was there for a little under two years. After that I was doing theatre in other groups.

### Jana Natya Manch

In 1973 Jana Natya Manch was founded by a group of people who'd been in IPTA. You see, what happened was that at that time, for one reason or the other, people had to leave IPTA. It wasn't like a small splinter group of IPTA. It was like theatre activities had ended there and people could not work in that structure any more. But they wanted to do theatre, good, progressive theatre for the people—so they formed Jana Natya Manch in the early part of 1973. In the early days of Jana Natya Manch I wasn't directly associated with it, but I was aware of their work. I think it's part of my history also, like it's part of Anil's history, who joined us much later.

Janam had done large plays at that time, major plays—*Bakri* and *Bharat Bhagya Vidata* were two such plays and they were touring extensively in north India, in the smaller towns. I think, for both plays, there were at least 50 or 60 shows and very few of them (except the ones in Delhi), were performed in actual auditoriums; they were in open spaces. Either there was already a platform on which they performed, or a makeshift stage was erected. An enormous amount of touring. It was a large cast, mostly of young people, but there were not-so-young people also involved. That, I think, was one of the most active phases, especially considering that they were large plays. Keeping a big play alive is far more difficult.

By 1975, when the Emergency was clamped down, activity in Janam suddenly ceased, because in Delhi the kind of terror that was there in the air . . . not that anything actually happened to Janam, no, but there was so much happening in Delhi at that time and the kind of censorship that was prevalent everywhere—we didn't do anything. It's something which we've thought about and talked about, that if such a situation comes again . . . I think we will not be inactive, we'll work out ways . . . Because, you see, we have that experience with us. At that time we were young, the group was young, and everywhere there were so many attacks on all kinds of groups of people, organizations . . .

After the emergency we did one play called *Firangi Laut Aye* (The British are Back) and a translation of Utpal Dutt's play *Ebar Rajar Pala* (Now It's the King's Turn to Play)—*Ab Raja ki Bari Hai*. *Ab Raja ki Bari Hai* was a good show. It's a good play, so there's no reason why we should do badly. By this time I had joined, in 1977, just when it was coming out of inactivity. But I wasn't acting in the plays; I was doing other things backstage and was generally involved.

We couldn't do very many shows of these plays, not more than 8 or 10, perhaps even less, primarily because, for the organizations arranging shows or inviting us, doing plays was not such an important thing, you know. I mean, in the sense that the other priorities of these organizations—because of the aftermath of the Emergency—naturally took precedence. So we did one play in mid 1977—*Jab Phirangi Laut Aye*—and in December/January of that year we did *Ab Raja ki Bari Hai*. Then there was a long gap, not many shows. So some time around the middle of 1978 when Safdar finally came back from Srinagar, Kashmir, back to Delhi, that is, we were talking about . . . I still remember, you know, we used to rehearse in the JNU City Centre at 35 Feroze Shah Road, and we were sitting there on chairs wondering what to do and it was as simple as that—*agar hum bade natak nahin le ja sakte hain janta ke beech mein to hum chhote natak le jayenge* (if we can't take big plays to the people then we must take short plays)—and this is how, you know, the search for short plays began.

We weren't quite satisfied with what we found, and so we took a major decision—I think the most important decision Janam has ever taken—that we would write our own plays. So far, you see, none of us had

ever actually tried our hand, as a group or an individual, at writing a play. Taking a play and working on it, yes—or translating, or whatever—because *Ab Raja ki Bari Hai* was a translation done by Safdar and Rakesh [Saxena], after my mother had done the first draft—just a sketchy kind of a translation. That was, I think, a very major, major decision that we took. Because that's when we started talking to people on what to write. We talked to our trade union friends and student activists and various other groups.

There was this incident which had taken place a year before in a factory called Herig-India, in Ghaziabad, where there were two very small demands the workers had: a place to park their cycles and a place to heat their *khana* (food). And over this—I mean, they were not even demands—there was a major protracted struggle, a strike, firing, and workers died. All this was the material for *Machine*. *Machine*, I think, is a remarkable play. I mean it's amazing, you know—so many years we've been doing it, but it has not become outdated because somewhere, I think, it captures the truth of the situation and it's a curious mix of poetry and so-called harsh reality. It's abstract in many ways and yet has a focus. There are long pieces in *Machine* which are, you know, sort of soliloquies in semi-poetic prose. The narrator has three such bits, and the worker and the security officer and the industrialist. One would have thought that it's very wordy, and in one sense it is, I mean, there are lots of words, but it is not wordy, that's not the impression it creates. So somewhere it catches people's minds, it enters into them and people relate to it—all kinds of people, certainly working class people much more, but not only them.

#### **'The source of our creativity . . . is our audience'**

I think—a very general kind of a process that all our plays have undergone—in one sense there has always been a lot of involvement and participation in the creation of a play. Not just at the rehearsal stage, but even before that. It could be a matter of ideas, it could be simply a reaction, or somebody writes a draft and one then intervenes and gives reactions, or before we begin writing, when one is talking to . . . or when one is trying to focus on the starting point of a play—either an issue or a theme or just a starting point, it's discussed in the group. So in that sense it's a collective decision. Or, you know when we are doing a play on . . . say one of our later plays—a play against child sexual abuse—we have a lot of discussion with various people by way of documentation. Or when we did all our plays against communalism—we have, I think, 8 or 9 of them—we've talked to, you know, ordinary people, to historians, to social scientists, to trade union activists, to students, and tried to get as much real material as possible. Sometimes, during that one gets an idea, a theatrical, dramatic idea, sometimes one doesn't. It varies, you know, from play to play, but in that sense there is a lot of participation by the performers or the people who are in the group. But otherwise, in the actual nitty gritty of the play being either written or evolved—it is there in many ways.

For *Machine* the bulk of the writing was done by two people—Safdar and Rakesh Saxena. I am sure that somebody added a bit here and there, but the bulk certainly was theirs, you see. And most important—the idea and inspiration of the play came from some of our trade unionists. And that's why, you know, when we say that the source of our creativity—some of it, at least—truly is our audiences, it's really not a cliché, because that is the place from where we get a lot of our ideas. One may be doing a play on . . . say, *Aurat*—okay, but after talking, you know, after the play, when one is just interacting with the audiences and talking to them, all kinds of things are told to us and it gets stored away somewhere, and in some other play it gets reflected. Not directly, as an incident, as something that's specifically come from the audience, but the sense of it. That is a very important source of sustenance for us. Because without that, I don't think we'd be able to create our plays; I mean, we don't create our plays only in the rehearsal space with the 10 or 20 people that we have. It's really beyond that, and we constantly get a feedback from our audiences, either directly after the play, or when we go more than once, they come later on to tell us—when we are fixing up the next show, they tell us, 'You know, we talked to so and so . . .' or 'This group of women had this to say; interestingly some others had something else to say.' So we get to know a plethora of ideas and reactions, and that has always helped.

#### **'Machine . . . was the truth . . . it was theatre'**

The first time we performed *Machine*—15th of October, 1978—was in a group called Lakhakon ki Gosthi (Group of Writers). It was a very small crowd and, incidentally, we did it on a stage. It was in a college, so it was just a raised platform, but it was nearly one sided. But this was not such a significant show; in one sense it was, since it was the first show, but then you see, I don't think it is the first or the second which is important, the point is that . . . the second show, the next show that we did—that was definitely . . . never have I performed like that. The second show was in front of a 7000-strong trade unionist audience from all over the country. There was a big trade union conference in Delhi and it was being held in the Indoor Stadium, and

there is this well in the centre and tiered stairs all around and we said that we'd go and perform *Machine* there. Naturally, if it's a conference of trade unionists, we should be there. Our comrades here in Delhi said, 'No, no, no, very serious things are going to be discussed, you can't do some play-vay and all that now, that's not important.' So we said, 'No. It is. Give us 15 minutes only—10 minutes—we'll cut it down to 10 minutes.' So they said, 'Okay, when the conference is over, when the meeting is over, you can come in and then it's up to you.' We said, 'Okay it's up to us.' So at three o'clock we were let in. We went in and everybody got up to go—they thought it was over and so they got up. Suddenly they saw this group of six young people, wearing black T-shirts and blue jeans, who made some formation which was obviously a machine—a very simple thing, but definitely a machine, and we were producing mechanical sounds. So there was this pause, this silence and everybody sat down and the machine went on. It usually goes on for . . . what? . . . fifteen seconds in a normal show, but that day it went on for at least fortyfive seconds. Because, you know, one had to get them sitting, and they sat down, and then there was—you know—total and complete concentration. Seven thousand pairs of eyes watching us. That's an experience—I don't think I've ever experienced the same thing again. It was, of course, a very good show—I mean, it had to be, given that kind of a thing. After the play was over, there was silence, which was, you know, far more enthusiastic than any kind of applause, and then came the applause. But that silence was to me the most important, and that's the kind of applause that I think any performer would give his heart for. (*Chuckles*) I think we hadn't realized what we were doing—honestly, I certainly hadn't and that is something—you know—that is theatre. And the immediate connection that one made with the audience there and the kind of response that they gave us. Everyone wanted us to go to their area, which, of course, was impossible, but it *was* euphoria. I can still relive it, something like that has never happened again, and I think that is also what keeps people going.

[I think they responded to it] because it was the truth, because it was theatre . . . and also, perhaps, to some extent because they'd never seen anything like this. I mean, it wasn't mechanical in what it was saying; it hadn't limited itself to specific social advertising or whatever—it was far beyond that—it was unravelling layers of thoughts, relationships—between the machine and them . . . their work relationships, production relationships. And it was not giving any clearcut answers. It was certainly giving a direction, very definitely, unambiguously, but it wasn't saying 'do this' or 'do that'. It wasn't forcing you in that sense, but it was certainly forcing you to think.

And the show on the following day was in front of a lakh of workers—there was this very big rally as part of the conference. There we did it on a raised platform, one sided—but I've never performed in front of such a big crowd. Very few people have. Only the 6 of us who were actually performing know what it was like. We had mikes and everything and lots of people recorded the play. Even now, when we go to some small town, sometimes we come across people who say, '*Comrade, apka play hai hamare pas*' (Comrade, your play is with us).

Many of them went back and did the play, of which, unfortunately, there's no documentation. Absolutely none whatsoever. We know that many of them did it, because we got the feedback, but no details, like who had done it, which places, how many shows . . . that's when it got translated, incidentally, about which we came to know some 3 years later. We know that people had translated it into other languages. I think that's what good theatre is all about—that it goes to the audience, is taken up and goes beyond. I'm sure people made changes and I think that is what it should be. That's what every play should undergo.

So, you see, if anybody asks me what political theatre is, I'll say that's political theatre. I may not be able to define it, but that is what it was.

Those of us in Janam at that time had regrouped ourselves. When we began after the Emergency, we couldn't sustain a large group because we weren't doing many shows. When we were doing *Machine*, there were just 6 or 7 of us—7, actually, 6 of us were in the play and one wasn't—but somewhere all of us in our own way knew that this was something that we couldn't let go, that we had to experience this more and see what happens. For the next 10 years we did nothing but street theatre; all plays were evolved, original. Not all plays were successful. I remember two plays that were not finally performed. We rehearsed them, but they were not actually performed because they just didn't click, even during rehearsals. Then there were 3 or 4 plays which we performed, but they obviously didn't click with the audience. Incidentally, one of those plays, called *Jab Chor Bane Kotwal* (When the Thief Turns Policeman)—we did some 8-10 shows of it and then we gave it up, but later we printed it. That play has been done later by a college group in Delhi on several occasions—it's interesting to see why they picked up that play—something that we'd discarded. They've made changes in it, not major changes, and it seemed to work when I saw it. But I could also see why it wouldn't work except in a college situation.

#### **'The composition of Janam members has been very mixed'**

The composition of Janam members has been very mixed since the beginning. Essentially urban and middle class, but within that a variety of languages, cultural backgrounds, education—we've had somebody who's

not formally educated, somebody who's a Ph.D, somebody who's into academics, somebody who's come up the hard way—lost a parent and taken care of the family, starting from selling things on the pavement and slowly worked his way up from there. So that kind of variety has been there. When we started street theatre, for example, Manish had a small press. Manish [Manocha] is really a literature person and was still very involved with it at the emotional level, not doing much, obviously, as he had this small press for his livelihood, but he was able to give a lot of time, because it was his own set up. Then [Subhash] Tyagi was with the Delhi Electric Supply and therefore able to give a lot of time (*laughs*). He probably had the least problem amongst us, you know, in getting off from work and performing at odd places, taking *chhutti* (leave) and all that kind of thing. Two of us were unemployed, looking for work, so we had all the time in the world. Safdar could manage his work. And Rakesh was in between jobs at that time—so it's been like that. When we were in IPTA, most of us were students. As I've said, many of us came from the SFI. But slowly, over the years, that naturally changed and when we began doing street theatre none of us were students. We were either looking for a job, or about to get a job—you know, placed somewhere. That was an advantage in many ways because it meant that all through the year we could give the same kind of time. And because domestic responsibilities hadn't really built up, we were either doing a little bit of our jobs to justify the salaries we were drawing and the rest of the time was for Jana Natya Manch—not just in the evenings but from early afternoon, very often. And this was 365 days a year—we were working on plays and performing. And during that time—1978 upto 1982—in our street theatre phase, we were performing the maximum. I don't have the figures, I'll have to compute the figures, but I remember once we made a calculation that we were performing two and a half or three and a quarter shows a day!

#### **'At that time [one could] go and perform anywhere'**

At that time in Delhi it was not difficult to go and perform anywhere and everywhere. There were many invited shows—students' groups or women's groups or trade unions—our association with the CITU and the trade union movement has been very strong from the beginning, so performances for them, whether a strike situation or not. We've been performing a lot for them. But in a number of our shows—as many as 30-40%—we'd just go off on our own. For example, one of the places where we used to perform very regularly in winter was the boat club area, which is a government office complex. In winter hundreds of people would pour out of their offices and sit around and chat. We would just land up there at one o'clock or quarter to one and beat our drums and gather people and show whatever play we were doing. We went there every week—not the same spot every week, but to a certain area we'd go to four or five times a month. That's a lot. In fact, many people from that area knew us as performers—for many years they'd still recognize us. Those shows were very interesting because, you know, sometimes the beat policeman would saunter past and he'd stop to see what was happening and try to throw his weight around—sometimes more violently than was warranted, but sometimes just because it was his duty to do so. So we used to go and ask him, 'Oh, we're just doing a play for ten minutes or twenty minutes; why don't you sit and watch?' Sometimes he would agree to watch and even give a small donation at the end of the play. Sometimes he'd try to be more difficult and one of us would take him aside and generally engage him in conversation till the play was over. Very often that happened when we went to marketplaces or such places on our own, you know, places where we knew that people would be already gathered or very easily gathered. But when we went into working places or residential areas, whether slums or middle-class colonies, usually we had a contact. Usually—not always. Naturally, in colleges and such places we needed some contact because principals could be tough, and all that.

But now in Delhi it's not possible to perform like that, because generally the level of security has gone up. It's got nothing directly to do with the kind of play we're doing; it's that the police are generally more tough, and they're far more in contact with each other, so they can send messages very quickly. The beat policeman now has a walkie-talkie; in those days he only had a *danda* (baton). Back then, he'd at least need to walk to the police station and by the time he'd walked there and informed them, we'd have finished the play and gone off. So the security has definitely . . . after 1984, it has slowly mounted. The last 7-8 years have not been easy. Till 1986 we used to perform in the central park of Connaught Place very frequently, because there would be lots of people around and it was a good place to go and do a play, especially in summer. In fact, there used to be a group of younger artists, the non-established ones and there would be a kind of art *mela* (fair)—they'd just put up their paintings, little pieces, and people would come and look at them—I don't think too many pieces actually got sold, but many ordinary people actually got to see them, and that was important for them. And there we'd gather very often on Saturdays. It wasn't a formal arrangement—it could have been, but it wasn't. It was just that creative people from different streams would be working things out very spontaneously and naturally—they just got in touch with each other. Because there were these kinds of activities happening

there, people would sort of go there.

But in 1986, Safdar and N. K. Sharma were arrested . . . what happened in 1986 is that the DTC [Delhi Transport Corporation] fares—public transport fares—were raised a second time. Five years earlier they were raised and we'd done a play called *DTC ki Dhandali* (The Bungling in the DTC). Because the fares had gone up a second time, we did the same play with some changes in 1986. It was during the performance of this play that the police were very alert, because they knew from past experience that this play could get people together. The common people were absolutely fed up and they were protesting in their own ways. So they [the police] wouldn't let us perform. It was a very short play. In fact, during a performance at a bus stop the police came, and the play is such that it doesn't look like a play is happening. We're not in our usual black costumes. So they [the police] moved, and two people—N. K. and Safdar—were picked up. By picked up I mean really picked up. This large, bulky man just landed up and he sort of clamped his hands around the necks of these two and just hauled them off. We had very few props (none in fact) and we quickly dispersed, initially trying to protest—lots of people from the audience also protested and there was a minor *lathi* charge—and then the police just took Safdar and N. K. away. We went back to office and contacted different artists, rang up the police station, told the Party people, a lot of theatre people were contacted, somebody went to Mandi House, somebody just sat on the phone and rang-rang-rang and called up lots of people, somebody called the journalists . . . They were finally released very late that night, or rather, very early next morning. They were released primarily because there was so much pressure both from the artist community and from the Party. It wasn't that there was any case or anything, but after that they've been really alert. All the people who'd been on duty there that day—even if we were just innocently passing by—after all, that's a place that we often passed—would look at us suspiciously and follow us, you know, as if we were there to put up a play. So after that we've really not been able to perform in Connaught Place. Slowly security has become much worse.

Legally, the position is that the Dramatic Performances Act exists, though it cannot be implemented or evoked just like that. But it's there; it can be used any time. In fact, there was a protest in the early 80s when a group of performing and non-performing artists met the officials in Delhi and a kind of informal arrangement was reached that there wouldn't be censorship and that there wouldn't be prevention of performances. But that was only an informal arrangement because of the sense of togetherness of the artists. It has really not been evoked in Delhi, but it still exists. And there's Section 144. Now in Delhi it's used virtually all round the year. They can enforce it for a certain time period only, but they give one day's break and clamp it down again. In fact, in central Delhi, around the Parliament and Connaught Place, it is there all the time.

But you see, at the same time, what we've been doing is . . . say on National Street Theatre Day we went to perform at the India Gate lawns. In the evenings it's very pleasant—lots of people. What we did was just write a letter to the local Police Station and inform them that we were doing this as part of this—just that. Even in the residential areas—the resettlement colonies or factory areas—we always do that. Either we or our host organization does it. So we simply inform and on the strength of that information we go ahead. So far it has worked. Sometimes blanket information is given. Suppose we're doing a campaign—we say that as a part of this we're going to perform. The actual spots and all that are not given. Sometimes we know the spots and sometimes we don't, but some kind of information is given.

*Do you feel that the audience over the years is less willing to listen?*

No. No. In fact, that is something . . . I suppose that everything changes and this also has to change, but honestly, it hasn't changed. I've never found audiences getting bored. They may have gone away because they have to catch the chartered bus—that has happened. That definitely happens all the year round, and I think it will continue to happen, given the nature of the transport system in Delhi. But otherwise—because they've been bored or because they've disagreed—no. In fact, if they disagree, they stay back to tell us that, which is what we also want.

*What about their not having the time to actually stop and watch? Do you find that people are more pressured?*

Well, people *are* more pressured—I'll say that. At the general level one can see that, but nowhere is it difficult to beat the drum and play the *damru* and gather a crowd of 200/250 people—it's not difficult. It may be difficult in a sparsely populated place where there are big buildings and few people, but if it's in the evenings and in a park—no, it's not difficult.

*I asked this because it's something that came up in a discussion with a theatre group from Orissa. They said that one of the reasons they'd stopped doing urban street theatre was that they found that in a city like Bhubaneswar, they weren't getting an audience for more than a few minutes because everybody was on his or her way somewhere.*

Well, I think that it also depends on where you're performing. I mean, it would be silly to perform in the Inter State Bus Terminal, unless you know that the buses are on strike or they're not going to move so that there will

be hundreds of people stuck there. Actually, you know, even in the ISBT—we've never actually gone in there because we would be prevented—I think that we'd be able to have a 500-strong audience watching a play for half an hour. Because there would be lots of people waiting, some of them for hours. Of course, some people would definitely go away, but that would happen anywhere.

Once we were performing in a congested resettlement colony and there's a strong audience—listening to us, watching, passing remarks, a fairly stable audience—and these two women passed right through the acting area because they had to go home. They were carrying oil and *atta* and whatever and they just passed through the acting area—and it's interesting, you know, that the audience doesn't really mind. It doesn't affect them, but it affects us. That is something I've learnt over the years—we get worked up, but the audience doesn't. That's something we should learn. Or say the sounds . . . what happens in resettlement colonies is that there are these hordes of little creatures crawling in front of you, throwing stone chips at you, pinching your feet—you're standing in front of them doing this strong piece of acting and you're trying to emote and there's this little fellow who's barely two and he's happily pinching your ankle. So you just have to ignore that and continue acting with the rest of your body. Maybe you can give it a little shake, hoping that he'll let go—sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Once Sudhanva—I remember, he doesn't remember—was acting with total concentration, doing a good job of acting and there was this little fellow who couldn't have been more than two-and-a-half—I'd been watching him for some time . . . it's fascinating, you know, they're there all around you, but they're totally alienated from whatever is happening above a height of, say, 3 feet—so there was this little fellow who wouldn't budge—he was making mounds with dust. Sudhanva was standing there and this fellow just took fistfuls of dust and made little hills on top of Sudhanva's shoes. Sudhanva just stood there as if nothing had happened, you know—absolutely emotionless, but I found it hilarious. I just sat and laughed. It was so funny. Luckily, I wasn't supposed to be acting then, I'd definitely have had to walk out laughing if I had to act. But it didn't bother anyone. It didn't bother me, either, I was just amused. But what happens is that children have this constant habit of chatter and the urban or semi-urban audience totally disregards it. It's as if this constant chatter doesn't bother anyone; it's a common factor. But in villages you'll find the elders telling the children to shut up and be quiet. So we also have to keep that in mind, you know, that the children's chatter doesn't bother the audience.

*In terms of actual performance and audience, what else do you feel is important?*

The choice of a place is important. If you have the opportunity, you should go to a slightly quiet place. I mean, why invite more disturbance from outside? For example, instead of performing bang on the side of a main highway, you should go a little inside. Very often organizers choose just that spot because that's the place where most people will come. That's true, but that's also the spot with the maximum noise because of trucks blaring past. If you go a little inside, you'll still have the audience, but it will be a lot more quiet. So this question of space is important. The kind of space is different for every performance, the physical space—it could be flat, it could be slightly undulating, very undulating, could be cramped or very spacious. It may or may not be a circular performing area with audience all around. When we're rehearsing, we assume a circular acting area, but very often we have to perform in a very different space. The last election play that we did in Jama Masjid, which is in old Delhi . . . in the lanes of Jama Masjid, you can hardly find any place. So we had the audience jumping onto the wooden fences on the sides or some platform or somebody's staircase. We had to use those spaces—somebody made an entrance from a staircase, entering from that person's house. So you know, it's always a question of using what is there.

Initially I wasn't that flexible, and I found it very difficult. But experience has made us adventurous—the spirit of adventure, I think, is imbibed as we rehearse. So one of the things we like to do if someone new joins us is to take him to just watch some of our shows if we are having shows at that point of time. It helps, it gives a kind of a background, a preparation, an initiation.

When we began doing street theatre, I know that we were quite at sea—we are still much at sea, but less so, I think—about how to use our voices. How much modulation can you do? What do you do about projecting your voice? That's something we've learnt with experience. I'll just illustrate with an example. When we were doing *Aurat*, very often in front of large audiences, I had the central role and I was in the performance space most of the time. I had the maximum lines to speak. Well, I have a naturally loud voice, but that's about it. And some amount of experience in projecting. Soon after we'd started doing it there was a textile strike in Delhi and we had to give several performances to very, very, large audiences. There was one show in which there were about 10,000 workers. Very quiet place, because the factory was closed and it was slightly off the main road. So it was quiet, but then 10,000 is a large number. I don't know what happened. I think that just looking at those people something happened inside me—I've never been able to figure out, but I did something to my voice and that was the qualitative jump in scale that I acquired in my voice, and the

projection was perfect. And since then I know that I can use my voice in a way that I'll be heard, and I rarely have a sore throat. Over the years, for instance, one thing I've realized is that the bass voice and bass sounds are something that we hadn't explored earlier; we were always thinking of higher pitches, not the lower ones. But there are certain kinds of voices which are very suitable for the lower pitches. Not in all, but in many situations. Modulations in the bass tones: three people speaking together—not quite a symphony, but something like that—these are things we're exploring now. How the bass voice can be used properly, how it can be projected.

This sort of thing, you know, comes with actual experience. We do have workshops but not just for specific things. Like if we're doing exercises in speech and there's an expert in speech, then we try and have him but it gets woven into other things also. That is, in fact, a good thing because none of us has been trained. Anybody who's willing to work with us comes in and works, and that's how they learn. But in the method of our working there's something that enables us to transfer our experiences to each other. And we also try and have enrichment workshops for ourselves—in acting, in voice, in speech. People whom we ask, the experts, they always come very willingly; that's the kind of goodwill that Jana Natya Manch has.

I began acting because there was nobody else. You know, I started doing street theatre when I was doing my bachelor's degree, and it was through Jana Natya Manch, which was really a small group. There were just 6 of us and all of us just had to perform. That's how I started. In the first two plays I had very small roles, which was good, because I was very unsure about the whole thing. But in the third play we did—*Hatyare*—it was a larger role and a role that ran throughout the play. I was doing different roles, but it was very important for the same person to do those roles—the industrialist, the politician, the bureaucracy—everything. When I look back at our earlier shows of this play, I think that we were just about competent. I don't think I was particularly clever at it. It was competent primarily because there were a lot of good actors around us; so one watched and learnt also. Tyagi was one person who had a natural response to acting, he was a natural actor, in that sense. So acting with him was a learning process in itself. He never actually said, 'Do this', but when you acted with him it did something. Manish had a wonderful voice and his diction was very, very, clear. So that was something to learn. In actual acting, Safdar would tell me what to do, 'Try this', or 'Do that' . . . sometimes he would leave it to me, but sometimes he would also tell me specifically what to do when he saw that it wasn't working out or that I didn't have an idea.

It was really during *Aurat* that in terms of acting skills I concentrated far more within myself. Because it was just one woman, one actress, doing 7 or 8 different kinds of roles of different age groups, somewhere I started observing much more, observing people around me to get a sense of the whole thing. Safdar was the one who trained me or whatever you want to call it—but he was very careful about—I don't know whether he did it consciously or not, I have no way of knowing that now, and I only think about it now—and he was very careful about not structuring me, but letting it emerge, giving ideas, pushing me here and there, 'Look at that, look at how the *presswali* (a woman who irons clothes) uses her hands.' Just 'look' and that's it; he never added '. . . and now use it in your acting'; there's no role of a *presswali* in *Aurat*. But he would just ask me to take a look, just to observe how they worked—not to imitate it, but to get a sense of it. Observation is definitely something that he got me started on. Or he would say, 'Okay, now you have to raise your hand. So raise it and observe the angle of your arm. Does it feel comfortable or does it feel like a block of wood?' He used to say, 'Look, you have to feel at ease with your body.' That's how I actually got into various nuances of acting and just doing the thousand-odd shows of *Aurat* for different kinds of audiences has contributed to a sense of acting, which I may not be able to teach somebody.

It's just that you have to feel something—I think that is required. And the responses from people while performing—to me that's very important. When I'm in the acting area, however perfect a rehearsal has been and however bad a performance is, the difference between a rehearsal and a performance is just enormous. The fact that you are in the acting area and people are watching you and responding to you, gauging that response—it's that connection, that chemistry that operates between me and every member of the audience. To me that is a very important aspect of the way I look at acting. It's not that it helps me or hinders me—but it makes me act—yes. Makes me act, not falsely—because whenever I'm doing false acting, which does happen sometimes, they immediately sense it—

*What do you mean by 'false acting'?*

By false acting I mean just doing the role . . .

*Not feeling the role?*

No, no. When I do all those politicians, I certainly don't feel the roles—far from it.

*Then what do you mean by 'just doing the role'?*



When you're just using tricks, you know . . . there are certain tricks. I don't mean the skills of acting, there are certain techniques and you have to be aware of them. But they must be skills that are demanded by the play at a particular point, demanded by a role. I'm always conscious that Moloyashree Hashmi the actress is doing a role. Not for a moment in *Aurat* do I think that I'm any of those women. I'm not and I know I'm not and nor does the audience think so. They always come and say that 'You acted very well' or that the *acting* was very good. They don't confuse you with a particular role, ever . . . I don't know if I can explain, but that's the only way I can differentiate.

*I know exactly what you mean—I was just trying to figure out where the sincerity comes from. What is it that differentiates between sincere acting and insincere acting?*

Sincerity is a very important factor, yes. Honesty towards what one is doing—I think that *is* important. I'm true to what I'm doing. That is an aspect—yes.

*Because otherwise it becomes manipulative . . .*

There's no manipulation at all, though some may argue that acting *is* a form of manipulation. When you are showing a situation, you're certainly manipulating, as you're putting people in a particular situation, inducing the audience to think in a certain way. But in fact it is not manipulative at all, because one is constantly communicating; the sense is there in the performer and the whole play. It's communicated that you need not believe what we're saying, you need not agree with us, but don't go away; stay back to tell us about it. It's like that . . . You were asking earlier about the audience not having time. You know, just last month we were performing an election play—the noisiest of places that we could perform at—it was actually at the crossroads and we were holding up traffic. We had taken police permission and the police were there, but suddenly this person came up—we later discovered that he was a Congress (I) man—and said, 'Look, you people go to the park and perform there; you can't hold up traffic like this' and he generally made a noise. I just collected whatever properties we had and put them in one corner so that if we had to disperse, those things would at least be in one place. There was no danger or anything, but just the problem of people going away. But nobody went, you know, the audience was there—there were about 450 people and they just stood, waiting for this man to let off steam. I think that was an eye-opener to me. If the audience was willing to watch, then there was certainly no reason why we needed to beg this man to please allow us only ten minutes. This has happened in 1997 in Delhi, fast Delhi, no-time Delhi; we were doing this play and traffic was held up—that's true, it was held up—but the audience didn't mind. It was also not an area where there's been a lot of trade union activity or anything, and it was in the evening, which meant that people were obviously going home, or somewhere—but they stayed.

*At any point in all these years have you felt that your involvement, contribution, your thinking, has been because of the fact of being a woman? Has that made a difference?*

Saying something different because I'm a woman?

*Or speaking from a woman's perspective.*

Yes, sometimes it is there, but not in a big way. Not in a play, perhaps, but in organizational matters, sometimes—yes.

*For example?*

Working with people. It happens, it happens with the best of us. You know, interacting with a woman—especially now that I'm the convenor of Jana Natya Manch—I can sense it in some people. It is never articulated, never blatant and offensive, and I think that's because of the strength of our group, but what does happen sometimes is that it is difficult to take things from a woman, because she is a woman. Simply because of the gender factor. But it has never caused any major problems, really, and we need to work around it, sometimes confronting it directly, bringing it out in the open—I think that's important—sometimes not . . . In terms of contributing to the acting part, consciously I don't think I've ever thought like this, but somewhere it must have happened. I know one thing. When *Aurat* was being written—it was being written in front of me, I mean the actual words were being put down—there's this first scene where a little girl wants to go to school and her father tells her that she can't, there are some dialogues. I was asked, 'What do you think the girl will say? What do *you* feel would be her actual feelings?' Whatever I said was incorporated. So that's a specific example, but otherwise . . . I don't know.

*In terms of moving around, has gender made a difference?*

Yes. It's amazing—it made a qualitative difference, positive to the audience, especially when *Aurat* was being made. *Aurat* was first done in March 1979 and we had started doing street theatre since October 1978. Here was a play being done by one woman and seven actors, and it was being shown to nearly or entirely male audiences and it was something that people remarked on very positively, 'Look, this lone woman is so great.' What they meant was not 'great'; they meant that here's a person who's obviously not an actress in the accepted sense of the term, yet acting in this wonderful play that moved, disturbed, affected—whatever. They liked the play even if they disagreed with it and they also liked that it was being done by a very ordinary woman, a lone woman—that brought a very positive response. People were coming to talk to me like that, they were happy to see me, and I think that somewhere in their minds . . . maybe if their daughters wanted to act, they would be less forbidding—maybe, I don't know. Very often men would come and talk to me—sometimes young men and sometimes elderly men—with a lot of fondness. There were these two shows—one in the Aligarh Muslim University and the other in one of these Delhi colleges—very, very, rowdy audiences. We landed up wanting to do this play and there was all sorts of noise and catcalling and we didn't know what to do. So we decided that we would just begin. So we began the play—there's this lone woman in the centre and men all around her. Some of the audience could see because they were on balconies. Then suddenly the movements stop and the voice of this lone woman emerges—and there was instant silence. I know I spoke louder than usual but even then I couldn't have been heard over all that noise. What made a difference was that it was a woman's voice. It was a very positive difference, as it made everybody watch the play. After the show was over and everything, Safdar stood up and gave a long lecture to these young people about the play and the responsibilities that they must bear and they all listened very quietly. In that college it was unthinkable that they would listen to any such long lecture, but they did, and in total silence. It was all due to the strength of the play. The same thing happened in Aligarh Muslim University. It was a general fun-filled atmosphere. Nobody was interested in listening. There were loads and loads of people and one of our team members was an ex-student of AMU; he kept appealing to the students, 'Friends, please be quiet and listen to us'—nothing, nobody was interested. We started our choral music with the *damru* but it didn't work; we had to give it up. So we decided to just begin our play, which we had wanted to do later. We started *Aurat* and everybody watched the play. We realized that the play has some kind of strength.

Never have people actually misbehaved with me—not during a performance, not afterwards. Not during *Aurat*. On the contrary, in fact. If anything, people have been very respectful and appreciative. One incident I suddenly remember—it was somewhere in Punjab, I think. It was a late night show, we were performing, we had begun the show and there was a policeman—I think he was from the CRPF or something—who made a half-jocular comment about a *nachnewali* (nautch girl) or something like that—he wasn't even actually misbehaving, it was just a stray remark which people pass so often, you know, and it was not even said loudly, it was only half said, but people from the audience pushed him out—actually pushed him out physically.

(Sudhanva: There's one small instance of how Mala's being a woman perhaps made a significant contribution to a play. I think it happened very clearly in *Artanaad*; I won't be able to give an instance, but in *Artanaad* Mala was involved in the creation of the play and her being a woman contributed very significantly, very crucially, to the way the play has now taken shape. In *Andhera*, it is something that I can actually pinpoint. There's this one improvisation which we were doing . . . I had one line in mind—a worker had died and his body had been brought home, he'd obviously died in an accident and his body was at home, about to be taken away and someone says that, '*Yeh arti nahi uthegi*'—This body won't be moved. I had this one line in mind and we were trying to build a scene around it and I remember that the first three or four rounds of improvisation just didn't work. I thought that it would probably be this young worker who'd say it, I thought he would have an important part in the play, act as the catalyst, the leader of the trade union. But in one improvisation Mala just stood up and said this line, and the way she said it—though she wasn't this young person, she was a much older person in this improvisation—we hadn't yet decided roles, it was just free improvisation, anybody could enter and do whatever role they wanted. So Mala just entered and said this line and she said it very powerfully. What struck me was the tremendous sense of strength and dignity that she brought into this role of an old woman. Once she had said this line, there was no way that line could go to anybody else; it had to be done by her. So then one started to think as to who this person could be. As it transpired, we worked out that it was the old mother of the dead worker, and once you have such a powerful character in one scene—she doesn't really speak much, but just that one line says a lot—once you've introduced such a character, you've got to use her, you can't just let her go. That's why the old woman in *Andhera*, the grandmother, though she doesn't have too many lines, is one of the characters you remember at the end of the play. She makes a point. Personally, I think it's Mala's contribution. Even in *Artanaad*, some of the improvisations that we did, like this lovely long thing that Brijesh [Sharma] addresses at one point of time where Mala as the mother of the child is being heckled and she says, 'Why should my child not enjoy all the things that kids of her age enjoy'—that

whole thing, that finally Brijesh wrote down as poetry, a wonderful piece—the improvisations came from Mala.)

I would look at it slightly differently, specially in *Artanaad*. It's a human response, because I don't usually think of myself as a woman all the time, even though I *am* a woman. I feel that it's more important to be a human being, much more important. In *Artanaad*, I felt that any adult, any sensible human being, would want it and perhaps my work with kids added something to it. But the gender aspect—I don't think it comes in consciously. It is there, certainly, I mean only a mother could have said what is said, as the play has emerged . . .

(Sudhanva: I wasn't saying that it was anything separate. Actors on their own always put things into the play—that's how our plays are created, whether there's a script or not—it's the actors who create the plays in the end. All those small little things that you do, you know, a gesture here or a look there, the intonation, the pace and the rhythm and everything. So, everybody makes a contribution. So I wouldn't quite go to the extent of saying that Mala did these things because she's a *woman*, necessarily, but the fact of her being a woman is still there. And certainly this aspect of Mala's working in a school with small children . . . somewhere it . . . I won't be able to pinpoint it at all except perhaps in *Artanaad* . . . in other plays also, this experience is there, in *all* the plays that she's involved in. I think that she brings that experience into her work.)

You know what happened the other day—one of my kids said, 'Auntie, you make us laugh and you can make us laugh because you are an actress.'

*I was beginning to ask you about the styles that you use. Was there a conscious decision at any point of time that you wouldn't stick to social realism or naturalism, that at times you'd combine symbolism and stylizations?*

I think because we were working in unknown territory, we were ready to use whatever seemed to work, right from the beginning; and I think that's true even now. Maybe we are more aware of some things that *don't* work. One thing that I find true, especially for street theatre—it's true for any theatre, actually—is that if you have to make a hidden movement, then you do the exact reverse, make it very, very, obvious. Like when you have to give bribes, you do it very secretly, but in a play you make it larger and larger so that it becomes funny and the secretiveness comes out through its sheer reversal. So that is something that we know won't work—hidden movements. The other thing that doesn't work is general shuffling around; if you think you can hide yourself by shuffling around, you can't do it. You can actually do it much better by just being quiet. If there are four persons standing around and one person is just there, not talking all the time, he becomes hidden. If one doesn't want to enter into the attention area of the audience, then the best thing to do is to be very quiet, just be there—then you're accepted as a piece of furniture till something happens and you have to speak.

We used to watch a lot of theatre and we'd often talk about it. The only person who had done any formal study was Safdar, because he was an English literature student. So he had read and watched a lot of cinema, and all that came down to the group by way of discussions. But any other form of serious, formal studies as a group—I certainly don't remember any such effort. Some of us would read, not everybody, but somehow it becomes shared—not necessarily formally, but during work. That does happen. One of the things we faced problems with in the early years was that a lot of the large actions in a play cannot be done below knee level because of the way the audience sits—some of them are sitting, some of them are standing and you can't have important actions lying down or sitting—they all have to be above the knee level. The other thing that doesn't work is that, if you are performing in a circular acting area with the audience all around, then you cannot have any choreography or composition which is static for very long, unless it is a conscious decision, like having it there throughout the play to make a point. Then again, if it's a circular acting area and I'm making a movement from point A to point B, then if I'm coming towards the audience at point A, I'm moving away from the audience at point B. So my action is seen differently by different sections of the audience.

(Sudhanva: I think Mala is right that now we are far more conscious of styles and forms and all those kinds of things. We are also far more conscious of reading in order to bring it into our work. We're also trying to analyse our own work. Of course, I wasn't there in the early years; I wasn't there till 1987-88, but I can well imagine what it was like. In the early years, it was just doing—lots and lots and lots of doing. In my thinking, there must have been—as Mala has been saying—many levels of influence for us to be able to reach out for more and more things. People were seeing things, you know, watching theatre and cinema and paintings and somewhere all that must have made its way into our work; but now it is far more conscious. When we watch a play and we see something good, it's not that we decide, 'Oh, that style is good and I'm going to use it'—it's not like that. But, for instance, in the last two-and-a-half years the plays we've done are far closer to realism-naturalism than the earlier ones, and I think that is, to a certain extent, a conscious decision, to see if it works.)

*Do you think that it could also be the influence of television?*

(Sudhanva: No, not at all. I'd argue that it's because . . . for so many years we've seen a certain kind of street theatre—when I came into Janam, I had a vague and yet fairly concrete notion of street theatre. There were certain things that we knew couldn't be done in street theatre. Now we have an attitude of, 'Why not?' We are constantly trying to find out how much more can be done. Is it possible to sustain a two-person scene completely realistically? Of course, realistically to the extent possible. You obviously can't have sets and costume and lighting and make-up. That kind of thing you can't ask for.)

*So you're trying to push the barriers by introducing things that you haven't done till now?*

(Sudhanva: Yeah. Take for instance a play like *Rahul Boxer*. *Rahul Boxer* is probably the most realistic play we've done so far—even more than *Andhera* and *Artanaad*. In *Rahul Boxer*, except for two scenes between Rahul and the coach—which are far more, not stylized, but formal—the rest of the play is completely realistic. And in the last scene where the killing is done—this young boy is killed by Rahul and his younger brother—that entire sequence of the killing takes about five minutes of acting time. It's not as if they go on hammering for all of those five minutes, it's spaced out and all that, but that entire scene is done completely realistically. Now, in retrospect, I can put it into words, at the time of doing it I may not have been able to. In one sense I wanted to see what kinds of things were possible. So in that sense, you're quite right. Normally the movement is the reverse way—from naturalism to stylization and other things. In our case it has been the other way round.)

I'd like to add something here. In the early years a few things happened. One was that—this is in retrospect—because one was doing street theatre in spaces and conditions that were new to us as a theatrical experience, one felt that one had to do a different kind of acting. It was a subconscious reaction, I think. I certainly hadn't thought about it before, but today I'd interpret it like that. All of us as a group felt that one had to be different because it was a different kind of theatre. Also, because it was the early years, one was trying out certain things which were working. Like not doing realistic theatre, and even the structuring of the plays. If you take a play like *Raja ka Baja*—on the quality of the education system—the play itself is not realistic. There are so many cuts and inter-cuts between the chorus and the anti-chorus and the actors—everything is moving like that. It's still a very successful play, from what I can gather. Even recently some people were telling me that they keep on doing it.

I do very clearly remember right from when we began doing street theatre, something that Safdar would always say, or N. K. would always say, or we'd say to ourselves very often, or talk and think about, is that we had a world to explore and that there's really no limit. We shouldn't think that this can be done or that can be done. Everything can be done, the point is to find a way of doing it. Because certain things worked, one kept on working in that direction, knowing at the emotional level that other things could also work, but we hadn't really got round to doing them. I think that initial period of gestation before actually trying out different things was necessary. So that initial period of doing things in one broad stream was there and the shift—shifts, actually, I'd say—were necessary. Today we are aware that this is one thing that's working. But we know that there are many things to explore. It's not that some things will work and some things won't work. The attitude should always be that anything will work; it's a question of making them work through creativity and talent and innovation.

(Sudhanva: It's not as if today Jana Natya Manch is a group that does realistic plays on the street. Even today, if you look at the last 3-5 plays that we have done, some of them have been closer to realism, but some have not—by any stretch of imagination—been realistic. So there's always alternate things happening.)

In one play there're two or three different things happening. In *Jinhe Yakin Nahi Tha* (Those Who Did Not Believe) there are bits of what you could call realism and there are bits which are not and there are bits that are in-between and there are bits that I don't know what they are—there's probably no word for it. It's a pity we're not doing it right now, otherwise you'd have seen it. Very in-depth play, incidentally. This thing about doing an action which can be viewed by everybody in the same way has always been there because everybody has to see. But in that play something very crucial happens which cannot be done in the round, it has to be done one sided, but it still doesn't make a difference—people understand, get the flavour and everything. Yes, different sections of the audience get different things, but perhaps that's just great because there're different things in the play.

(Sudhanva: There is an interior and an exterior. For the whole play, the action takes place in one large hall kind of thing—it's a factory. The interior of the factory is where all these workers are. Something keeps happening throughout the play in the exterior. Therefore, if you look at the play from one end, you'd get a sense that

you're inside the factory and you are looking out of it along with the actors. From the opposite end, you'd get a sense that you're outside the factory and the actors are looking at you. But either way it seems to work. One has to keep in mind basic things like: even when you're looking in one direction you should be visible to everybody.)

And not talking always in one direction. Standing in this one direction, but naturally moving your neck in such a way that you throw some sentences the other way also.

(Sudhanva: And building that into your acting—making it part of your role. But even now, in terms of form, in terms of style, I think Jana Natya Manch is an extremely eclectic sort of a group, in the sense that we do whatever works.)

*You are not identified with any particular kind of style or form. Okay, so do you think that this element of trying out new things, also keeping many things going at the same time, has been a factor from the beginning?*

(Sudhanva: Oh, yes.)

Yes, yes, very much.

*Does it have something to do with the temperament of the core people involved?*

(Sudhanva: Maybe not the core people involved, maybe much more the shared experience of performance. The one thing that is really very difficult to try and get a sense of, unless you're actually a part of it, is this bewildering variety that one faces all the time—in terms of space, in terms of audiences, in terms of reactions, in terms of everything. Therefore, in one sense, creatively one's got to be on one's toes all the time.)

That is linked to being relentlessly active—we're constantly doing some play or the other, creating, performing, creating, performing. And therefore we are able to collate all these experiences and bring them into our next play or the one after that. Indirectly, very often. That's why one would creatively use something from a folk form, maybe. Something that one has seen somewhere creeps into your experience and finds an expression. And that keeps happening. That's why we feel that it's very important to experience more and more and more, because that's how you come into your own expression. None of us in Janam, since the very beginning, has been trained in one specific kind of theatre. That's why, maybe, we cannot think of saying, 'Okay, we'll take up this form and work.' We'll do a play and then see what happens.

(Sudhanva: At the same time what is probably true is that the individuals who make up Jana Natya Manch—I mean, it's not a huge group, we're just a bunch of 20-25 people—so what happens is that the personalities of the people who're involved in the creation of a play are somewhere there in the background. For instance, in some of the earlier plays of Jana Natya Manch, one can see the personalities of Safdar and N. K. and Tyagi and Rakesh—they are somewhere there. It's also because I know most of these people and so I can recognize it. Similarly, I'm sure if you look at the plays today, each one of us who's involved today—like in *Rahul Boxer* or *Artanaad* . . .)

In *Rahul Boxer*, even Anil—Anil does the role of Rahul Boxer . . .

(Sudhanva: The role has been created by him—it's entirely his creation and therefore the linkages in the play are something that he has created entirely on his own—with help of course, but it's his personality—it's there in the play.)

*One line you said that struck me is that, 'Actors make the play.' Is that always true of Janam?*

Not in the sense that in the last three or four plays the structure of the play has been evolved through direct improvisation—not in that way. Some of them, yes, but not all of them. But in the stage before that, when people are talking or trying out things—there, very often, people's perceptions, their way of looking at things, the way they portray things, have come in. But usually we have a written script, however rough a draft it might be. It may undergo a sea change during the rehearsals, as it did in *Raja ka Baja* which used to be a play called *Teen Crore* that we'd done 6-7 times. It was a good play, but there were problems. Then we read this wonderful poem called *Aa Raja ka Baja Bajaa* by Manmohan, a young poet . . .

In terms of the earlier plays, because we had a written script—in the creation of the script there were contributions, and each actor brought his own interpretation to his role. But the way some of the more recent script-structures have been evolved, the involvement and contribution of the actors has been far greater. That, perhaps, hadn't been there earlier. So it's a yes-and-no answer to your question. But Sudhanva has a different point to make.

(Sudhanva: I'm not certain that I can articulate this. The point I'm trying to make is that, it is, of course,

axiomatic that in any play, in any role, actors are going to bring in their personalities, for sure. But when I look at our own work—especially at the work I'd seen in the early days of my association—*Aurat*, *Samrath ko Nahin Dosh Gosain*, *Raja ka Baja*—in all three plays I think there's more than simply two actors doing their roles in their own ways, it's not that. I'd argue that no matter how the play got created, after the play has been created and is out and in performance . . . a play like *Samrath* which we used to do very extensively (we'd logged about a 1000 shows of the play)—in most of the shows there was Tyagi and Mahesh playing Madari and Jamura. For me, in the early days as an outsider, as a viewer, and later on as an actor in Jana Natya Manch, in one sense *Samrath* is Tyagi and Mahesh. The wonderful sense of rapport, the wonderful repartee that they were able to bring to the performance—it's not a question of how many lines they added, how they improvised—it's a question of how the two worked together, and that, for me, is *Samrath*. Or let us say in *Aurat*, for instance, it's not as if we haven't done *Aurat* without Mala, we have. And I'm also not saying that Mala necessarily contributed a lot when the play was being written—I don't know about it, but I suspect that it wasn't an enormously huge contribution. But once the play is out in the streets, the play has, to certain extent, at least, been shaped by Mala.)

*So you're trying to say that even when they are not directly involved in writing the script, a play becomes memorable because certain people have done it in a particular way?*

(Sudhanva: Yeah. It's also true, of course, that *Aurat* has a wonderful script . . . Just last night we had a performance in JNU and some of my students had come to see it and that's what they were all saying—that it's an extremely tight script and it's very dramatic . . . All of that is there, of course. I'm not trying to hold up one thing against the other—it's not that. But the entire experience of the play has been, I'd argue, certainly shaped by Mala to a much larger degree than she recognizes or she feels. Even *Raja ka Baja*. In *Raja ka Baja* I do the central character, but Rameshwar Dayal is Tyagi and it just can't be me.)

Between *Samrath* or *Aurat* or *Raja ka Baja*, or a play that we did recently like *Jinhe Yakin Nahin Tha* or *Artanaad*—when the play was being created, through whichever process it took place, from the creation of the play to the first performance, the direct and conscious contribution of the performers was more in *Jinhe Yakin Nahin Tha* and *Artanaad*, than in the three plays I mentioned earlier. But once the play is there, when it is being done by another set of people, it will be done the way they are doing it. That would be true of any play. I'm disagreeing with Sudhanva, basically. I'm not quite convinced by what he's saying.

*I think maybe they've stayed in [Sudhanva's] mind as very powerful renderings—the vision or the memory of the play remains as it was done by those people. But it exists as a script. Say, even when you were talking about Rahul Boxer, saying that the character was done by [Anil]—when he moves on and someone else does it, that person will do something different with it. But it doesn't alter the fact that it originally came out of one single person. But I want to ask you . . . when you look back, what do you think is the major contribution of Jana Natya Manch? What is your sense of achievement from it? And also, maybe, critical evaluation?*

Janam's single most important contribution has been—I may be sounding immodest—inspiring street theatre to be done. We had no idea, especially in the early years, how widespread the plays would become. Because they were successful scripts, they've been taken up by all kinds of groups, not just students. Therefore, once they were performing—they were part of this process of doing street theatre, of doing theatre among the people. That further generated doing other things, trying out new things, and so forth. In that sense Janam has played an inspiring role without any fanfare, in a very quiet, understated sort of a way.

Also, the fact that our plays have been successful by and large—of course there have been some that weren't, but they have also been learning experiences—that this kind of theatre works, that this kind of theatre has unlimited possibilities and that we're so regular in our work. Every year we do 3 or 4 new street plays and some of the older ones, also. No mean achievement. The effort is to try out something new to whatever extent possible. Therefore, you see, trying to make them as complete an experience as possible, trying to add new things, layers of meaning, trying to consciously reject the commonly accepted notion that street theatre is something that anybody can do, that you just stand up, do something, you need just two characters and some exchanges and dialogues and that's drama—no, drama is not that. Drama has to be created and crafted even on the streets; it involves a lot of hard work, trying new things. That is why our plays have been so successful, translated and done everywhere—those that are done, that is. These are things that we've achieved by way of example and also by way of scripting. But new things just for the sake of doing new things has not been our way—sometimes even that may be a useful thing to do, but we haven't done that—we've tried different things and that certainly has been a contribution. At one point of time what had happened is that—not that we were directly responsible for it—many years ago in the University of Uttar Pradesh there was a short play competition and 17 groups participated and each one of them did *Raja ka Baja*. Poor judges—just imagine! The

first one came, then the second one came, then the third one came—by then the audience must have gone away! I'm sure that they went away. It made us feel very great, sure, but actually come to think of it—nobody was trying new things! But maybe that was bound to be, it was only a phase. By now there are some groups—not very many, but some—who're evolving scripts on their own, trying new things, not necessarily doing scripts by others—doing that also, but doing their own things, too. I do think that we've been a source of inspiration, at least.

*I remember a discussion over why street theatre looks the same, wherever one goes in the country. It's a kind of uniform thing that goes on in the name of street theatre. But if they are evolved out of local needs, then there should be differences, or something must be wrong somewhere.*

Yes, they are very similar, but there are differences also—increasingly so, now. Fifteen years ago one didn't find those differences. One of the reasons, but I don't think that's the only factor, is that if there is a model then you tend to imitate that model and that leads to a proliferation of similar kinds of things. But that's only one factor. The other thing is that wherever people were doing theatre in urban or semi-urban areas, they'd deal only with stock characters and stock characters can be shown only in one kind of way and therefore there was this similarity. I think that phase had to be gone through, it was an essential part of the whole process. I find far less similarity now than I did earlier.

‘Why do we choose to do street theatre? The answer is always political, it has to be.’

This is an amalgamation of two interviews by STQ with PRALAYAN, playwright, actor and director of Chennai Kalai Kuzhu, and member of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers’ Association. BIREN DAS SHARMA talked to him during the Theatre for Consciousness workshop organized by Natya Chetana in Bhubaneswar in February 1996; and ANJUM KATYAL talked to him in Chennai in September 1997. Their interventions appear below in italics. USHA R., an actress from Chennai who has worked with Chennai Kalai Kuzhu and other Chennai theatre groups, also participated in the first session. Her observations appear within parentheses.

*When was the group formed?*

In 1984, September. At that time the Chennai district unit of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers’ Association was very active. They had organized a state-level theatre festival in Madras and they asked us to stage a play. At that time there were different kinds of theatre activities all over the state under the aegis of this Progressive Writers’ Association—some modern approach to theatre was also there at that time. So we started to organize our group. Most of them were very close to me, friends of mine, who shared my ideas with me, like-minded people who got together. We created a play, Nangal Varugirom, which means ‘Here We Come’. It was written by me.

Actually, this is not a street play. It is a proscenium play. A play within a play style. It is one hour long. A street group performing. There is a folk tradition in the neighbouring district of Madras, Tiruvanamalai, my native district. Telling stories through song and mime and other things. Three people stand and sing, narrate, through a narrative tune, and they tell a story. Sometimes they use expressions and words also, when necessary. So the group was telling the story. The group members belonged to the subaltern strata of society—one person was a rickshaw puller, another an auto driver, a construction worker, a tea-shop vendor. So, they are telling their stories—by dancing and acting. The police interrupts. ‘You have to vacate this place because you are blocking traffic,’ etc. The audience comes to the performers’ rescue—they defend the performers and turn on the police. The police withdraws. Then, the audience compels the performers to continue the play. The performers get irritated and start portraying police atrocities. A play within a play style. First through the songs, then they make it a scene. At that time a notorious thing had happened in Tamil Nadu. In Salem district, in police custody, a girl was sexually molested and killed by the police. It was an issue taken up by all the women’s and youth movements of the time. So we took that narrative and made a play. And at the end of the play, they ask the people to rise against the excesses of the police. The police and some goondas attack all the performers and beat them. The actors fall down on the ground. The props and instruments are destroyed. The police go away. Then one actor tries to stand up and reach for the horn—there was a horn on the ground. He takes the horn and blows. The curtain falls.

Actually it’s a one-hour long play without any curtain. The play within a play, the changing of the space, everything happens before the audience. We weren’t using any lights. Just flat lights. But mime and realistic acting, dance movements, everything was enacted. Also, the music group that played a part of the background music was sitting behind the performers, in the centre of the stage. Like in Terukoothu. Harmonium, tabla, flute, dhol—five members are sitting and playing. The performance is taking place in front of the music group.

*Is this typical of Terukoothu?*

It’s inspired by Terukoothu, but it’s not typical Terukoothu. At that time we did not have any experience. But we were influenced by the debates going on in the Tamil theatre scene. We were only exposed to the show, to ‘showing’. So, we took to showing also. What we wanted to say, we said through showing. That’s how we understood the play. It’s a very fast play. Received well. And we took the play all over the district—nearly 40 performances within a three or four month span. After that, in January 1985, we started to work on a new play. The Bhopal gas tragedy had just occurred. So this was the background against which we tried to evolve a play. This was also a proscenium play, about what the aftereffects would be 5 years later. The title was *Bhopal, A.D. 1990*. If we shut our eyes, refusing to see the horror of the Bhopal gas tragedy, what would happen to the victims? To the remaining few who escaped from the disaster? So it’s dramatized imagination. It’s a one-hour-forty-minutes play. Episodic structure. Each episode ends with a character remaining on the stage, who becomes the first character of the next



episode. Actually, we collected so much material from people's science activists, some scientists, environmentalists—we put all these materials together and made it into a play.

*So by this time your group had formed properly?*

Yes, yes. In 1984, with the first performance.

*Can you give me some idea of the membership ?*

At that time I was working as a journalist. The group members were from different walks of life. Only two or three of the founder members are still with us. Alex is an insurance employee. Balachander is an office employee, working in a private organization. Mangai—she was studying. Joseph. He was unemployed then. Now he is employed. Same with C. M. Kumar. Ganesh was working in the postal service, as Extra-departmental staff. Then there was Thamarai Selvi, another girl. She was in service. Akbar was also in service. He is working now for a corporation. S. Ramachandran was a student then, now he's a full-time CPI(M) activist. There were three more people. Ashok—a government employee. Amburaj and Nirmalraj, both professional musicians.

Now, myself, Alex and Ganesh are left from the very first group. After the first play, many people joined. They are still in the group. Since December 1984 or January 1985, after the first production. Of these senior members, about six or seven people are still there.

Now we have twenty members. They are not full-time. They are all working people. But they are the main members. Sometimes we invite others. We are acquainted with so many people, who have engaged in some of our activities in the recent past. We use them also. But the regular members are twenty people. T.A. Viswanathan, K.B. Devarajan, Narendran—all these members joined in December 1984, after the first production. Then came Prema Krishnamurti, Anbarasu, Ashok, Ramu, T. R. Vijayanand, Manohar, Balakrishnan, Jaya, Rema, Ulagaraj, Rajkumar, Rajesh, Yovel. These are the main members.

Three or four of them are working in insurance; one is in the Port Trust, two in banks, one has his own business. Ganesh is our percussionist. He is our auto driver. Now he is working with a newspaper. They are using his van and tempo. One or two people are still searching for jobs—they are self-employed, unemployed. Prema is with Madras telephones. Rema, she is working in a private institution. Jaya has just finished music college, she is searching for a job as a music teacher—that kind of thing.

*Your group has a mixed composition and you are also in contact with various movements. They are involved in the production process. How does this make a difference or influence your work?*

Working with a mixed group is always very rewarding. Actually, our group's background is very, very different from other groups. All our members are from different backgrounds. Some are from a convent school background, some from slums, some have recently immigrated to the city from rural areas, some are working in banks, some are auto-rickshaw drivers. This makes any discussion lively, multi-dimensional. Since it is not a homogenous group, we also have problems. Some people want to stick to their own ideas and refuse to change their approach. Initially we did not know how to solve problems like this. But gradually we have learnt how to tackle such problems.

*What would you describe as the ideology of the group?*

Actually we share a common ideology with the Progressive Writers' Association. Basically, most of the group members are from the Progressive Writers' Association, though we do not insist on this. But in the process, we have begun thinking in similar ways.

*Are you affiliated to the CPI(M)?*

Yes, I myself am.

*Like Janam does election plays for the CPI(M), does your group . . . ?*

Yes, even we have done some, in 1989. Before that, no. At that time—you see, our first and second plays were long. The second play, *Bhopal*, is one hour forty-five minutes long. It attracts the people, but we couldn't perform it more than twice. So we were not busy at the time. It was a phase of discussion. We were going about it in a formal way. So many discussions about everything—theatrical, political, ideological. At that time we got a script of Janam's *Aurat*, in 1986. We hadn't seen Janam's performances. But we translated the script into English and adapted it into Tamil. Why did we do an adaptation? Because in the text itself we did not find enough to perform. The codification, suggestions are not received through the text, you know. Our understanding of street theatre came from Samudaya, at that time. So we did the play in a different way . . . we got the idea from *Aurat*. It is a fifteen minute play. One narrator. She is a woman. A conscious and liberated, radical woman. She's addressing the audience. About how women are marginalized all their lives, from the cradle to the graveyard. She talks about this,

episode by episode. Whenever she wants, she interrupts the play. See, all our actors wear a single uniform. I got the idea from Meyerhold. We add something suggestive by way of costume. It's totally mobile. Easy. Roll and fold. But it was performed on a raised platform, with three sides open, not in a circular acting space. So the play got framed. Mangai was acting in the main role and another woman, Vasugi, was the narrator—she is now a women's activist. Like in Janam's play, Mangai did all the roles, she is a child, she is everything. It was received well, it went everywhere, all over the city. Then we gradually moved into the street theatre.

We want to do something better. One step forward. To strengthen the theatre—not by making glossy theatre. To strengthen our acting treatment. To deepen our acting treatment.

*You mentioned that the group tends to hold the same values and believe in a common approach?*

See, when we came to the street theatre in 1986 doing *Aurat* and everything . . . that did not give us the correct idea about street theatre. But in 1986 I was invited by KSSP—Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad, who wanted to do a kala jatha. They were taking street theatre all over the state for their science popularization campaign. They wanted to do a similar campaign in Tamil Nadu. Six actors from our group, and seven or eight actors from KSSP stayed together for a month. We translated and transcreated some of the KSSP plays and performed all over Tamil Nadu. Fifty centres. For a month-long period. I feel, that was a different kind of street theatre that we practised. It had music, stylized movements, it was more physical . . . So that gave us some idea. We wanted to work on the street theatre, know it better. So we went deep into it.

*Recently you said that there is a need to define street theatre. Can you talk about this?*

When we started doing street theatre we did not feel the necessity of defining what street theatre really is. At that time we were also not really concerned about theoretical issues of street theatre. After Safdar Hashmi's assassination, we wanted to commemorate his birthday, 12 April, as National Street Theatre day. On that day, we decided to perform *Hallabol*, the very play which was being performed when he was assassinated. We got the script and translated it and produced it with very few changes. We were used to performing anywhere, a railway platform, a playground, any place. But we used to perform in the Angan Mancha style, in which the audience can sit on three sides and there is a backdrop. Because of this, all our choreography and compositions were photographic compositions. But we wanted to produce *Hallabol* in Tamil in a circular space. So far, we had not been exposed to circular composition, but we experimented with it. At that time we had no experience of entry and exit in a circular space. In our group there was one actress—Anandhi—who was a JNU student; she had seen Safdar's production. So we produced the play with her help and the use of dramaturgy, political satire, were well received. As we started performing more and more, we gradually started understanding the space. We had a very busy schedule till June; in September we went to Delhi to participate in a National Festival of Street Theatre. We met many street theatre groups of our country. We had an informal discussion on street theatre, in which questions of definition and aesthetics came up.

M. K. Raina, Habib Tanvir, Moloyashree Hashmi, people from Bengal and other states were present. In his essay titled 'Right to Perform' Safdar had discussed some of these issues. All these questions came to our mind as we continued our work. We wanted to look for answers through work, through practice. Why do we do street theatre? We do it because of its mobility, handiness, cost-effectiveness, because it is close to people and not confined to any particular kind of space. But why do we *choose* to do street theatre? The answer is always political, it has to be.

We also tried to identify important elements of street theatre. Though street performance has a history of a thousand years, such traditional street performances have a connotation different from what we practice. Ours is at an infantile stage. We do not have a model or a guide. So we have to work and identify its problems and solve them on our own. What are its important elements? Immediacy. It may provoke immediate action, debate or dialogue. It should organize the casual passersby into an audience. There is no invited audience for street theatre, it should organize its own audience. It should also be dynamic. Only a dynamic production can hold the audience. It should be faithful to its content, to what it wants to say or portray. What is happening is that other kinds of people's movements like literacy movements, people's science movements, are also using street theatre on a large scale. Street theatre activities are expanding day by day. Earlier we were hesitant about what we can and cannot do. We also thought that street theatre was for taking up immediate political issues; there was no place for creative experience or aesthetic achievement. But the fact is that street theatre people rarely try to be creatively successful. Many people say that you cannot do this or that in street theatre. Mass usage of street theatre actually gives an impetus to so many innovations—unmotivated innovations. The kind of power street

theatre has, the kind of scope it has, gives rise to a lot of experimentation which has no ulterior motives.

We had a meeting with street theatre workers of the country and at that time we also discussed the creative problems of street theatre.

*When did it take place? Could you name some of the participants?*

It was held in 1990. It was chaired and moderated by M. K. Raina, who provoked the participants to talk. I found that I was the only person who could answer all the questions he raised. It became like a duel. He got inspired and vehemently provoked me. At that time I answered his questions but I was not fully satisfied with my answers. I felt insecure. Raina presented so many problems about street theatre. The creative process of street theatre was discussed elaborately during this session. We had a lot of experience in running a group professionally, performing regularly, maintaining the group. Jana Natya Manch also had similar experience. We realized that our problems are similar in many ways. In my group, initially I wrote most of the plays and invited the actors to the rehearsal. Usually we do not rehearse in the evening, like many groups. We have full-day rehearsals. Actors would take leave for rehearsals. For any production we have a residential camp for five-six days and we rehearse from morning to night. This is the way we prepare a play. Initially we begin with the skeletal idea of a play. We discuss the subject, the theme and the concept of the play. All participants are invited to comment and discuss. They contribute so many incidents from their own experiences, which are related to the theme or concept of the play. Several themes emerge from this discussion and we select one for improvisation. By improvising again and again on this particular theme, we slowly get a better idea of the theme we intend to address and a skeleton of a play gradually emerges in the process. Then we redo the improvisations and develop the play. At different points we stop the improvisations to write down the dialogues and treatment. The playwright takes up this task and writes it down. Then we go back to improvisations again. In this process we finally complete the play, finalize the dialogue and decide on choreography. This is the general process.

Some people think that their individual creativity cannot and should not be judged in this way. So they sometimes question this process. A play written by someone and submitted for consideration may be rejected by the entire group because of irrelevance of the dramaturgy. After watching our plays many ask, 'Who has written the play?' It is a difficult question to answer. We do not know how to answer this question. One may give an idea, but a play is always built collectively. So we always say that it is a collective effort. In order to understand the new creative value of such collective efforts, we try to understand the process itself. That is the beginning. I do not find our process of working and developing a play difficult. But some people find it difficult and they question the process. I tried to convince them. But there were disagreements. Sometimes we allow them to do whatever they have written. In fact, we did one or two plays written by others. But these plays were not received well. The problem still exists in our work. But we keep on working.

We were involved with the literacy campaign. At that time we also discussed the theme at so many different levels. How to approach illiteracy? How to understand the illiterates? As street theatre activists, we initiated this kind of discussion before we started working on the theme. We developed three or four plays in the process. These plays were totally different in format and style. Mr Ramanujam of Tamil University was with us to brush up the production. During this period we had to face those same questions. One person gave us a script. It was the story of a village girl and it dealt with the problem of a bad horoscope. A certain kind of fault in the horoscope is considered to be very inauspicious. It becomes taboo to marry that girl. It was a musical play which we produced. The girl was brought up well, she went to school. In a sequence this girl, now grown up, was ready to marry a boy. All arrangements were made but the marriage was stopped because of her horoscope. Her father tried everything, but no one would marry her. She was very, very frustrated. She became old and in the end she became insane. The play was done in folk style with songs and dances. The play ended with an appeal to the audience, saying that it is not fair for the society to handle a human being in this way, that we have to understand the pain of those who suffer. We invited some women's activists to come and see the production and comment on the play. Ramanujam was also present. The women activists asked, 'Why do you end the play in that way? Marriage is not everything for a woman. Why do you show her becoming insane? It is not a positive ending.' We discussed these questions among ourselves. The play was well structured and the writer was not fully convinced. But the rest of the group was ready to address these questions in the play. At last we came to a conclusion. At the end of the play the girl becomes mad, she starts singing and then starts wailing loudly. Suddenly, she stops crying and stands up, ties her hair and shouts at the narrator, 'Stop this play. What nonsense is this? If a woman can't get married, is this the only way? Has she got to become mad? Is there no other way? Can't she stand on her own feet? If you do not change the

ending of the play I will not act. Even for the sake of theatre I can't accept this.' Other actors console her and quarrel with the narrator. 'Why don't you change the end?' Then he changes the ending. The play, as I told you, was in the form of a ballad, a narrative story told through songs. So the chorus sings a new ending. The song says that for a married life all you need is a good understanding between the husband and the wife. Horoscopes and things like that do not make a difference. This ending was not accepted by the writer immediately. But the play was received very well all over Tamil Nadu. The play was taken up by many literacy groups and performed all over Tamil Nadu. The writer of the play then came to realize that this is the correct way of ending the play, it also makes the play very powerful and very modern. The play was actually very well written, the lyrics were also very good. The playwright realized that the new ending gave a new energy and power to the play. This kind of thing can only happen in street theatre, in the creative process of making a street play. We would like to work in this manner and leave room for this kind of experimentation. This should also develop our understanding of street theatre. An experience like this gives us a lot of confidence, we realized that if we explore seriously we can attain new heights.

*Due to your contact with various groups you get different kinds of inputs which sometimes help you to develop a play. It is bound to be an interesting process.*

Actually after the 1991-92 meeting in Delhi we participated in a workshop for street theatre workers. It was a month-long workshop and so many people came—Ram Gopal Bajaj, Raina, Sonal Mansingh, Tripurari Sharma, Prasanna, Chandralekha, Dadi Padamji, G. P. Deshpande—so many veterans were in the workshop. Jana Natya Mancha people were also present. There were discussions every day. Once again we tried to define what street theatre is. In the South we have a long tradition of street theatre. We came to street theatre after Samudaya and KSSP. At that time, the street theatre of North India was different from the street theatre of the South. A street theatre performance in North India used to end with red flags, slogans etc. This came to South India in the initial stage. But Samudaya and KSSP's plays do not end with red flags. We tried to develop our dramaturgy in a different way. During the workshop we also discussed these differences. One person said, 'If you want to be a theatre practitioner, you cannot do street theatre. Street theatre is Party work. It is part of a political movement and not theatre. If you try to do street theatre without slogans, without the red flag, it will cease to be street theatre.' Some people do think in that way. During the workshop, once again, we had a debate with M. K. Raina, and once again he provoked me. We came back with that provocation and did a production in 1992. I decided to do a non-issue-based play. We usually identify an issue which is ideologically and politically important and immediate. But this time we wanted to do a play which would be based on a so-called non-issue. We decided to do a play on the city of Madras, on our living surroundings. During a preliminary discussion session S. P. Agathalingam, who works in the youth front, came and told us a story. A dog was drowned in a cesspool and died. But nobody cared about it. Cleaning it would involve three departments—cleaning of the road is the responsibility of the Corporation, cleaning of the sewage is the responsibility of the sewerage department, and if it involves any construction work, that is the responsibility of the PWD department. So cleaning a single cesspool involved three departments. A lot of petitions were submitted. But each department turned down the petition on the pretext that it was not their responsibility. Finally people gathered together and voluntarily cleaned it. That was the story. We found the story very interesting; it gave us an idea for a non-issue-based play. We started improvising on the theme. At that time I was concerned with the problems of towns and villages. Many people in city slums, specially those who form the main working force, have rural roots. We have to understand them in a different way. In our elitist understanding, people in the slums are ill-mannered, unhygienic—we have so many misconceptions. We wanted to address these in the play. We discussed these things. So in the very beginning we tried to identify the image of Madras with the labour statue. After four or five full-day workshops, we got the play ready.

*But how was it connected to the real incident? How did it raise the treatment of the play?*

The entire process was very interesting. Initially we started discussing the dead dog. But in the course of our discussion we changed it to a dead child. This change made the real incident much more significant. People want to get the body out. They discuss about who should be informed? The police? The Corporation? Or the Sewerage Board? The scavengers come, the Corporation officers come and finally the police come. The Corporation people asked the slum people to submit a petition and promised to do the needful. The police wanted to know whether the child had committed suicide or not. Who had seen the dead body first? Everybody wanted to run away, no one wanted to get involved. The play begins in this way. Initially we focused on the evils and the darker side of the society. Then we got an idea. We wanted to take the play to a deeper level. We felt that the voice of humanity is lost in the problems of

everyday life. We thought that the voice of humanity should be heard in the play. So we introduced a young mother and her baby.

(Usha: People often complain about the dehumanization which takes place in the city, specially among those who belong to the lower strata of the society; that living in constant poverty, they become inhuman. This play shows the struggle of their lives and the kind of problems they are submerged in, and how this kind of psychology creeps in, how it takes place.)

We tried to explore these problems in the play. A young mother is searching for her little daughter who is lost, and at the same time there is this incident where a child is found drowned in the cesspool. While the body is in the cesspool, people are busy with various problems. I showed various queues. Each time people show their concern, something happens and they have to rush to join the queue for ration. A person responds to the young mother's plight and agrees to help her. But as soon as he comes to know that palm oil is being distributed from the ration shop, he also rushes to the shop. She goes to the market place in search of help and there some people want to molest her. Someone comes to her rescue. He asks her about her problem and she tells him about her lost child. While people gather to help her, the police come and throw them out in order to clear the pavements. You see, people are ready to help, but each time one problem or the other prevents them. There is a queue for water. She goes there and enquires about her daughter. People are very busy. One says in a joking manner, 'You can get another daughter, but not another pot of water.' There is a queue for the latrine, and there is a big quarrel about who will go to the latrine first. She goes there for help but each time her voice is drowned in the other cries. We end the play with a Brecht song, 'There will be singing about a dark time.'

*So this is what has happened to your non-issue play. It has become a serious issue-based play, isn't it?*

(Usha: What we meant by a non-issue play is a play which is not overtly dealing with political themes or issues. Usually what happens is that we essentially deal with whatever concerns us and these are issues, very immediate burning issues. For example, when the Roop Kanwar incident took place, the group did a play immediately. So far as this particular play is concerned, it so happened that some of the problems, specially the water problem, coincided particularly with the actual water problem in the city. But it was not intentional.)

*To what extent do your plays differ from those of other street theatre groups?*

There is no full-scale street theatre group other than my own group, groups associated with the Progressive Writers' Association, and others either associated with me, or trained by me or those who received training with me. There was street theatre in the late 70s. Then Badal Sircar came to Madras and conducted a workshop. People who attended that workshop started doing street theatre. But none of those efforts were made in a full-fledged, well-organized manner. They met in the evening one day, next day they came a little early, met at 4 o' clock and rehearsed for two hours; and in the evening they performed. But this kind of effort did not lead to the formation of a proper street theatre group. But this was the first street theatre activity in Tamil Nadu. This happened in the late 70s or early 80s. At the same time some groups belonging to the Progressive Writers' Association started doing street theatre. They would take a story, say a Chekhov story, and perform it. But this was not really street theatre proper. After that some ultra-left groups, Naxalite groups, started doing street theatre. They did some of the Samudaya plays and they had done some powerful street theatre in the beginning of the 80s. Then they had to stop for various reasons. After 1986 we started doing street theatre, and now we and the groups belonging to the Progressive Writers' Association are the only groups practising street theatre. In the beginning we did street theatre, and at the same time performed on proscenium stage. When we started there were a few groups but most of them have stopped working now except Koothu-P-Pattarai, which is a professional group, experimenting to develop a new language of theatre. In other groups, you will find people leaving and joining different groups. But in our group, most of the founder members are still with the group. Whoever left our group left either because they were transferred or for some similar reason. But wherever they are, they still do theatre. In our work we care very much for the audience and feedback. We are concerned with the socio-political relevance of our work and at the same time we are very concerned with the creative process. This is where our work differs from the work of other groups. By creative process I mean the role of the director, role of the writer and the question of creative input in theatre.

*I found two important aspects of your production very important. One is simplicity and the other your use of satire or elements of comedy. Am I right in my observation?*

We really believe in humour and satire. We had a discussion some time back and someone asked whether

humour makes the message sugar-coated or not. For us humour is an expression of enlightenment. It generates force for the common people. If you want to make a political comment on the existing conditions it should not be presented as a statement. It should be presented as a satire. We are aware of the power of satire and comedy. It has a power over the audience. We have not only felt it, we have experienced it. At the same time, we are very keen to keep a balance. During improvisation we get lots of interesting ideas, we try out many humorous ideas. The question is to be careful, always. One should think how it is relevant to the theme, to the entire play. Some groups who redo some of our plays often lack this awareness and there is the risk of playing to the gallery. It happens sometimes. One should always remember that satire and humour are political idioms.

*What about simplicity?*

Suppose we want to make a play on pesticide. First, we have to understand the issue. So much research has been done on this. One or two members of the group would go through the material and give the entire group a feedback which would be discussed in detail. Then we would discuss the political perspective of that issue. For this purpose we can have many people—the experts in the academic field, we can have discussions with them, read what they have written. Politically we are well-informed—all our members are aware of the contemporary political scene.

*Would you say that one of the strengths of your group is that all your members are equally aware of what they are saying? It is not like they are performing somebody else's idea, everybody believes in the same thing and they are well-informed about the issue they are dealing with. So when the improvisations take place, they are much more spontaneous.*

All cannot make it to the same level. But if one wants to make a play one should equip the actors with all this information. Without thorough information actors cannot improvise in a proper way. If they are wrongly informed they may do wrong or irrelevant things. We have seen this happening. It is a necessity to keep the members informed, give adequate input in terms of information. This is also a part of the creative process. Some members in our group may keep quiet, but they are very sharp otherwise. Some are very verbal, some are very subtle and some are less informed. But the less-informed people can also be very talented and if they are informed they can generate tremendous energy. This is true for every group. It is a question of how you handle your members.

*And there is no clash within your group ?*

It will come. We are human beings, it will come. There was a difference of opinions and some people parted company. But you have room to discuss and make others change their mind and reach a consensus. Actually, in the beginning I wrote the plays. I wrote the first two plays, and *Aurat* was translated by Mangai and adapted by Mangai and me. Then the process changed. Now we don't first write a play and then start rehearsal. Now we concentrate on the process. We decide the topic, or theme, or get some inspiration from images, and start a discussion. Then we start to build up the story line, images and everything. It's a long process. Everything is evolved. We finalize the words by improvisation. What Sudhanva wrote in 'Sculpting a Play' (STQ # 11)—that is the process. But there is guided improvisation. Wherever the improvisation stops, we struggle. Sometimes I write. Then we start the improvisation after the writing. Then we finalize and rewrite sometimes. Suppose rhythmic dialogue is needed—most of the rhythmic dialogues have to be written. An idea comes from the improvisation and we rewrite the play. All the members have the space to contribute.

Whenever we have a new production, we don't work just in the evenings. We need one hour just to warm up. If we gather after office at 6 o'clock and start the warm-up, and then have to leave by about 8.30, it is no use . . . So we work on holidays. And sometimes we have to take leave. We go somewhere and work together.

*What about your concerns about form?*

It is now a necessity to understand that street theatre is part of the overall theatre movement. Doing street theatre should not be a goal in itself, but it should be used for spreading the theatre movement. We need to build up a people's theatre movement, and for that we need all kinds of theatre. Preference for a particular kind of space is also a political choice. A circular space is very intimate and close. It is also a very dynamic space. We give preference to, give emphasis to, the space and its characteristics. Sculptural compositions are more multi-dimensional than photographic compositions. So sculptural compositions are more dynamic and work better for the audience, for their creative imagination and thinking. This is the way we approach street theatre in the circular space. But if you want to do something different or if you want to do a play for an audience of 10,000, a circular space may not work. An experience of a street

performance can best be communicated to a smaller audience—maybe 1000 to 2000 people. If you have a raised platform in the same circular space, you may reach 20,000 people. It will communicate, but the theatre experience will not be the same. It will be a totally different theatre experience. People may also enjoy the performance, but the experience will not be the same, it will definitely lack dynamism and intimacy. I would say that if you want to address a larger audience, you should do it in a different way. Actually, it will need a different kind of language, also. You have to use only capital letters, bold type. Such devices may work for a large gathering. Once we started experimenting in this line, but we did not finish it. We have noticed from our own experience that whenever we perform for larger audiences, the experience is always different. The play is understood, it is also enjoyed—but the audience does get a different kind of theatrical experience. If you want to give the same kind of theatrical experience to say, an audience of fifteen thousand, you have to modify your approach according to the space and the audience. Theoretically one can probably achieve that.

*As a group, what are the basic things that you look for in street theatre—that you try to do?*

See, I feel that street theatre is not everything. But it plays a major role. It is an art form. It is a developing art form. It is in the process of developing. It will have to be developed. It is the only theatre which gives space to people who do not have a place in official or mainstream theatrical spaces. It is a media itself. So it will give the thrust culturally, economically, in terms of gender. It can express concern, protest. It is, on the whole, an outlet for the people. That is the real social function of street theatre. That should not be undermined. It has a major role to play in the society—social, political and cultural. Personally I believe that the street theatre has some kind of hegemony in spearheading the people's theatre movement, but that hegemony is not coercive. Just practising street theatre does not make us political people. We have to work hard to develop the art form of street theatre. See, personally I believe, as a theatre practitioner you can't rely on a single form of theatre. So you have to do other kinds of theatre. Some people have been in our group for ten or twelve years. They have so many ideas of theatre. They want to try everything. If we want to do Shakespeare or something else—we have to do it differently. If we want try that in street theatre, we kill the street theatre and we also kill Shakespeare. So, we also do that kind of play for our own learning, to develop ourselves. Once we took a theme, rounded up some people and had a strong discussion on every aspect and . . . it's not yet written, but we are going to do it in the near future. I am writing that play—it's a historical play about a devadasi who lived in the Chola period. She climbed up the Tanjore temple tower, and jumped. This incident was engraved on a rock. So, we are trying that way also. See, only, when we are exposed to other forms of theatre, the actors and group members are given exposure, will it give some impetus to do street plays in a different way. And also, it is not easy to be in the street theatre, without any . . . it is important . . . you get easily frustrated, if you're without political commitment—politics which is oriented towards the people. Without the commitment, without politics oriented towards the people, you can't stay in street theatre.

*You have also done theatre in the proscenium. What is the difference in your approach? Why do you do it and how do you do it?*

Nobody is really seriously concerned about the problems of street theatre, its aesthetics and performance problems. Nobody is really ready to even discuss with or listen to you. For me it is very safe and easy to do proscenium plays. You can pick up a translation of an European play, rehearse for ten days and stage it on the eleventh day and get the review published on the sixteenth day. With this you can find a place in the theatre scene. But to be known to attract attention by doing street theatre is a difficult task. People who used to do street theatre five years back are not doing street theatre any more. Many of them have either switched over to proscenium theatre or stopped altogether. What happens is that one easily gets frustrated in doing street theatre. It is not easy to do street theatre for a long time. It needs a lot of conviction, it needs a lot of exploration and innovation and only then can you reach a height, get some kind of satisfaction. If you want to come to street theatre you should first develop yourself as a theatre practitioner, you should know about all kinds of theatre. One should realize that the proscenium stage has its own potential and meaning. We did a few proscenium plays precisely for that reason. But in all our proscenium productions we use some devices of street theatre. We do not stick to conventional concepts of scene etc.—or even the NSD idioms of blocks and rostrum. We use body language in the proscenium also. We did a Premchand story, *Moteram ke Satyagraha* dramatized by Habib Tanvir and Safdar Hashmi which was translated and produced in Tamil. We were told by Jana Natya Mancha of their experience when they switched over to proscenium plays. It is difficult for the street theatre actors to work in a proscenium box—there are problems of entry and exit, actor's position—it is difficult for actors who are used to performing in the open, circular space. In our case this did not happen. In fact, in

the beginning of our street theatre activities we used to perform on a raised platform against a backdrop, keeping three sides open, and we used photographic compositions. Because of this experience our actors had no problem at all. We are actually used to performing both in circular space and also in undefined spaces. By undefined space I mean any given space which cannot be changed. We sometimes go to a space without any prior knowledge and we have to be flexible enough to change and adjust according to the demands of the space. For that particular production we experimented with stage props. The play was to be taken to different places and we did not know what kind of stages would be available. So the only props we used were blocks and frames, and depending on the way these were arranged in different scenes, they acquired different meanings. The same props were used differently for different scenes. But the play was performed only twice, for various reasons. Another play was adapted on a Tamil poet Bharathidasan, who is known as a revolutionary poet of Tamil Nadu. It is a play within a play. Poets are meeting to discuss the poet Bharathidasan. He is a very radical poet, a leading poet of the Dravidian movement. Also his radical views, views on social reform are very, very important. So there is a debate among the people who believe in the left ideology over whether to accept him or not. Then they decide to pay respect to him, to do a play on him. When they start working on the play the actors get confused because of the values propagated by him. They want to stop and discuss their differences. The debate is also incorporated in the play. Once they are convinced, they move on to the next scene. The play goes on like this, and in the end they affirm the strength of Bharathidasan and we end the play there. It all happened on the proscenium stage. It was an hour-long play with music and movements and we used a lot of physicality, body images, bodies used as property, as objects.

*How has the creative process in these productions been different?*

It was a very, very long process. It probably took three or four months. We decided to do this play to commemorate his 100th birth anniversary. At that time we had a discussion on why we want to do this play. The same debate we showed in the play actually took place in the group at that time. We wanted to include and incorporate the discussion in the play also. The script was simultaneously developed. In this creative process, the role of the writer is different. So at the initial stages, there were poetic images which denoted the ideological developments in Tamil poetry from the first century to the twentieth century. It is a small gift to the anthology of Tamil poetry. In the improvised and extended version of the play, there is a debate between modern and classical poetry, actually an extension of some kind of literary, cultural, and political debate. This is an adaptation of a Sanskrit play. Bharathidasan has adapted the Sanskrit play into Tamil. The story begins with that of a king who wanted to give education to his daughter, the princess, and wanted her to learn poetry and literature. He asked his minister to find a teacher. The minister expressed the doubt that the princess was very young and beautiful, which might lead to a problem. The king, however, insisted and a teacher was found—a very young poet.

They thought of a device. The lessons would take place with a curtain in-between, since this was a caste-related affair. She is a princess and he is a lower-caste person. Moreover, the princess was told that he was a leper and the poet was told that she was blind. The drama is conceived in such a way that the audience can see both of them. But one day, they suspect the truth of what they have been told, remove the screen, see each other and fall in love. The news reaches the king. The king wants to punish the poet for it but the princess refuses to let him do so. Then the king sentences both of them to execution. But the people stage a revolt and release both the princess and the poet. The play symbolizes the cultural politics of the situation. The final speech of the poet in the court is very popular among those who learn Tamil as a special study. It is very provocative, powerful and emotionally charged as well. We have made use of physical devices, making a screen of actors and so on.

*So there were improvisations. And how do you tackle the problem of training?*

We have a residential camp from morning to evening. Here we practise folk dances and movements. Some senior members are exposed to workshops. New members are allowed to watch and learn. Sometimes, during rehearsals, we give them some training. My fellow colleagues and I also give training in some basic folk steps to tune their bodies. Then they gradually step into small roles. On an average, there is one year or a year and a half of exposure. Actually, while on the question of training, most of our members undergo systematic yoga practice through various asanas. One of our troupe members is a yoga expert as well. Trainees undergo practice in two or three kinds of folk dances, folk idioms and attend workshops organized by other theatre people like Ramanujam. What we feel is that we want to learn some discipline. Next week we will have about six or seven training sessions in the street dance of Andhra, which involves complicated movements. This kind of practice will give an impetus to the physicality of our actors.



*How do you initiate the newcomers into the ideology of theatre?*

Those who see our work and are inspired, often express the willingness to join our group. We inform them later if we need them. Women members often face practical problems. We invite friends known to us for a short duration, to act as substitutes. Getting members is not a problem. We have to limit ourselves. We have to tell them that we are unable to pay them.

*What kind of audience do you reach out to? How does audience-response influence your work?*

Audience-response gives energy to our work. I firmly believe that when we are in the creative process, we have to think of the audience, the common man and the middle class or upper middle class level. Actually, we are culturally sensitive also. We identify ourselves with the subaltern section of the people. We follow the local spoken language, the common man's language. Our audience is often mixed. In Tamil Nadu now, there is a new phenomenon—Kalai-Eravu (cultural nights)—non-stop performances—street plays, traditional folk dances, folk theatres, literary speeches and singing sessions which continue throughout the night. All these programmes impart secular values. It is a new development in the name of progressive ideas. Since we have mixed audiences, in some areas, we get varied reactions from the people. We had tried to depict how Puri Sankaracharya was helping to legitimize Sati. We were critical of it and some people objected to our depiction, but others enjoyed it. Our performances are of three kinds—our own performances on the street; or somebody may call us to perform at some place, whereupon we inform them about lighting arrangements etc.; or we also have performances in colleges, schools and recreation clubs and even during lunch in office complexes for the employees. These are our audiences spanning the grassroots level to the middle class level. We have also performed successfully among theatre-lovers and serious-minded people, ready to accept this kind of parallel theatre.

*In your categorization of audiences, how are the arranged audiences assembled?*

They are informed beforehand. There might be some function along with theatre performances, like a book release. Or they might have invited us to perform.

*And can you tell me a little bit about funding . . .*

Most of the funding is through collection from the people. And also, sometimes colleges, institutions, some workplaces, invite us. Some festivals also, like state level college festivals or Sangeet Natak Akademi festivals. Then we charge. That goes towards a fund. Our members do not get any remuneration from the group.

Except for transport—they can be remunerated for what they spend. Sometimes we travel for four or five days together to districts or other areas. People who are not well off are compensated. Salary compensation—everything. Actually, the Progressive Writers' Association is a broad-based institution. Many film people are there, industrialists are there. So, through those people we manage. Otherwise for this kind of activity, it's difficult to get . . .

*Since we are on the topic of funding—we were talking in the morning about some of the problems that have crept into this whole street theatre scene over, say, the last four-five years, that is also related to funding. How do you politically analyse this? What is your view? And also, your ideas of funding and street theatre done by the NGO's.*

Nowadays, most of the well-meaning theatre professionals want to earn money. The government is not creating any scope for them. So they are turning to funding agencies. It is a pity. We need patronage also, but of what kind, is the question. We need vehicles for travel. If any agency is ready to sponsor vehicles, they are welcome and they will be acknowledged as sponsors. We need some rehearsal space and an auditorium. But very few such agencies are forthcoming with this kind of help.



*Mahanagar, Chennai Kalai Kuzhu. Photo (bottom): Mohandas V. Badagara.*

Funding is actually a political question. So far as our theatre group is concerned, we do not depend on any government department or funding agency. We manage on our own. We have very little to survive, to meet our production costs. Now we have started a fund-raising drive by performing.

Actually, institutional funding is a political question, not an economic one. But most development issues are supported by this kind of funding. Foreign funding, Government of India funding. Now, foreign funding through the Government of India also. So, it is a problem, a very big problem. We cannot simplify this problem. Some theatre groups are getting funds. In India, so many NGOs are active in the field of development and many of them get funds from different sources, from multinational funding agencies and from the Government of India. The attitude of the Government has also changed in the last decade. The Government has started to nurture the NGOs with funding. Why? There is a political reason behind this. The Government wants to gradually shift its social and cultural responsibilities on to the NGOs. So you will find many NGOs working nowadays, in the area of child health care, rural health care. They get funds, and many of them have their street theatre groups and they use theatre for their various projects. If you want to do something in the field of rural development you cannot neglect these factors, you cannot neglect the NGOs. There are some well-meaning people in the NGOs.

It is a fact that some well-meaning NGOs have done good work in their respective fields. But for us, funding remains a very difficult question. For us, funding is a political factor. We must understand the social and political factors behind funding first. At the same time we have to tackle it in a different way. Some of the street theatre groups are getting funds and a few of them are doing exceptionally good work. But most of the groups are doing street theatre for the project's sake and they do not take theatre seriously. There is no feedback, there is no follow-up. They finish their project and then move on to another project. We are very concerned about this. I am not for funding—I am against it.

*Do you notice any particular issues that are favourites with the development people?*

The entire NGO scene is very vast. The girl child, child labour, AIDS—most of the people in the NGO sector are now working on these things, as these are the issues for which they get funds. But some well-meaning work has also been done, like in the area of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu. Some of the new groups have done tremendous work—building up social service, documenting and everything. KSSP, for example, is not really an NGO. It is a movement. They have a membership all over the state. Also, there is the Tamil Nadu Science Forum—they started with KSSP inspiration. They also get funding from the government—only from the government, not from any multinational agencies. But what they are doing is not the same.

As for theatre, so many groups get funds for street theatre. Five or ten years ago we couldn't imagine that this would happen. Funds were only available for glossy or mainstream theatre which would appeal to the elite—commercial theatre. Now they've started to give funding for street theatre also. But not for the development of theatre. What they are giving is a social development allowance. Street theatre has become the media strategy of that project. So this is the recent trend.

What I feel is—you can't deny anybody's right to perform. Everybody has the right to perform, that we agree. But you have to understand the seriousness of this problem and also how to come to terms with these problems as a street theatre practitioner.

*So how do you see the problem?*

See, this should be countered a little—it has to be emphasized that you have to practise street theatre in the right way. Not just for giving answers to all these problems . . .

*What do you mean by 'the right way'?*

Street theatre's basic element is protest. Protest is not the same as 'giving awareness' to the people. The protest element is transformed and redefined as awareness. Some claim—we are going to give awareness to the people. See, there is a hegemonic attitude in this: We are aware, so we go to the people to make them aware. That is not actual street theatre. Street theatre does not allow the audience to remain passive.

The members of our group are all political people. They are affiliated with a political movement. They are active in trade unions, they are involved with political activities. Because of this, Chennai Kalai Kuzhu productions also have a political goal. There are so many ways of expressing political involvement. Why do they come to Chennai Kalai Kuzhu? Because this is creative expression. They have a political ideology. They are activists. But this is a creative expression of political beliefs. So, that is the essence of our activity. This essence is not there in the NGO approach.

*The differentiation you make between protest and awareness—can you talk more about it?*

Readily. See, protest starts from the grassroot level, not from the top to the bottom. It evolves at the grassroot level and travels to the top. But awareness is a top-to-bottom approach. It's a bureaucratic approach. Some well-meaning people have also made this mistake. They didn't understand. Take the area of health—quite a large amount of spending is involved in the area of health, to spread awareness.

Sanitation is the main problem in the rural areas. The health department wants to make the people use sanitary latrines. So they tell the people that they are unhygienic, that they have to use a latrine. But, in the people's consciousness, the reality is different. To them, putting a latrine inside the house is unhygienic. That is their practice, their belief. All the new houses have a latrine now. But houses built some 10-15 years ago—belonging to lower-middle class people—have no latrine in the houses. Now that is changing. See, when you insist that something is necessary, you have to understand the people's reality, their belief. They thought, nasty things should not be inside the house. So they didn't build a latrine. That is their belief. You have to touch that belief. Through this kind of understanding . . . I don't want to rationalize all these activities—but the approach shouldn't be one that won't allow you to understand reality.

*So, what you are saying is that if you understand the way they think then you can use that thinking and maybe . . .*

Yes. Suppose sanitation is a problem, and you are making a play. What will happen when you think from the grassroot level? Questions will arise. 'What about the source of water? We have to walk three or four kilometres to fetch drinking water. When we have a latrine we have to use much more water. Where will we get it?' When you are working, people will ask, people will tell you: 'Okay sir, I will build a latrine, but how can I get the water?' The health department doesn't have answers, because water is the responsibility of another department. See, the departmentalizing and compartmentalizing of issues . . . All the issues are interlinked. All rural issues are interlinked, whether it is caste, or the class structure, or the feudal structure. See, but to all these NGOs—it's different.

*That's one problem. And the other problem you were mentioning in the morning was this business of working on a project basis. If you can talk about that also . . .*

Project basis, yes. Our work on female infanticide is also a type of NGO project. But it is associated with the Tamil Nadu Science Forum. So, it was a mass movement. They have done so much work. Apart from the funding and everything, they are also publishing books and selling them among the people and collecting the money and private donations. Many others are putting in their energy after their jobs. This activity is interlinked. So, what's happened now with NGOs is that—ten or fifteen years ago, there was nobody ready to talk about street theatre. Now universities and drama schools concentrate on street theatre. In mass communication departments, there is a subject: 'Low Cost Media'. In Low Cost Media, street theatre is also one.

This was bound to happen, because of what we did in the street theatre movement in the 80s. The impact, its role among the people . . . Also, the murder of Safdar Hashmi. Now, everybody comes to see street theatre. Now all the NGOs are putting it into their projects. Suppose an NGO wants to do a street play, whether it is on AIDS or something else, they immediately call some theatre people and say: 'You know theatre? Then do street theatre.' He may be a theatre person. He may be very skilled in theatre, but may not know the language of street theatre, have any experience of the medium. Then people join together and evolve a play and perform it. About ten or fifteen performances. They have it documented. They get some feedback from the audiences. Old lady, small boy—everybody enjoyed it! See, assessing the street theatre is very difficult. Whenever you go to any village, you perform anything, they enjoy it, they have that kind of hospitality. It is because of their cultural belief: somebody comes to our village to do a performance, we have to respect them. We have to say good things about them. That is the reality. So, we cannot misunderstand this.

Their involvement is temporary, over a particular issue. They are not allowed to connect that issue with another issue. But in our street theatre practice, everything is related. Suppose we are talking about the immigrant problem, immediately we connect it to the Chennai Corporation's slogan of 'Vision of 2000: The beautiful city of Chennai'. All the middle-class people believe in, dream about, that project. But the NGO approach is not to challenge the hierarchy, government departments or anything like that. 'We are not for confrontation. We are for consensus'—that's what they say (*laughs*).

The process, the creative process has changed. When we are involved with a play, all the members of the group do not have the same view. But they are ready to agree with what is right in another's view. They try to work things out, and in the process they try to find a personal truth and personal identification. With the NGOs, the project has a two-year time span; of that, the street theatre project is for one or two months. They have to do environment building and assessing; the initial project should have one media strategy and at the end of the project they should have another media strategy. So, everything gets compressed. In one month they get together, make a play, perform it and everything. Even the feedback does not really affect the work—they go on to another project. They will not use that experience, what they have gained, the feedback they got from the audience when they performed. They

can't use it. That is a different issue, this is a different issue. That is an environmental issue, this is the infant mortality issue. Like that. Compartmentalizing issues. This is very tricky. And also, it's basically the art of protest gradually turned into the art of persuasion. But I firmly believe this approach will not last. Even NGOs will get tired of street theatre and go on to some other low cost strategy.

See, apart from theatre—you have to understand—most of the NGOs are concentrating on really relevant issues. Wherever political movements have failed, they are in that area. Tribals, problems of development, dams, irrigation—so many things. That should not be underestimated, that reality, the relevance of the issues. How they are doing it is a different question—making it a career. Particularly in the area of dalit development. So many things have taken place. This should be understood in the proper light. So, this kind of media strategy—it's a problem.

*What you are saying is that the issues, the areas, they are concentrating on are very important and relevant areas.*

Yes. Most of them. Political movements are trailing behind them. See, the government developed the Narmada dam and it became an NGO issue. At that time, it was not on the agenda of political parties.

*So, what's the point you're trying to make?*

That it should be understood in the political context.

*So what you are saying is that the NGOs are working in very important areas, but they don't have a political understanding—is that it?*

Yes, political understanding. See, it's a failure of the Indian political parties.

*Of the fact that there is more social service than political work?*

It started as social service and turned into political issues, political work. So it should be understood in a political context. They have to understand their limitations, also. In some way they are also affecting the overall impact of political activists. Yet they have done some good work, in the area of environment, in the area of literacy. Literacy is very important, but we have to assess how it was achieved, what's going on now. We gained something in literacy, total literacy. The Kerala model, Ernakulam model, was a very rational model. But that model is not followed very well. It became bureaucratic. After the total literacy campaign, within six months or a year, the neo-literates will become illiterate again, with no proper follow-up or post-literacy campaigns.

*So how far do you think this medium of using street theatre is effective? Do you feel that it can really bring about change?*

Regarding the literacy campaign in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Pondicherry, Andaman, Nicobar, and some other states—Karnataka, Andhra and Madhya Pradesh, I have some knowledge about the campaigns. Particularly Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Andaman–Nicobar, I am the coordinator for the street theatre. It's really become a mass cultural movement, all the street theatre jathas, what they call kalajathas. It has become a very powerful people's cultural movement. Street theatre is the engine which draws the literacy train. Kalajatha—that is the engine, it brings the literacy movement to the people. It has fulfilled that mission. (*Laughing*) Not a task—a creative task. It's fulfilled that mission.

See, after all that cultural work and everything, we don't have any frame or methodology or anything to continue or follow up. The post-literacy programme is marginalized at the block level. The government is not taking any interest.

*Can we return to your thoughts on form . . .*

Street theatre as a form, you know, is faced with so many questions from the people who practise other kinds of theatre. Jana Natya Manch also faces these kinds of questions. See, we have been doing street theatre only for the last twenty years or so. In Bengal street performance was present from the 40s, 50s, or even before that. But the modern connotations came in the late 60s, or the 70s—after the Vietnam war and everything. At that time, a new type of person came into the street theatre. Basically they were educated—from colleges and universities. They came to politics first. For their politics, they used street theatre. This is another phase of street theatre in India.

Now, we want to answer all the questions in our own way . . . For example, stereotyping—stereotyped



*Uram*, Chennai Kalai Kuzhu. Photo (bottom): Mohandas V. Badagara.

characters in street theatre. I agree with Mala [Hashmi's] view. Stereotyping is neither a sin nor a virtue of the street theatre. Not only stereotyping. There are caricatures, caricaturing the ruling, dominant figures. It is a political right to caricature. It gives energy. Things should be understood in this way. As for the dramaturgy itself, it's an experiment to widen the limitations of street theatre. At the same time, you can't go on authenticizing the characters. This is the influence of realistic theatre and film. So I find it a problem. But maybe it is a developing phase. We have to go through the trial and error . . .

Our emphasis in our practice is on narrative. Now, with the postmodern influence, this kind of narrative is branded a fascist narrative. This is a political question. We have to answer it. I do not broadly agree with all these postmodern notions in our practice. But, we have some very powerful narratives in our tradition, which give room to the participation of the audience and everything. That kind of narrative should be experimented with. And also, how to make them more vibrant by putting in images; using other theatrical language terms; making it dynamic. We are using images, some narratives, happenings. Actually, in our new production, *Mahanagar*, there is a character. But it's not a realistic character. It's a suggestion. You have to make a reality of images. By suggestion, codification, images, sound images, choreography, other things. That is our emphasis. In this latest play, also, we are trying to . . . there is a story line: they come from the village to search for a better life. All the people have migrated from the villages. While they are staying on the pavement, there are clashes. A young girl and boy meet when everyone is sleeping. They are not a couple, they are friends, lovers—without anyone knowing, they meet and talk. One person wakes up and finds out, and then everybody beats up that boy. And they are talking about pride. 'How can you . . . even if my daughter is ready to talk with you, how can you talk with her? What are your qualifications?' Actually there is an undertone of hierarchy—caste or something. We are not codifying that, because it becomes a problem. They are all immigrants. But they want to maintain their 'pride'. These attitudes suppress our people, externally and internally. So, our emphasis can only come by way of narrative. We are concentrating on this.

*Concentrating on the narrative form that you take?*

Yes. Also, on the subject itself—you have to concentrate on the attitudes, not just on the way it happens. The attitudes, the mental attitudes, the behaviour patterns, their approach to the issues. Very burning issues. These things are more important for us than characterization. There are so many characters in this play but we haven't pinpointed the characters. We have not engraved the characters in detail. In five or seven minutes, within that time they have to make the impact of the play. We are emphasizing that kind of thing. At the same time, it's in the open air. We do not concentrate on wordy conversations. We are not setting all the characters in a circular area, you know. In some street theatre, everything happens in a circular area, and they forget that the entire space is vacant. Also, we are not maintaining silence. Silence means no sound. Suppose you want a silence in the performance text—you have to emphasize it by some sound or instrument. Dramatically you have to create the silence. Also, we can't make a play without music and percussion.

*Music is important?*

As part of the narrative. Also, dramatizing the thing and interpreting the happening in different ways. Sometimes making an imagery of sound.

*Can you give an example?*

Imagery of sound means . . . In *Mahanagar*, in the beginning and end of the play, there is a poetic image. Four persons come together in the acting space. They exclaim about the beauty of the city. Glossy skyscrapers, and the beach, full of film actors going around, all the young girls with mini skirts, everything. They exclaim, 'Hey . . . Ngappaa!'—like that. Exclaiming, they fall down and they form a rock. Four actors become a rock. And another four persons, one by one, demolish all the illusions, myths built up by . . . There is not a drop of water even to clean our bums. We are fighting each other for space. Young girls are searching for a livelihood by picking up papers in a ditch—the police try to molest them. So many realities like that. And they try to remove the rock. At the end—there's a very popular symbol of Madras, the labour statue. It's in Madras Marina beach, it's a Roy Chowdhury sculpture. At the end of that sequence . . . first the four actors come and speak and become a rock and the other actors come and take a position—at the end we get the labour statue. At that time we have a sound, with the entire chorus singing. Sound. Sound. It ends with a siren, a factory siren. It is a freeze, and that sound relates to so many things. The city's grandness and also the suppression of the pain (hums the tune: *tan da na. Tan da ni da ni da ni da ni, tan da na*). And at the same time there is a factory siren, six or seven actors make it one by one. The visual is the labour statue. It takes two minutes. Two minutes of the freeze of the labour statue and sound. At the end of the play, also, we repeat the same thing. It is a very simple play. We are very fascinated with actors' bodies. We are not using any clothes on the upper part of the body. Because it gives some identity factors, the coarseness, the texture, the complexion, it gives some colour to break the monotony. Also, we use the body curves.

The process is very important to our work. How we make a play. How we evolve that play. Still, the questions come. What is the role of the street actor or director? What is the role of the playwright? In the

name of collectivism you are suffocating the individual. It will come. Yes, we have to answer these questions in our practice—try to answer them. So, we try to understand the role of the playwright, role of the director. There is a director, but that director's role is totally different in street theatre from any other theatre.

*In what way?*

See, he has to give, he has to create a condition of collective contribution. He has to act as a catalyst to a collective imagination. And he has to guide them to develop, to search for the performance text. Maybe he is the first person to lead them to search for what they perceive—in every way. It is his duty to inspire everything.

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## Theatre Log

### Street Theatre Groups: Brief Profiles

[In August 1996, we sent a series of letters to about thirty street theatre groups all over the country, inviting them to send in information about their activities. The idea was to present a nation-wide picture of such groups through brief profiles compiled from the responses we got. For whatever reason, only two groups responded to us—one from Kanpur and one from our home city, Calcutta. Below, we present their profiles, reconstructed from what they sent us.]

**Ekjut** was born on 31 October, 1984 in Kanpur, with 7 members, with the objective of promoting art and artists. Today they have 40 regular members and 6 artist members. Santosh Gupta, who has acted in innumerable plays and won quite a few awards as both actor and director, is the helmsman of Ekjut.

The group concentrates on promoting the Kanpur variation of the folk form Nautanki. They have performed all over India with excellent press and audience responses. The group organizes theatre workshops for newcomers and trains all participants for productions. They prefer street theatre over proscenium theatre as they feel that the latter needs more money, effort and energy. Street theatre can also relate better to the people in general, and creates a greater impact.

Ekjut feels that the theatre movement in the country is not healthy enough, chiefly due to a financial crisis. They think that the basic necessity for theatre today is the support of financiers and promoters of art and culture. They feel that there should be strong and effective networking among different street theatre groups so that it becomes possible to simultaneously propagate the same message all over the country. However, one of his complaints is that today most street theatre groups are affiliated to some political party or the other, which curbs freedom of expression and blunts the critical edge of street theatre as an effective weapon of protest.

Any person with interest in and commitment to performance can become a member of Ekjut.

**Notun Chehara** of Calcutta began performing on 28 November 1987. The nucleus was formed by students of the Department of Drama, Rabindra Bharati University. They were strongly committed to Marxist ideology and the Left Front Government in West Bengal. The group has grown from 5 founder members to 22 members today.

The impulse to protest, through street theatre, against the new National Education Policy that propagated model schools affordable only by the affluent elite, led to the birth of this group. Their aim was to add a new look to conventional theatre through reinterpreting the function of the stage and involving pedestrians in the process of theatre. They wanted to free political messages from the four walls of a proscenium to the open-air, under trees, in the fields, or on the pavements of city streets. They also try to liberate theatre from a fixed, rigid, expensive, and decorative stage and carry it to the most flexible, economic and unconventional stage, on the streets. Notun Chehara favours stark realism over illusionism, presenting socio-economic and political problems directly to people. They believe that the powerful bourgeois media constantly misguide the people with mis-reporting and wrong analyses, which is why it is necessary to reach people quickly and regularly with correct, scientific analyses of events, so that a materialistic, communist approach can develop in favour of the people's democratic revolution. They believe that street theatre can and should become a live daily of truths. Any attack on the working class, students or common people is picked up as a subject for plays that are prepared and produced almost extempore. Notun Chehara productions mostly highlight the danger posed by fascist forces and encourage positive action. The audience is expected to interact and take positive decisions.

When they started, all the members were university students who had no funds to even rent a rehearsal room. They used to rehearse in the open compound of a temple inside the Presidency Jail. When they were rehearsing *Ajker Singhasan* (Today's Throne), a play exposing the dictatorial nature of the Congress (I), some of the jail staff got enraged and threw them out of the temple compound. Notun Chehara started rehearsing on the fields inside the jail, but one winter evening they suddenly got drenched as cold water was poured on them from the terrace. They went to the superintendent of the jail to lodge a complaint, but he only had them thrown out of the jail compound by armed guards. Undaunted, the performers continued to rehearse on a pavement nearby and that remained their rehearsal place for more than two years. That junction came to be known as *natak more* (Theatre Crossing).

They have produced more than 30 street plays during the last 10 years. Scripts are usually

prepared immediately whenever anything of significance happens. Then it's just a question of rehearsals and on to the streets. Some selected spots are used for the shows at appointed hours. Performances are carried out on the streets, in market places, at factory gates, in front of workers' quarters, in university campuses, on open fields in villages, in temple halls or even within redlight areas. One of their most popular plays is *Safdar Marena* (Safdar Doesn't Die), scripted and performed immediately after Safdar Hashmi's death on 1 January, 1989. It's had over 800 performances since.

All the actors assemble at the spot, change into their costumes of a white kurta, blue trousers, and a red belt for the men, and a red-bordered sari for the women. They start singing lines from popular Hindi film songs to attract the attention of the passersby. Popular dance forms are also used. As a crowd gradually gathers, actors suddenly start the play. The rapport between the actors and the audience develops fast in the absence of any distance between them.

It hasn't always been smooth sailing for the troupe, as is to be expected for any theatre group that directly addresses politics. They have been attacked by Congress (I) goons, Sanatan Dal activists etc., and the performers have been injured in such clashes. But this has only made the group more determined to carry on.

Just as proscenium plays use a stage, set, props, lighting and make-up, street plays also use trees or shrubs, lamp-posts, buildings; even moving transport is sometimes utilized for staging street plays. In the course of their decade-long existence, Notun Chehara has experimented a lot with the street theatre form and the director claims that today they can understand the specificities that demarcate street theatre from other forms of theatre.

Ashis Dutta is the scriptwriter, director and guiding spirit of Notun Chehara. Ashis was fascinated enough by Utpal Dutt's street plays to set up a street theatre group of his own. He feels that street theatre may, in essence, be termed agitational theatre, a weapon of protest, through which the audience can be agitated and motivated directly and easily. Talking about the relevance of street theatre today, Ashis feels that the rise of street theatre, especially since the 70s, has been an effective challenge to proscenium theatre. The drama of ideas which replaced the drama of illusion had to search for a special stagecraft to propagate its ideas more directly to the audience. The one-penny audience thrown out of the costly stage-palaces once more crowded around street plays on its way to work or during breaks. The

intimate relationship possible between the actors and the audience created a confidence in even casual passersby about the honesty and sincerity of the theatre people. In India, millions of people live in rural areas with not enough proscenium stages to cater to their thirst for dramatic performances. By carrying their performances to the villages, street theatre groups can make up for this lack. Since both stage and screen have become too expensive for the common people to afford, street theatre offers them the ideal entertainment, with the advantage that it educates and informs, evokes and incites, even as it caters to their interest in theatrical performances. Notun Chehara feels that in countries like India, which are on the path of industrialization leading to a rise of the working class, street plays are more relevant than proscenium theatre from the socio-economic-political point of view; and that more experimentation is required to develop it into an effective weapon of mass communication.

They feel that networking among street theatre groups is essential so that sharing of views and experience becomes possible, and as a first step they have been organizing a street drama festival annually since 1990 on 12 April, the birthday of Safdar Hashmi, celebrated nationally as Street Theatre Day. A directory of street theatre groups in the country and a comprehensive book on the evolution of street theatre would help in its further development. A good journal on street theatre is also needed.

The other significant issue today is the severe lack of finances, and the group feels that solutions should be collectively worked out. Notun Chehara complains that the Left Front government is rather indifferent towards street theatre, as no steps have been taken to popularize this art form by promoting it at different state government festivals and functions. While there are award schemes for proscenium plays and artistes, no such schemes exist for street theatre activists. Street theatre groups are contacted during election campaigns only; the rest of the time the ruling Left's attitude towards them is totally apathetic.

### **National Open-Air Theatre Festival in Calcutta**

Steering clear of the debates that surround the terms 'street theatre', 'third theatre' etc., the Paschim Banga Natya Akademi and the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre jointly organized the first open-air national theatre festival in the state of West Bengal from 28 November to 2 December. The open space in the Rabindra Sadan/Nandan Complex was the venue.

The state Natya Akademi, founded in 1987, is

sponsored by the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs. The Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre has a programme of documentation, publication, archival collection and preservation. It also plays an active part in promoting cultural exchange between the states in the eastern region of the country.

The state Natya Akademi has been active in promoting and popularizing the open-air theatre tradition and this festival was the third phase of their project. The earlier two festivals, organized in Calcutta and Alipurduar, had been state level festivals, while this time groups from all over India were invited.

Over the five days, Calcutta's theatre lovers were exposed to open-air performance by 14 different groups from different parts of the country. Performances from the state included Yugagni's *Ami Meye* (I'm a Woman, directed by Abhijit Sarkar); Satabdi's *Michhil* (The Procession, director: Badal Sircar); Alternative Living Theatre's *Jaibati Kanya* (The Young Woman, directed by Probir Guha); Sudhamoy Samiti's *Bikalper Sandhane* (In Search of an Alternative, director: Swapan Das); Rural Living Theatre's *Andheri Raat* (The Dark Night, directed by Yusuf Mandal); Jana Sanskriti's *Gnayer Panchali* (A Rural Saga, directed by Sanjay Ganguly); IPTA, Sampratik Sakha's *Drishtipat* (The Look, director: Sankar Ghosh) and Pathasena's *Rakta Karabi* by Tagore.

Plays put up by teams from other states were *Tukke-par-Tukka* by Rang Vidushak, Bhopal (director: Bansi Kaul); *Jinhe Yakin Nahi Tha* by Jana Natya Manch, New Delhi (director: Sudhanva Deshpande); *Suno ek Kahani* by Natrang, Jammu (director: Balwant Thakore); *The Journey* by Chennai Kalai Kuzhu (director: Pralayan); *Nong Tarak Le* by Aryan Theatre, Imphal (director: Dr N. Premchand); and *Sadachar ka Tabiz* by IPTA, Patna.

The inaugural session was presided over by Sisir Sen, and Moloyashree Hashmi was the Guest-in-Chief. The very different styles and techniques brought forth through these various performances clearly demonstrated the richness of the open-air theatre tradition in the country. The audience response was certainly enthusiastic and vivacious enough to make veteran theater person Usha Ganguli, the coordinator of the festival, formally close it with the promise that next year there would be a week-long open-air theatre festival in the city.

### **Sombhu Mitra Memorial Lecture**

Calcutta's Natya Shodh Sansthan initiated the first Sombhu Mitra Memorial Lecture as part of its foundation day celebrations on 22 July with Dr Pabitra Sarkar's talk 'Sombhu Mitra, theatre-

thinker'. Samik Bandyopadhyay, president of NSS, began by saying that the Sansthan considered it best to plan an annual memorial lecture on Sombhu Mitra to underscore the continuing relevance of Mitra's quest for a theatre philosophy throughout the 60s—a project eventually abandoned.

Pabitra Sarkar spoke of certain aspects of Sombhu Mitra's theatre thoughts, culled from his various writings. The aspects he covered were: how Mitra differentiated between the concept of play (*natak*) and theatre (*natya*); what he considered to be the most important aspect of theatre and why; and the great master's thoughts on a national theatre for India. Referring to various articles by Mitra, Sarkar pointed out that he had insisted on the importance of demarcating theatre from plays and how the former, not the latter, were more his concern. Sarkar talked of how Mitra had always highlighted acting as the most intrinsic feature of theatre, with everything else—set, lights, costumes, props—as accessories. The references used by the speaker were extensive, but did leave this listener somewhat dissatisfied, as he stayed strictly with Mitra's words—it surely would have been more interesting if Sarkar had tried to relate Sombhu Mitra's theatre practice with his theatre thoughts, pointing out how he had tried to use and/or improve this element of acting that he considered so important to theatre, the specialities of the acting tradition set by him, and so on.

There is another aspect to consider, also. In the writings referred to by Sarkar, acting was definitely privileged by Mitra over all other elements, including direction, but there was an interesting shift in Mitra's thoughts on this issue. I quote here from Samik Bandyopadhyay's obituary on Sombhu Mitra, published in the *Indian Express* (New Delhi, 29 May 1997): 'In an interview six years after [Sisir Kumar] Bhaduri's death, Mitra told me: "He was perhaps the first real director that we had in our theatre. We couldn't have started if he hadn't been there. It is only because Sisir Babu created the total theatre in Bengal that we have been able to experience theatre at a level of deeper realization . . . The reference for theatre is perhaps altogether different for us who profited from exposure to those productions by Sisir Babu, and we remain grateful to him for that alone.'" Here we have an example of directorial intervention being foregrounded as something that determines theatre as a whole, in contrast to the statement that acting is the most important element. This interview had been published in its original Bengali version in *Parichay* (Poush 1372/January1965) issue.

It was much later, in his *Kake Baley Natyakala* (What Is the Art of Theatre? Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1991) that Mitra reversed his position,

putting acting above everything else, commenting that: 'The task of a director is to drag out good acting from within people . . . Someone acts as a guru, a teacher, to train novice artists. But that's not a director's work . . . Ideally, a director should work with high class actors only.' It's perhaps not unjustified to wonder why Sarkar chose to ignore this entire trajectory; he could surely have pointed out this change in Mitra's position, even if he didn't want to go into the reasons thereof.

While discussing the topic of a national theatre for India, Sarkar presented from Mitra's writings what he had in mind about a national theatre for India and just briefly referred to the fact that there had been a debate between them on this notion of Mitra's. Sombhu Mitra had, in fact, propagated the idea of what he called *leela* as the ideal mode of a truly Indian theatre and argued that Tagore's metaphorical plays provided a paradigm for this. In an unpublished Bengali article that Samik Bandyopadhyay has in his collection, Mitra argues [translation mine] : 'Let's not forget the special features of our Indian theatre . . . It doesn't matter if the sahibs don't understand it . . . Indian theatre has . . . different levels and extents. [Ranging] From very mundane everyday affairs to profound philosophical realizations. Everything is like a *leela*. Human beings running around, committing mistakes, quietening down again with some deep realization, all this is like a show, as if a dance is going on in the world, that is what I call *leela* . . . An unrestrained flow is what is the feature of our best dramatic resources. A kind of openness. Where there is not just hard work, not becoming as prickly as a porcupine as soon as one encounters another, but becoming oneself, so that an unrestrained, intimate form can evolve. That is when theatre acting assumes the form of *leela*. Very simple, very easy, but somehow as enthralling as an addiction.' Even without being a theatre scholar, it is not difficult today to understand how any monolithic concept of one national theatre for a pluralistic country like India could pose several problems. Sarkar, an eminent theatre scholar, had taken a counterposition on this issue in 1981. In an article in his *Natmancha Natyarup* (Proma, Calcutta, 1981), Sarkar had argued the following points:

a. It is not accurate to classify all European drama as action-oriented and objective as opposed to what Mitra emphasized as the contemplative aspect of Indian theatre.

b. Mitra's use of the concept of the national was not clear enough, as Indian nationality definitely has more than one dimension.

c. It's not clear as to whether political themes would have any place in Mitra's concept of Indian national theatre.

d. Mitra's concept of national purity is problematic, to say the least, as it is unthinkable that any form in a country's performative tradition can evolve without internalizing anything from traditions that flourish outside its geographical boundaries.

e. Folk traditions provide a much better source for evolving an all-Indian total theatre than Tagore's metaphorical plays.

Sarkar has commented in this same article that this particular notion of Mitra hasn't received the attention that it deserves. One is, therefore, bound to wonder why he left it totally undiscussed from any critical perspective in his lecture. Must paying homage entail uncritical eulogizing? Are debates somehow dishonourable?

**Paramita Banerjee**

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In tribute to  
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***N i j a b h u m e y***  
(*On Their Own Ground*)

with veteran actress  
**Ketaki Dutta**  
and  
**Chapal Bhaduri,**  
the renowned jatra performer,  
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semi-autobiographical play.

Ketaki Dutta, daughter of the famous actress Prova Devi, was trained by the great Sisir Bhaduri, and here she revisits moments from theatre history in the company of her brother Chapal Bhaduri, one of the best known female impersonators in the jatra. Together they play memorable pieces from the rich repertoire that is their personal and professional heritage, reconstructing a golden era of Bengali theatre for the audience of today.

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