A READER

MODERN INDIAN THEATRE

edited by NANDI BHATIA

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Modern Indian Theatre
An Introduction

It is important to see that India's tryst with modernity takes different (necessarily comparable) forms in different languages. It is essential for our self understanding that the unity of Indian cultural expression is achieved through the plurality of linguistic (in this case theatrical) expressions. For that reason the terminology of 'regional' is misleading when it comes to cultural production. Each mode is uniquely important. Each one is uniquely Indian. In that sense there is no regional theatre in India. There are several, equally valid and legitimate Indian theatres.

—G.P. Deshpande, 1999, p. 95

Since Javed Mallick's pessimistic reflections on the poverty of 'Theatre Criticism in India Today,' in 2000,[1] several studies have been published, which emphasize the inclusion of theatre in the theoretical and critical debates made possible by the increased emphasis on the links between nationalism, imperialism, and literatures from the colonized parts of the world. While suggesting these directions in theatre scholarship, they have also initiated inquiries into what constitutes modern Indian theatre, inevitably locating its changing and contested relationship to modernity in India's colonial and nationalist pasts, and post-colonial

[1] Javed Mallick, 2000, pp. 113–17. Mallick identifies Rustom Bharucha as one of the few writers 'who, through their writings, have tried to raise the standard of theatre scholarship in India'.

developments. Of note among the recently published studies are Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence* (2005) and Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays, and Performances* (2006). Dharwadker's book interrogates the trends and developments in post-Independence urban drama in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada in relation to its colonial past. Dalmia's work is remarkable for providing an in-depth analysis of such concerns as they developed in Hindi drama since the late nineteenth century during the Bharatendu Yug, continuing through the Jayshankar Yug in the 1920s, the modernist phase in the 1960s, and in the work of avant-garde women playwrights/directors of the 1990s. Other studies include Minoti Chatterjee's *Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Nationalism and the Bengali Stage* (2004), and Nandi Bhatia's *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (2004), along with anthologies of plays such as Tutun Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (2005), Erin Mee's *Drama Contemporary: India* (2001), and G.P. Deshpande's *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (2004). Together with earlier work such as Rustom Bharucha's *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theater of Bengal* (1983) and *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (1992), and Jacob Scrampickal's *Voice to the Voiceless: The Power of People's Theatre in India* (1994), this expanding corpus of critical work on Indian theatre is important for several reasons. First, it indicates a growing interest in Indian theatre history and points towards the need for more work that subjects this highly pluralistic and diverse field to critical scrutiny. Second, it emphasizes the political side of theatre that has received insufficient attention as compared to its aesthetic dimensions, highlighting modern Indian theatre as a terrain that has the potential to question and contest authoritarian structures through the use of aesthetic forms that have been creatively altered. In addition, it enriches and supplements the treatment of Indian theatre in books such as Gilbert and Tompkins' *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996), J. Ellen Gainor's *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance* (1995), and Brian Crow and Chris Banfield's *An Introduction to Post-colonial Theatre* (1996), which locate it within the comparative framework of

theatrical practices from a variety of sites in Africa, the Caribbean, South Asian and the settler colonies of Australia and Canada. While this larger comparative focus is both useful and necessary, it becomes imperative, as Gilbert and Tompkins themselves point out in *Post-colonial Drama*, that since Indian drama and theatre's 'history/practice is extremely complex, it is impossible to do justice to Indian drama in a broadly comparative study. Moreover, the varieties of drama, dance, languages, and cultures that have influenced Indian theatre are [far] too vast to consider in a text other than one devoted to just India' (p. 7).

Heeding such calls regarding the importance of theatre, the current volume assembles an archive of critical essays, excerpts, and theoretical and political statements written in English that reflect upon the changing visions for theatre since the late nineteenth century. Such an exercise acquires special relevance because the place of theatre in the literatures of modernity, Indian literature, and colonial and post-colonial studies is marked by ambivalence and marginality. On the one hand, since the late nineteenth century, theatre has remained central to social and political movements through anti-colonial plays that were subjected to censorship under the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876. It was also an important forum for progressive writers and political activists in the early twentieth century in many regions and has helped raise concerns in post-colonial India through institutions such as the National School of Drama (NSD) as well as through the efforts of fringe movements in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s onwards. This is true especially of street theatre. The thematic range of modern theatre includes the politics of the British Raj, conditions prevalent on tea and indigo plantations, workers' rights, famines, the 1947 Partition, psychosocial fragmentation, familial problems and urban angst, concerns with women's issues, dowry problems, and the rights of dalits, among other issues. These wide-ranging concerns have been addressed in a number of creative ways including mythological dramas, folk forms and rituals, historical revivals, transformed versions of Euro-American plays, notably of Shakespeare and Brecht, and through avant-garde experimentation. On the other hand, within the expanding corpus

of literary criticism on the literatures of India, it remains the genre that has received the least amount of critical attention.[2]

Although it is impossible to cover the entire terrain of modern Indian theatre in a single text, the pieces in the current volume speak about the many entanglements of traditional and European, classical, folk and ritualistic, and rural and urban forms and practices. In addition, they address the overlaps in colonialist, nationalist, and Orientalist positions that characterize and shape modern theatre. While representing a spectrum of perspectives including those of playwrights–directors themselves, important voices in theatre criticism and history, practice, and direction, as well as the less influential interjections that are nonetheless significant for understanding the demands made on theatre in the face of socio-political pressures and developments, the articles reveal the multi-faceted, hybrid, and contested formations of modern Indian theatre. The critical essays range from historical overviews to discussions of specific movements and moments in varied locations, languages, and socio-political contexts. Because of overlapping influences amongst various dramatic practices, they alter ways of seeing theatre strictly along linguistic or regional lines or neat divisions of Sanskrit, traditional, European, or folk theatre. Rather, they point towards the complicity of theatre historiography in promoting discrete and watertight divisions at specific political moments. Additionally, they address theatre's negotiation with the issues of class, caste, and gender, and the ways in which the nation came to be imagined from these varied perspectives at critical historical moments. Since performance constitutes a critical aspect of modern theatre, the articles in the current volume also address issues pertaining to the role of actors and the myriad meanings of scenery, performance spaces, architecture, and language. Overall, the articles confirm theatre's ambivalent and paradoxical relationship with modernity—both in terms of form and content. Remaining tied, as it did, to the national question, it represented contradictory positions, generated highly varied responses amongst practitioners, and developed unevenly

[2] Ananda Lal also makes this point in the 'Introduction' to *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, 2004.

across regions, localities, and languages. My introduction aims to provide a contextual history that enables an informed reading of the pieces in the current volume. This demands, at the outset, an unpacking of the changing meanings of the term 'modern' for modern Indian theatre.

RETHINKING THE 'MODERN'

Although scholars identify playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi), Badal Sircar (Bengali), Mohan Rakesh (Hindi), and Girish Karnad (Kannada) 'with creating a modern dramatic literature in India' (see Mee 2001), modern theatre's beginnings can be identified in the colonial encounter that resulted in the influence of Western and European models on local theatrical traditions. British theatre formed part of cultural life as early as 1757 when Bengal came under the rule of the East India Company, and saw a proliferation of playhouses, prominent among them being the Calcutta Theatre (built in 1775), the Sans Souci Theatre (opened in 1839), and Chowringhee Theatre (built in 1813), which flourished under the patronage of colonial officials. Initially restricted to the *sahib*s and *memsahib*s, theatrical activity spread among the local literati and men of wealth who began staging European plays at local theatres, schools, and college stages and, by the late nineteenth century, resulted in the emergence of a stream of urban drama that was influenced by Anglo-European traditions. Even though, as Partha Chatterjee points out, it remained the 'least commended' aesthetic form as compared to the novel and poetry, by the late nineteenth century, theatre had developed into a broad-based entertainment in urban centres such as Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay and attracted the largest middle-class audience (Chatterjee 1993, pp. 7–8). With the simultaneous intensification of an anti-colonial movement whose ideas permeated the theatrical scene, modern theatre came to be marked by several paradoxes. Partha Chatterjee identifies such paradoxes in the context of theatre in Bengal that acquired its modernity in the middle of the nineteenth century from two models: the modern European drama, which had found a strong foothold in Bengal by this time, and Sanskrit drama, 'now restored to a reputation of classical excellence because of the praises showered upon it by Orientalist scholars from Europe'

(Chatterjee 1993, p. 7). The paradox, asserts Chatterjee, lay in the aesthetic domain of drama: 'The literary criteria that would presumably direct the new drama into the privileged domain of a modern national culture was . . . clearly set by modular forms provided by Europe' because 'critics schooled in the traditions of European drama' did not necessarily approve of local conventions (ibid., pp. 7–8). Rakesh Solomon's assessment of 'modern Indian theatre' in the current volume provides detailed insights into such paradoxes. He classifies the three phases of theatre history since 1827 as the Orientalist phase beginning in the late eighteenth century, the high nationalist phase (1920–47), and the post-Independence nationalist phase. As attention came to be paid to those three phases, the development of 'modern' theatre through European contact saw a turning back to Sanskrit theatre, which came to be revalued and revived as 'classical' because of nationalist aspirations and Orientalist praise. This theatre, argues Solomon, 'sought to project both modernity and Indianness in its style and subject matter, and thus constituted a fundamental component of the Indian intelligentsia's grand nationalist enterprise to invent, on the one hand, a pan-Indian nation-state that was modern' but which simultaneously attempted to bring about an 'imagined' nation into existence through a return to ancient Hindu traditions. The 'modern' playwright's problem in recreating this 'Indianness' as a result of colonial and imperialist influences constitutes, in G.P. Deshpande's words, a political issue—political because 'the acceptance or partial acceptance or rejection of [post-Enlightenment] modernity involves political choices and political acts' (1999, p. 91).

The notion of modernity played out into multiple spheres of theatrical life, including venues of performance, theatre architecture, patronage, space, lighting, proscenium stages, the commercialization of theatre through the sale of tickets, and even the shift from the actor-manager role to that of director. For Bharatendu Harishchandra, the founding father of modern Hindi theatre, modernity signified plays modelled after European drama in formalistic terms and scenography (Dalmia 2005). According to Vasudha Dalmia, Harishchandra saw the chief characteristic of the modern as the 'repeated change of scene, a narrative

segmentation that is implemented by the recurrent shift of the painted backdrop' (Dalmia 2005, p. 36). For the Parsi theatres, which peaked between the 1880s and the 1930s and contributed to the 'first "modern" phase of Indian theatre' (Kapur 2006, p. 91), modernity was channelled in the creation of new theatrical models through the use of traditional performances on European style proscenium stages. In doing so, they attempted to achieve a consciously viable commercial stage and to create expectations about viewing pleasures among consumers that became 'the very foundation of the entertainment business—including the Indian cinema industry' (ibid., pp. 87–8). In terms of themes, the Parsi theatres' modernity derived from their international eclectic and hybrid repertoire of stories and forms that included the Persian *Shah Nama*, *Arabian Nights*, nineteenth century courtesan culture, stories from Shakespeare, and Victorian melodrama.

While assessing the first five decades of the twentieth century, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar has argued in 'Drama in Modern India' that the social reform and anti-colonial movements of a whole century and the two World Wars shaped the themes of modern drama in the various languages of India. On the literary and critical front, the influence of Marxism, psychoanalysis, symbolism, and surrealism were some influences that dominated the early twentieth century. Besides, Iyengar also pays attention to the actor as a critical presence who 'helps to galvanize ... [the play] into life' (ibid., p. 8). In Iyengar's words, 'The diverse illusions of the written word, spoken voice, vivid gesture, scenic display, and riot of colour and sound somehow create life in the theatre, and the imaginative actor's part is almost as important as the creative dramatist's' (ibid., p. 9). Iyengar thus makes the actor a central feature of modern drama, emphasizing that the modernity of the actor is also being shaped, in part, by the colonizing influence. While he gives the example of a late nineteenth century Madras actor, G.C.V. Srinivasachari, on whom the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, the then Governor of Madras, bestowed the title of 'an Indian Garrick' for a superb performance in *Shakuntala* (ibid., p. 9), such titles, which are often used to bolster the reputation of theatre, the director, and the playwright, played an important role in according modernity to theatre. Thus, it was not uncommon for Girish Chandra Ghosh

to be called the 'Garrick of the East' and Agha Hashr Kashmiri of the Parsi Urdu theatre as the 'Indian Shakespeare.'[3] The concerns pertaining to the actor, as evident in Bellary Raghava's essay in this book, extended to demands for better infrastructural, material, sanitational, educational, and changing facilities for the actor. The 'language of modern Indian drama' during these decades ranged from 'the inane to the near-sublime, from the smutty to the philosophical, from coruscations of wit in the Anglo-Telugu of Gurzada Apparao or Anglo-Kannada of T.P. Kailasam to the gleams of poetic symbolism in Tagore's best plays' (ibid., p. 10). Music too, as Ananda Lal points out in his essay in this book, became an important modernist device, as seen in Parsi musicals, in B.P. Kirloskar's Marathi plays, and in Tagore's works, the 'pivotal figure of modern Indian theatre' who 'inserted snatches of Western music in a fully operatic creation' alongside classical *ragas*. In one way or another, the modernity of theatre involved constant referencing and response to western and European drama as evoked by playwrights of different generations, among whom Shakespeare functioned as a key model. In Tagore's challenge to realism in his essay 'The Stage,' included in this book, the modern came to be tied into his critique of cultural nationalism, of religious orthodoxy, and innovative use of metatheatre, structural innovation, and stylistic experimentation.

MODERNITY AND NATIONALISM

Evidently, theatre could not be disentangled from the idea of the national; rather, it became deeply entrenched in nationalist thought and its accompanying contradictions. It is possible to identity the beginnings of a 'national' theatre in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the production of a number of anti-

[3] See entry on Girish Chandra Ghosh in Lal, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, pp. 131–3. According to Mohammed Hasan (1964), Agha Hashr (1879–1935), who adapted Shakespearean plays in Urdu and renamed his theatrical company as the 'Indian Shakespearean Theatrical Company' in 1912–13, was 'fond of the title Indian Shakespeare, which stuck to his name for a long time, due either to his eminence among Urdu playwrights or his services in popularization of Urdu translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays' (Hasan 1964, p. 133).

colonial plays in Bengal such as Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan* (*The Indigo Mirror*, 1860), and with Harishchandra's plays in the Hindi belt, in particular Banaras and its surrounding regions. These plays attracted the attention of the British government and were partially responsible for the passage of the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876. Emerging soon after the 1857 Mutiny and the Indigo Revolt of 1859–60, the political themes in these plays showed seeds of discontentment even before the formation of a full-blown nationalist movement. But what precisely did a 'national' drama mean in the face of modern ideas and influences? For nineteenth century Bengal, national theatre meant a critique of colonialism that ultimately relied on colonial models. Addressing the connections and contradictions of the nationalist urge to define an autonomous identity and selfhood, which resorted to an imitation of British/colonial models, including architecture, stage design, and the proscenium arch, Sudipto Chatterjee, in his essay in the current volume, unpacks the 'components of nineteenth century Bengali theatre that invoked the imagined Hindu glory of India while situating it in the modernity of colonial Victorianism.' Other contradictions included the exclusion of Muslims from the parameters of the nation and the erasure of women from the plays' thematic concerns.

The anti-colonial sentiment, which intensified during the early decades of the twentieth century, brought along with it a renewed nationalistic energy in theatre that was often encoded in mythological and historical plays, as seen in the plays of Radheyshyam Kathavachak and Jayshankar Prasad in Hindi, respectively, right through the 1920s and 1930s. Suffused with a spirit of a revivalist Hinduism, the 'national' in mythological plays, dominant in Hindi and Marathi drama, included the consolidation of religious values and *dharma* (moral duty) towards the nation that demanded anti-colonial action. Simultaneously, though, drama saw the development of a strong social vision that addressed class issues and themes regarding 'untouchability,' which, in turn, shaped visions of a national theatre.

In south India, as Theodore Baskaran points out in his essay in the current volume, anti-colonial plays sought their inspiration from colonial excesses that were to take on a special significance

for political activists. Baskaran presents an analysis of the ways in which the stage in south India 'was used as an instrument of propaganda by the nationalists from 1919 right up to 1945' giving 'intellectual and emotional support' to the nationalist movement and initiating the politicization of the masses. Examining the use of censorship and regulation of drama through Section 10 of the Dramatic Performances Act, he provides a detailed analysis of drama companies operating in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (in places such as Madras, Guntur, Madurai, Coimbatore, for example) during this period and the different dramatic modes—historical, mythological, social, documentary—through which subjects such as the Jallianwallah Bagh tragedy, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience movements, and the execution of Bhagat Singh, came to be handled.

With the rise of Left movements in the 1940s, the idea of a 'national' theatre came to be located in the context of class struggle by groups such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). Malini Bhattacharya's essay in the current volume provides insights into the work of the IPTA in the north-east region and along with Atamjit Singh's discussion of the IPTA in Punjab, also to be found here, points to the force with which the IPTA urged a return to folk forms in languages that belonged to the 'people' as spelt out in the IPTA manifesto itself.[4] Similar to the visions of the IPTA, Baldoon Dhingra, in the piece included here, highlights the need to address social problems by paying attention to the vernacular languages, arguing that 'to suggest a single language for the National Theatre is to limit its scope, to deny to it the essential universality which is implicit in the word "national."' And even though for Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a nationalist activist, and organizer of the 'Indian National Theatre' in 1953, the idea of a 'national' theatre was inspired by an international vision influenced by the international socialist movements of the time, she identifies the roots of theatre

[4] Bhattacharya extends this early discussion to the question of women performers in the Bengali IPTA in a later article titled, 'In Search of New Roles: Women Performers in Bengali IPTA (1943–1951)'. *Theatre India*, 2 November, 2000: 86–92. For a broader overview of IPTA, see Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance*.

in India's dance ('*nritya*') traditions and connects them to festivals that ostensibly originated in 'nritya.' Despite such identification, Chattopadhyay also finds limitations in the traditional theatre, which 'should be the background to give tone and colour to the modern experiments' yet 'keep forever awake in us, a keen sense of discernment to ... aspire for a noble standard and strive for something even greater.' To this end, a 'national theatre', she argues in her essay in this book, should 'take a variety of shapes as experience has shown in other countries, even Russia, in spite of its uniformity of ideology' and should provide the 'widest scope and greatest play' to life's 'variety of expressions.'

POST-INDEPENDENCE, THE ANTI-MODERN, AND THE 'THEATRE OF ROOTS'

After Independence, the need for a theatre that addressed the concerns of the independent nation became the subject of intense discussion at the 1956 drama seminar, in which Chattopadhyay was involved. As Aparna Dharwadker asserts, its participants suggested an Indian theatre of the future as one that would follow 'synthesis', which she identifies as 'the middle ground between mere revivalism and imitative Westernization, which would reconcile pre-colonial traditions with the sociocultural formation of a modern nation-state' (2005, p. 43). The seminar's aspirations were fulfilled with the establishment of the NSD in 1959 as the national institution of theatre. Yet, the simultaneous revival of Sanskrit drama further set the stage for an anti-modern stance, which emphasized the connection to the ancient past as an important ingredient of national theatre for restoring an 'authentic' Indian tradition, which, in the nationalistic post-colonial imagination, had been interrupted by colonialism. Thus, 1956 saw the production of Bhasha's play *Swapnavasavadathha* in Hindi (directed by H.V. Gupte) by the Song and Drama Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. Following this, 1957 saw the revival of Sanskrit theatre through the initiation of the Kalidasa Festival of Ujjain. This trend was to continue in the 1960s with Shanta Gandhi's production of *Madhyamavyoyoga* in Hindi with students of the NSD, which,

in Nemi Chandra Jain's words, represented an attempt 'to explore various processes for authentically presenting a Sanskrit play to modern audiences' (Jain 2003, p. 77). Sanskrit plays continued to be performed in Hindi during the following decades, aided by the Kalidasa Festival, which, in 1974, invited eminent directors from different parts of the nation 'to produce a Sanskrit play in the original or in any modern Indian language at Ujjain, or with their own troupe and bring it to the annual Kalidasa Festival' (ibid., p. 79). Encouraged by the festival, between 1974 and 1986, prominent directors, including Nadira Babbar, K.N. Pannikar, Ratan Thiyyam, and M.K. Raina, staged several Sanskrit plays.[5] Jain asserts that there 'was hardly an important director or group in any language in the country who had not attempted to produce one or more Sanskrit plays during these decades' (ibid., p. 12) and revive the Sanskritic tradition for contemporary Indian drama and its audiences.

Such trends and developments initiated a movement towards a return to the 'theatre of roots' that sought its energy in local traditional, ritual and folk performances. Jain identifies in this return an exploration of a 'distinct identity' through not just a rediscovery of 'the two thousand years old Sanskrit drama, production methods and *natyashastra*' but also through 'the traditional and folk theatre surviving in different forms and languages all over the country' (ibid., p. ix). Such revival, argues Jain, represented a rejection of the 'servile imitation of the decadent Victorian and semi-realistic moulds of theatre devised for entertainment or superficial social reforms, or a mindless distortion of the Western dramatic and theatrical practices' (ibid., p. ix). Continuing through the 1960s and 1970s, this movement reached its high point in the 1980s when Suresh Awasthi, General Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi during the period 1965–75, strongly propagated that modern theatre return to its 'roots.' According to Richard Schechner, and as argued by Awasthi in his article in this book, Awasthi's aim was to 'put modern artists in touch with their roots. He wanted to make sure that traditional

[5] For detailed information and analysis of the productions, see Jain, *Asides*, pp. 74–92.

arts were not isolated in their practices, becoming mere living national treasure' (Schechner 2005, p. 10). In Schechner's view, the works of innovators such as B.V. Karanth, Rattan Thiyyam, Kavalam Pannikar, Mohan Agashe, and others 'are not conceivable without Awasthi's vision' (ibid., p. 10), and he saw Awasthi's tireless efforts as a move towards creating 'a kind of Indian national theatre—actually a plurality of theatres that combined traditional and modern elements ... where village and urban cultures existed both independently and in combination' (ibid., p. 10). A notable outcome of the roots movement that emphasized an anti-modern outlook, according to Dharwadker in her article in the current volume, was, that 'in the same measure that the traditional and the folk ... [were] invested with originality, creativity, authenticity, and Indianness, the forms of contemporary theatre' such as Western style realistic theatre 'that [did] ... not participate in the revivalism movement [were] ... reduced to inconsequence.' Another consequence of the roots movement was that the attempt to define the complexity of modern theatre through the folk was simultaneously re-appropriated in the 1980s, especially through government-sponsored Festivals of India. Propagating, as Dalmia argues, 'the image of an India immortal' this kind of appropriation began 'to draw upon the arts in a way that once again sought to bring the classical and the folk as timeless categories, as part of a "past that efficiently dislodges the present in staking its claims over the nation's art"' (Dalmia 2005, p. 200). This, however, is not something that escaped attention of politically alert playwrights. Mahesh Dattani's 'Dance Like a Man' (1994) effectively deals with the politics of such appropriation through Lata's preparations for a government function and the manipulation of reviews by her ambitious dancer-mother in the hope of being selected to showcase the 'Indian' dance during a performance at the Festival of India in Canada.

As well, the 'roots' movement itself came to be highly contested even by those who did return to 'Indian' forms. Such contestation became most visible at the Sangeet Natak Akademi's 'Nehru Centenary Festival' in 1989, which ostensibly brought together a gathering that 'had never happened in modern Indian theatre during the last century' to discuss the 'Retrospective of Modern

Indian Theatre' (Awasthi 1990, p. 185). While the festival showcased plays by playwrights such as Bijan Bhattacharya, Utpal Dutt, Girish Karnad, and Pannikar, in eight languages, in order to represent modern Indian drama as a composite identity negotiated across linguistic and regional barriers, the fissures became visible due to the absence of major playwrights including Habib Tanvir, Ebrahim Alkazi, and Badal Sircar, and the non-participation of the NSD Repertory.[6] Such fissures gestured towards the need to recognize the drawbacks of cultural nationalism. In decolonized societies, as Frantz Fanon points out, while cultural nationalism serves as a tool for emphasizing questions of identity and tradition as central to nation-building, it is not without pitfalls. It can result in blindness to internal dissensions, which erases the contradictions of post-colonial nation-states and reinvents cultural forms and identities in static and cohesive terms (1968). Indeed, as Mee argues, the return to roots did represent a decolonizing gesture (2001, p. 2) through the rejection of colonial models and offered a critique of the social and political problems of the nation. Yet playwrights did so by redefining the modern in ways that recognized the modern and the traditional, the urban and the rural, and the classical and the folk as being mutually influencing and inseparable. As Girish Karnad asserts in the context of his drama, 'Even to arrive at the heart of one's mythology, the writer has to follow signposts planted by the West' (ibid., p. 95) and negotiate 'tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved' (ibid., p. 93). Kathryn Hansen's work on the inclusion of Nautanki's theatrical elements such as

[6] For a report on the 1989 festival see Induja Awasthi, 1990, pp. 183–9, and Kavita Nagpal, 1991. The fissures also became evident in a letter in TDR that responded to Induja Awasthi's report about the festival by attacking the festival as depoliticizing, safe, and 'an obscure expedition of medievalism containing in its objective an elite concern for "revivalism" and "ritualism".' The writer, Suman Mukherjee of Calcutta, accused the proponents of the 'roots' movement of practising 'their rituals in the front of the city elite and the foreign delegates in the name of "Indianness"' (Mukherjee 1991, p. 20).

farce, poetic meters, songs, dances, commentary, and chorus, along with the incorporation of satire, allegory, and realism in the plays of Habib Tanvir, Shanta Gandhi, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, and Laxmi Narayan Lal, among others, has shown how they juxtapose the 'high' and the 'low' and resort to linguistic diversity to address class and caste politics, and everyday social injustices (Hansen 1983). To this end, Diana Dimitrova's article in the current volume introduces, through a discussion of Western realism's relationship to Hindi drama, ways in which notions of modernity occupied Hindi drama through the various phases of its development since the late nineteenth century.

Even the work of playwrights/practitioners of the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, a period identified as the 'Renaissance of Indian Theatre' (Bandopadhyay 1998, p. 426)[7] reveals intense experimentation that saw, on the one hand, the collapse of the well-made play, yet, on the other hand, simultaneously engaged with Western forms, especially Brechtian, in combination with local forms and conventions and returned to the folk in ways which revealed overlaps with the proponents of the 'roots' movement. In order to engage in an active critique of the nation through its theatrical forms, K.N. Pannikar experimented with traditional dance idioms from Kerala, Habib Tanvir brought folk actors from Chhattisgarh, and Karanth (Karnataka) used Yakshagana in his drama. At their best, says Samik Bandopadhyay, 'the directors interacting with the traditional and/or folk theatres sought to go to the core of these forms, to catch their rhythms or motivating energies, gestural idioms, occasionally formal conventions or

[7] Bandopadhyay also provides the following list of those who contributed to this phase: Satyadev Dubey, Rajinder Nath, Mohan Maharishi, Vijaya Mehta, M.K. Raina, Bansi Kaul, Shyamanand Jalan, Ajitesh Banerjee, Shyamlal Ghosh, Asit Bose, Bibhas Chakraborty, Prasanna, B.V. Karanth, K.N. Pannikar, Shanta Gandhi, Jabbar Patel, Shriram Lagoo, Amol Palekar, Pravin Joshi, Ratan Thiyam, H. Kanhailal, Habib Tanvir, with Shombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, and E. Alkazi. Other contributions came from the first new generation of playwrights, notably Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mohit Chattopadhyay, Chandrasekhar Kambar, Manoj Mitra, Utpal Dutt, G.P. Deshpande, Mahesh Elkunchwar and older playwrights such as Bijan Bhattacharya, Adya Rangacharya, and C.T. Khanolkar continued to contribute to the new drama.

devices, and use them to convey a modern sensibility at work' (Bandopadhyay 1998, p. 427). The focus, he argues, was on 'changing human relationships in changing times, revealing in a sense the history of modern India in the explication of densely loaded texts' (ibid.), and he cites Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*, Patel's *Ghasiram Kotwal*, and Kanahilal's *Kabui Keioiba*, as important examples of this shift. In the excerpt presented in the current volume, Utpal Dutt recommends a theatrical form that is elaborate in scenery and spectacles, which are inspired by the 'Yatras' and local myths of revolutionary heroes, emphasizing them as important elements in a play that connect with the audience and show 'something worthwhile is being done by way of new theatre.'

And even as playwrights embraced cultural roots, they simultaneously critiqued them. In her article in the current volume, Pankaj K. Singh discusses how the use of legends of the Panjab and myths in the post-colonial phase of Panjabi drama involved a critique of local cultural traditions that confronted, questioned, subverted, and rejected dominant ideologies, especially those concerning women. Additionally, the energy of the 1960s and 1970s recast theatre through an experimentation not only with form but also with space, especially in the work of Badal Sircar who initiated his 'Third Theatre' and later called it the 'Free Theatre' (economically free with its no-ticket policy and rejection of sponsorship), in order to deal with themes 'ranging from anti-social to state to nuclear exploitation, particularly as practised in the perpetuation of the rural–urban divide, and the deliberate 'denial' of the village in the persistent valorization of the metropolis and the cataloguing of its ills and problems; and the evil of religious obscurantism and intolerance' (Bandopadhyay 1998, p. 427). Such developments also initiated, in the 1980s, discussions about the inter-culturalism of Indian theatre, which shifted to discussions of the place of Indian theatre in the world (Bharucha 1992).

Theatrical experimentation also disrupted the elevated status accorded to European drama and its conventions through local representations. Productions of Shakespeare in different languages and locales, for example, as pointed out by Jyotsna Singh in her essay in this book, acquired different meanings ranging from having 'originated in a desire to imitate the English culture' to grassroots

versions, which took into account class issues and rejected the conventions of the proscenium stage, suggesting 'both admiration and ambivalence' towards English plays and Shakespeare. Singh provides examples of such ambivalence through a discussion of Utpal Dutt's Jatra style *Macbeth*, a point that finds further support in Atamjit Singh's article in the current volume, which reinforces that modern Panjabi theatre was influenced more by Western and Shakespearean theatre than Sanskrit theatre. Such deep-rooted influences of European drama have led scholars such as Dharwadker to rightly caution against the simplistic rejection of modernity as a 'Western phenomenon.' Critiquing arguments that insist upon the revival of traditional theatre as a restorative act of recovering precolonial forms interrupted by colonialism, she argues in her essay in this collection that such claims, which call for a rejection of 'modern' theatre as un-Indian and view it as a colonial legacy that compromised indigenous forms, have resulted in new mythologies, generated new hierarchies, and 'obscured the actualities of post-Independence theatre.' And so, she goes on to assert, 'to reject modernity in theatre as an unacceptable legacy, one would logically also have to reject modernity in other forms of social and cultural organization.' Any critique of modernity as being un-Indian is 'riddled with inconsistency, misrepresentation, and contradiction.'

What these inconsistencies also expose is that modernity in theatre spread unevenly across different regions of the nation. In some places, as Ananda Lal points out in his essay in this book, it reached only in the mid-twentieth century thereby allowing the pre-modern and the post-modern to co-exist. Satya Prasad Barua's analysis in the current volume, of the development of the proscenium stage and 'theatrical activities of the modern type' in Assam, including the use of wings, costumes, stage lighting, music, acting conventions, and themes, points out the uniqueness of such phenomena.

LANGUAGE POLITICS

Another point of contention in debates on modern theatre has been the question of language. According to Iyengar, drama in English, even before Independence, had to contend with

difficulties concerning the audience and location, restricted as it was primarily to cities, towns, and universities. And even though English language theatre proliferated during the nineteenth century, especially in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, the upshot of this growth was 'the rise of modern drama in Marathi and Gujarati ... in the face of the challenge from vernacular dramatic activity' (Naik 1977, pp. 182–3). As theatre gained momentum during the early decades of the twentieth century through organizations such as the IPTA, Chattopadhyay's Indian National Theatre, Ebrahim Alkazi's Theatre Unit, and the Bharatiya Natya Sangha, an affiliate of the World Theatre Centre of UNESCO, none of them was 'devoted exclusively to drama in English' (ibid., p. 183). Even the first Five Year Plan after Independence, which 'encouraged the performing arts as an effective means of public enlightenment' and saw the founding of institutions such as the NSD, Rukminidevi Arundale's Kalakshetra at Adyar, Madras, Mrinalini Sarabhai's Darpan Academy of Performing Arts in Ahmedabad, and theatre departments in universities including those of Baroda, Calcutta, Punjab, Annamalai, and Mysore provided far fewer opportunities to English drama (ibid., p. 184). Also, NSD's interest in promoting a 'national theatre' through translations of plays from other languages into Hindi further marginalized English language drama. Sometimes, according to Jain, plays were staged in Hindi even before being staged in the original language, a trend that continued and made Hindi theatre a kind of 'national' theatre among stageable plays. Such linking of theatre through Hindi made an enormous contribution towards the 'centralization of theatre with all its advantages and drawbacks' (Dalmia 2005, p. 172). While the advantages included giving regional language plays such as *Tughlaq* a national audience, among the drawbacks were the subsumption of the regional under the rubric of the national promoted by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (the National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama, established in 1953 in Delhi), and the NSD, which also undertook the task of conserving the 'folk' traditions in reified terms. To this end, critics such as Bandopadhyay saw the setting up of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the annual Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards as 'the first attempt at an institutionalization of theatre as a national experience' and

the setting up of the NSD as the 'second step in the same direction' (Bandopadhyay 1998, p. 423).[8]

Despite the success of playwrights such as Asif Currimbhoy and Gurcharan Das, due to the lack of enough patronage and rejection of English as the language of the elite and a colonial import that was therefore not 'Indian' enough, English language theatre came to be dependent on the translation of plays written in vernacular languages into English, notably those by Karnad, Sircar, and Tendulkar.[9] Nilufer Bharucha's article in the current volume shows, through the example of Gieve Patel and Cyrus Mistry's plays, how original drama in English remains on the margins as it is not seen as being commercially viable and is often 'ignored by the press in favour of Broadway imports and Shakespearean plays put up by visiting theatre companies, sponsored by the British Council.' She sees this tendency as reflective of a colonized mentality that 'often survives the end of empire.' Yet, as Mahesh Dattani points out in his article in this collection, a plural and culturally diverse society requires a 'pluralistic approach' that moves away from the conventional way of 'defining by linguistic and regional divides,' a way which, in his estimation, 'does not work for creating artistic identities' or defining what is 'quintessentially Indian.' Dattani's own English language theatre and the plays that Nilufer Bharucha analyses insert the social realities of the urban Indian ethos into national life, providing, through their focus on urban communities, a critique of caste politics and communal and intra-community exclusions. Significant in this regard is the attention Bharucha brings to the indigenous Warlis in coastal Gujarat in plays such as *Mister Behram* (1987), tribes 'who are outside the pale of the Hindu

[8] However, as Bandopadhyay points out, it would also be useful to get a greater sense of the relationship of the NSD, in terms of its facilities and theatre training, to regional theatres where technically trained actors are regularly faced with a paucity of sponsorships, funding support, and even performance venues (with there not being enough theatres to perform in).

[9] Tracing the beginnings of English drama to 1831 with the publication of *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta*, C.L. Khatri and Kumar Chandradeep argue that despite the presence of a substantial body of drama in English, its reputation rests on the translation of regional language plays into English (2007).

caste system' and were displaced by the newly arrived Parsis in their villages. In terms of communication, the plays resort to an Indian English idiom, reinforcing the advantages that Gurcharan Das identifies in the use of colloquial expressions such as 'kya yar,' 'chalo,' and 'Bhai' (cited in Naik 1977, p. 192). Das sees the use of such expressions as speech acts that have the potential to bring about 'a revolution in spoken English' (ibid., p. 192). To this end, Christopher Balme's article in the current volume is useful insofar as he describes English language drama (original and in translation) as a process of 'transcreation' and 'syncretism' that constitutes 'a dramaturgical method which can bridge cultural dichotomies and can look on either tradition, free of aesthetic hierarchies and normative constrictions, as the raw material from which to fashion works utilizing forms, codes, and conventions from both traditions.'

POLITICS OF CASTE

The politics of caste and social exclusion which occupy modern Parsi drama produced in English (Nilufer Bharucha) were also critical to plays such as Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971), Tendulkar's *Kanyaadan* (1983), and Kusum Kumar's *Suno Shefali* (*Listen Shefali*, 1978), for example. The latter deals with the angst of a 'Harijan' girl, her questioning of self-worth, and her refusal to rely on the charity of the upper-caste. Yet caste related issues acquired a greater force and centrality in the work of Dalit theatre groups, amongst which Datta Bhagat's play *Routes and Escape Routes* is considered 'the first modern Dalit play to reach a large and diverse audience' (Mee 2001, p. 4). The term Dalit, which refers to a 'realization' towards equality, in the words of Dangle (ibid., p. 16) foregrounds a politics of social reconstruction and change, which draws on the teachings and philosophy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotibhai Phule. According to Ramnath Cavhan, a Dalit theatre writer and activist, 'Implict in these [Dalit] writings is a thought of social change, of destroying the caste system and of national integration.'[10] Although it began in Maharashtra, Dalit theatre

[10] http://georgs-home.com/dalitrcavhan.html. Accessed on 24 February 2006.

spread to Delhi, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Goa, and Uttar Pradesh (UP). In UP, it contributed to the mobilizational campaigns of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) through the recovery and revival of stories of 1857 *viranganas* (women warriors) such as Jhalkaribai, which are staged through popular theatre to highlight their roles in the nation's struggle for liberation against colonial rule in 1857 and to connect their contributions to the present (Narayan 2006 and Gupta 2007). S. Armstrong's article in the current volume addresses the issue of caste subordination in a Tamil play and examines how caste politics add another layer to theatre by questioning oppressive systems and interrogating the elitism prevalent in certain kinds of theatre practices. Discussing *Bali Adugal*, which is structured around an inscription of human sacrifice and connected through a conversation between Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Dr Mulk Raj Anand—a conversation extracted from Ambedkar's book *The Annihilation of Caste*—Armstrong studies the politics of literary and cultural acts of translation, and the relevance, importance, and challenges involved in translating Dalit texts into English and foreign languages. While the circulation of these texts through translations in other languages ensures a wider dissemination of their social messages and critique of caste, class, and national politics, the politics of translation are ultimately embedded in power-relations and impose a multi-layered cultural sub-text, which the writer (in this case the author of the article who translated the play) has to contend with and bring to attention.

WOMEN AND MODERN DRAMA

The question of gender, as Anuradha Kapur asserts in her article in the current volume, 'has remained almost unaddressed in modern performance.' She refers to Hindi playwrights and directors of the 1990s—Neelam Man Singh, Amal Allana, Anamika Haksar and herself—to show how the 'modern' in their work attempts to destabilize regressive notions of tradition and to 'undo the sutures that have been put in place to hold together the idea of a composite Indian identity.' Scholarship in recent years has become increasingly attentive to gender issues, interrogating the relationship of women to nationalism and modernity in the dramatic sphere, on

the stage and in print culture, through thematic representations of women in theatre and through their contribution as actors, directors, and writers of plays. Susan Seizer's work on actresses of Special Drama in Tamil Nadu (2005), Minoti Chatterjee's *Theatre on the Threshold* (2004), Deepti Priya Mehrotra's *Gulab Bai* (2006) that details the story of a nautanki dancer in the 1930s, and Rimli Bhattacharya's discussion of the Bengali actress Binodini Dasi in *My Story and My Life as an Actress* (1998) elucidate how the images, roles, and lives of women as actors, performers, and participants involved complex negotiations with prevailing social ideologies and middle-class assumptions that emerged in response to the derisive discourses of colonialism. Additionally, Tutun Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance* (2005), Lakshmi Subramanyam's *Muffled Voices* (2002), and Betty Bernhard's video recording of contemporary theatre activists (1998) represent a variety of positions and perspectives.[11] Other attempts such as Seagull Press's publication of Mahasweta Devi's *Five Plays* (1997), *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*'s documentation of work by street theatre activists, and Oxford University Press's launching of several collections have contributed to the archive of women's theatre. As such, this work has also provided a renewed focus to theatre scholarship on women, as discussed by Nida Sajid in *Feminist Review* (2006). Other useful efforts include interviews with playwrights and directors such as Lata's Singh's interview with Tripurari Sharma about her play *Aziz-un-Nisa. San Sattavan ka Qissa* (*Feminist Review* 2006), publication of biographies such as Reena Nanda's *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay* (2006), J. N. Kaushal's complication of articles, interviews, and conversations in *Sheila Bhatia* (2000), and special themed issues of journals such as *Theatre India* (November 2000 and May 2001) on 'Women that Men Created' and 'Women Directors' Directions', respectively.

Many of the essays included in this reader record the tensions that emerge around the question of women and their

[11] This critical work is particularly useful given the difficulty/paucity of documentation. For instance, Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning* was published 14 years later, after several performances.

contribution at various moments for over a century. Sudipto Chatterjee points out the ways in which nineteenth century nationalist theatre in Bengal became complicit in the thematic erasure of women, despite the latter's participation in anti-colonial agitations. Amrit Srinivasan discusses the impact of the anti-nautch campaigns and legislation of 1947 (that became linked up with the communal politics of the Dravidian movement) on relegating the *devadasis* to the margins of society. Discussing the position of women in Marathi theatre from 1843 to 1933, Neera Adarkar shows how the recorded history of Marathi theatre 'both marginalizes and undervalues women's real contribution to theatre' and questions the assumptions of a historiography that either erases or provides derogatory portrayals of actresses and women in theatre during this period. Satya Prasad Barua's essay also discusses the introduction of actresses in the 1930s as a modern gesture but one that faced public criticism.

Yet the articles in this reader also highlight the achievements of women in the IPTA in the 1940s and 1950s, Chattopadhyay's setting up of the Indian National Theatre, along with the contributions that women made in the 1960s, which achieved a new high by the 1970s with the work of Neelam Man Singh. Simultaneously, some articles also refer to the intensification of theatre on the streets through the efforts of Anuradha Kapur, Tripurari Sharma, Maya Rao, and others in the 1970s and 1980s onwards, which kept the legacy of the IPTA alive and combined it with the inspirational lessons of Safdar Hashmi, who faced a tragic end in 1989 as he and his troupe performed a play about factory workers in Sahibabad near Delhi. While focusing attention on the work of avant-garde directors and playwrights of the 1990s from Delhi, Vasudha Dalmia, in her essay in this collection examines how they unpack notions of identity and gender that were revived and reconstructed through the nationalist idiom of Hindutva. Acknowledging the work of the IPTA in paving the way for women such as Shanta and Dina Gandhi (Pathak), Zohra Sahgal, and Sheila Bhatia, who played a crucial role in the arena of performance 'by making culture a nationalist concern,' Dalmia commends these directors for taking up 'the many strands which had evolved through the post-Independence decades, the folk, the classical, Western high

bourgeois, but also the feminist and the cinematic, to weave them together into a modernist idiom.'

INFLUENCES OF TV AND MODERN MASS MEDIA

If the appearance of film in the 1930s was blamed for the decline of theatrical activity, the popularity of television by the mid-1970s caused new anxieties regarding its implications for theatre. While recognizing the limitations that film and TV impose upon drama, J.C. Mathur and Kirti Jain also address the possibilities these media provide, in their essays in this book. Addressing the detrimental effects of the 'marvels of trick photography,' speech, and dialogue of film that resulted in the downfall of 'the spectacular drama of the Parsi theatre,' Mathur nonetheless highlights the positive effects of cinema in terms of 'techniques of stage-production based on electrical and mechanical devices,' speech, and 'the discarding of coherence, symmetry, episodic build-up and other common practices in dramatic art' such as short scenes. Overall, Mathur highlights the differences between cinema and theatre in terms of inter-personal sharing, the communicative environment of the theatre hall and its live aspects, direct community involvement and theatre's localized specificity, and calls for TV to be an ally of theatre.

Given the concerns with the rising viewership of TV in the 1970s, Kirti Jain, in 'Drama on Television' provides new insights on the relationship between TV and drama, and the possibilities that TV can provide in terms of stage techniques, acting, camera, the emotions achieved through close-ups, as well as in accessing a viewership that is otherwise limited to drama. She also argues that the 'availability and nature of TV play scripts forms the most crucial point for discussion. It is important to realize that unlike any other mode of creative writing a TV play script cannot be a one-man band; here the scriptwriter, director, actors, producer, and cameraman are all equally important and it is only when they all work in co-ordination that the script acquires any meaning.' She also emphasizes the visual work done by TV and highlights the need for new TV playwrights as she sees a great potential in TV. While concerns regarding the marginalization of modern theatre are on the rise with the increasing influence and domination of

film and television, such concerns simultaneously raise questions about the ways in which dramatic forms and practices negotiate the growing impact of media. To this end, Lothar Lutze's essay, written in 1990 and included in this book, provides a useful discussion. Through the example of the Ramlila of Bhimtal, Lutze shows how regional folk theatres, 'in spite of cinema and television, still attract large audiences in their respective regions—*yakshagana* in Karnataka, *bhavai* in Gujarat, *nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, *jatra* in Bengal, or, as a popular variety of religious folk theatre, the annual representation of the Ramlila ... all over northern India.' Further, he asserts that many of the regional theatre forms have 'come to light even in mass media such as the commercial Hindi film.' This latter assertion is useful if one considers two recent films. The first film, director Chandan Arora's *Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon* (2003), while ostensibly a satire on the world of Bombay cinema and the difficulties it imposes for entry-level aspirants such as its village dancer-protagonist, nonetheless throws light on the popularity of *nautanki* style theatre in the village and makes it available to urban audiences. And director Dibakar Banerjee's film *Khosla ka Ghosla* (2006) shows the ability of a theatre group to break into the corrupt world of real estate politics in suburban Delhi, when all other strategies fail, and restore a seized piece of land to its rightful owner.

Even though some essays could not be included because of the difficulty of obtaining permissions and though their absence affects the broader range of this book, the essays and excerpts presented here provide a sampling of varied yet interconnected responses to the debates in the field of modern theatre. The earliest piece comes from 1876 and presents the terms of the bill on censorship and regulation of dramatic performances that was passed as theatrical activity acquired a nationalistic edge during the post-insurgency milieu of 1857 and intensified anti-colonial nationalism in the political arena. It represents the disciplinary mechanisms that were enforced for enabling the performance of colonial power as political power passed from the hands of the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858 and, as Lal asserts in his essay included here, like 'all the important elements of modern times', it survives into contemporary times. Statements by Tagore, Raghava's 1930

assessment of a national theatre, the IPTA manifesto of 1943, Chattopadhyay's (1945) and Dhingra's aspirations (1944) for a 'national' theatre, and Dutt's and Dattani's views on theatre provide insightful interjections into certain critical assumptions. Together, they convey a sense of the political and aesthetic concerns of drama and theatre and reinforce the idea that interaction with varied forms of nationalism—ranging from the anti-colonial and the Left to the Hindu nationalistic formulations re-evaluated in Dalit drama and by women's groups—has been a central preoccupation of modern theatre. To this end, modern Indian theatre undercuts the rubric of a 'national' theatre that rejects its multiple and contested formations. Rather, by emphasizing theatre's navigations across regions and localities, languages, and traditions, the articles in this collection caution readers against reconstructing modern Indian theatre through what Anuradha Kapur identifies as a static or essentialist evocation of 'tradition' that gets set off 'against modernity' and is projected as 'the loss of authenticity.'

NANDI BHATIA

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History, Historiography, and the 'Modernity' of Indian Theatre

Towards a Genealogy of Indian Theatre Historiography

Rakesh H. Solomon

Any consideration of historical writing and public understanding of the past in the subcontinent reveals that history was an important terrain of the battles that led to political transformations rather than simply being transformed in their wake .... The struggle to redesign the past in the context of colonial rule and its aftermath in South Asia has proved to be an especially long-drawn-out and complex one.

—Sugata Bose, *Journal of Contemporary History*[1]

This essay seeks to historicize Indian theatre historiography by grounding it precisely within the rugged terrain of India's political, social and cultural history from the mid-eighteenth century to the present. Beginning with the earliest production of Orientalist theatre scholarship in 1827, the essay analyses the key texts of Indian theatre history to suggest a genealogy of its historiography. By tracing the role of specific historical moments in determining these works' selection, arrangement and treatment of their material, the essay demonstrates how these histories were never, despite their own self-proclaimed assessments, simply the result of dispassionate search for data and evidence and the application of universally reasonable set of criteria. I divide this 180-year period

[1] Sugata Bose, 'Post-Colonial Histories of South Asia: Some Reflections', *Journal of Contemporary History* (Vol. 38, No. 1), p. 133.

into three major phases and cluster these theatre histories within their corresponding historical eras. The first segment of this period may be called colonial India's Orientalist phase—it begins in the late eighteenth century with the birth of Indology, but its tendencies persist throughout the nineteenth century and even into several decades of the twentieth century. The second may be termed colonial India's high nationalist phase—it begins in 1920, when Mahatma Gandhi launches his revolutionary *satyagraha* movement, and ends in 1947, when India achieves Independence. The third stage may be designated as India's postcolonial phase—from 1947 to the present—marked by new, post-colonial nationalisms and ideologies. Discussing in a largely chronological fashion the theatre histories written during each of these three phases, I assess their degree of success or failure in coping with the complex diversity and unique histories of various Indian theatre genres. These histories' representations of Indian theatre changed markedly from phase to phase, shaped to a remarkable—and hitherto unexamined—extent by corresponding changes in theatre historiography, which was in turn being determined by each period's political and cultural history. The essay concludes by proposing fresh avenues for investigation and exploration, so that we might arrive at a fuller and deeper understanding of Indian theatre and its history and historiography.

At the very outset the writer of Indian theatre history encounters some bewildering paradoxes. The ancient world's most comprehensive and minutely detailed compendium of theatrical information, Bharata's *Natyasastra* or the *Natya Veda*, offers the historian copious data about every conceivable theoretical and practical aspect of theatre: acting and dance, music and prosody, shapes and sizes of playhouses, organization and management of theatre companies, costuming and make-up, properties and stage decorations, theories of emotions and sentiments, types and rules for dramatic composition, and even requirements for critics and audiences. Yet this library of information offers no dates or chronology, no trajectory of the development of the art and craft of theatre, and no verifiable names of playwrights, company leaders, producers, or actors. The *Natyasastra's* silence on such vital matters is compounded by its assertion that the ancient Indian theatre

appeared full blown, created in one stroke by Brahma, the Creator of the Universe, and was entrusted to the legendary author of the treatise, Bharata, and his one hundred sons.[2] In short, the *Natyasastra* furnishes little of the kinds of concrete details imperative for the historian to practice his craft of providing verifiable evidence and constructing credible contexts.

In addition to the early Indian texts' seeming disdain for chronological time, another difficulty faced by the writer of Indian theatre history is the absence of a stable, well-defined or chronologically continuous political entity called India.[3] Instead of a single nation, India over most of its 4000-year history consisted of scores of kingdoms with shifting boundaries, different races, several major languages and hundreds of dialects, and an extraordinary multiplicity of cultural practices. During this four-millennia long unbroken history, moreover, India existed as a unified state only during six or seven brief periods. The norm was scores of small independent kingdoms with changing loyalties and confederacies. In the fourth century BCE, Seleucus Nikator, Alexander's Greek heir to Western Asia, sent an ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, the first ruler in recorded history to unify India as an empire. The Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, noted in his diary the erstwhile presence of as many as 118 kingdoms.[4] As Vincent Smith and Percival Spear conclude in

[2] The legendary Bharata does provide a list of his hundred sons, who may represent the names of important theatre artists. Of course, this assessment has to be tempered by the knowledge that some scholars think the *Natyasastra* is the result of a compilation by diverse hands over a very long period. Some commentators have interpreted the hundred sons as members of an artistic rather than a biological family, and others have identified a few names with known writers: see Kapila Vatsyayan, *Bharata: The Natyasastra* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 8.

[3] Most ancient Indian texts' emphasis on cyclic time over linear time must not be read as their lacking a sense of history, a misinterpretation most famously articulated by James Mill in *A History of British India*, 3 vols. (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1817). For a recent critique of Mill and subsequent manifestations of his view, see Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[4] See Megasthenes, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian; being a translation of the fragments of Indika of Megasthenes collected by Dr Schwanbeck, and*

their *Oxford History of India*, 'In all ages the crowd of principalities and powers has been almost past counting', except on those rare occasions when a paramount ruler provided a brief period of unity.[5] 'When no such power existed, the states, hundreds in number, might be likened to a swarm of free mutually repellent molecules in a state of incessant movement, now flying apart, and again coalescing' (II: 5). Geographically and demographically too, the historian of India must deal not with a country but with a subcontinent defined by a 3500-mile peninsular coastline and a 1600-mile long mountainous barrier and a diverse and huge population that today numbers over a billion people.

In the face of such a reality, the writing of a *national* history of theatre in India may strike one as impossible. Yet from 1827 onwards we have had at least fourteen national theatre histories of India.[6] Most of these are significant contributions, and some are pioneering and indispensable scholarly works on India's theatrical history. Published between 1827 and 1992, all are written in English, except one written in French and subsequently translated into English. Given this time frame they reflect in many ways their genesis between the Orientalist and postcolonial phases of the scholarship on Indian theatre. These scholars' attempt to provide what they consider representative national histories and thus to treat India as one political entity, however, is not artificial, anomalous or politically driven to advance ideological agendas, whether Orientalist or high nationalist or postcolonial. Their treatment stems neither from Orientalism's essentializing view of India as an always singular, unchanging, and mysterious land,

of the first part of the Indika of Arrian, by J. W. McCrindle. With introd., notes, and map of ancient India (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1877).

[5] Vincent Smith and Percival Spear, *A History of India* 2 vols. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1965; reprint 1990), II: 5. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

[6] In this study I have included only book-length studies that offer (or intend to offer) a national history. I have therefore necessarily excluded a great number of valuable but narrowly focused histories that examine one or two genres, regions, periods, or specific issues. Thus, for example, Ralph Yarrow's specialized if somewhat ambiguously titled monograph, *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001) falls into the excluded group.

nor from the high nationalist or postcolonial need to project a unified, independent and great Indian nation. These histories' national focus actually derives from their recognition of another paradoxical fact about India.

Throughout history India's political, regional, racial, linguistic, and social divisions have been overpowered by a fundamental cultural and civilizational oneness. From as early as the Aryan period, about 1500 to 1000 BCE, an idealized concept of a unified India, called *Bharatavarsa*, exercised a critical hold on the Indian mind. Foundational civilizational texts from this period clearly enunciate the idea of an Indian nation defined by the entire subcontinent's lands and rivers, religion and culture, races and tribes. It would appear from our postcolonial vantage point, following Homi Bhabha and Benedict Anderson, that the early Aryans were in fact 'narrating' and 'imagining' their nation into existence.[7] Mirroring life and thought about 1000 BCE, the Mahabharata, the massive defining poem of Indian culture, clearly portrays *Bharatavarsa* as one nation and one people bound by a common geography, religion, and culture—well before such a pan-Indian nation state ever existed.[8] India's other defining poem, the Ramayana, whose essential core may predate the *Mahabharata's* even though it arrived at its current form much later, etches a similar Bharatavarsa—an idealized nation under the rule of Rama, the perfect king, martial hero, and beloved avatar of Vishnu. Similarly, the *Natyasastra*, reflecting views between about 200 BCE and about 200 CE, speaks of a single nation called Bharatavarsa.[9] It advises playwrights that the action of 'all plays which have celestial heroes'

[7] In works now well known, Benedict Anderson suggests that nations are imagined communities, whereas Homi Bhabha argues that nations are themselves narrations. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) and Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[8] For dates and the historical context at the time of the composition of the Mahabharata and of the Ramayana, I follow Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 37–40; subsequent page references to this work will be given in the text.

[9] For dates of the composition of the *Natyasastra*, I follow the conclusions presented in Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli, eds. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press,

should be set in Bharatavarsa, 'because the entire land here is charming, sweet-smelling and of golden color'.[10] The ideal nation concept persisted in the medieval period when Hindu religious movements, like Bhakti, swept through an India substantially ruled by Muslim kings, and saint-poets often celebrated Bharatavarsa. Antagonism against the Muslim rulers, and later against British rulers, only made the idea of a Bharatavarsa more potent and more widespread.

The writing of national histories and surveys treating India as a single entity thus remains an intellectually valid proposition and a long-honored tradition. The first modern history of Indian drama was Horace Hayman Wilson's three-volume *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* published in 1827 in Calcutta.[11] It consisted of Wilson's comprehensive account, 'Treatise on the Dramatic System of the Hindus', his translation of six major Sanskrit plays, and a final section that offered brief comments on twenty-three Sanskrit plays. A distinguished scholar, Wilson was the author of the first Sanskrit–English Dictionary (1817) and of numerous studies and translations of ancient Sanskrit texts, and he was the Secretary to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, a director of the Royal Asiatic Society, and the first occupant of the Boden Chair in Sanskrit at Oxford University.[12] Wilson's analytic survey and graceful, though relatively free, translations of the plays into modern English proved immensely influential: a French translation was published in Paris in 1828; a German translation appeared in Weimar also in 1828; and in London a reprint was issued in 1835 and was followed by

1990), pp. 34–5; subsequent page references to this work will be given in the text.

[10] Bharata, *The Natyasastra*, translated and edited as *The Natyasastra (A Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Histrionics) Ascribed to Bharata-Muni*, by Manmohan Ghosh, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya; vol. I: 1951; 3rd revised ed., 1995; Vol. II, 1961; 2nd revised ed., 1995), I: 307–8.

[11] Horace Hayman Wilson, *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus*, 3 Vols. (Calcutta: V. Holcroft, 1827).

[12] H. H. Wilson also contributed three continuation volumes covering the period from 1805 to 1835 (Vols. VII–IX) to the later expanded editions of James Mill's *A History of British India*, mentioned earlier.

a second edition in 1871.[13] The quick succession of translations of Wilson's theatre history and anthology into different European languages reflects the expanding interest in Indian philosophy and culture in Europe at that time. That wave of interest was originally set in motion by the translation of another Sanskrit play, Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntala*, by Sir William Jones and published in Calcutta in 1789 as *Sacontalá, or, The Fatal Ring, an Indian Drama*, and which, in turn, had been followed by new editions in London in 1790 and 1792 and in Edinburgh in 1796 and by translations into German by Georg Forster in 1791, into Danish by Hans West in 1792, into French by A. Bruguiere in 1803, and into Italian by Luigi Doria in 1815.[14] Mirroring the literary bias of these late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century European Indologists, Wilson's avowed goal in his study was to champion Sanskrit plays as great literature. Thus the *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus*, notwithstanding its own title, completely ignored practical staging matters pertaining to his Sanskrit plays. More problematically, Wilson's work demonstrates his era's distinctly Orientalist ideology and practices. Orientalism grew out of an 'incestuous relationship with the Western exercise of power' to present an authoritative fabrication of an Orient composed of always fixed essences impermeable to historical change.[15] Thus Wilson essentializes Indian theatre as exotic, changeless, and timeless by making an ancient and defunct Sanskrit theatre stand for all Indian theatre. The Sanskrit theatre, of course, is only one of many Indian theatre genres, and it is a genre that had come to an end by about 1000 CE. Thus Wilson's construction of Indian

[13] Sylvain Lévi, *Le Théâtre Indien*, 2 vols.(Paris: E. Buillon, 1890); translated by Narayan Mukerji as *The Theatre of India*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1978), I: 2. All subsequent page references are to this translation and will be given in the text.

[14] Kenneth G. Zysk, 'The History of Indology in Denmark', Asien-Institut, København, Denmark, <http://www.hum.ku.dk/asien/D_PDF/Indology in Denmark.pdf>; Lévi, *Le Théâtre Indien*, I: 1; and Nicola Savarese, 'Bibliography', http://www.nicolasavarese.it/frcnbib3.htm.

[15] Gyan Prakash's telling phrase in his 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Vol. 32, No. 2, April 1990), p. 384. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent page references to this article are given in the text.

theatre suppresses the multitude of non-Sanskrit genres no matter how thriving or widespread.

After a half century of burgeoning European and Indian scholarship on Sanskrit literature and culture, we have the next major theatre history: Sylvain Lévi's two-volume *Le Théâtre Indien* ('The Indian Theatre') published in Paris in 1890. Lévi was only twenty-seven when he completed this study, first submitted as a doctoral thesis in Paris, but his chapters furnish some astute commentary. 'The Indian drama is so literary that it often appears to be unfit for the stage', he writes, 'yet, it is actual theatre. Kalidasa and his successors did not write for readers but for an audience; they meant [their plays] to be staged' (I: 7). True to this claim, Lévi devotes a full chapter to 'Dramatic Practice' where he examines the stage, theatre buildings, actors, theatre companies, and what he somewhat anachronistically labels the 'The Direction' and 'Stage Management'. The other chapters in his 444-page work cover such topics as 'Treatises on Dramaturgy', 'The Dramatic Art', 'History of the Indian Dramatic Literature', 'Dramatic Aesthetics', 'The Origins of the Drama', 'The Greek Influence', and 'Modern and Contemporary Theatre'.[16] Lévi was armed with the late nineteenth-century European belief in evolutionary development of art and literature and the scientific approach as the historian's principal method. Convinced of the superiority of Occidental rationalism over Oriental modes of thought—a binary opposition standard in Orientalist discourse—Levi condemns some early Sanskrit documents as 'so contaminated by imagination, prejudice and preconceived ideas that they have little chance to reflect the exact truth' (I: 6). He articulates his own methodology: 'We prefer ... the method ... of putting the question objectively, starting from a solid and precise position and leading the discussion with scientific detachment' (I: 54). But he also recognizes the inadequacies of this system, which he, ironically, finds exemplified in the labors of some

[16] The chapter entitled, 'Modern and Contemporary Theatre', devotes four pages to the traditional theatre genre called Jatra and the remaining nineteen pages to translations or imitations of Sanskrit dramatic forms since the ancient period and to Western-influenced plays of the nineteenth century; II: 97–119.

early Sanskrit theoreticians whom he compares to modern chemists who 'treat the works of the spirit like inorganic bodies. They deem it sufficient to separate the elements and list them one by one, to classify them in groups and types, and to reproduce *ad infinitum* the established combinations' (I: 20). Although writing in the 1890s, Levi does not share contemporary British colonial officials' reconfigured Orientalism that began to represent India based not on essences but on painstaking on-the-ground ethnological, archaeological and other surveys, censuses, and reports—what Richard Saumarez Smith has called 'Rule-by-Records and Rule-by-Reports'.[17]

In other respects, however, Lévi's *Le Théâtre Indien* presents some serious problems. Ostensibly committed to writing a comprehensive theatrical history, Lévi declares, 'The name of Indian theatre must embrace both the most humble dramatic productions and the masterpieces of the great poets. All scenic entertainments, including life-tableaus and puppet-shows belong to the Indian theatre' (I: 3). Thus he intellectually acknowledges that Indian theatre consists of not just Sanskrit theatre but also of all the other non-elite genres that existed before, during, and after the Sanskrit period. Yet, given the prevailing cultural and scholarly attitudes, he essentially dismisses the non-Sanskrit theatre genres, including all those that flourished after the ancient period, i.e., the wide variety of vernacular genres that Indian theatre historians today generally label traditional theatre, popular theatre or folk theatre. In effect, like his predecessor Wilson, Lévi equates a history of Sanskrit theatre with a history of Indian theatre. In fact, he spells out his elitist position quite clearly, 'We have, without hesitation ... reserved the term 'Indian theatre' for the Sanskrit drama ... We think that the Sanskrit theatre is the Indian theatre *par excellence*' (I: 3). As if not to leave any doubt, Lévi dubs the popular non-Sanskrit theatre 'unsophisticated', 'indifferent to literary qualities', offering 'very little originality', and a 'mere abstraction' (I: 4–5). In a

[17] See Prakash's brief discussion of this changing Orientalism, pp. 386–88, which also cites this work, Richard Saumarez Smith, 'Rule-by-Records and Rule-by-Reports: Complementary Aspects of the British Imperial Rule of Law,' *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (new series), 19:1 (1985), pp. 153–86.

classic Orientalist turn, he concludes: 'The popular theatre has no history' (I: 5). Given such views one can understand why Lévi felt justified to entitle his book, 'The Indian Theatre'. A more accurate title, however, would have been 'The *Sanskrit* Theatre,' just as H. H. Wilson's *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* should have been called 'Select Specimens of the *Sanskrit* Theatre of the Hindus'.

Wilson's and Lévi's imprecise titles are symptomatic of several major difficulties that have from the beginning afflicted the writing of Indian national theatre histories. To continue this discussion, however, I must first briefly outline the three main phases of India's cultural and political history. According to broad scholarly consensus, a well developed urban culture, the Indus Valley civilization, flourished between about 2500 and 1600 BCE.[18] This civilization was supplanted by Sanskrit-speaking Aryans beginning about 1500 BCE. The Aryans religious books, the four Vedas, became the foundation of Hinduism.[19] By the fourth century BCE these Vedic Hindus had gradually conquered and assimilated the pre-Aryan peoples of most of India, culminating in the first Indian empire of Chandragupta Maurya. Until the tenth century CE, Hindu culture—with Sanskrit as the language of religion, court and literature—dominated but did not replace the numerous regional languages and artistic genres, which charted their own independent course but without closing themselves off from Sanskrit influences. This ancient Indian era ended by about 1000 CE, when succeeding waves of Muslim invaders achieved political supremacy and eventually displaced Sanskrit literature and culture with Persian language and culture. Sanskrit slowly died out as a spoken language while remaining the medium of Hindu religion and scriptures, but the various vernacular languages and artistic genres thrived. This new period, traditionally labeled the medieval era of Indian history, continued up to the rise of British power between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, which, in turn, inaugurated the modern

[18] I follow the periodization employed in the latest edition of Wolpert's *A New History of India*.

[19] Bharata claims for his *Natyasastra* the lofty and sacred status of the fifth Veda, the *Natya Veda*, literally, the Theatre Veda.

phase of Indian history. English gradually supplanted Persian as the language of government and other institutions of power and as the language of India's political, economic and cultural elites, facilitating India's encounter with modern European ideas and institutions. This tripartite division is usually summed up simply as the Hindu, Muslim, and British eras or as the Ancient, Medieval, and Modern eras. (For the three corresponding periods of Indian theatrical history, see Figure 1). It must be acknowledged that this periodization also reflects colonial-era Orientalist historiography but one that was later adopted by a broad spectrum of nationalist and postcolonial Indian historiographies.

In the light of this history it is clear that in their respective studies Wilson and Lévi use a single genre—the Sanskrit theatre that ended in about 1000 CE—to represent the entire theatre of a nation, and thus they effectively erase the extraordinary variety of theatrical genres that flourished in different Indian languages during the subsequent eight to nine hundred years. These volumes thus illustrate an exceedingly skewed historiographic perspective and amount to radically incomplete histories masquerading as national theatre histories.

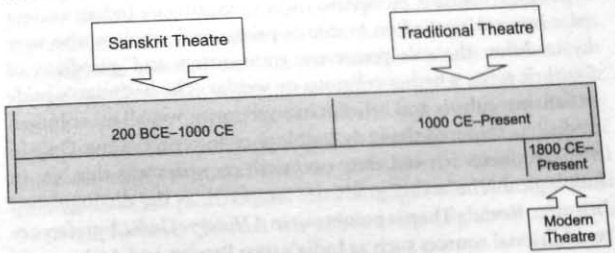

Figure 1: Main Periods of Indian Theatre History

By elevating the theatre created in one language over those created in all other languages of a nation, such historiography, knowingly or otherwise, takes a highly political position in the case of a multilingual and multiethnic country such as India. From the earliest time different regions in India had their own languages, which gradually developed sophisticated linguistic, literary and

performance traditions. Even when Sanskrit dominated as the language of courtly, religious, scholarly and artistic domains, regional languages held their own, enriching and being enriched by Sanskrit. On one level, even Sanskrit theatre was multilingual. Each play consisted of dialogue composed in Sanskrit for men of higher status and for highly educated women, and dialogue composed in three or four different regional languages or *prakrits* (literally, 'original' or 'natural' languages) for most women and all men of lower status. Thus Kalidasa's famous *Abhijnanasakuntala* ('Sakuntala and the Ring of Recollection') consists of dialogue in Sanskrit, Sauraseni, Maharastri, and Magadhi; and Sudraka's *Mrchakatika* ('The Little Clay Cart') consists of dialogue in Sanskrit, Sauraseni, Avantika, Pracya, Magadhi, Sakari, Candali, and Dhakki—a point lost in translations into European languages.[20] By rendering Indian theatre monolingual, Wilson and Lévi fail to convey the multilingual complexity of Indian theatre, and, ironically, even the full multilingual essence of Sanskrit theatre and culture that they obviously wished to champion.

A part of the blame for such privileging of Sanskrit theatre lies in the historical context that gave birth to Indology in the mid-eighteenth century. Europeans eager to investigate India's ancient past inevitably relied on brahman priests and scholars who were by tradition the sole preservers, transmitters and guardians of Sanskrit texts, whether religious or secular. The brahman's pride in Sanskrit culture and belief in its superiority over all other Indian traditions coloured the early Indologists' interpretations. Only in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was this bias in Indological scholarship gradually tempered, as the distinguished historian Romila Thapar points out in *A History of India*, by reference to additional sources such as India's own Persian and Arabic texts, foreign travelers' accounts in Greek, Latin, Chinese and Arabic, and inscriptions, numismatics and archaeological excavations.[21]

[20] For the interplay of different prakrits and Sanskrit in Kalidasa's plays, see Barbara Stoler Miller, 'Kalidasa's World and His Plays', in her *Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kalidasa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 3–41.

[21] Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1966), pp. 17–19.

Irrespective of the origin of their bias, Wilson's *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* and Lévi's *Le Théâtre Indien*, by virtue of their being the first two modern histories in any language, whether European or Indian, exerted immense influence on subsequent scholars of Indian theatre and thus also perpetuated their narrow perspective. Twenty-two years after Lévi's study, the next theatre history, also entitled *The Indian Theatre*, appeared in London in 1912.[22] Again, it was not about Indian theatre but rather about the Sanskrit theatre. On its title page, however, its author Ernest Philip Horrwitz, unlike Lévi, appended a subtitle: *A Brief Survey of the Sanskrit Drama*. Thus the full title, *The Indian Theatre: A Brief Survey of the Sanskrit Drama*, nicely encapsulates the Orientalist treatment of Sanskrit theatre as interchangeable with Indian theatre. A dozen years later in 1924 Arthur Berriedale Keith published the next theatre history, which for the first time in the modern study of Indian theatre did not treat it as synonymous with Sanskrit theatre. A member of the Inner Temple and the Regis Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology at the University of Edinburgh, Keith labeled his work with precision: *The Sanskrit Drama in its Origin, Development, Theory and Practice*.[23] Without discussing the matter in any detail, Keith gave the impression of even-handedness in his approach to the traditional theatres. He explained that his investigation focused on Sanskrit theatre without reference to vernacular theatre in order merely 'to bring the subject matter within moderate compass' (p. 5). Well through the century Keith's book, like his earlier *History of Sanskrit Literature*, remained one of the most widely read and cited texts.[24] Although Keith authored numerous subsequent books on a number of subjects, it must be noted, he never devoted any effort to writing about and thus

[22] Ernest Philip Horrwitz, *The Indian Theatre: A Brief Survey of the Sanskrit Drama* (London: Blackie, 1912).

[23] Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama in its Origin, Development, Theory and Practice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).

[24] Arthur Berriedale Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920).

providing cultural and intellectual space to any of the traditional theatre forms.[25]

Remarkably, even in postcolonial India, as late as 1991 a purported history of Indian theatre demonstrates the staying power of the brahmanical-Orientalist prejudice against vernacular theatre first seen in Wilson and Lévi a century earlier. Chandra Bhan Gupta's *The Indian Theatre*, published in Delhi in 1954 and revised and reissued in 1991, becomes the fourth study to employ Lévi's misleading title.[26] Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Delhi, Gupta quotes Keith on several issues with approval, but he more closely mirrors Wilson and Lévi (whom he also quotes) in his focus on Sanskrit theatre to the exclusion of the traditional theatre as well as the vital modern Indian theatre which by 1954 had amassed a hundred-year history.

The designation, modern Indian theatre, refers to a new genre that developed between the late-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. During this period, while the Europeans were discovering ancient Indian culture, Indian elites were discovering modern European culture. Out of this encounter arose the new theatrical genre called the modern Indian theatre. Shaped by the imperatives of empire, nationalism, and nativism, this was a metropolitan genre, created by a bilingual high-caste bourgeoisie, who strategically adapted elements from a gallery of models that included the Sanskrit theatre, traditional theatre, and European theatre. By and large they borrowed most heavily from European playwriting and staging practices; they also sporadically and very selectively adapted a few features from their region's traditional theatre; and they copied, although sometimes only nominally,

[25] That Keith, H. H. Wilson, Sylvain Lévi, and other theatre historians were professors at European universities incidentally illustrates Edward Said's point about the institutions of Orientalism which allowed opinions and myths about the Orient to circulate as objective knowledge—in the service of economic and political interests.

[26] Chandra Bhan Gupta, *The Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1954; revised 1991). The third book that had echoed Levi's title was Ramanlal Kanaiyalal Yajnik's *The Indian Theatre: Its Origins and Its Later Developments Under European Influence, With Special Reference to Western India* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934; rpt. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1970); it will be discussed later.

some elements from the Sanskrit theatre. Ironically, it was only after the Orientalists had first championed Sanskrit literature and translated it into European languages that these Westernized Indian elites had turned to Sanskrit drama and revalued it as 'classical', as a part of their nationalist aspirations.[27] The modern Indian theatre began as refined cultural consumption for the upper crust but developed into broad-based entertainment for large audiences in cities across the country and thus manifested itself in several different languages. Irrespective of its language, however, this theatre sought to project both modernity and Indianness in its style and subject matter and thus constituted a fundamental component of the Indian intelligentsia's grand nationalist enterprise to invent, on the one hand, an identity that was modern but with roots in an ancient past and, on the other hand, a pan-Indian nation state that was modern but which incorporated the numerous old royal kingdoms. In short, like the authors of the ancient Hindu epics noted earlier, they too were trying to 'imagine', 'narrate', and 'perform' a nation into existence. As a result of this origin the modern Indian theatre enjoyed great prestige among the cultural elites, which, in turn, led to a new genre chauvinism and historiographic elitism, as represented by the next two theatre histories—both produced at the height of the nationalist movement in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the broad arena of the nationalist movement, Modernity and Reason—key components of the Orientalist project—held sway over the Westernized elites who led India's anticolonial struggle. So much so that, 'Nationalism,' as Gyan Prakash notes, 'hijacked even Gandhi's antimodern ideology in its drive to create a nation-state devoted to modernization and turned him into a figure revered for his ability to appeal to 'irrational' peasants and for [his supposed] mystical bond ... with the masses' (p. 391). Not surprisingly, then, nationalist historiography—whether political

[27] Given modern India's glorification of its Sanskrit drama heritage, it is remarkable that while *Abhijnanasakuntala* had been widely translated into European languages beginning in 1789, as noted earlier, no translation into a modern Indian language appeared until at least eighty years later. See G. P. Deshpande, 'Introduction' in his *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000).

or theatrical—was significantly shaped by these twin ideologies. 'History, as a discipline,' Prakash also points out, 'was, after all, an instrument of the post-Enlightenment regime of Reason,' and 'History and colonialism arose together in India' (p. 391).[28] Having acquired practices and principles of historical writing from Western models and often directly at Western universities, the early Indian theatre historians inevitably shared some additional Orientalist formulations as well. Like the Orientalists, they neglected the traditional theatre, and, like them, they focused on only one genre to represent all Indian theatre. However, unlike the Orientalists who represented Indian theatre as made up only of an unchanging *ancient* theatre, the nationalist—for whom projecting a modern nation-state was paramount—represented Indian theatre as made up largely of a dynamic and developing *modern* Indian theatre. They, moreover, tempered their position by acknowledging the achievement of the ancient theatre—nationalistically stressing its pre-British and pre-Muslim formation—and by occasionally nodding towards the traditional and folk genres as well. In 1934 Ramanlal Kanaiyalal Yajnik, a professor of English at a small college in Bhavanagar state in Western India, published in London a study of the *modern* Indian theatre but named it *The Indian Theatre*.[29] The problem posed by his title was not ameliorated by his subtitle, *Its Origins and Its Later Developments Under European influence, With Special Reference to Western India*, as was the case with some previous histories discussed earlier. Yajnik's history treats the largely European-inspired modern Indian theatre as the only genre among all others worthy to represent Indian theatre. Begun as a Ph.D. thesis at the University of London and dedicated to pioneering theatre scholar Allardyce Nicoll, the book reveals an author clearly in thrall of European and especially British theatre and largely dismissive of traditional Indian genres except for those elements in them that resemble British dramatic and theatrical conventions. Although the work deals primarily with the modern Indian theatre, a preliminary section examines Sanskrit theatre

[28] Gyan Prakash, 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography,' *Social Text* (Vol. 31/32, Third World and Post-colonial Issues, 1992), p. 17.

[29] Yajnik, *The Indian Theatre*.

and a few traditional theatre genres but chiefly in order to locate parallels with Western theatre practices, and thus even this section becomes another part of an overall enterprise of projecting Indian theatre as possessing many affinities with European theatre and thus deserving of respect and attention. In spite of these pronounced biases, Yajnik's painstaking research in government and private archives, his unearthing of important documents of performance and his consistent emphasis on staging over literary values make his book an extremely valuable historical account of the growth of the modern Indian theatre.

The other theatre history written in the final years of the nationalist struggle was Hemendra Nath Das Gupta's four-volume, *The Indian Stage*, published in Calcutta between 1944 and 1946.[30] Reflecting the contemporary reality of mass nationalist movements of their time, Das Gupta and Yajnik became the first Indians to challenge the European monopoly of Indian theatre historiography, and in turn they helped shape a new nationalist historiography and history. Like Yajnik, Das Gupta too offers an introductory nod to the Sanskrit theatre and to a few traditional theatre genres, especially the Jatra of Bengal, but his primary goal, again despite his comprehensive title, is a history of the modern Indian theatre, and in fact, of almost exclusively its Bengali-language manifestation. He makes this intent explicit in his preface, which in effect contradicts his own title, for it declares his overall aim 'of writing a complete History of the Bengali Stage'(I: i). No doubt the modern Indian theatre first emerged and achieved its earliest flowering in Calcutta in the province of Bengal, yet there can be no justification for this implicit claim that the modern Bengali theatre could stand for the entire modern Indian theatre. Similarly, although Das Gupta completed his book during the three years immediately preceding India's independence when nationalists fervently sought to project Indian culture as modern, that circumstance cannot excuse his portrayal of the traditional genres as inconsequential or worse. In discussing the still vibrant

[30] Hemendra Nath Das Gupta, *The Indian Stage*, 4 vols. (Calcutta: Metropolitan Press, 1944–6; rpt. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2002). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

and popular theatre called Bhavai in the state of Gujarat, to cite one example of Das Gupta's nearly wholesale denigration of traditional theatre, he insists, 'Gujrat [sic] from 14th to 18th century had no stage ... nor any dramatic literature worth the name. The Gujrati Bhabais [sic] ... were the only drama liked by the people, rather by the people of the low classes', and their 'vulgarity' was a 'shock to cultured minds' (III: 177).

Perhaps even more seriously, the prejudice of historians like Yajnik and Das Gupta against the ungenteel genres prevented them from recognizing that even the modern Indian theatre, despite its urban-bourgeois-Western veneer, shared several affinities with the folk and rural genres, especially in the area of acting styles, which in turn contributed to this theatre's appeal for the urban masses. While the modern theatre's playwrights had direct access to Western dramatic styles via printed plays, the vast majority of actors did not have access to Western acting styles and actor training techniques, notwithstanding the occasional touring company from England. Perforce these actors relied on the acting they had encountered in India, which was the acting of traditional theatre troupes.

Beyond elitist prejudice and historical inexactitude such claims for the supremacy of the modern Indian theatre meant a devaluation and even erasure of the traditional theatre forms from public consciousness, especially in the influence-wielding metropolitan centers, at a time when these forms were already under enormous pressure from the effects of modernization and the consequent shrinking of their traditional patronage base. Through their publications, Yajnik and Das Gupta, especially as de facto members of the emerging nation's cultural elites, exerted considerable influence on public officials and other leaders who made cultural policy and controlled government funding for the arts. In short, at least in an emergent India the writing of national theatre histories had serious—sometimes negative—consequences beyond the academy and in the very real world of theatre companies and theatre artists.

The fifty-six years since India achieved independence in 1947 have produced eight national theatre histories in English.[31] Unlike

[31] In this counting I have excluded the far too sketchy, illustrated survey found in many Western libraries and some bibliographies: Mulk Raj Anand's *The Indian Theatre* (International Library of Film and Theatre; London: D. Dobson, 1950).

the pre-independence histories, seven of these do not posit any one period or genre as the single, pre-eminent or representative achievement. The eighth, Chandra Bhan Gupta's *The Indian Theatre* (1954; 1991), stands out as atypical because, as already discussed, it treats the Sanskrit theatre as synonymous with Indian theatre and thus represents an older attitude characteristic of the Orientalist strand of colonial Indian theatre historiography. All of the remaining postcolonial works show a remarkable convergence in the way they construct Indian theatre history. For the first time theatre historians, albeit with varying emphases, define Indian theatre as made up of all three of its main branches—the Sanskrit theatre, the traditional theatre, and the modern theatre. This inclusive construction also means an all-encompassing coverage of the nation's three historical periods—ancient, medieval and modern—as well as its important languages, regions, social classes and peoples. Such a comprehensive coverage justifies their claim to being true national theatre histories of India. In good measure their approach reflects the shifting values and national goals of a new democratic India's intellectual and cultural elites. Moreover, six of the volumes are by Indian specialists and one by a team of North American scholars, indicating at least a quantitative shift towards Indian and American scholarship, and away from European, especially British, expertise.

Of these seven histories, Manohar Laxman Varadpande's *History of Indian Theatre* (1987–), an ambitious six-volume work is still in progress and will be excluded from the following discussion, although his proposed framework and two completed volumes clearly share the other historians' comprehensive vision of Indian theatre history.[32] Another book, *Indian Drama* (1956, rev. 1981), published by the Government of India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, also reveals a similar vision, as evident in the range of its topics and authors. Nonetheless, having been put together by a government bureaucracy, its essays vary greatly in

[32] Manohar Laxman Varadpande, *History of Indian Theatre* (Vol.1 of *History of Indian Theatre*) and *Loka Ranga: Panorama of Indian Folk Theatre* (Vol. 2 of *History of Indian Theatre*), (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1992).

scope, depth and quality and overlap to a degree that makes any fair assessment impractical. I have therefore also excluded this work from the analysis that follows.[33]

The five histories for further examination are Balwant Gargi's *Theatre in India* (1962), Som Benegal's *A Panorama of Theatre in India* (1968), Adya Rangacharya's *The Indian Theatre* (1971), Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli's *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (1990), and Nemichandra Jain's *Indian Theatre: Tradition, Continuity and Change* (1992).[34] Four of the books above—all by Indian authors—devote the maximum space to the modern theatre—cumulatively in both its pre- and post-Independence phases. On the one hand, this reflects a continuation of Yajnik's and Das Gupta's nationalist emphasis on the modernity of Indian theatre but—very significantly—without their virtual exclusion of the traditional and Sanskrit theatres. On the other hand, this mirrors India's lionization of its post-Independence theatre as equal to the best of any nation, an assessment that operates as a part of a new postcolonial nationalism seeking to project the country as a progressive and important nation state. Most of these historians, with a surprising degree of uniformity, offer extravagant praise for the plays and theatrical productions of the post-Independence period, and they consistently rate them superior to those of its pre-Independence years—a blanket assessment that I, for one, question. Wittingly or not, these historians are clearly participating in a broader nationalist process of self-definition, and, as experts, they are providing the necessary authority to bolster a newly independent country's high valuation of the artistic attainments of its postcolonial era.

[33] *Indian Drama* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956; revised edn, 1981).

[34] Balwant Gargi, *Theatre in India* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1962); Som Benegal, *A Panorama of Theatre in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1968); Adya Rangacharya, *The Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1971; 2nd edn, 1980); Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli, eds. *Indian Theatre*; and Nemichandra Jain, *Indian Theatre: Tradition, Continuity and Change* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1992). Subsequent page references to these works will be given in the text.

In three of the five histories—those by Gargi, Benegal and Rangacharya—the Sanskrit theatre comes in second and the traditional theatre third, in terms of the amount of attention each merits. The renewed emphasis on the Sanskrit theatre shows that historians in the postcolonial phase of Indian theatre historiography, unlike Yajnik and Das Gupta in the high nationalist phase, clearly acknowledge the ancient theatre's continuing significance. Yet this theatre's secondary status in relation to the modern theatre also suggest that future historians are unlikely to give it the preeminent position accorded it in the Orientalist phase exemplified in the works of Wilson, Lévi and Keith.

Although these three postcolonial histories offer the traditional theatre the least space, that space—in all cases except Benegal's where publishing exigencies ruled otherwise—is substantial and considerably greater than that allowed in any of the previous histories. In the remaining two postcolonial histories, the traditional theatre for the first time receives the maximum attention (in Richmond, Swann and Zarilli, eds. *Indian Theatre*) or only slightly less than the maximum (in Jain, *Indian Theatre Tradition*); these studies are the most recent ones examined here and thus also presage a new emerging focus on the traditional theatre in the years to come. Overall, the new attention accorded traditional theatre in these five histories mirrors a new postcolonial nationalism and cultural assertiveness and self assurance in India that allows artists and historians to embrace indigenous, often rural, and non-literary performance genres long denigrated and silenced by European Orientalists and Indian nationalist elites. This unprecedented status is connected in complex ways, rather than in any simple causal fashion, with the highly successful blending of traditional theatre practices with contemporary ones by leading postcolonial Indian playwrights (like Girish Karnad, Satish Alekar, Mohit Chattopadhyay, and H. Kanhailal) and postcolonial Indian directors (like Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, Habib Tanvir, and Ratan Kumar Thiyam) as well as some internationally influential European directors (like Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine).

The first history of the postcolonial period, Balwant Gargi's *Theatre in India* is also the first published in America and displays the author's extensive first-hand knowledge of world theatre. Gargi

contextualizes his discussion throughout to show parallels and divergences between various Indian theatres and those of the West and Japan and China. Partly as a result of this and partly as a result of lingering colonial-era habits of explaining away the unfamiliar, Gargi affixes too many and ultimately misleading Western labels to unique Indian genres: 'classical' for the Sanskrit theatre and Bharata Natyam, 'opera' for Jatras, 'pageant plays' for Ram Lila and so on. Aside from such labeling, though, his Western theatre vocabulary and references prove both precise and illuminating, while simultaneously revealing his modernist and postcolonial perspectives and prejudices, such as his rejection of late nineteenth-century Gujarati melodrama. A playwright and a short story writer, Gargi offers colorful and swiftly etched portraits of each theatre, with brief but valuable comments on context, history, and current state. Having attended performances of virtually all the contemporary genres he examines, Gargi comes across as an omnipresent and omniscient narrator but one who rarely stops to cite sources, marshal evidence or articulate his historiographic vision. Implicit in his coverage, however, is an all-embracing vision of Indian theatre that includes not only the Sanskrit, traditional and the modern theatres but also dance, puppetry, children's theatre, modern ballet, and amateur theatre.

Among the postcolonial histories, as already noted, Som Benegal's *A Panorama of the Theatre in India* is the only one without a meaningful traditional theatre section. This omission, however, was not a result of the author's choice but, as is clear from the preface, that of his publisher's need to avoid competition with one of its other books devoted exclusively to the traditional theatre. It is a pity to miss Benegal's views on that theatre because his comments on the Sanskrit and modern theatres offer many insights. Overall, more analytic than descriptive, he notes wryly that 'A Herodotus, Thucydides or Plutarch is alien to Indian tradition', in order to explain the dearth of historical documentation about Sanskrit theatre (3). He interprets Bharata's claim that the *Natyasastra* is a sacred fifth Veda as a strategy to gain acceptance from upper caste audiences for entertainers who chiefly belonged to the low Shudra caste (3). Benegal analyses the Sanskrit society's world view and finds its focus on the individual versus the group as the primary

reason for its decline, challenging the traditional view that blames the successive Islamic invasions. His investigation into the low quality of the nineteenth-century Parsi dramatic repertory faults 'the fatuous farces, contrived thrillers, low tragedy, imitation comedy of manners, and extravaganzas' of the British provincial companies that traveled to India and thus became the only models available to the Parsi theatres. The aesthetic and personnel of this Parsi theatre did not decline, he writes with some irony, but metamorphosed into the Bombay film industry (now called Bollywood).[35] Such insights are the strength of Benegal's history, notwithstanding his circumscribed coverage.

Adya Rangacharya's *The Indian Theatre* first published in 1971 and reissued in 1980, appears regularly in many bibliographies of Indian theatre. Rangacharya was a professor of Sanskrit for two decades, wrote several novels and scholarly works and participated in Kannada-language theatre for nearly four decades as an actor, producer, and playwright. Thus it is astonishing that his history suffers from so many fundamental problems. By the author's own admission, except for the chapters on Sanskrit and Kannada theatres, the book derives almost all its information from three secondary sources: *Indian Drama*, the problematic Ministry of Information and Broadcasting anthology discussed above; *The Marathi Theatre, 1843–1960*, a short work issued under the aegis of the Marathi Natya Parishad or the Marathi Theatre Council and published in 1961 by Popular Prakashan, Bombay; and *Seth Govind Das Abhinandan Grantha*, an occasional volume of essays in Hindi brought out in 1956 by an Abhinandan (or felicitation) Committee. In addition to this dependence on some less than impeccable secondary material, Rangacharya's book is deeply flawed in other ways too. Some of his statements, such as the following, are simply baffling: 'An ordinary man's language would not have a vocabulary of more than 500 words' (29). There are numerous problems of

[35] Benegal's trenchant critique of Bombay films has been rearticulated forcefully since the mid-1990s by his son, Dev Benegal, a rising film director, who denounces both Bollywood and the art cinema that emerged in reaction to Bollywood. Instead he advocates a new genre that focuses on India's contemporary urban reality, which in a way introduces to Indian film what many modern Indian playwrights have been doing with regularity.

logic; the citing of evidence is inconsistent at best; at times an argument or a description is abandoned halfway through; and the prose is hobbled by awkward and unclear phrasing. One must reluctantly conclude that such deficiencies probably are a result of his less than rigorous overall approach to writing, especially his routine refusal to revise his prose. Thus his disclaimer in the preface to *The Indian Theatre*, 'I have never liked and have always avoided reading a second time anything that I wrote', must be taken more as a literal rather than a rhetorical statement (vi).

Scholars and students of Indian theatre had to wait twenty years to see the next history. Their wait was amply rewarded by a rigorously researched and historiographically self-aware work, Richmond, Swann and Zarrilli's *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, published by the University of Hawaii Press in 1990. The book's three principal and four contributing authors—each with years of specialization in one or two Indian genres—collectively bring a breadth and depth of expertise unmatched in any of the other postcolonial histories. The book benefits, moreover, from new approaches to theatre and performance studies, with nearly all its authors having undertaken practical performance training and fieldwork in India in their respective genres, in addition to their traditional academic preparation and research. Most of the book's extensive photographic documentation also comes from the authors' own fieldwork. For each genre, these scholars provide historical background, performance context, analysis of salient features, performance documentation/reconstruction, and assessment of current conditions. The important introductory chapter, moreover, offers an analysis of historiographic issues unique to Indian theatre, such as the ramifications of using genre and period labels like 'classical,' 'traditional,' 'popular,' 'ritual', 'devotional', and 'modern'. At nearly 500 pages, longer than any of the other post-Independence histories, *Indian Theatre* is comprehensive, authoritative and richly detailed.

All the four postcolonial histories discussed so far—those by Gargi, Benegal, Rangacharya, and Richmond, Swann and Zarrilli—not only share an all-embracing vision of Indian theatre, but they also share a common organizational framework and approach. Their identical method consists of an examination of the different

constituents of Indian theatre *separately* one by one—in discrete chapters or discrete clusters of chapters. Thus each author first discusses the Sanskrit theatre in one or more chapters; then the traditional theatre, usually in multiple chapters but with each chapter devoted exclusively to one genre; and then the modern theatre, again in one or more chapters. An otherwise reasonable framework becomes quite problematic, especially in the context of Indian theatre, when these authors almost uniformly treat their chapters as a series of independent and unrelated units. In other words, such an approach in effect portrays Indian theatre as a conglomeration of disparate theatre traditions and genres, and leaves a cumulative impression of a theatre that is profoundly fragmented—not an artistic whole with sinewy interconnections and a unifying core, not the creation of a nation and its people.

Yet from ancient times, as my discussion of *Bharatavarsa* above shows, a concept of civilizational and national unity has undergirded Indian thought, defined an Indian identity, and has been manifest in all kinds of commonalities and interrelationships within Indian art forms, including the performing arts. Reflecting this essential cultural identity and world view, Indian theatre genres are interrelated and possess numerous common features, which the theatre historian, especially one writing a national history, must unveil and analyse as part of his job of constructing a proper context. Given the complexity of Indian theatre, this is a difficult but not impossible task. To be fair, Richmond's introduction offers a graphic framework of five partially overlapping circles to suggest common features within several though not all genres. Yet this perspective is only sporadically and minimally present in the chapters that follow, presumably because most chapters were prepared individually by the seven different authors.

Fortunately, the last of the postcolonial histories, Nemichandra Jain's *Indian Theatre: Tradition, Continuity and Change*, demonstrates the feasibility and the value of analysing interconnections within India's numerous theatres. Jain is the editor of the Indian theatre journal *Natarang*, a former professor at the National School of Drama in New Delhi, author of numerous Hindi-language theatre studies, a theatre critic, and a winner of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi award given by India's National Academy of Music,

Dance and Drama. Jain covers a surprising range of topics and offers keen insights within the confines of a short book. He follows the traditional tripartite Sanskrit-traditional-modern division found in the other histories but systematically seeks links between these theatres, broadly pursuing his theme spelled out in his subtitle and preface: to stress 'achievements in different phases' as well as 'strands of change and continuity' (10). Particularly interesting are his analyses of the differences and similarities in the amount and function of music and dance in the Sanskrit and traditional theatres and also within different genres of the traditional theatre itself, especially when separated as northern and southern genres. His comparative approach informs much of the book, including his section on the modern theatre where he explores the connections between the modern theatre manifestations in the states of Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamilnadu. Also excellent is his assessment of new developments in playwriting and directing in the post-Independence era of the modern theatre with which he has been intimately connected. This involvement and his strong sense of postcolonial-nationalist pride, however, sometimes skew his perspective, especially in his disparagement of the earlier era of the modern theatre. His comment, for example, that this 'new theatre which began in our country ... was, if not a total imposition, almost entirely an imitation of the western theatre', certainly overstates the case (66). Overall, though, he offers thoughtful, knowledgeable and analytic comments, and, most significantly, he consistently traces convergences and divergences between the various theatres and periods to a degree unmatched by any previous history.

This essay's comparative critique of major Indian theatre histories since the early nineteenth century thus reveals three distinct historiographies—each grounded firmly in its specific history. Orientalist historiography shows a narrow elitist construction of Indian theatre as synonymous with a single genre—the ancient Sanskrit theatre. High nationalist historiography makes a token acknowledgement of the Sanskrit and traditional genres but defines Indian theatre as comprising primarily of the modern genre. Postcolonial historiography offers a plural, democratic and comprehensive construction of Indian theatre, embracing all the theatre genres—Sanskrit, traditional, and modern—but it does so

with a markedly inflated assessment of the post-Independence achievements of the modern genre. In sum, the essay highlights the historicity of Indian theatre historiography and suggests a broadly mapped genealogy that illustrates how Indian theatre historiography, like all historiography, was regularly reformulated by its era's particular history.

The latest of these histories, Nemichandra Jain's *Indian Theatre: Tradition, Continuity, and Change*, illustrates the rewards of analyzing interconnections and mutual influences within India's multiple genres. But this is only a beginning. Historians of Indian theatre need to show, much more than they have done so far, how these genres are a part of a larger, plural whole. They should disclose the underlying unity and connectedness of Indian theatre across chronological, regional and linguistic boundaries, while at the same time documenting its remarkable plurality and diversity. From my perspective both these facets need illumination and documentation if we are to paint a reasonably complete picture of Indian theatre. Far more than has been evident in the works examined here, historians of Indian theatre also need to reflect on their own principles and methods as theatre historians and to be self-aware of the unspoken assumptions and values underlying their writing. We also need theatre studies from other perspectives, such as those of Marxist historiography which displaces the concept of a homogenous India in favor of a heterogeneous entity, formed by class struggle and resistance, as exemplified in works like D. D. Kosambi's *Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*.[36] Other Indian political historians in recent years have also challenged elitist historiographies by championing a 'history from below' model and initiating the subfield of Subaltern Studies, whose methods and perspectives, if applied to Indian theatre history, are sure to yield fresh insights.[37] For example, what the

[36] D. D. Kosambi, *Culture and Civilization of Ancient India In Historical Outline* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965). Necessarily given his vast scope, Kosambi offers only a tiny descriptive section on ancient theatre in his chapter entitled, 'Sanskrit Literature and Drama.'

[37] For a comprehensive assessment as well as some vigorous critiques of the Subaltern Studies project as it has now evolved, see Vinayak Chaturvedi, *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000). For a more

subaltern thinks of the bourgeois-urban modern theatre or how the outcast views the exclusively higher-caste Kuttiyattam temple theatre of Kerala would be instructive. Audience reception, the impact of the printing of playscripts with the arrival of printing presses in the nineteenth century, the shifting of patronage systems with the decline and subsequent abolition of royal houses, and the impact of decades of Bollywood films and now of global television are critical areas that historians could investigate. Together with the earlier histories, such new research will contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the history of Indian theatre, the complex processes of historiography within political history, and the uses of historical writings in colonial and postcolonial worlds.

recent revaluation of Subaltern Studies, see the early chapters of Dipesh Chakravarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

A Historiography of Modern Indian Theatre

Ananda Lal

The apparently simple word 'modern' requires some amount of explanation, if not precise definition, before one embarks on a quest for the characteristic traits of modern Indian theatre. Many people, even cognoscenti, use 'modern' very loosely to refer to post-Independence developments, often unaware that those very aspects that they associate with modernity had all appeared previously at different times during the course of the colonial period in India. In consonance with international consensus on world history and cultural studies, we must admit that modernism reached us on the coattails of the British Raj in the mid-nineteenth century. It effected sweeping changes in our theatre over the next hundred years, until 1947 and perhaps the subsequent decade, so that the only accurate adjectives for the following fifty years up till now can be postmodern, postcolonial or even contemporary. In fact, it is much easier for us to determine the beginnings of modernism in Indian theatre than for Westerners to do so in theirs, because the shift from premodern forms to modern ones here is so clearly distinguishable. Chronologically, too, it seems to nearly coincide with that turning point in Indian history, 1857, the First War of Indian Independence.

In contrast, recent Euro-American literary scholarship has successfully obfuscated the conventional markers of modernism

in the West by borrowing terminology from the discipline of history and demarcating the cusp where the medieval age ends as the start of the modern age. Thus, what we happily used to call the Renaissance now shows up in criticism as the early modern period.[1] Fortunately, there is no reason for us to apply this latest fad to our history, because it would constitute sheer contrariness to argue that the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries in India were modern. The latest literary historiographer of our country, Sisir Kumar Das, dates his Sahitya Akademi-endorsed two-volume survey of 'Modern Indian Literature' as 1800 to 1956.[2] I prefer to delay the onset of modernism in Indian theatre by a half-century or so purely on empirical grounds, that the movement, though initiated by 1800, did not really set in until later (a climatic analogy, like the monsoon does a few weeks after its onset). At the other end of the calendar, I must point out that modernism, again like the monsoon, took its time to reach some theatre regions, as late as the mid-twentieth century—in alphabetical order, Dogri, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Manipuri, Rajasthani, Sindhi. Let us also not forget the reality that in many traditional forms, modernism hardly had much of an influence, so that premodern and postmodern Indian theatre anachronistically coexist today.

But to rewind to the beginning, mere importation of the proscenium arch in itself did not herald modern Indian theatre, for the Playhouse (Calcutta, 1753) and Bombay Theatre (1776) catered exclusively to the small British populations in those harbour towns. Although the Russian bandleader Herasim Lebedeff opened his Bengally Theatre (Calcutta, 1795) with two Bengali productions, it proved a cul-de-sac that did not lead to a stage tradition either directly or indirectly. Since the British brought modern ideas to India, quite appropriately, the first 'modern' Indian play was written in English by Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjea in 1831—*The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta*—though it was neither staged, nor did it inspire any successors. I deem it modern because of its theme, social criticism forming an integral part of modernism; for the first time in Indian drama, an author explicitly criticized living conditions around him.

[1] See Sally Banes and Noel Carroll, 'Modernism and Postmodernism', in Dennis Kennedy, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre & Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 866–70.

[2] Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature: 1911–1956* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995), p. xvi.

Another milestone on the road to modern theatre passed in 1853, when Vishnudas Bhave presented in Marathi the first *ticketed* shows for native audiences at the Grant Road Theatre, Bombay. Professionalism is not a key factor in the emergence of modern Indian theatre because many traditional troupes performed as professionals. Bhave's religious subject matter, too, was nothing extraordinary. Only the novel adoption of the democratic sale of tickets as a commercial strategy in a playhouse made the difference. To prove my point, the very same year saw Amanat's pioneering Urdu *Indarsabha* at Wajid Ali Shah's durbar in Lucknow. But we can hardly term this modernist, not only owing to the mythological story, but also because it stuck to the age-old system of courtly patronage in its staging. Bhave was the first Indian theatre entrepreneur, soon followed in 1853 by Parsi companies acting in Gujarati (and Urdu, later) at the same venue.

In Calcutta, the Bengali stage remained within the confines of private family theatres open only to invited audiences. But what the enlightened joint households of the Bengal Renaissance lacked by way of organized financial acumen, they amply compensated for by means of trailblazing drama. Some of them established competitions for original plays on socially relevant issues, which they then staged. This reformist zeal shaped frontline modernist theatre across the world, but interestingly, Ibsen had not begun writing his social dramas as yet. Among the serious Bengali playwrights was Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, whose *Kulin-kulasarbaswa* (1857) and *Naba Natak* (1867) attacked the prevailing custom of polygamy. Among writers of comedies, Michael Madhusudan Dutt satirized upper-class affectations in *Ekei ki Bale Sabhyata* (1865) and *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron* (1867). It is a matter of pride for Assamese literature that during these early decades it produced two plays similar to those of the Bengali intelligentsia, Gunabhiram Barua's grim *Ram Navami* (1857) on child marriage and Hemchandra Barua's farcical *Kania Kirtan* (1861) on opium addiction. The rest

of India caught up with content in performance during the 1870s: Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Vaidiki Himsa Himsa na Bhavati* (Hindi, 1873) on violence sanctioned by faith; Jagamohan Lala's *Babaji* (Oriya, 1877) against religious chicanery; Ranchhodbhai Dave's *Lalita Dukhdarshak* (Gujarati, 1878) on women's plight.

Consequently, by 1870 modernism was well under way, established thematically in eastern India and commercially in Bombay. In 1872, the Calcutta stage also went professional, but in an absolutely unprecedented direction. From the inaugural production—Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan* about tyrannical indigo planters—it was blatantly polemical and anti-British. Within four years the Bengali public theatre outraged the colonial authorities so much that they passed the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876 to curb its subversive, seditious and provocatively patriotic tendencies. Like all the important elements of modernism, this legislation survives into postmodern times, virtually to the letter, as most state governments have not repealed it, ironically enough even invoking it to stifle their own opposition. In general, social and political plays comprise the core of meaningful Indian drama down to the present, definite legacies of modernism.

What has not lasted, however, is the mass appeal of theatre to Indians a hundred years ago. From the 1870s to 1930, theatre's popularity touched its high-water mark in India, its place as favourite entertainment afterwards usurped by cinema and now perhaps by television. Modern theatre in the West never attracted such a fervent following. In India, on the other hand, professional troupes rapidly evolved a formula combining melodrama with musical, which they used as a device to capture full houses and as an unlikely vehicle to express social or political messages when necessary (the latter often through historical allegory after the Dramatic Performances Act). Moreover, for the first time a pan-Indian populist theatre emerged in the nationwide reach and influence of heterogeneous, fairly cosmopolitan Parsi companies that toured productions in a lingua franca of Hindustani, even travelling abroad to southeast Asia and east Africa. Serious artists condemned this commercial phenomenon and spectacular style, but it did serve an unacknowledged, unconsciously unifying nationalistic end, in many ways presaging the role of Hindi movies after Independence. The tradition still lingers on in the work of Surabhi Theatres in Telugu, over a century old and battling the odds to the bitter end in the face of dwindling audiences.

While modern Indian theatre deployed distinctly premodern melodramatic techniques in its armoury, it experimented in quite modernist ways with song. Both aspects reveal a typically Indian aesthetic response, carried over in the case of melodrama from Sanskrit *rasa* theory giving primacy to emotions, and in music building on a richly diverse heritage, continuity in both of which remains theatrically evident to this day. Indian plays are still sentimental compared to Western ones, and make lavish use of songs; often, an atmospheric soundtrack actually feeds the melodrama. Besides the Parsi musicals, two other important forms of musical theatre arose around 1880. B. P. Kirloskar invented Marathi Sangitnatak on his *Sakuntal* (Pune, 1880) and Bengali Gitabhinay peaked in Rabindranath Tagore's debut, *Valmiki Pratibha* (Calcutta, 1881). Kirloskar mixed secular folk songs with devotional kirtans, Hindustani with Carnatic ragas, and had them delivered by his actors rather than the usual practice of a chorus. Tagore boldly refashioned classical ragas and even inserted snatches of Western music in a fully operatic creation. Hindi theatre also contributed in 1881, when Bharatendu Harishchandra composed *Andher Nagari*, an innovative musical farce on society and politics.

The Eighties witnessed a sea change in other genres, too. Many assume that traditional theatre is by definition premodern, but the Kannada folk play *Sangya Balya* heralded a modernist approach by presenting an apparently real-life incident of adultery in a contemporary manner. The most significant paradigm shift took place in matters of gender related to performance. Admittedly, actresses had been inducted on the Bengali stage in 1795 (by Lebedeff) and professionally in 1873 (by the Bengal Theatre), and in 1872, Dadabhai Patel had imported singer-dancers from Hyderabad for his Parsi company in Bombay; but all belonged to the euphemistic category, 'of easy virtue'. Tagore broke a major barrier on *Valmiki Pratibha* where, as noted by one reviewer, 'a maiden from a respectable family acted before the public'.[3] For

[3] *Sadharani*, 27 February 1881. Translated by Kironmoy Raha in 'Tagore on Theatre', *Natya: Theatre Arts Journal*, Tagore Centenary Number (1961), p. 7.

his *Mayar Khela* (1888), the distaff side of the Tagore household enacted all the characters, including those of men. Meanwhile, Harishchandra had commented in the preface to his tragedy *Nildevi* (1881), 'It is my desire that Indian women should come out of their indolence on the road to progress by following western women ... It is our belief that our women were not in this deplorable state from eternity.'[4] In 1892, Tagore treated the subject of women's sexuality in *Chitrangada*, considered as scandalous by some critics. By 1926, he went to the extreme of writing a play without any male parts at all, *Natir Puja*. However, female impersonation continued in most other regions of India, in Marathi right up to 1933 when Natyamanwantar first introduced respectable ladies as actresses in S. V. Vartak's *Andhyalanchi Shala*. The acceptability of women on stage thus became a major step in the progress of modernism.

In many ways, Tagore was the pivotal figure of modern Indian theatre, but scholars have not recognized his position. He stormed the bastions of domestic realism and picturesque entertainment, both of which followed the Western lead, and proposed more imaginative stagecraft modelled after Sanskrit aesthetics. In the seminal essay *Rangamancha* (1902), he took a stance of rebellion against cultural imperialism while advocating the banishment of painted scenery:

> ... the European wants his truth concrete. He would have imaginative treats, but he must be deluded by having these imaginings to be exact imitations of actual things. He is too much afraid of being cheated, and before accepting any representation of imaginative truth with some amount of enjoyment he must have a sworn testimony of its reality accompanying it. ... The cost which is incurred for mere accessories on the stage in Europe would swamp the whole of Histrionic Art in famine-stricken India.
>
> The theatres that we have set up in imitation of the West are too elaborate to be brought to the door of all and sundry. In them the creative richness of poet and player are overshadowed by the wealth of the capitalist. If the Hindu spectator has not been too far infected with the greed for realism and the Hindu artist still has any respect for his craft and his skill, the best thing they can do for themselves is to regain

[4] I. N. Choudhuri, 'Drama: Hindi', in K. M. George, ed., *Comparative Indian Literature*, Vol. 1 (Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1984), p. 509.

> their freedom by making a clean sweep of the costly rubbish that has accumulated round about and is clogging the stage.[5]

I think this must have also been widely read in English translation in the respected, nationally circulated magazine *The Modern Review*, because it came out the month after Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913. Given the sudden rise in his reputation, his views may have influenced other Indian theatre workers to alter course as well.

He led from the front in his choice of topics, too. He repeatedly wrote on the most delicate theme of present-day India, critiquing the majority religion. *Malini* (1896) introduced Buddhist liberalism as an alternative; *Achalayatan* (1911) attacked the orthodoxies of Hinduism; *Natir Puja* revisited Buddhism as a pacifist faith; *Chandalika* (1933) dealt with untouchability; *Tasher Desh* (1933) took a satirical dig at the 'Land of Cards', Hinduism. Prophetically anticipating contemporary ecological and environmental awareness, he composed a series of plays on the seasons between 1908 and 1934, which he typically produced on open-air sets in Santiniketan (such as 'an elaborate garden with real trees, flowers and rustic seats'), or as described by an eyewitness, 'The play takes place out of doors, the open verandah in front of the library of the *ashrama* being used for the stage. The audience sits on carpets, or on the grass, under the stars. ... There is no curtain to be lowered or raised; the stage is lighted and the action begins. ... There is no scenery ...'.[6] His classics, *Muktadhara* (1922) and *Raktakaravi* (1924), respectively warned against the damming of rivers and exploitation of mineral resources. Perhaps no author worldwide—leave alone India—has written so much drama criticizing institutionalized religion or pleading for harmony with nature.

Among other things, he pioneered educational theatre for children. At his school in Santiniketan, he insisted from 1908 that pupils perform plays regularly, composed his scripts specifically

[5] Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Stage', trans. Surendranath Tagore, *Modern Review* 14 (December 1913): 543–45.

[6] The first description is from Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1958), p. 102. The second passage is from Marjorie Sykes, *Rabindranath Tagore* (Madras: Longmans, Green, 1947), p. 108.

for this casting pool keeping in mind the ratio of boys and girls, and often held open rehearsals of great pedagogical value. This modern outlook and practice embraced older students too, once he set up his university, Visva-Bharati. Only after his death did the first formal university theatres in India begin: the Andhra University Experimental Theatre (1944) started annual college drama competitions and M. S. University, Baroda, commenced operations in 1950.

Indirectly, Tagore's overnight global renown after he received the Nobel Prize also 'modernized' Indian theatre by bringing it to the attention of international audiences, which knew only of classical Sanskrit theatre previously, if at all. Thanks to W. B. Yeats, the world premiere of his play *The Post Office* (*Dakghar*, staged much later in Bengali, in 1917) took place earlier in 1913, before he won the Nobel, at the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland. Tagore's celebrity status not only led to a spate of translations and productions abroad—the largest number of any twentieth-century Indian dramatist—but also facilitated intranational translation among regional Indian languages, an important modernist phenomenon that had not received much prior attention.

Tagore made striking theatrical innovations as well. He structured *Phalguni* (1915) as a play within a play, probably the earliest modern Indian application of metatheatre. His nephew, and famed expressionistic painter in his own right, Gaganendranath Tagore, designed the first box set, for the Bengali premiere of *Dakghar* (1917). Tagore appears to have been the first modern Indian director, as opposed to the older concept of actor-manager, and developed an individualistic, 'natural' style of acting emulated by professional Bengali stars later. The understanding he shared with the other contender for the title of 'first Indian director', Sisir Bhaduri, resulted in trendsetting approaches—for instance, possibly the first intentional occurrence of audience participation in modern Indian theatre, when the cast of Tagore's comedy *Sesh Raksha* (1927), directed by Bhaduri, asked spectators to join in the wedding celebrations on stage.

An inveterate experimenter, Tagore grew interested in dance during the late 1920s and assisted in the rediscovery of classical dance forms by bringing gurus to Santiniketan to teach and

incorporating choreographed sequences in his plays, as early as *Natir Puja*. This impulse climaxed in his invention of modern Indian dance-drama (not to be confused with Uday Shankar's invention of modern Indian dance), epitomized in his three great poetic works *Chandalika*, *Chitrangada* and *Shyama* (1936–9). These eclectically took ideas and grammar from all four newly resurrected 'classical' forms, Tagore himself instrumental in elevating Manipuri dance to this status at a time when most people considered it 'tribal', as well as folk styles and even foreign idioms from Kandy (Sri Lanka) and Bali (Indonesia). In typically modernist manner, he stressed performatory hybridity, automatically drawing the ire of purists and conservatives.[7] A similar reaction awaited the Kannada pathfinder K. Shivarama Karanth later, though he began 'refining' Yakshagana since the 1920s.

The arrival of *Alam Ara* (1931), the first Indian talkie, struck a body blow to theatre. The commercial or professional companies never recovered, though they hobbled on into the 1970s in some states. In their place, however, a new theatre emerged, avowedly amateur to protect itself from compromising with the demands of popular taste, and overtly socialistic in its politics. Concern for the oppressed and underprivileged was as old as *Nildarpan*, but a revolution occurred with the founding of the Indian People's Theatre Association in 1943 and its banner production, *Nabanna* (Calcutta, 1944). Bijon Bhattacharya's play radicalized Indian theatre by its direct thrust, and stagecraft by using no scenery, nor even makeup. Within a decade, offshoots and fellow travellers sprang up all over: the touring Prithvi Theatres (1944), led by Punjabi Hindustani actor Prithviraj Kapoor; the Dravida Kazhagam Party (1944), which provoked Tamil anti-caste sentiment through C. N. Annadurai's plays; Praja Natya Mandali (1946), who appropriated the Burrakatha form to spread its message in Telugu; Kerala Peoples Arts Club (1952), with Thoppil Bhasi's *Ningalenne Communist Akki* in Malayalam; the Jammu and Kashmir Cultural Front (1953), also utilizing popular drama for socialistic purposes;

[7] For detailed discussion of all the points on Tagore, see my edition of Rabindranath Tagore, *Three Plays* (Calcutta: M. P. Birla Foundation, 1987; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

and culminating in Marathi Dalit theatre, inaugurated by M. B. Chitnis' *Yugyatra* (Aurangabad, 1955), which played to lakhs in Nagpur the following year.

This vanguard brought in its wake the so-called 'group theatre', the serious amateur movement that became the mainstay of post-Independence contemporary theatre. Logically, modern Indian theatre ends here and I must stop, but not before mentioning two other events in 1953 that look forward to subsequent developments. One, the establishment of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, ushered in official national policy on the performing arts, with all that followed (including the National School of Drama). Secondly, Jaishankar Sundari's comeback to the Gujarati stage as director of Rasiklal Parikh's *Mena Gurjari* in Ahmedabad, mixing elements of Bhavai, started the urban folk-theatre fashion that proved so commonplace in later decades across the country that it turned into a cliché.

Comparative Indian theatre is a virgin forest that few scholars have entered, and I have attempted here to put together a very basic historiography of its modern phase that is bound to contain inadvertent gaps. Theatre researchers must build up this field of study, identifying our internal links of parallels and influences, so I would appreciate readers pointing out any significant omissions in this essay.

Reassembling the Modern

An Indian Theatre Map since Independence

Anuradha Kapur

We, who are from countries that are crisscrossed by various experiences of time, modes of being, processes of production, orality and literacy, newspapers and cable televisions, have to be very careful with the use of the word tradition.[1] In a very general sense, we know of course, that tradition means handing down knowledge of various sorts, or of passing a doctrine, but somewhere there is another subtextual sense as well, that this handing down is done with respect and duty. Handing down active knowledge, kits of survival, modes of behaviour, ways of speaking, singing or dancing, is one thing but doing this with respect and duty quite another. When the move from what might be transferred from mother to daughter or from father to son is narrowed or enlarged,

Note: Some of the issues taken up in this paper have been previously discussed in the following essays: 'A Wandering Word, an Unstable Subject' in *Theatre India* No. 3, May 2001 (pp. 5–12) and 'Female Impersonation, Narration and the Invention of Desire' in Dalmia, Vasudha and Stuart Blackburn (eds.) *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2004.

[1] A version of this paper was initially presented at a seminar on South Asian Theatre at Hanoi in October 1998. It has subsequently gained from discussions at a South Asia Seminar at the University of California at Berkeley in 1999; and at Miranda House, University of Delhi in 2000.

depending on the way one looks at it, so as to become abstract, and develops into an authorizing or exhorting force imbued with a sense of the 'age-old', of 'ceremony', of 'gravity', which occasion respect and duty, an altogether different set of values enter the argument.

We know that words such as *tradition, age-old, ceremony,* stabilize events, customs, modes of living; seen this way tradition cannot be tampered with, only preserved; it needs to be salvaged so as to save what is authentic in it from a present rapidly becoming a past. Yet we know that it takes, in some very real way, no more than two generations for customs and actions to become 'traditional' (as opposed to being modern, innovative fragmented or even tainted). We know also that constructing a performing 'tradition' is by nature freezing it at the precise moment of its inscription. Therefore for the purpose of this paper, let me problematize the word in several ways and thereafter construct a thumbnail sketch of Indian theatre practice of the last fifty years and some of its traditions.

I shall do that by adjusting a lens on the 1990s when debates around the organizing principles of performance crystallized and allowed for a remapping of contemporary practice, especially in Hindi theatre. This means that a number of important figures of modern theatre will not be brought up in this paper—as I will seek to position, emblematically as it were, only those practitioners on whom certain tendencies converge, and because of whose work certain ideological moves are explicated.

I

In attempting to assemble a history of the practices of Indian theatre, we face a double problem. There is little archaeology of theatre forms when compared to the number of forms that exist. Thus there may be rich detail available for one form, and almost nothing for another. Our levels of textualizing performance are varied. Take for example *Kuttiyattam,* the only traditional form of Sanskrit drama surviving in India today. The *Cakyars* have been performing this as obligatory duty since the ninth century; *Kuttiyattam* is then at least a thousand years old. *Ascaryacudamani* attributed to Saktibhadra who is believed to have lived in the late

9th or early 10th century is one of the most important texts of *Kuttiyattam.* A companion production manual *Ascaryacudamaniyute Kramadipika* is still extant and gives a scene-by-scene guideline for production. In comparison, the dance form, *Bharata Natyam,* has been reconstructed for the use of the Indian middle class, only in the 1930s and 1940s. Today it is the very standard of national culture, the almost sole custodian of the *essence,* India.

B.V. Karanth uses *Yakshagana*[2] for a version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*[3] in the 1970s; this traditional form, like *Bharata Natyam,* is also a 'reconstructed' version of Yakshagana. During the early 20th century, a salvage operation on existing forms such as the Yakshagana was attempted so as to prevent its retrospective loss. Yet what was put together was necessarily the result of a choice, in response to the specific and precise demands of that historical moment; thus the scholar and poet K.S. Karanth (1902-97) assembled a Yakshagana that was an imagined authenticity. Performance history may then be an archival idea, produced, among other things, by copied and recopied manuals like those of *Ascarayacudamani,* by a web of memories, by a succession of apprenticeships.

In some senses all these imagined authenticities are fables of identity where the ultimate referent is a spirit untainted by the fragmentation of modern life. If this is the case, then tradition is more a tradition of what we seek to recover; not unchanging and age-old, but it's very opposite, transformed and used. Tradition then is a history of change, something which is in constant flux, and therefore something that need not be set off against modernity, and its result, the loss of authenticity.

II

At the outset I should like to look at two major paradigms of traditions-in-use in India. One, the popular theatre called the

[2] Yakshagana is a traditional form from southern India that uses mythic material for its plots and has very vigorous dancing, singing and percussive music.

[3] B.V. Karanth's production of *Macbeth* was called *Birnam Vana* (Birnam Woods) and was translated and adapted into Hindi by Raghuvir Sahay.

Company Theatre or the Parsi Theatre,[4] enormously successful all over India between 1860 and 1930, and the other, the Theatre of Roots,[5] as it is sometimes called, which became important as an organizing principle through the late 1960s to the 1980s.

The influence of the Parsi Theatre is not usually accredited in the reckoning we make of contemporary theatre because the Parsi Theatre cannot claim for itself a classical lineage, but is instead, of mixed parentage. I shall look at this in greater detail; suffice it to say here that it is seen to have a great degree of western influence, endurably in the use of the architectural proscenium arch which came to India in the 1870s and created a significant shift in stage relations. Although it is self-evident, let me say here that these relations were materially different from the relations set up in the open forms of pre-colonial India. The Parsi Theatre's influence on acting, scenography, dramatic structure, music, is widespread even today, but is peripheral to the debates that centre on authenticity and the retrieval of that.

The Theatre of Roots is an outcome of that inevitable moment in a postcolonial scenario where a retrieval of those forms that were seen to be lost under the hegemonic pressures of the colonial regime is sought. Pre-modern forms, especially those that were uncontaminated by 'western influences', are affirmed and put to use in theatre practice. It is within these two broad categories of tradition that I wish to place some moments of the last fifty years.

Marian Pastor Roces[6] tells a story about a traditional gong-maker in the Philippines whose splendid gongs were crafted out of the brass that war bullets yielded. What then can be coded as traditional?

The Parsi Theatre is an eclectic form—of mixed origin, and of unlike parts, a new formation, taking stories from the Persian *Shah Nama,* and the fabulous *Arabian Nights,* from the singing and

[4] The heyday of the Parsi Theatre Companies was between the 1850s and the 1930s, after which they converted to cinema companies and the theatres they had built became studios.

[5] A term coined by Suresh Awasthi, theatre scholar and critic, in the 1980s.

[6] Marian Pastor Roces, in paper presented at the symposium *Inroads: Asia,* Los Angeles, August 1997.

performing traditions of nineteenth century Indian courtesans, from Victorian melodrama, from Shakespeare as performed by Western touring companies, European realistic narrative structures, British amateur theatricals, and from the visual regime of the major Indian painter Raja Ravi Verma (1846–1906). Ravi Verma's images became the canon from where contemporary costume, gesture, and body type was derived and which, to this day, informs the iconography of gods and heroes, in calendars, oleographs, and popular art down to recent TV series in India. This 'body' performs a whole range of roles that extends from inhabiting mythic characters to middle class ones: epic encounters between good and evil and the quandaries of the modern Indian are enacted—child marriage, female literacy, gambling, religious sectarianisms, alcohol abuse are the reformist narratives of the newly forming nation.[7] For example, Radheyshyam Kathavachak's *Bharat Mata* (1918), Agha Hashra Kashmiri's *Bharat ki Pukar,* and *Ankh ka Nasha* (1924), Naryan Prasad Betab's *Hamari Bhool* (starring Akhtari Faizabadi), and *Kumari Kinnari* (1928) played at the Congress session in Calcutta, were examples of such storylines; Prithvi Raj Kapoor's *Deewar* (1945), *Gaddar* (1947) and *Pathan* (1948) were enormously popular secular narratives touring India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Java, and Africa in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Characters in these narratives, like most other modern characters, are full of self-divisions. As an example, the division between love and duty creates heroic struggles that go especially well with the stories produced by the first wave of nationalist fervour. For instance, in the film *Naya Daur* (1957), the making of an asphalt road functions as an allegory for the making of a modern nation but at the same time the nationalist modernist argument about the perils of progress is also set out.[8] The road finally connects people, and hearts, and reduces religious distance.

[7] This body is transformed into the 'modern Indian body type' through cinema, as Parsi Theatre companies converted into cinema companies in the 30s.

[8] See Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema,* Oxford University Press, 1995.

These new Indian characters are composed by a deep idealism in which social evil is exposed so that it can be rectified.

Such idealism rapidly dockers into a modernist disillusionment with the new nation and becomes related to the dark social realism of the 1950s and 1960s. Dharamvir Bharati (1926–1997), Mohan Rakesh (1925–72), Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008), all important playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s, move into an existential modern vocabulary where ruthless exposures are performed on societal corruptions; this is done metaphorically in plays of Bharati and realistically in Rakesh and Tendulkar. Bharati's *Andha Yug* (Blind Age), based on the Indian epic Mahabharata, is an allegorical reading of the text where the heroic self-divisions of the characters yield the classic modernist tropes of doubt, angst, and terror. Tendulkar turns idealism upon its head by putting the hypocrisies of the Indian middle class in the dock and by stripping away its tawdry concerns.

Girish Karnad (b.1938), one of India's leading playwrights, firmly positions postcolonial concerns in his enterprise: he does so by rethinking mythic material and by reshaping it around modernist concerns of subjectivity.[9] Karnad psychologizes myth and produces characters with motivations hidden and apparent, transferred and accepted; self-divisions here are not played out within the heroic mode but within existentialist constraints of love. The divisions—between self and self, between loving and unloving, between two kinds of love, between love and instrumentality—are modern, but the characters within whom they are acted out, are mythic or heroic, taken as they are from traditional materials—from the epics for instance, as also from the *Kathasaritsagara*.[10] Interesting modernist contradictions emerge in the writing: myths and epics become, as it were, a civilizational weight on the playwright and

[9] Among Girish Karnad's celebrated plays are *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Nagamandala* (1988), *Taledanda* (1990) and *Agni aur Barkha* (Fire and the Rain) (1995).

[10] The famous collection of fairy tales composed by the Kashmiri poet Somadeva in about AD 1070.

that puts in place its corollary, the constant desire to unpack it by modernizing it.

Even though E. Alkazi does not fit into the paradigm of the Parsi Theatre and that of the Theatre of Roots that I have outlined to position the debates of the 1990s, it is imperative to situate his enormously significant intervention into Indian theatre, from the early 1960s to late 1970s. Alkazi put in place, almost single-handedly as it were, a modernist realist idiom into the Hindi theatre which affected theatre production across regions and across languages. His staging of Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh ka Ek Din* (One Day in Ashadh) or Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* (Blind Age), both written in the 1960s and produced in 1962–63, presented these texts with a realist exactitude hardly ever seen before; his meticulous attention to detail crafted stage pictures that were consequent on the precise cultural context indicated in the play and had little to do with building ornamental or attractive scenery. The architectural discipline of his staging was distinct from the decorative *mise-en-scène* of the Parsi Theatre or the open improvisatory staging of a director like B.V. Karanth.

B.V. Karanth (1928–2002), active for three decades in Indian theatre chiefly as director but also as music composer, tried to put forward a counter narrative to realism and sought to ease open the realist fixities that had become established in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Karnad's desire to remodel traditional texts, Karanth sought to modify and recycle traditional performance vocabularies. Karanth used the *rangpati*,[11] the chorus, the narrator, the *Sutradhar*,[12] he used music, mime, dance, stylized as well as naturalistic modes of acting, he used concepts borrowed from the *Natyashastra*, and from the Parsi Theatres, and put this eclectic lexicon on an empty transformative stage common to most traditional performances.

Karanth's open form, his non-convergent, episodic narrative, with the story dispersed or displaced into theatrical strategies taken from both classical and folk sources—might one call his sort

[11] A hand-held and therefore mobile curtain used for entrances and exits in most traditional theatre forms.

[12] The main narrator, and sometimes singer, whose name means the 'one who holds the strings' (of the narrative), like a puppeteer.

of work 'traditional' in that it seeks to reaffirm Indianness through the use of time-honoured materials? And by so doing, might one implicate the question of identity into it?

I suggest that Karanth's engagement with theatre language, his interest in a wide variety of performance protocols, is a modernist commitment to reconditioning traditional vocabularies for contemporary use. Thus his work shifts the debate on forms outside the frame of the authentic, and outside the frame of Indianness as well. The counter narrative he assembles is not a pedagogical enterprise that is intent on defining identity or prescribing ways of being Indian. Indeed it is not even concerned with programming a 'look' for Indian theatre.

III

Identity was redefined, along with tradition, in the early 1980s. This redefinition, as it were, has a great deal to do with a new and spectacular use of tradition as ornament, as national identity, and as 'difference' in the work of Ratan Thiyam. Ratan Thiyam (b. 1948) moves from the premises that were set up by the Theatre of Roots as practiced by Shanta Gandhi (1917–2002), Habib Tanvir (b. 1923) and K.N. Panniker (b. 1928), among others, to a *spectacular mode* that becomes globally legible because of its formal sophistication. From its global success, so to speak, it moves to become the most valued herald of contemporary Indian theatre. Deriving a performance vocabulary based on Manipuri martial arts and the lyrical *Vaisnava* traditions local to Manipur, Ratan Thiyam's work signals debates on Indianness in ways that other contemporary work has not been able to do. In a crucial sense, it makes apparent that the use of a performance language derived from folk or traditional theatres is very much an ideological construct, and that such language almost necessarily includes a critique of 'modern societies' because it can be taken as being intrinsically expressive of the 'spirit' of a nation, of its underlying beliefs and values, articulated in speech, music, gait, or costume. Almost certainly these values, apparently manifesting unique cultural specifics, can also function as cultural exchange—ways of signalling what makes a country and its forms 'different'. And being markers of cultural exceptionality, these values need to be safeguarded, to be preserved, as 'attractions' of

that particular cultural configuration. Ratan Thiyam, it seems to me, makes vexed joineries between 'product' and 'identity'; and between 'difference' and 'attractions'.

Two paradigms, that of the Parsi Theatre—the hugely popular modern commercial entertainment that produced an ever expanding audience and based its theatrical experience on profusion, excess, and eclecticism—and the Theatre of Roots—that concerned itself, in some senses, with anthropological retrieval by developing reconstructed forms—cover roughly the uses of tradition in our recent history of theatre practice.

In an age where clarity and permanence of affiliations may have given way to an uneven configuration between the local, regional and the national, it seems all the more interesting that Ratan Thiyam's work navigates these uneven classificatory demands of the ethnic to produce the more prescriptive Indian identity, and more symbologies, than the work of B.V. Karanth and others of that generation. Questions of inflecting subjectivities or gender do not occupy both these projects.

IV

In the last decade some very challenging work has been done by women directors as they have shifted the debate towards new forms, and towards new subjectivities. Though their productions are very different, a broad trajectory unites them: their bringing the question of gender on the stage, which has remained almost unaddressed in modern performance.

This body of work presents two things: it considers as its *subject* a sort of experience that may have been for the most part invisible till now; and then visibilizes this experience in ways that displace some of the narrative strategies currently in use. Parenthetically, I must add that I see the articulation of such experience as not being attempted by women alone—but for the purposes of this paper I shall look at the work of women theatre practitioners working mainly in Hindi.[13]

[13] For a more detailed reading of 'feminist' theatre practice in India see my 'A Wandering Word, an Unstable Subject' in *Theatre India* No. 3, May 2001 (pp. 5–12).

What does attempting to put a gendered language in theatre imply? Are different narratives, stories and characters sought to be produced? Are there altogether different ways of structuring event, life scripts and plot? Does that entail another way of manipulating experiential time and space, and therefore temporality, and therefore sequentiality?

Women practitioners have experimented with the process and form of dramatic *writing* on the one hand, and with the processes of directing or *constructing* a play on the other, and have put in place a revised set of authorial and professional relationships. For one thing, new dramatic structures that stress collective and cooperative working processes by giving precedence to *performance* rather than to the *playscript* have come into circulation. This has adjusted the perspective on both writing and on performing.

It is possible to argue that event, plot and character shade into each other, at least in theatre. And while it is self-evident that this is relevant to theatre made by men and women alike, I bring this into discussion here as all the three coordinates have engaged women practitioners one way or another.

A sequence of events is plot; provided we consider plot not just as a simple journey from one event to another: for an event can be such that it can come to pass in mental space, or it can occur in physical, material space. All events, even mental ones, are physicalized on stage, as happenings. On stage, action is only action if it is visible or physical. This physicalization takes place largely on the actor's body (which stands in, as it were, for the character's body) and through the *mise-en-scène*. If events are plotted in space (and time), as well as on the character's body then there is no easy way to separate event from character (for the character is the carrier of event) and character from plot.

Recent work by women has sought to reestimate the nature and meaning of 'event', that life-altering unit of time, by configuring event as related to character and not entirely to heroic action. Events may be fragmented into a series of *moments*. And these moments may not *appear* to be life changing but may still be so; they may not appear to make ostentatious or grand revisions to our existence and yet initiate death, departure, deception and atonement. During the space of a meal, or a song, during a glance

held, or a morsel swallowed, people may 'die', make liaisons, decide on a new life, betray their beloveds. Because inner lives veer, falter, expand, and contract, an entire story may begin and end in a simple everyday action. So while, on the one hand, there maybe no 'event' to speak of, several life-changing decisions may have altered the perceptual maps of the characters.

These seemingly timid or faint manoeuvres might also be designated indirect action, where an exceptionally transfiguring moment is not conspicuous on stage. To map these loops and breaks, these meanderings and these faultlines, the plot has to be made in such a way that its joineries are kept loose to allow deflection. To rework the meaning of development in character as in plot—which is usually understood as being a chain of events notching one into another in a directional way, and direction as being secured to the conventional pillars of story telling (that of beginning, middle, and end)—traditional plot devices and even dependence on dialogic communication requires questioning. The plot/ character configuration needs to transit towards a new set of subjectivities in order to unsettle expected portrayals. Changes in the way of drawing character result in redrawing the parameters of plot.

Consequently in some women's theatrework plot is frequently circular, and refuses resolution, character can change status, personality, and even gender, crossing society's artificially maintained boundaries of roles and station; objects can induce relationships, and imaginary landscapes produce tangible attachments (as in Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry and Anamika Haksar's work).

Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, who works in Chandigarh, runs a company of about twelve actors. They are both urban and non-urban performers. The non-urban performers are called *Naqqals*, female impersonators who sing, dance, and do stand-up-comedy, mimicry and balladeering. Other actors in her company have grown up in cities, and have obtained modern education, in drama schools or universities. By putting such a company together, Neelam Man Singh manages to construct before our very eyes, folk traditions in collision (and therefore in transformation), with the 'contemporary' in Indian theatre, with contemporary Indian 'bodies'. Such collisions make 'tradition' unstable and the audience

is forced to rethink it. Because Neelam puts female impersonators side by side with urban actresses, today's women so to speak, she also destabilizes gender representations.

In some senses, there is a reluctance in Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry to pin down women to any ready-made interpretation; in her productions of *Yerma*,[14] *Maduwoman*,[15] and *Fida*[16] there is an excess—costume, gesture, speech, and temperament break the bounds of the permissible and expand by theatrical invention into eloquent melodrama, passion, and agitation—that allows for a generosity of character. Neelam's theatricalization of Yerma's desire is an example. Yerma sings and laments, expressing her yearning for a child; while Yerma tosses on the ground, a rope, strung between two twigs held in the hands of two female impersonators, is set alight above her head; the female impersonators stay impassive and stolid, as if made of stone; the fire eats up the rope and a tracery of ash crumbles on to Yerma. The ash, the song, the longing, bracketed between two chimerical women, unsettles many assumptions, about corporeal and illusory women (and men), about love, desire, and bonding.

Destabilizing or deconstructing gender norms has been a concern in Amal Allana's work as well. Amal Allana, who works in Delhi, seeks to make gender mobile, as it were, by disturbing stereotypes. This she does by shifting and restructuring the elements of gender in her production of *Himmat Mai*[17] for example, where she cast the distinguished actor Manohar Singh in the part of Mother Courage/Himmat Mai. By making this exceptional casting she reallocated the attributes of feminity and masculinity—passivity, patience, nurturing, sympathy, on the one hand; aggression, courage, bravery, single-mindedness, and authority, on the other—from a woman's 'role' to a man's 'body' and *vice versa*, and thus redefined them.

[14] After Lorca's play. The production was made and extensively performed in the early 1990s.

[15] An adaptation of *Maduwoman of Chaillot* by Jean Giraudoux, produced and performed in the 1990s.

[16] Based on Racine's *Phaedre*, performed in the late 1990s.

[17] An adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*, *Himmat Mai* was produced in the early 1990s.

My work too has been concerned with upsetting sexual and gender hierarchies. Two projects that dovetailed into each other examined cross-dressing, and by allusion, androgyny. The first performance was a one-woman show along with an installation that was based on a Bertolt Brecht story, *The Job*.[18] *The Job* is about a woman who takes over her dead husband's post, which is that of a night watchman in a factory, and impersonates him for four years to keep her children from starving. She wins high praise for her courage and loyalty and then because of an accident in the factory, she is discovered to be a woman. No amount of pleading, legal or otherwise, gets her the job back. It is given to those who have 'male' stamped on their papers.

This play attempted to look at the repercussions of a woman becoming a man; its dangers and its transgressions, and in the context of the story, its disastrous consequences. For me it was especially important to consider this subversive masquerade as the reverse or negative of the concept of female impersonation as female impersonation continues to exist in India as an honoured tradition.[19]

[18] Based on Bertolt Brecht's story *The Job*, the play was produced in the mid 1990s. It had an installation and video animation by the distinguished artist Nalini Malani and was translated into Hindi by Atul Tiwari. Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Stories*, edited and introduced by John Willett and Ralph Manheim, Methuen, London, 1983, 1999. See also Bertolt Brecht [1933], *Der Arbeitsplatz oder Im Schweisse Deines Angesichts sollst Du kein Brot essen* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1997).

[19] Female impersonation has a long and varied history in India. Among the traditional theatre forms that employ female impersonation are Krishnattam, Ramlila, Raslila, Yakshagana, Therukuttu, Bhavai, Jatra. These forms are principally devoted to enacting epic and mythological materials. Women were disallowed from the stage, all the way till the late 19th century and when they come into the theatre, as also into cinema, in the 20th they were usually courtesans; but notwithstanding the stigma connected to acting, singing and dancing, there was an overlap between female impersonators and actresses. The smaller, walk-on parts were reserved for women and the more complicated characters, for female impersonators, some of whom achieved unrivalled success, such as Jaishankar Sundari (1889–1975) and Bal Gandharva (1888–1967).

Sundari: An Actor Prepares[20] is a performance based on the autobiography of the celebrated female impersonator, Jaishankar Sundari who performed all over India between 1901 and 1931.[21] Sundari became the rage of Bombay, enormously popular especially with women, for whom he became a sort of model, setting the style for every thing from dress to deportment. The performance sought to investigate the enigmatic presence of the man-woman figure in the theatre, and the cross-gender fascination it has characteristically conjured in audiences. Even though the premise of female impersonation almost always rests on the idea of an essential femininity, its performance sought to emphasize that gender is actually constructed in practice and that it is in fact encoded in demeanour, costume, manner, and convention.

Consistently concerned with finding unorthodox expressive structures within the theatre, Anamika Haksar's work does not play by any standard rules of story telling—her narratives are non-linear and non-convergent, often circular; they are baggy and meandering, not tight and conclusive. By making room for interjections, lapses in concentration and changes in direction, Anamika Haksar makes a formal subversion, as it were, and plots an unusually generous narrative, encompassing stylization and naturalism, inner and outer realities, material and spiritual worlds. *Antar Yatra*,[22] a production she directed in the mid-1990, is profoundly affected by the structure of the playing space, which was a constructed circular tent opening into a seventy-foot deep field. The lives of her epic characters unfold, expand, and take in the wide field, which then get translated into becoming their mental prospect, their dreamscape. Desire, thought, and longing

[20] *Sundari: an Actor Prepares* was produced in the late 1990s.The design was by Bhupen Khakkhar and Nilima Sheikh, the music design was by Vidya Rao and the dramatization was by Geetanjali Shree and Dinesh Khanna.

[21] Sundari's autobiography was in part written and in part dictated by Sundari to his son, Dinkar Bhojak. Sundari, Jaishankar/Dinkar Bhojak, *Thoda Ansu Thoda Ful*, Ahmedabad: Shiyji Asher, Vora & Co, (1976); recently translated into Hindi by Dinesh Khanna as *Thode Ansu Thode Phul*, National School of Drama, Delhi, (2002).

[22] *Antar Yatra* was based on Ilanko Atikal's, *Cilappatikaram* (The Jewelled Anklet) traditionally believed to have been composed in fifth century AD.

are made visible, *manifest*, in this vast expanse and simultaneously made contingent, *conditional*, on atmosphere, and on topography.

This distribution of the attributes of the self into landscape, objects, scenery, and props makes character *ephemeral*, as it were, and breaks up the notion of the unified individual. It puts to question among other things, the notion of characterization itself. It foregrounds the provisionality of life scripts, which are frequently full of contradictions that are hard to resolve into any coherent representation.

V

In conclusion, theatre made by women directors of the 1990s attempts to undo the sutures that might have been put in place to hold together the idea of a composite Indian identity. The figural paradox of the female impersonator stages the questions of gender and identity—essences are undone through performance. The feminine then becomes a masquerade, a staging, one of many possible guises. The impermanence of such masquerades is stressed and as a consequence character itself becomes porous, permeable, not unyielding, and predetermined. By making fragility central to structure and plot, these productions raise some crucial questions about re-historicizing narrative in ways that can animate the problematic of gender and subjectivity, of identity and Indianness, and manoeuvre the razor's edge between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' for our time.

The Critique of Western Modernity in Post-Independence India

Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker

In the Euro-American traditions, modernity is both a teleological principle of historical organization that separates the ancient and medieval from the post-Renaissance world, and a name for qualities that distinguish objects from one another within a given historical period. More specifically, literary modernity signifies a deliberate disengagement from past and present conventions in favor of verbal, formal, intellectual, and philosophical attributes that are new for their time, whatever the time. Horace, Dryden, George Eliot, and Sylvia Plath are all moderns in this sense, as are the late seventeenth century proponents of libertinism in England, or the late twentieth century practitioners of minimalism in the United States.

In Indian literary history, however, the issue of modernity remains inseparable from that of the transformation of Indian cultural forms by Western influences under the inherently unequal conditions of colonial rule. The conventional historical argument is that Indian literary modernity was a consequence of the dissemination of the European literary canon on the subcontinent, the institutionalization of English literary studies in the mid-nineteenth century, the formation of modern print culture in the course of the nineteenth century, and the large-scale

assimilation of modern Western literary forms—novelistic and short fiction in the realist mode, historical drama, national(alist) epic, romantic and confessional lyric, essay, discursive and critical prose, and biography and autobiography, among others. Concurrently, the influence of Western dramatic texts, conventions of representation, and forms of commercial organization displaced indigenous traditions of performance and established theatre as a modern, urban, commercial institution for the first time in the mid-nineteenth century. Given the ideological underpinnings of such a position, the 'colonial' origin of Indian literary and cultural modernity has emerged as a key issue in the debates of the post-independence period (witness the 1956 Drama Seminar), since colonialism is seen as destroying the very 'essential' and 'authentic' civilizational qualities that the orientalists had constructed in the nineteenth century. The resulting polemic, however, treats the culture of print very differently from that of performance.

MODERNITY, PRINT, AND PERFORMANCE

In discussions of print genres, such as poetry, prose fiction, essay, and autobiography, Indian theorists and critics after independence are not preoccupied with the question of European origins or the unmediated replication of European models, but with the appropriation, indigenization, and assimilation of the borrowed forms within the major modern Indian languages. The modern literatures that emerge under Western influence in India are thus *Indian* literatures, not displaced or transposed versions of European literatures. In his comprehensive account of modern Indian literatures, Sisir Kumar Das places the encounter between Europe and India in perspective through a historical comparison: 'Probably with the exception of the Greco-Roman encounter (which enabled Greek and Latin literature to exist side by side forming an indivisible universe for the educated Roman), the modern Indian literary history provides a singular case of [the] co-existence of two literatures, one of them alien, English, and the other indigenous, the Indian literature' (55). Vinay Dharwadker elaborates on the nature of this co-existence in terms that question poststructuralist arguments about the 'subaltern' status of Indian discourses:

> [T]he print culture that emerged on the subcontinent by the beginning of the nineteenth century was a hybrid, multicultural formation actively involving a large population of Indian investors, producers, distributors, and consumers. The ineluctable and uncontainable hybridity of this print culture, without precedent in the West or elsewhere, ensured that it did not and could not replicate in India the conditions, processes, and outcomes of the Enlightenment, print capitalism, or romantic nationalism of Europe. ... The colonial subject formed at the intersection of writing, print, and education on the subcontinent therefore had to be and is significantly different from the 'sovereign subject' of Europe, and also possesses, to invoke Gayatri Spivak's metaphor but not her argument, the power 'to speak.' ('Print Culture' 114)

The earliest Indian subject position to appear in the medium of print was also that of resistance to colonial rule (119), and this resisting subject has been the agent of historical change, as well as 'the idealized protonationalist and nationalist protagonist of fiction, poetry, and drama in virtually all the major modern Indian literatures' ('Print Culture' 120). In Dharwadker's analysis, what appears alongside resistance is also a position of self-possessed 'cultural ambidexterity, an equal or commensurate facility in two or more cultural systems concurrently' (123); the ambidextrous subject belongs neither to a subaltern nor to a dominant culture, but tries to maintain a critical distance so that s/he can act with equal effectiveness in both.

The end of colonial rule alters the conditions of both appropriation and resistance, and post-independence writers in the Indian languages have approached the issue of Western influence with a conscious internationalism and cosmopolitanism. Adil Jussawalla, editor of the first major post-independence anthology of new Indian writing (mainly in English translation), considers the issue of origins and influences more or less irrelevant to literary production:

> It is true that certain literary forms like 'free verse' and such literary concepts as 'realism', 'naturalism', and 'stream of consciousness' originated in the West. So did the novel itself. But such forms and concepts have now spread all over the world, and it would only be fair to call their use in India 'parasitic' if all international cross-influences and borrowings went by that name. A fairer way of judging a country's literature is to see the way its writers use certain international forms, to try to appreciate the changes they make along or against their particular literary traditions, sometimes with the help of these forms, sometimes not, and, most important of all, to try to understand the effect of their writing on their people. (18)

In the development of Indian literary modernity within the culture of print, therefore, the event of independence serves its anticipated function as a chronological and qualitative marker, but the perceived relation between the colonial and postcolonial periods in terms of forms, traditions, movements, and influences is primarily one of *continuity*, not *disjunction*. When Indian literary historians and critics discuss the major movements of the last century—nationalism, romanticism, progressivism, and modernism—they do not distinguish sharply between the pre- and post-independence periods. Furthermore, if post-independence authors reject their nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century precursors, it is not because the latter are 'modern' (that is, culturally dependent on the West), but because they belong to earlier stages of literary development and are not modern enough. The major fiction and poetry of the colonial period is romantic and naturalistic; that of the postcolonial period is modernist and postmodernist—the product of a more, not less, aggressive modernity.

Indian cultural-nationalist arguments about drama, theatre, and performance after 1947 approach the issues of modernity and Western influence in a radically different way, and the basis of the difference is the perceived relation of the colonial to the precolonial. The effect of modern print culture in India was not to destroy traditional literary forms and practices but to create a range of new poetic, fictional, nonfictional, and discursive genres that had no identifiable precursors in precolonial writing. In contrast—so the traditionalists claim—the modern Westernized culture of realistic, secular, and commercial urban performance disrupted and displaced indigenous theatrical traditions that had developed continuously for nearly two millennia. The new Western aesthetic of production and representation forced a culture that possessed highly developed antirealistic forms of classical, devotional, ritual, and folk performance grounded in traditional (mainly rural) life to accommodate realism, the urban proscenium stage, and commercial theatre institutions. The religious, ritualistic, and devotional contexts of much traditional theatre atrophied, and the

culture of patronage became obsolete, both in the cities and the countryside. By introducing 'literary drama,' Westernized theatre on the subcontinent also led to a rejection of such popular forms as the jatra of Bengal, the bhavai of Gujarat, and the tamasha of Maharashtra as 'debased' and 'corrupt.' These are the reasons for which cultural nationalists attack theatrical modernity, and the attack has weight and urgency precisely because in drama there are major pre-colonial traditions to 'recover.' Thus, while in the case of poetry and fiction most post-independence critics object not to the borrowing of Western forms but only to their ineffective imitation, in the case of drama traditionalist critics object to the act of borrowing as such. The focus of anticolonial critique with respect to print genres is language, but, with respect to performance genres, it is form. And while the post-independence rejection of writing in English has invoked the relation between culture, experience, and language, the rejection of westernized modern performance in the indigenous languages has invoked the relation between culture, experience, and form.[1]

In one perspective, one may argue that the cultural-nationalist critique of westernized modernity is not unique to Indian theatre,

[1] Interestingly, the one critical approach that takes a different view of the colonial period is the one that regards 'Indian theatre' as a single, continuous, and varied tradition spanning three millennia. Studies that adhere to this model employ four main historical divisions: the period of classical Sanskrit; postclassical developments in traditional, devotional, folk, and intermediary forms; the modern period of Western influence; the period after independence. This long historical view places the 'problem' of colonialism in an altogether different perspective and creates a tolerance toward colonial developments that is strikingly contrary to the ideological critique of westernization. In his general introduction to *Drama in Modern India*, an Indian PEN publication of 1961, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that the effect of the Western impact was 'to awaken the dormant critical impulse in the country, to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and literature, and to open the way for a fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expressioin' (4). The initial flood of translations and adaptations from Sanskrit and English drama led to 'intelligent imitations, and presently to experiments in the creative mingling of the two streams, the indigenous and the foreign' (5). Javare Gowda's preface to *Indian Drama: A Collection of Papers* (1974) notes that the classical, folk, and Western traditions are now simultaneously available to the contemporary Indian playwright: 'The really creative writer can use all these three influences and make a distinctively Indian drama. This is the task ... before the writers in India' (Gowda, x). In another important respect, however, the inclusive historical approach has the same effect as the discourse of postcolonial anticolonialism: it views the last five decades as an unformed expanse describable not as 'history,' which began a very long time ago, but only as a series of 'trends' or 'developments.'

but a universal postcolonial symptom that critics concerned with many new national literatures in the former European colonies have described variously as 'nativism,' 'traditionalism,' 'reactionary nationalism,' or 'the conflict between ... the traditional culture of the past and incorporation into a global modern culture.' C. L. Innes notes that 'the literature produced as part of a cultural nationalist project is a literature produced in opposition to the narratives and representations which deny dignity and autonomy to those who have been colonized. But this opposition is addressed not just to the colonizing power, nor even primarily to it, but to the people of the emerging nation, and seeks to engage them in their own project of self-definition' (Innes, 120). In this process common to many postcolonies, 'modernization' is 'synonymous with the promotion of the cultural values of the colonizer, and the development of so-called civilization,' and its rejection is a precondition for recuperating a 'usable past' (Griffiths, 'Post-colonial Project', 166). Despite its resemblance to these other postcolonial discourses, however, the nationalist critique of modernity in Indian theatre reflects the particular history and politics of Indian cultural forms and has to be understood in relation to them.

REPUDIATING THE MODERN: THREE ARGUMENTS

The repudiation of theatrical modernity by Indian cultural nationalists in the post-independence period rests on three principal arguments, all of them well represented in the polemic of the 1956 Drama Seminar: modern westernized theatre was an alien imposition that did not and cannot flourish in India; the end of colonialism offers the best opportunity for correcting this aberration; and the renewal of Indian theatre depends on the revival of indigenous, culturally authentic traditions.

In recent years, the first position has appeared most forcefully in the work of such scholar-critics as Nemichandra Jain and Kapila Vatsyayan. Jain argues that Western practices disrupted an

indigenous theatrical tradition that had been continuous for more than two millennia, and had evolved 'according to *our own* world-view, on the basis of one or the other aspect of *our* culture, and under compulsions of *our own* social and political conditions' (63; my emphases). He also claims that during the Sanskrit phase theatre was 'almost the same for the entire country,' and maintained its unity across various language regions throughout the postclassical period (twelfth to seventeenth centuries). Western-style theatre was 'totally different in all these aspects,' because it took shape 'in imitation of an alien theatre, fundamentally different in its world-view and aesthetic approach' (64). Under neutral cultural conditions it would have met with certain failure, but under the conditions of colonial dominance it found support among a growing English-educated middle class anxious to imitate and please the British. The educated Indian 'turned away from his own moorings,' traditional forms were 'relegated to sections of traditional society, rural or tribal, and to the socioeconomically deprived classes' (Vatsyayan 184–85); the result was a 'fatal alienation between our rural and urban theatre ... which gradually changed the very contours of our dramatic activity at all levels' (Jain 61).

For the antimodernists, therefore, the end of colonialism presents the moment of restitution, when the older 'natural' theatrical traditions can resume their rightful place in national culture. This is not only necessary but inevitable because according to them the modern theatre of the colonial period created nothing of lasting value: it was a 'desert of imitation' and opposed all the habits of representation and spectatorship that were most suited to Indian culture. Proponents of this view derive ideological strength from the crisis of realism in Western theatre that underlies such movements as expressionism, the theatre of the absurd, and Brecht's epic theatre, because for them this crisis demonstrates the intrinsic superiority of the antirealist and anti-Aristotelian aesthetic of traditional Indian theatre over Western forms. Similarly, the focus on traditional forms and texts in the intercultural experiments of Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, and Peter Brook have occasioned the argument that Indian practitioners cannot afford to ignore what even major Western theorists find revitalizing. Indeed, Kapila

Vatsyayan suggests that post-independence Indian playwrights have rediscovered their roots chiefly because of the influence of ancient 'Eastern' forms on such Western practitioners as Artaud and Brecht, and those same forms have now begun to exercize a powerful influence on 'modern avant garde theatre,' or 'mobile theatre,' within India itself.

With reference to contemporary practice, the various strands of this traditionalist argument converge into one dominant assertion: the formal, aesthetic, and representational principles of indigenous performance genres offer the only possibility of an authentic alternative modernity in Indian theatre, and the playwrights and directors who have chosen to experiment with the traditional (precolonial) repertoire represent the most significant theatre work of the post-independence period. The essential elements of this argument are present in the polemic of Suresh Awasthi, former Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the most vocal proponent of the 'theatre of roots':

> Most of the directors and playwrights doing Western-oriented imitative work thought of the traditional theatre as decadent and of no relevance to their own theatre work. Many were prophets of doom, thinking of these traditional forms as museum pieces. History has proved them wrong. The great cultural upsurge of the post-independence period has resulted in cultural decolonisation, and traditional arts have asserted their vitality and relevance. The new and most creative work in contemporary theatre is inspired and influenced by the rich and variegated traditional theatre. ('Defence' ii)

Awasthi notes that in such regions as Kerala, Manipur, and Karnataka, very old theatre forms coexist with the work of innovative contemporary directors like Panikkar, Thiyam, and Karanth, who have followed Shombhu Mitra's lead in searching for their creative roots, and mounting an effective anti-colonial offensive. Their work liberates theatre from its 'colonial moorings,' and has created 'a new and indigenous idiom ... which has restored traditional techniques and aesthetic values tempered with contemporary sensitivity' (iii–iv). These qualities of the 'new' traditional theatre, however, remain more a matter of assertion than demonstration, since there is very little criticism explaining its aesthetic, semantic, social, and political intentions in the present. In a study that

approaches drama as 'the gift of gods.' Awasthi himself passes up the opportunity to discuss the new body of work—or even specific plays—although he again describes the return to traditional forms as the most significant event in post-independence theatre.

The playwright Habib Tanvir, one of the major practitioners of 'mobile theatre,' is more circumspect in his overview of the post-independence field, even though his critique of contemporary theatre, and his sense of what is most interesting in recent playwriting, have much in common with the positions of the traditionalist critics.

> The urban theatre of India only partially reflects the fundamental features of Indian culture. By and large, it remains imitative. It tries to ape the conventions of the western theatre. At its worst, it represents the pale copy of the most worn-out western theatre traditions. At its best, it reflects new western forms recently evolved through a rigorous process of experimentation. Nonetheless, there are producers and theatre groups in Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and elsewhere that are engaged in original work of a very valuable nature. They are mostly involved in experiments with Indian folk theatre forms. Though in a country of vast cultural resources like India, their number is deplorably low, they have already managed to break new ground and lay the foundation of a genuine Indian theatre. (6)

The specific works Tanvir mentions in this connection are Karnad's *Hayavadana*, which is based on a twelfth-century folktale from the *Kathasaritasagara*; the political jatra plays of Utpal Dutt and the tamasha plays of P. L. Deshpande, which employ the major intermediary forms of the Bengal and Maharashtra regions, respectively; and his own *Agra bazar*, which celebrates the life and work of the eighteenth-century Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi. Tanvir rightly credits the IPTA with the first artistically serious experiments in folk theatre but recognizes that the trend has intensified greatly since the 1960s; in a familiar move, he then repeats the claim that folk styles express in true and authentic Indian forms. The negation of much contemporary urban Indian theatre is inherent in this anti-modern stance: in the same measure that the traditional and the folk are invested with originality, creativity, authenticity, and Indianness, the forms of contemporary theatre that do not participate in the revivalist movement are reduced to inconsequence.

THE COUNTER CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONALISM

The motivations, positions, and effects of the cultural-nationalist critique of theatrical modernity in the post-independence period invite a rejoinder, because the traditionalist position misrepresents the status of precolonial traditions, the nature of colonial Indian theatre, and the relation of both these to the present-day theatre. The desire for cultural autonomy and wholeness does not translate in any simple way into the possibility of inserting a pristine pre-colonial past into the postcolonial present. Gareth Griffiths describes 'constructions of pre-colonial society' as 'at best mythic and at worst deliberative fictions of the new ruling elite,' because 'even the continuing cultures in the indigenous languages have been subject to profound modifications and hybridizations in their ready and wholesale adoption of such forms of European literature as the novel and the short story, as well as in the fact that the markets and readerships of such literature overlap and influence each other' (168). Invoking Wole Soyinka, Brian Crow and Chris Banfield comment that a 'return to roots' is energizing, not when it is an 'ideologically convenient mythology,' but when it is a strategy for rediscovering the intrinsic principles by which a society can transform itself in the present (11). Rustom Bharucha particularizes these arguments for Indian theatre when he suggests that the idea of tradition as a recoverable, unmediated cultural essence is a postcolonial invention, like the nation itself: 'Our tradition had already been mediated by the colonial machinery of the nineteenth-century theatre, the conventions and stage tricks derived from the pantomimes and historical extravaganzas of the English Victorian stage,' and the borrowed conventions were in turn thoroughly Indianized through music, song, color, pathos, melodrama, and histrionic delivery (*Theatre and the World* 251). Just as Western influences are indigenized, indigenous performance traditions are hybridized in the colonial period. Bharucha also makes a point that reappears in theoretical defenses of modernity and realism—that performance traditions weaken naturally under adverse socioeconomic conditions, so that a deliberately 'recovered' tradition is an ideological construct, not a living form.

INDIGENOUS AND WESTERN FORMS: THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The generalizations about the destruction of indigenous forms by alien ones therefore need careful scrutiny. How 'alive' were traditional, folk, and popular forms of theatre when modern theatre practices emerged in the major colonial cities? To what extent did the two theatrical models compete directly with each other? And how 'alienated' did the new theatre remain from Indian society and culture? Conversely, to what extent do post-independence experiments in folk and traditional theatre restore pre-colonial aesthetic and performance traditions? What normative force can they exercise in contemporary practice?

First, most theatre historians agree that after the decline of Sanskrit theatre around AD 1000 and the Muslim conquest of north India by the twelfth century, significant theatre activity resumed in the Indian languages only in the nineteenth century. Some classical theatre forms survived in the Tamil- and Malayalam-speaking areas of southern India, and religious forms, such as the ramlila and raslila dominated the north. In such languages as Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, and Gujarati, a variety of folk and popular forms took shape during the postclassical period, and according to Sisir Kumar Das, the vitality of these traditions actually weakened the Western impact in the beginning, delaying the westernization of the Indian stage for some time. But in languages like Hindi, Punjabi, or Kashmiri, there was no notable theatre at all until the late nineteenth century, and therefore little for colonialism to displace.

Second, the nineteenth-century critique of indigenous forms was not primarily a British but an Indian preoccupation. Nandi Bhatia points out that the British were equally contemptuous of the 'immorality' of traditional Indian entertainments and the presumptuous crudity of Indianized versions of Shakespeare, and encouraged the polarization of theatre 'around the categories of 'low' [Indian] and 'high' [European] culture' (14). Because indigenous theatre was alien and inaccessible, the British were also interested in developing alternative cultural spaces in the interests of better political control. But indigenous forms came under attack

because of the self-critical thrust of social reform movements, the emergence of middle-class culture in the cities, and the commitment of such major authors as Bhartendu Harishchandra, D.L. Roy, and Rabindranath Tagore to the literary and cultural possibilities of the new aesthetic. As Kathryn Hansen notes, the emergence of urban drama under European influence 'did not completely supplant indigenous theatrical genres, but the reformist discourse that resulted from the colonial experience pushed the theatre to the margins of respectability' (*Grounds for Play* 235); eventually 'the campaigns against popular culture dramatically diminished the number of practitioners, leading to their eventual exile from urban society' (*Grounds for Play* 255).

Third, westernized theatre may have devalued indigenous forms in cultural and critical discourse, but the conditions of its existence were so radically different from those of traditional theatre that there could hardly be any genuine rivalry between the two models. Nineteenth-century urban theatre was, first and foremost, a product of new forms of enterpreneurial capital, best symbolized by Calcutta's National Theatre, which began charging ticket prices when it opened in 1872, and the major Parsi theatre companies, which were based in metropolitan areas but also traveled throughout the country. The audience for this theatre came mainly from the urban (initially English-educated) middle class, though the travelling companies gradually acquired a larger popular base. New theatre architecture and the proscenium stage dictated new staging conventions, which involved the full range of modern theatre arts—acting, costumes, sound, lighting, scenic and set design, and stage machinery. In contrast, indigenous forms had a rural or semi-urban base, depended for patronage on the landed gentry or religious institutions, and needed minimal physical organization in terms of location and staging. In the nineteenth-century cultural context, modern urban theatre may have been considered superior to the older forms, but was hardly a substitute for them. As Kathryn Hansen notes in the specific case of Nautanki, 'the urban stage is a largely middle-class phenomenon found in the major cities throughout India. ... In contrast to the urban stage, the Nautanki theatre relies not on the patronage of a Westernized middle class or on its imported

substratum of ideas and texts. Rather it is rooted in the peasant society of premodern India' (*Grounds for Play* 40). Furthermore, urban theatre succeeded not by colonialist fiat but because it was a new form of representation with seemingly endless potential, like cinema a century later, and because it became, in certain locations, a viable commercial institution. The 'prestige' of Western theatre alone might have sustained it for a time with a coterie, but no form of popular theatre could have survived if it did not satisfy a larger urban audience.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, urban theatre may have been an 'alien' form at its inception, but went through the same rigorous process of indigenization and assimilation as the print genres of poetry, fiction, and nonfictional prose. Following the orientalist 'recovery' of Sanskrit theatre between the 1790s and the 1830s, the dual theoretical frames of reference for the new theatre were the classical Indian and the modern Western dramatic canons. Far from erasing the Indian past, this theatre made the past available to the discourses of identity, selfhood, culture, and nation. Sudipto Chatterjee argues that the English-educated Indian, who had lost his 'native-ness' through contact with the colonizer, 'had to invent a new identity for himself. This new identity, essentially a paradigm of hybridity, was fashioned out of the binary strains of Sanskritic *revivalism* and *Westernization*' (Mise-en- (Colonial- Scène) 23). In late nineteenth century India, the commitment to Sanskrit texts was in no respect incompatible with the growing forms of Western influence.

The genres of colonial Indian theatre reflect this hybridized duality perfectly. As noted earlier, nineteenth-century performances ranged over plays in English, European plays in English translation, Indian-language versions of English and European plays, translations of Sanskrit plays into modern Indian languages, and original Indian-language plays that were Western in form but not in content. From the beginning, the material of the new Indian plays was also resolutely Indian, deriving from mythology, history, folklore, and the social texture of contemporary life. Later in the nineteenth century, as Hansen points out, Parsi theatre drew on Indian classics, new social dramas, and Western imports (especially popularized versions of Shakespeare), while urban elite theatre

produced new scripts as well as translations from canonical Indian and foreign playwrights ('Making Women Visible' 40). The print and performance cultures of modernity, therefore, share the same nativized hybridity, and the same hybrid subject appears in both. Not surprisingly, the two principal architects of the Bengal Renaissance, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Rabindranath Tagore, were playwrights as well as novelists and poets.

Colonial Indian plays therefore exemplify one of the basic claims of postcolonial theatre criticism, that 'colonial cultures generate new theatrical forms by negotiating between indigenous performance modes and imported imperial culture' (Gainor xiv). 'Western influence' is not an insoluble substance that remains unchanged by the alchemy of transplantation. So when Kapila Vatsyayan argues that after a century and a half the forms and institutions of Western theatre remain 'alien' and unnatural, she has to suppress the fact that between 1870 and 1930 they spawned the first and only national-level professional theatre in the country, and merged during the 1930s with that 'quintessentially Indian' mass medium—film. In short, critics like Vatsyayan misrepresent the introduction of a new popular culture of performance (which waxes and wanes according to market conditions and taste) as a process of deliberate cultural suppression and destruction.

There are two further aspects of colonial theatre which underscore its thorough assimilation into the matter of India. Chatterjee uses theatricality as a metaphor to analyze the 'multifarious workings' of the socio-cultural mise-en-scène of the Bengal Renaissance as the conjunction of a text composed of a newly discovered national identity, a process of catalysis/rehearsal involving intense social debate and change, and a performance consisting of the copious literary and dramatic output of Bengali authors. In this context, Bengali theatre 'performs a metonymic function and works like a play-within-a-play. It is both emblematic as well as a product of a larger *mise-en-scène* of the social order' (Chatterjee 25). In a similar vein, Julie Stone Peters argues that 'those who imply that the history of theatre in the empires is the history of two sides at war are ... mistaken' (Peters 201). These positions are the exact converse of the traditionalist argument, and underscore that colonial theatre is something other than a record of hegemonic imposition

on the part of the British, and cultural self-betrayal on the part of Indian practitioners.

Furthermore, once urban theatre took root as an institution, it was at least in intention increasingly, if inconsistently, a theatre of resistance rather than collusion. Recent theatre studies have sought to uncover the significance of this medium in the culture of empire by recognizing the 'strategic political and cultural force of theatrical production within a community or larger geographical region,' and by 'focusing on the unique nexus of theatrical performance as a site for the representation of, but also the resistance to, imperialism' (Gainor, xiii). Sudipto Chatterjee's observation—that the 'nationalism' of late-nineteenth century Bengali theatre 'rested on elision on one side, and fabrication on the other' ('Nation Staged' 22)—suggests the compromising effects of orientalism on nationalist sentiment. But the furore over the English translation of *Nil-darpan*, the troubled stage history of the play in the 1870s, and the passage of the Dramatic Performances Control Act in 1876 are all recognizable signs of tension between the colonial state and theatre as an urban institution. In Nandi Bhatia's view, it is possible to talk about the 'rise of nationalist drama after 1860' (vii); Bhatia observes, 'by 1876 theatre in India had indeed become an expression of the political struggle against colonial rule and a space for staging scathing critiques of the oppression and atrocities inflicted upon colonial subjects by colonial rulers on the indigo plantations and tea estates' (I).[2] Modern Indian drama had thus begun to function as an anticolonial medium at least a generation before the formation of the Indian National Congress officially launched the nationalist movement in 1885.

[2] 1876 is the year of the instrument of colonial censorship, the Dramatic Performances Control Act. To place this act in perspective, one should note that no such measure was on the books in India, whereas in England the Stage Licensing Act had been passed in 1737. The British wanted to bring the situation in India up to par with England, with two additional intents: to prevent anti-British propaganda of any sort and to express their contempt for the quality of indigenous theatre. The idea of having plays read and licensed before they were performed (as in England) by some counterpart of the British Lord Chamberlain was rejected a unnecessary. The bill for prohibition was first drawn up for Bengal and then ratified by the administrators of each British Indian state. The three plays that were instrumental in setting censorship in motion in 1876 were the anonymous *Gaekwad-darpan*, *Chakar-darpan*, and *Gajadananda o Yuvraj*. The first two were considered libelous, and the third disrespectful to the Prince of Wales.

INDIGENOUS AND WESTERN FORMS: THE POSTCOLONIAL PERIOD

The myth of modern urban theatre as an aesthetically alien, politically complicit, and culturally insignificant form is therefore at variance with literary, theatrical, and political history. But the corresponding myth also needs demystification: that the 'return to tradition' in the post-independence period reestablishes forms and conventions that colonialism had disrupted, and that this restoration is (or should be) the most significant event in contemporary theatre, both in itself and as the instrument of cultural decolonization. In fact, the 'new' traditional theatre is a commodity for the same predominantly middle-class urban audience as other major forms of contemporary theatre. Its materials and conventions of representation are different; its locations and modes of consumption are not. It is simply a new kind of urban theatrical experience mediated by large-scale state patronage, and dependent on the institutions both of print and performance.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the qualitative similarities between neo-traditional theatre and the modern theatre it ostensibly opposes. The folk-based and traditional performance styles of Tanvir, Kambar, Thiyam, and others have often taken performers *out* of their native rural environments into urban, sometimes international environments, but there is little evidence that the reverse is true: that these traditions have been revitalized in their original locations for their original audiences, or that experimental urban productions have reached rural audiences on a significant scale. In other words, the new traditional theatre is not based on the traditional relations between author, performance conditions, and audience, because those relations have ceased to exist in a postcolonial society undergoing rapid modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. New modes of agriculture have transformed the village as an economic unit, and the mass cultural forms of film and television have eroded the link between rural life and rural art forms. In addition, contemporary plays

employing traditional/folk techniques straddle the gap between orality and print. In their 'natural' state folk, traditional, and intermediary forms have fluid performance texts, but usually no published versions, whereas recent folk-based plays like Karnad's *Hayavadana*, Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswamy*, and Thiyam's *Chakravyuha*—which are among the iconic texts of contemporary traditionalist theatre—are equally important as performance vehicles and as printed texts. The traditional forms were hybridized during the colonial period, and the cycle of hybridization completes itself in the postcolonial period when those forms are transplanted into urban theatre. The idea that this process of 'reviving' indigenous forms for urban consumption neutralizes the colonial phase and establishes continuity with pre-colonial and premodern traditions is at best an ahistorical fantasy or an ideological illusion.

The claims about restoring a lost past are fallacious for another reason: the urge to unlearn alien habits and relearn those intrinsic to one's 'own' culture is a distinctly postcolonial urge. Classical and medieval forms acquire a new national cultural significance in India only when the modern nation becomes available as a referent. The postcolonial views of nation, culture, and tradition are possible only as a reaction to colonialism, since a 'national culture' did not exist in its modern form in precolonial times. Hence, to argue that the 'return to tradition' in post-independence theatre restores a continuity that colonialism disrupted is to be selectively historical: a stance that can only be produced by a specific history is used to negate that very history. As Kwame Anthony Appiah points out, the 'bolekaja' critics who issued a combative call for the decolonization of African literature ('Come down, let's fight'), rely fundamentally on the very categories of Western thought they seek to exclude. The critics' ostensible purpose is 'to wrestle the critical ethnocentrism of their Eurocentric opponents to the ground in the name of an Afrocentric particularism' (Appiah, 57). Their complaint, however, 'is not with universalism at all ... [but with] Eurocentric hegemony *posing* as universalism. Thus, while the debate is couched in terms of the competing claims of particularism and universalism, the actual ideology of universalism is never interrogated, and, indeed, is even tacitly accepted' (58).

Similarly in India, the nativist argument seeks to undo change because there is an older tradition to recover, yet that tradition is recuperated *by* the same institutions, and *for* the same audiences, that the argument rejects as alien. Furthermore, in a society that is caught inexorably in the processes of modernization, one cannot reject some forms of modernity while tacitly embracing others. To reject modernity in theatre as an unacceptable Western legacy, one would logically also have to reject modernity in other forms of social and cultural organization.

Finally, the traditionalists' weakest claim may be that of promoting the only 'intrinsic' and 'authentic' Indian theatre. For forty years, left-wing theatre workers and social-realist playwrights have asserted the Indianness and relevance of their own material. In his formative years Sircar regarded folk theatre, not 'modern theatre,' as alien to his urban and middle-class sensibility. Since the 1980s, Elkunchwar and Dattani have been among the most vocal critics of the position that contemporary narratives of home, family, and urban sociopolitical experience are less 'Indian' than twelfth-century folktales or eighteenth-century history. The critique of modernity in Indian theatre is therefore riddled with inconsistency, misrepresentation, and contradiction. Yet by creating a hierarchy of cultural forms and negating certain forms of theatre, this critique has effectively obscured the actualities of post-independence theatre, and in this it has a paradoxical resemblance to the 'metropolitan' traditions of Western theory and criticism.

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Colonial Influences, Nationalist Self-Expression

Different Shakespeares
The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India

Jyotsna Singh

I

SHAKESPEARE AS EMPIRE

Consider now if they asked us, Will you give up your Indian Empire or your Shakespeare, you English: never have had any Indian Empire or never have had any Shakespeare? Really, it were a grave question. Official persons would answer doubtless in official language; but we, for our part too, should not we be forced to answer: Indian Empire or no Indian Empire; we cannot do without Shakespeare! Indian Empire will go, at any rate, some day; but this Shakespeare does not go, he lasts forever with us;

—Thomas Carlyle, Lecture on 'The Hero as Poet. Dante; Shakespeare.' 12 May 1840

Calcutta, India, 17 August 1848: At a time when Calcutta was the intellectual and political center of colonial presence in India, a 'native gentleman' named Baishnav Charan Adhya performed the role of Othello in a production at the Sans Souci theatre, the famous English playhouse in the city. Considering that such an event took place in a restricted theatre, it is not surprising that the *Calcutta*

An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper at the conference on 'New Languages for the Stage' at the University of Kansas, 27–29 October 1988.

Star reported it as having set 'the whole world of Calcutta agog.'[1] Starting in 1775 when the Calcutta Theatre or the New Playhouse opened under the patronage of the empire, specifically of the then Governor General, Warren Hastings, and continuing for a period of about a hundred years, English theatres in Calcutta entertained a largely British audience of officers, merchants, scholars, and clerks of the East Indian Company. By all accounts, in its early years at least, this was an exclusive theatre determined to insulate itself from the 'natives' so that even the ushers and doorkeepers at the Calcutta playhouse were English.[2] Given these conditions, Adhya's dramatic identification with the Shakespearean role of Othello clearly complicated and displaced the stark 'Manichean' dichotomy of 'black and white' which, according to Franz Fanon, governed the relations between European colonizers and their non-European subjects.[3] When the actor donned the 'white mask' of a Shakespearean actor in an English production, he also enacted his difference from the white world, both in fictional Venice and in colonial Calcutta. Thus, instead of being appropriated by the colonial 'sahibs' play-text, the Indian actor revealed the ambivalence

[1] Quoted by Kironmoy Raha, in *Bengali Theatre* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1978), p. 10, in his description of the event. He, like some other theatre historians, spells the actor's name as 'Auddy.'

[2] For a full account of the rise and development of the English theatre in the context of the social and political milieu in colonial Calcutta, see P. Guha-Thakurta, *The Bengali Drama: Its Origin and Development* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1930), pp. 40–48; Sushil K. Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres: 1753–1980* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1982), pp. 1–7; Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 7–9; and Kironmoy Raha, pp. 8–12.

[3] Frantz Fanon, in *Black skin, White Masks*, trans., Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 44–45, sees the relations between the white Europeans and the non-white races as perpetually polarized: 'black and white represent the two poles of the world, two poles in perpetual conflict: a genuinely Manichean conception of the world' (44). In this paradigm, the choices for blacks are limited; they must find ways of becoming 'white,' but that, Fanon reveals, is a form of self-erasure for them. Adhya's intrusion on the European stage shows an alternative choice of 'playfully' disrupting rigid categories of difference through simultaneous mimicry and resistance (see quote by Bhabha in the text).

of its cultural authority through a native strategy perhaps best described by Homi Bhabha as 'camouflage, mimicry, black skin/white masks.'[4]

A sense of how some members of English audiences may have perceived this event can be derived from a letter in a contemporary edition of the *Calcutta Star* that unflatteringly calls the actor 'a real unpainted nigger Othello.'[5] Calling attention to the 'hidden' dark face of the Indian actor, the writer displays his anxiety about the possible cultural and racial contamination of the English stage and society in Calcutta. Such an anxiety would be understandable at a time when theatres were not only an important aspect of English social life in the growing colonial metropolis of Calcutta, but were also instruments of empire. Nourished by a steady stream of histrionic talent from London, and patronized by prominent colonial dignitaries, performances of plays by dramatists such as Sheridan, Congreve, Massinger, and most importantly, Shakespeare kept alive the myth of English cultural refinement and superiority—a myth that was crucial to the ruler's political interests in India.

What was the precise nature of the Empire's investment in Shakespeare? I will first consider the significance of such an investment for the colonial rulers in the nineteenth century—specifically in Calcutta—revealing its persistence as well as its unreliability. Further observations will show that while the reproduction of Shakespeare's works (as of other canonical writers) occurred as a part of a political strategy of exporting English culture in the nineteenth century, indigenous performances of the plays produced different, vernacular Shakespeares, mediated by the heterogeneous forces of race, language, and native culture. Thus, since the late nineteenth century native appropriations of Shakespeare on the stage have often emerged as both repetition/mimicry and difference—a response most vividly symbolized by

[4] Homi Bhabha's essay 'Signs Takes For Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside New Delhi, May 1817,' *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn (1985): 143–65, is particularly useful in examining the authority of the English 'book' in a colonial setting—and in identifying native strategies that are 'at once a mode of appropriation and resistance' (1962).

[5] Quoted by Kironmoy Raha, p. 10.

Adhya's debut as Othello.[6] Finally, I will examine why, despite efforts to 'Indianize' Shakespearean performances, critical and pedagogical discourses in the Indian academy continue to be shaped by the myth of the universal bard—a myth that reveals and perpetuates a 'complicity between indigenous and imperial power structures' in the postcolonial era.[7]

A recent, landmark study of colonial discourse by Gauri Vishwanathan illustrates the way in which humanistic functions traditionally associated with the study of literature were essential to the socio-political consolidation of the Indian empire.[8] This study offers a crucial instance of the systemic and powerful nature of the 'master discourse' of colonialism that Edward Said describes in *Orientialism*, his influential work on the subject. Referring to Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Said finds it useful in

[6] See Bhabha, p. 162.

[7] By contextualizing her discussion of Renaissance tragedy within a critique of postcolonial English studies in India, Ania Loomba, in *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pointedly reveals how the 'universal humanism put forward by institutionalized literary studies was useful [and continues to be useful] in the task of hegemonizing native elite culture' (21). Thus the continuing institutional reverence for the universal English book, the critic suggests, occludes the fact that an Indian student not coming from an English-speaking background is 'in a position of disability, exclusion, and awe' (22). See also Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in 'After 'Orientalism': Colonialism and English Literary Studies in India,' *Social Scientist* 158 (1986): 28–35. Here the critic examines the materials conditions governing the production and distribution of canonical English texts in India, showing how the idea of the universal and disinterested nature of literature conceals the interests served by its production. In this context, Sunder Rajan suggests, one must not underestimate the neocolonial control asserted by agencies such as the USIS and the British Council and the Western publishing companies who have invested in the English canon.

[8] A number of critics have noted that the export of literature played a role in ensuring the ideological hegemony of the British Empire. Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, for instance, in 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archive,' *History and Theory* 24 (1985): 247, discusses the role of English literature in the 'worlding of the Third World.' Gauri Vishwanathan's essay, 'The Beginnings of English Literary Studies in India,' *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 2–26, is the first sustained study showing how the 'enterprise of English literature teaching in India can be read as one of the texts of imperial governance' (Loomba 11).

showing how 'political society ... reaches into such realms of civil society' as the cultural arena 'of the academy and saturates them with significance of direct concern to it.'[9] In recognizing with Said and others that colonial domination was and is as much a cultural as a political process, one can understand how the reproduction of the English play—both as a dramatic and literary text—in theatres and educational institutions in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Calcutta was crucial in producing a discourse of cultural colonialism—a discourse in which Shakespeare was undoubtedly a privileged signifier.

Sushil Mukherjee begins his history of the theatres of Calcutta with the following account:

> When the English came to Calcutta they brought with them the plays of Shakespeare. Early in the nineteenth century Shakespeare was a subject of study in the Hindu College. Much before that Shakespeare's plays had begun to be staged in the theatres that the local Englishmen had set up in the city for their entertainment and relaxation. The names of David Garrick, the great eighteenth-century Shakespearean actor, and Garrick's Drury Lane Theatre...were familiar in Calcutta among the readers of Shakespeare and the lovers of the theatre.[10]

I would like to examine the conditions in which this love of the theatre, and of Shakespeare, developed, first among the English community, and later, among its Indian emulators. A trend of regular performances of English plays in and around the city began with the building of the Calcutta theatre in about 1775. The repertoire of plays performed at this theatre included *Hamlet, Richard III, The School for Scandal*, and a medley of lesser-known plays such as *The Comedy of Beaux Stratagem*, and *She Would and Would Not*. Most theatre historians note that David Garrick sent a Mr. Bernard Massing or Massinck from England to take charge of the Calcutta theatre. The model for the playhouse in the colonies clearly came from the mother country—from the theatrical arrangements and architecture of Covent Garden, Drury Lane, etc. In fact, one account also suggests that David Garrick sent a number of scenes painted under his direction for the theatre.

[9] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 11.

[10] Sushil Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres*, p. 1.

Other well-known English theatres drew on a similar repertoire of works for their performances. Some Shakespeare plays performed at the Chowringhee theatre, which opened in 1813, were as follows: *Henry IV* on 23 January 1814, *Richard III* on 25 August 1815, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* on 25 September 1818. Though often a venue for musical comedies and farces, the Chowringhee theatre was particularly popular for its Shakespeare plays. A Mr Stokler who apparently had some exposure to performances on the London stage, successfully rendered the roles of Iago, Cassius, and Falstaff at the Chowringhee theatre. A Captain Playfair also played a memorable Falstaff.[11]

The Sans Souci was another English theatre that was long remembered. Inaugurated on 21 August 1839, the year the Chowringhee theatre was gutted by a fire, the Sans Souci moved to a bigger building in 1841. Mrs Esther Leach, a prominent actress at the Chowringhee, moved to the new theatre and arranged for a few artists to be brought from London, among whom was a Mr James Vining. Having acted in Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Vining gave some important performances at the Sans Souci, among which was his appearance in *The Merchant of Venice* on 2 November 1843, playing Shylock with Mrs Leach as Jessica and a Mrs Deacle as Portia. And of course, the performance that remains most memorable is that of Baishnav Charan Adya as Othello with Mrs Anderson (the daughter of Esther Leach) as Desdemona. 'A Bengali youth in an English play in an English theatre catering to a [largely] English audience in...the nineteenth century, is certainly a memorable event in the history of Calcutta's theatres.'[12]

The repertoire of these three English theatres typified the range of the prolific theatrical activity in and around Calcutta that continued well into the middle of the nineteenth century. The fact that Shakespeare's plays figured prominently in the programs of most theatres suggests that the dramatic appeal of the plays was blostered by the cultural value attached to the proper name 'Shakespeare'. If, as evidence shows, Calcutta theatres were supported and patronized by the various Governors General and other colonial dignitaries, then it becomes clear how Shakespeare's

[11] Mukherjee, pp. 3–4, and Guha-Thakurta, pp. 42–43.
[12] Mukherjee, p. 7.

plays were significant in promoting and privileging the culture of the colonizers—both among the English expatriates as well as the elite Indians who gradually became associated with these theatres. Among the founders of the Chowringhee theatre was the famous aristocrat, D.N. Tagore, who later joined with other Indian contributors in subscribing to the rebuilding of the Sans Souci in 1840.

The gradual access gained by aristocratic Indians to the Calcutta theatres loosely coincided with the official colonial policy of promoting English language and literature in India. As the English consolidated their presence in India, the issue of their responsibility toward native education became increasingly important. According to Gauri Vishwanathan, the impulse to educate the native gained wide consensus because it was based on an awareness that the rulers could only rule by co-opting a native elite class as a 'conduit of Western thought and ideas.'[13] While there was some debate as to whether this elite class should receive an education in classical Indian languages or in English language and literature, the appeal on behalf of English literature advanced by Macaulay won the day in the passage of the Indian Educational Act in 1835. While the Orientalists lost ground, their position also partook of the notion that cultural values moved *downward* from a position of power.[14] Thus, in introducing English literature to elite Indians—or in allowing them access to Calcutta theatres—the colonial rules were *not* being egalitarian, but rather, were engaged in a 'hegemonic activity', by which, in Gramsci's terms, the consent of the governed is secured through intellectual and moral manipulation rather than through military force.[15]

It is clear, then, that the colonial administrators found an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control over the natives under the guise of a liberal education. This was achieved by representing Western literary knowledge as universal, transhistorical, and rational—and thus a source for abiding moral

[13] G. Vishwanathan, p. 10.
[14] See G. Vishwanathan's discussion of the Filtration Theory, 10. See also Loomba, pp. 22–3.
[15] My reference to Gramsci draws on G. Vishwanathan's application of his theory, p. 22.

values, underpinned by larger notions of social duty and order.[16] In Macaulay's terms, the need for 'interpreters' between the rulers and the 'millions whom [they] governed' could only be fulfilled by a 'class of persons Indian in blood and color but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and intellect.'[17] By including in their native subjects a love of English literature, the rulers were clearly trying to idealize the project of empire, while occluding its harsh, exploitative effects. This basic dichotomy between colonial discourse and praxis is apparent, for instance, in Charles Trevelyan's official confidence in English education policy, as elaborated in his book, *On The Education Of The People Of India* (1838): 'The Indians daily converse with the best and wisest Englishmen through the medium of their works and form higher ideas of our nation than if their intercourse was of a more personal kind.'[18]

In the context of nineteenth-century Calcutta, one can recognize the significance of the empire's cultural and political investment in the Shakespearean text—both as a literary and a dramatic text. Available evidence shows that the notion of a universal Shakespeare 'loved' by all Indians is clearly a colonial legacy—one that continues to influence postcolonial academic discourse in India. One critic, for instance, vividly describes how Shakespeare became a 'fashion' among the elite Bengalis at the time.

> While the English playhouses by their production of English, specially Shakespeare's plays created an appetite for theatrical performances, the foundation of the Hindu College in 1816, and the teaching of Shakespeare by eminent teachers like Richardson [who was also a founder of the Chowringhee theatre] created in the minds of the students—the intelligentsia of modern Bengal—a literary taste for drama as such, and taught them, not only how of appreciate Shakespeare criticism, but also to recite and act scenes from his plays. This fashion spread to every academic institution. In 1837 Bengali students staged scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* in the Governor's house, in 1852 and 1853, the students of the Metropolitan Academy and David Hare Academy staged Shakespeare's plays, while the old and new students of the Oriental Academy staged... Shakespeare's *Othello* in 1853, *The Merchant of Venice* in 1854, and *Henry IV*

[16] G. Vishwanathan, pp. 18–23.

[17] Quote from Macaulay's 1835 Minute cited by Loomba, p. 31.

[18] Charles Trevelyan, *On The Education Of The People of India (1838)* (London: Longman, 1838), p. 176.

> in 1855. Shakespeare's dramas became an indispensable part of English education and a popular items in all cultural productions. The Bengali theatre which made its mark in the later decades was the natural outcome of this new-found passion.[19]

It is remarkable that, in the above account, written in the 1960s, the critic somewhat blithely identifies the native 'appreciation' for Shakespeare as a spontaneous response, a 'fashion' or a 'new-found passion' that had a 'natural' outcome in the emergence of the Bengali theatre. While acknowledging that the English, in the person of Principal Richardson, one that 'created' a literary 'taste' for Shakespeare among elite Indian students, and the critic nonetheless views English literature as a transcendentally benevolent and non-political influence. In keeping with Thomas Carlyle's prophecy, it seems the legacy of the 'universal bard' still persists, testifying to the far-reaching effects of the early colonial efforts in naturalizing their subjects's allegiance both to Shakespeare and to the empire.

II

DIFFERENT SHAKESPEARES

> Shakespeare was the great recording genius of our Renaissance. Now Asia and Africa are experiencing their Renaissance. These regions received their industrial revolution...from us. Their arts lagged an era behind...Their art was inviolate, shackled to the past. But they came to want it to yield its long-preserved virginity, to be free. They knew they could not go on forever producing *haiku* or *kabuki*, or variations on the Ramayana...They are too intelligent...to want to do so...What holds them, for it deals with a world which is modern (rather than medieval) and bursting with energy (rather than sophistication) is preeminently the plays of Shakespeare.
>
> ...it will hardly do...to find Shakespeare unviable on the grounds that some or other peasant won't be able to understand him. Every country may not have its peasants, but every country has its illiterates.
>
> — D.J. Enright. 'In States Unborn—Shakespeare Overseas.' *TLS*, 23 April 1964

[19] S.K. Bhattacharya, 'Shakespeare and Bengali Theatre,' *Indian Literature* 7 (1964): 29.

D.J. Enright's vision of colonial history typifies hegemonic Western discourses that deny human agency to non-European 'subject' races. The 'logic' of this discourse is vividly described by James Clifford when he suggests that 'whenever marginal peoples come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the Western imagination...these suddenly "backward" peoples no longer invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied up to local pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new, but cannot produce it.'[20] When read in relationship to this paradigm, the story of the rise of the contemporary Indian theatre in Bengal shows that the process of cultural translation as it took place on the nineteenth-century *stage* was hardly as unproblematic as the colonizers would have liked to believe; instead, it was marked by contradictions and ambiguities that often blurred the distinction between imitation/emulation and originality—or between yielding to the new and producing it.

Most theatre historians agree that contemporary Indian theatre originated in Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century. The other regional theatres followed Bengal's practice, though they never developed with such vigor as the Bengali theatre. While the vital Indian folk theatre had an uninterrupted life in the rural areas for centuries, there was no direct evolution from the ancient Sanskrit classical theatre to new, contemporary forms.[21] Given this absence of new theatrical influences in the cities, one can understand that when the English educated Bengalis in the nineteenth century were exposed to Shakespeare and other 'classic' writers, they sought to emulate Western productions, while affecting a distaste for indigenous theatricals, including the popular and vital Bengali folk drama called the Jatra. Box sets, footlights, and proscenium stages were obvious novelties for the Calcutta elite, who took their cue from English productions.

An ironic aspect of this emulation is that it revealed the Indian gentry's desire for a stronger cultural presence and identity in the city. A number of contemporary local Indian newspapers in

[20] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 5.

[21] Bhattacharya, pp. 27–28; Balwant Gargi, *Theatre in India* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1962), pp. 107–8.

Calcutta voiced the need for a theatre like that of the Englishmen, with the privileged men of the city as shareholders. In response to these demands, the first Bengali theatre called the Hindu theatre opened on 28 December 1831 in a private residence, with a performance of selections from Shakespeare's *Julius Ceasar* and an English translation of a Sanskrit classical text. The audience consisted of many well-known Bengalis and European officials, suggesting that these early private theatres in Calcutta still catered to an exclusive audience.

The history of Bengali theatres in Calcutta from the mid-nineteenth to the twentieth century suggests both an admiration and ambivalence toward English plays, most notably those of Shakespeare. It is not within the scope of this essay to give a detailed and comprehensive account of individual productions; rather, my purpose is to give a selective overview of some localized manifestations of the canonical Shakespeare in the Bengali and other regional theatres in India. While the early nineteenth-century productions of Shakespeare's plays seem to have originated in a desire to imitate the English culture, they gradually became a part of indigenous theatrical entertainment as Indian producers freely and quite eclectically adapted and revised the original works. Through *performance*, as opposed to critical discourse, native appropriations of Shakespeare often displaced the cultural authority of the 'universal' colonial bard, even while expressing a reverence for his works.

There was very little activity on the Bengali stage between the years 1835 to 1853, even though a lavish Bengali production called *Vidya Sunder* had considerable success in performances for three years, 1833–35. It must be noted that this first Bengali play on a Calcutta stage was an adaptation of a famous story and not an original drama. But on the 16th and 24th of February 1853, the boys of the David Hare Academy staged *The Merchant of Venice* under the direction of David Clinger, a teacher associated with the Sans Souci theatre, pointing the way to a more sustained involvement in the theatre by the students of the Oriental Seminary in North Calcutta. On 7 April 1853, the students and ex-students of the seminary raised 800 rupees to set up a theatre for staging Shakespeare's plays, which came to be known as the

Oriental theatre.[22] One cannot question the Oriental theatre's genuine commitment, given the number of Shakespeare plays staged there for a number of years, as mentioned earlier in this essay; however, evidence also suggests an awareness, both in the theatre and in the culture, of the hybrid nature of this venture. An advertisement in *The Citizen*, 2 March 1854 makes it clear that this was not a 'pure' English theatre or even a private, aristocratic Indian theatre. The announcement declares that tickets can be bought freely for a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* by 'Hindu Amateurs.'[23] Yet these plays held no interest for the Bengali public ignorant of the English language. The *Hindu Patriot* (21 February 1855), while praising the performance of *Henry IV* at the Oriental theatre, bemoaned the lack of public response and advised the staging of Bengali plays.[24] Other contemporary newspapers in Calcutta also responded to other English theatres run by Indians by appealing to them to stage Bengali plays. By the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a dawning sense that neither 'English nor Sanskrit could prevent the Bengali theatre from dying in its infancy if original Bengali plays were not forthcoming.'[25]

Language became the deciding factor in the decline of the English plays and the development of a vigorous Bengali theatre. In 1857, the first original Bengali drama was staged in a private theatre. It seems that the period of a direct cultural subservience to English theatrical models was over. The English plays, and particularly Shakespeare, inspired the Bengali theatre is irrefutable, but the question remains whether the bard's influence extended beyond the period of the English theatres in Calcutta. According to S.K. Bhattacharya, most of Shakespeare's plays were translated or adapted for the Bengali language and a number of them were produced on the public stage from 1874 to 1920. The playwright's influence, however, cannot be measured by the number of his productions. Critics assert that it was from him that the budding playwrights of Bengal, 'learnt the concept of tragedy, the meaning of conflict, the art of characterization...in a word, the knowledge

[22] Mukherjee, p. 16.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Kironmoy Raha, p. 16.

of how to make the drama a dynamic expression of life in its... moment of conflict, crisis, and catastrophe.'[26] Further, 'every critic used a Shakespearean yardstick to judge another drama, and every dramatist cited Shakespeare in justification.'[27]

Given the fact that roughly ten Shakespearean plays were produced on the Bengali public stage from 1875 to 1920, the more general influence that Bhattacharya speaks of could only have been productive, rather than repressive, enabling the native playwrights to appropriate the colonial book for their own purposes. An instance of the hybrid nature of early Bengali productions can be found in an advertisement that appeared in the newspaper, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, on 28 January 1893. Announcing the opening of the new Minerva Theatre, the headline promises the audiences 'Shakespare in Bengal,' with a Bengali version of *Macbeth*. The set, the announcement declares, was 'mounted by European Artists,' but the performance had its own distinctive character. According to a contemporary issue of *The Englishman*, 'A Bengali Thane of Cawdor is a living suggestion of incongruity, but the reality is an astonishing reproduction....'[28]

While these early Bengali productions seems indebted to English theatrical traditions, even while adapting Shakespeare's works to the local milieu, the revival of Shakespeare on the Bengali stage in the late 1940s and early 1950s marked a wider distance from the colonial bard. Beginning in the 1930s, Bengali theatre gradually broadened its audience, becoming more responsive to the social and political realities of the Indian masses. Thus, when Shakespeare's plays reappeared on the Bengali stage around 1948, after disappearing from it around the 1920s, these productions reflected the influence of contemporary social realities. The name most notably associated with the revival of Shakespeare is that of Utpal Dutt.

Utpal Dutt, noted Indian (Bengali) actor and director, is a revolutionary intellectual who 'reacted violently to his Jesuit education and his familiarity with Western classics. The fact that

[26] Bhattacharya, p. 31.
[27] Ibid., p. 32.
[28] Mukherjee, pp. 81–82.

he could recite Virgil and Shakespeare dismayed him,' and yet his theatrical training came from Sir Geoffrey Kendall, touring with the Shakespeareana company in 1947.[29] After independence, he used his theatrical skills with the Little Theatre Group to produce a new play of Shakespeare every month—*Othello, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Twelfth Night, Hamlet*. In March 1948, when the Communist Party of India was banned, the Little Theatre Group protested against the ban by printing a political article, quite ironically, accompanying the program of *Romeo and Juliet*. It was at this time that the members of the group 'realized that they could not presume to be radical so long as they continued to perform plays exclusively for a minority audience, the Westernized intellectuals of Calcutta.'[30] Dutt's radical ideals were further fired and given shape in 1950 when he briefly joined the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which was formed in 1943 as an 'anti-imperialistic and antifascist' theatre.

Returning to the Little Theatre Group in 1951, Dutt radically changed the company; it now performed only in Bengali for a largely working-class audience. Among notable productions was a Bengali translation of *Macbeth* which toured several villages in the remote areas of Bengal. By immersing *Macbeth* in the ritual world of Jatra, the vigorous folk theatre of Bengal, and thus by transforming Shakespeare's language into a bold, declamatory form of incantation, typical of the Jatra, Dutt's company brought Shakespeare to the rural masses who had never figured in the colonial project of edification.[31] Drawing on the theatrical conventions of the Jatra served Dutt's purpose well, helping to create the spectacle that he believes is an essential aspect of a non-elitist revolutionary theatre. Jatra actors usually perform with highly charged religious fervor, using rhythmic gestures and incantatory speech. Given these conditions, the villagers responded to the play on the level of myth. Describing his staging techniques in a recent interview, Dutt states that his purpose is to 'try to shake the audience out of its unthinking stupor by sensation, visual surprise, songs, dances, colour on stage'.[32]

[29] Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, pp. 55–6. For a detailed account of Dutt's views on the social function of drama see Utpal Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons, 1982).

[30] Bharucha, p. 56.

[31] Ibid., pp. 61–3.

While views vary on the aesthetic effects of Utpal Dutt's version of *Macbeth*, one cannot doubt that through this 'grass roots' production, the company challenged Western culture's exclusive claims over the playwright's works by transplanting them onto the non-elite native's cultural terrain. In different instances, Dutt has clearly stated that 'the classics were not a prerogative of an elite. They would cease to exist unless they were brought to the people.'[33] This formulation, however, does not presuppose a timeless, universal Shakespeare loved by one and all. Rather it takes into account class, education, and race, among others, as constituent factors in any mode of cultural production. Bringing Shakespeare to the people meant rejecting the conventions of the proscenium stage and working with indigenous theatrical traditions familiar to the rural audience. Ironically, critics have noted that Dutt's rural production of *Macbeth* was probably closer to the blood and guts of the Elizabethan theatre than many recent European revivals.[34]

Other regional revivals of Shakespeare in India have also taken the playwright's works to the people, so to speak. Though these productions have not been politically motivated in the same way as Dutt's, they have drawn on the idiom of popular taste, often far removed from what may be called 'high culture.' C.R. Shah gives a lively account of a 'craze for Shakespearean drama on the Bombay stage' from the mid-nineteenth century to around 1913, and suggests this 'was not due to any special regard for Shakespeare's poetry or genius [but rather] because they provided a good story with a few romantic and thrilling situations.'[35] Plays were performed in a number of Indian regional languages on the Bombay stage: Marathi, Urdu, and Gujerati. Urdu adaptations of

[32] Nandini and Pradipta Bhattacharya, 'A Weapon of Change,' Interview with Utpal Dutt, *Sunday*, 3 November 1985.

[33] Bhattacharya, p. 5.

[34] According to Bharucha, the early performances of *Macbeth* in villages were far more successful in recreating a sense of the original, Elizabethan popular theatre than his later proscenium production in Calcutta, in which the play was transformed into a nineteenth-century melodrama (242–3).

[35] C.R. Shah, 'Shakespearean Plays in Indian Language Part I', *The Aryan Path*, November (1955): 485.

Shakespeare, appearing between 1890 and 1910, were free and often melodramatic renderings of the original. Some of the translations of titles are quite suggestive: *Cymbeline* translated as *Mitha Zahar* (or sweet poison), *Hamlet* titled as *Zahari Samp* (or poisonous snake), and *Antony and Cleopatra* as *Kali Nagin*, (or black, female snake).

The box-office appeal of the Urdu versions inspired a number of Gujarati productions of Shakespeare's plays between 1894 and 1910. These were also free translations and sometimes obvious travesties of the original plays. These vernacular versions, as the Marathi and Urdu ones, appealed to the Bombay audiences by providing 'plenty of spectacles, swift-moving action, noise, scenes of bloodshed, music and song, and dialogue in artificial and rhythmic language.'[36] Two curious features gave these productions a distinctly contemporary Indian touch: one was the addition of a large number of songs, sometimes as many as forty; and second, the addition of extra subplots that were used to satirize contemporary ideas of social behavior among the rich. These productions did not presume the audience's familiarity with Shakespeare, but obviously adapted the works to appeal to popular tastes. For instance, at the Urdu performances, the program gave a scene-by-scene synopsis of the action, together with the full text of the songs.[37]

After 1913, the popularity of these plays declined as Bombay theatres were converted to cinema houses for silent films. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of this 'craze' on the Bombay stage ironically displaces the notion of universality as being synonymous with Western culture. In these obviously irreverent and eclectic adaptations, the Shakespearean text is no longer sacrosanct; rather, it is invaded by 'heteroglossia' or a multiplicity of styles and forms in the Bakhtininan sense that disrupt the cultural authority of the official English Shakespeare.[38] Thus, while the colonial theatres of Calcutta promoted the bard as a central source of 'high culture,' later performances of his plays reproduced varied, heterogeneous Shakespeares.

[36] Shah, p. 485.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Krystyna Pomorska's Foreword to *Rabelais and His World*, by Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. x-xi.

III

THE POSTCOLONIAL, INSTITUTIONAL SHAKESPEARE

Bulletin of the Shakespeare Society of India—April 1988

Report on a discussion on 'Why Read Shakespeare?' held on 20 January 1988 at the University of Delhi.

Professor Datta observed that we read Shakespeare because he transcends all ages, nations, and cultures, and can, therefore, be assimilated into any age, nation, or culture. He deals with human beings, their sentiments and feelings, and since these do not change in any real sense, Shakespeare's appeal is timeless and universal. Further the issues he raises, the clash of values he depicts, are relevant to us and to our situation. ... On a more personal note Professor Datta confessed that in moments of crisis he recalls lines from Shakespeare and finds wisdom and consolation in them.

The speaker's fervent praise of the emotional and therapeutic benefits of reading Shakespeare seems to suggest that the bard is 'alive and well' in India. What it occludes, however, are the socio-economic factors that continue to legitimate and promote English literary studies in India. All of Delhi University's approximately 140,000 students must study English literature for at least one year, among whom around 20,000 may read Shakespeare.

Who are these students? In what ways are they constituted as subjects in the ideology of the universal English text, or specifically, the universal Shakespeare? Writing in 1972, a critic/teacher sums up his dilemma in teaching Shakespeare to students from diverse backgrounds: 'The reactions [to Shakespeare] vary... from Westernized students coming from affluent families and English schools to the students who come from unanglicized families and regional language schools. Perhaps, it is the second category we should concentrate upon—at least they are in the majority.'[39]

[39] S. Nagarajan, 'The Teaching of Shakespeare in India,' *Indian Writing in English*, proceedings of a seminar on Indian English held at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India, July, 1972. The earlier count of Delhi University students currently studying English

Such a schism between classes is still evident in Indian society. Yet 'official' critical and pedagogical discourses on the study of Shakespeare constitute and naturalize *all* students/readers, including the unanglicized majority, as admirers of the universal Shakespeare. The English literary text remains a hallowed entity. Though of course, the sense of awe experienced by the majority who do not study English as a first language is intrinsic to *their* linguistic struggle and has no relevance to the value of the text. The reasons for the importance of English literature for language teaching are not incidental. It is generally conceded 'during Independence, the Indian bourgeoisie found the continued used of a European language advantageous for social and political control. They could maintain their own privileged position through their monopoly over the colonial language.'[40] Thus, as Sunder Rajan points out, the indigenous power structures in Indian universities are buttressed by the 'hegemonic authority' of the 'Western university whose influence upon all academic functioning in India, and, in particular, upon the teaching of English and American literature, is very strong.'[41]

Furthermore, Sunder Rajan demonstrates, the privileged status of the Western canonical text in English literary studies is closely tied to neocolonial commercial and political interests:

> In India foreign publishing firms have until recently virtually had monopoly over the publication of prescribed texts in English syllabi. Oxford University Press, Macmillans, Orient Longmans, and now Penguin have found the market in India...large enough...to set up their branches in India.... Also to a very large extent English language and literary studies in India function under the aegis of two quasi-governmental agencies, the British Council and the USIS. These organizations perceive English and American literature as cultural products of their respective countries and promote them accordingly. There exists, therefore, a well-established system of funding, grants, patronage, publications, libraries, centres for

literature, taken from Loomba, 28, verifies the critic's remarks about the 'unanglicized majority.'

[40] Quoted by Loomba, 31, from Steve Whittey, 'English language as tool for British neocolonialism,' *East Africa Journal* 8 (1971): 4–6.

[41] Sunder Rajan, p. 29.

advanced studies, seminars and workshops that is administered by these institutions.[42]

Given these conditions, it is curious and telling that a 'natural' love of Shakespeare's works is proclaimed in much Indian literary criticism. A critic writing in *The Literary Criterion's* special issue on Shakespeare in 1963, reflects on an 'intimate' 'east-west encounter' and seems to envy the 'earlier generation of Indian intellectuals [who] were given a much more thorough grounding in the language and literature of the rulers,' especially Shakespeare, 'the Englishman's most treasured possession.' While giving reasons why Shakespeare's 'rich humanity' holds a particular appeal for Indians, the critic also reinforces class elitism when he states that 'where in the past a few people knew a great deal about Shakespeare, today a large number know a little about him.'[43] In the logic of this essay, entitled 'Why Shakespeare for Us?' the critic's reverence for the playwright quite typically smooths over the contradiction between the notion of a universal Shakespeare and the material, colonial legacy of the English book.

A more recent critical anthology, entitled *Shakespeare in India* (1987) also reinforces Shakespeare's 'universal' status. While the editors announce a 'love of Shakespeare in [their] country' (vi), the emphasis of the book is on textual criticism.[44] In this way, the essayists do not make any break with the Anglo-American critical tradition nor do they attempt to situate their work within their cultural and social milieu. Presented as the work of 'India's foremost Shakespeare critics,' the individual essays offer illuminating insights into the playwright's works; but nonetheless *Shakespeare in India* ultimately legitimates the neocolonial hegemony of the English book. Produced and marketed in the West by the prestigious Oxford University Press, it is given an 'acceptable' status in the Western academy, even as it represents the Indian critical practice as essentially imitative and derivative.

[42] Sunder Rajan, pp. 30–31.

[43] G. Muliyil, 'Why Shakespeare for Us?' in *The Literary Criterion*, Winter (1963): 79–81.

[44] S. Nagarajan and S. Vishwanathan, eds. *Shakespeare in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Preface, p. vi.

How does one explain this persistent tendency to venerate the 'timeless' Shakespeare? Ania Loomba offers a useful answer when she explains that the 'the transcendental status of the literary text continued to be useful in containing the tensions of a society that was not rendered homogeneous by expelling its colonial masters.'[45] Thus, when an Indian critic somewhat sweepingly praises Shakespeare for the 'wisdom born of his rich humanity' that 'prepares us for the new world of industrial and scientific changes,'[46] one begins to see how such criticism transforms the Shakespearean text into an accommodating ideal, disassociated from the social and political upheavals of the postcolonial world.

[45] Loomba, p. 22.
[46] Muliyil, pp. 82, 84.

The Nation Staged

Nationalist Discourse in Late 19th Century Bengali Theatre

Sudipto Chatterjee

Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all it is not what it seems to itself.

—Ernest Gellner[1]

Seen from below, the *state* increasingly defined the largest *stage* on which the crucial activities determining human lives as subjects and citizens were played out. [Italics mine.]

—Eric Hobsbawm[2]

Signs ... establish a stage on which the world can be represented as it should be .... [I]n this world of fascinating appearance, politics is aestheticized.

—Gunter Gabauer and Christoph Wulf[3]

Note: All translations from Bengali are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

[1] From *Nationalism and High Culture* in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 64.

[2] From *The Nation as Invented Tradition* in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 76.

[3] See *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1992), p. 318.

On October 3, 1873, *The Englishman*, a Calcutta-based English newspaper, reported the 'laying [of] the foundation-stone' of a Bengali public theatre, a wooden structure modelled on the European proscenium theatres of Calcutta. The inaugural ceremony was prologued with 'a European band with flags bearing the inscription "The laying of the foundation stone of the Great National Theatre"'[4] (Mukherjee: 40). This loftily named Bengali theatre was modeled after the Lewis Theatre located in the 'white' quarters of Calcutta where the English community of Calcutta went for entertainment. The Lewis' Theatre of Calcutta was modelled on the Lyceum of London, which, in turn, was supposed to reflect the Hellenic Lyceum, the Lukeion, where Aristotle is fabled to have taught his gathering of students. The neo-Hellenic architecture of the Bengali Great National theatre, thus, removed twice from its source, had very little to do with the play, the first and last, that was to be produced within its premises two months later—a Bengali mythological, referred to as a 'Fairy Tale' by its author, Amṛtalāl Basu. But although the architecture of the theatre seemed literally to be at war with the content of what was staged inside, it was, nevertheless, dubbed the 'Great National Theatre'! The theatre was built literally by imitation. Amṛtalāl Basu, the playwright and one of the founders of the theatre, reminisced in his memoir about how Dharmadās Sur, who 'had never learnt engineering anywhere', went to the new Lewis' Theatre in white Calcutta, bought tickets to sit in its 'pit' and estimated from that distance what amount of drape he would need for their theatre and decided to build it (Basu, B.: 82). Sur confirms this in his memoir—'We never took the help of any Englishmen or engineers, except for a few of the drop scenes which were painted by one Mr. Garrick' [translation mine] (Ibid.: 36). The Theatre, however, was not meant to last long. Its wooden walls were razed to the ground in the middle of the first performance when the gas lights, lacking chimneys, heated up too much and started a fire. But this was only a beginning and the very same site of the Great National Theatre later became the site of the famous Minerva Theatre which is performed in till date.

[4] See Sushil Mukherjee's *The Story of Calcutta Theatres: 1753–1980* (Firma K L M, Calcutta, 1982), p. 40.

However, the story does raise a few basic questions that will eventually constitute the substance of this essay: what is the connection between the Byzantine architecture of the British-built Lyceum Theatre and the Bengali-built Great National Theatre? Why did the native Western educated intelligentsia of Calcutta who built the theatre feel the urge to imitate their Western cohabitants, while being so intent on having their own 'national' theatre? This begs an even larger question: how are these two ontogenically opposed representations related to each other? The Great National Theatre of Bengal/India had, after all, employed 'a European band' to play up its nationalist symphony. How could a theatre identifying itself as 'national' be engaged simultaneously in an emulation (even adoration) of the 'other' as well as a proclamation (even celebration) of the 'self'? And—since architecture is *not* what this essay is about—we will ask, more specifically, how can a national 'self' *e*-merge by *sub*-merging its own identity? Is this an inevitable outcome colonial hybridity? In this essay we shall look at a few paradigms in the history of nineteenth century Bengali theatre to analyse the colonial native's construction of 'selfhood' vis-à-vis the notion of 'nation'.

But before inaugurating the immediate subject of the essay we need to briefly look at the logic and history behind how the colonial machine produced and fed the native identity. A sense of a glorious past, a celebrated heritage had started to inform the mind of the Hindu literati of Calcutta, who had become the vanguards of Bengali culture, from the beginning of the nineteenth century. This 'framing' of the native mind, as Edward Said emphatically points out in *Orientalism*, was a direct product of the Orientalist exercise that was working very closely with the colonial power strategy even while celebrating India's magnificent past. High caliber Orientalist scholars like William Jones (1746–94), H.H. Wilson (1786–1860), H.T. Colebrook (1765–1837), William Carey (1761–1834) and Nathaniel B. Halhead (1751–1830) were all 're-discovering' and 're-inscribing' Indian literatures and languages, preparing it to tell a story that they, as part of the great colonial machine, wanted to present and the native to *re*-present. This Orientalist re-inscription of the Indian identity involved, on the one hand, reverence for the colonial subject's past, and, on the other, disdain for its present

state. The fact that the colonial masters were allowing the 'world' (and, ironically, the natives themselves) to view how glorious the natives once were seemed to authorize their very presence in the colony. This binary determination decided the nature of the British colonial enterprise.

The Hindu Bengali literati of the early nineteenth century generally failed not only to read the paradoxical character of this double postulation, they endorsed it and, quite unscrupulously, set on to celebrate their proud cultural heritage that Orientalist research was discovering for them. This new fabulous Hindu identity that linked them with their colonial overlords by racial origin came as compensatory justification for the ignominy of being ruled by foreigners. The British were now a kindred race. Their 'otherness' had, to a large extent, been transferred over to the Muslims who were now looked upon as invaders of the land (*jaban*) and corrupters of the Hindu heritage (*mleccha*). This transference tacitly palliated the power relationship between the Bengali Hindus and the English while, at the same stroke, successfully disconnecting the Muslim from the mainstream of Bengali culture. With the Hindus thus stuck between the double identity—as (1) inheritors of a rich past, and, (2) colonial subjects—the British colonial administration had subjectified the native and his culture into a frame that would at one and the same time be native and foreign. But the frame would, nonetheless, be comfortable, acceptable and, all too desirable for the Hindu *bábu*. It would be formally and externally native, bearing bodily marks of the indigenous culture, but all its internal orientation would be determined by the colonial structure. In other words, all expressions of native culture would now only be allowed to play within controllable political limits. This intention of the colonial government became clearer when—at the end of a protracted Anglicist-Orientalist debate in the highest ranks of the British East India Company—English was finally adopted as the official language of India, in 1835.[5] This history of the relationship between the British and the Bengali Hindu plays out most

[5] See Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule In India* (London, Faber & Faber, 1990) for a detailed analysis of the project of English Education in India.

intricately in the theatre—speaking out in a hybrid voice, spelling out the 'desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*' (Bhabha: 86).

It would be pertinent here to recall Sigmund Freud's insightful postulations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: the inference drawn from a case-study of a one-and-half-year old child and his *fort-da* game through which he was compensating for the 'instinctual renunciation (that is, renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made by allowing without protest his mother to go away. He compensated for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach' (Freud: 9). The purport of the analogy is clear. The native literati of 19th century Bengal needed to find a glorious past and justify it with present-day actions, to fill the lacuna between *then* (fort) and *now* (da). But, as Jacques Lacan points out, the child's repetitive *fort-da* cannot be equated with a simple demand for 'the return of the mother' because that could 'be expressed quite simply in a cry'. Freud's brief case-study, too, came with an apropos disclaimer: 'It is of course a matter of indifference from the point of view of judging the nature of the game whether the child invented it himself or took it over on some *outside suggestion* (italics mine)'. It is in this disclaimer that Lacan located his objection to Freud's inference; and it is this disclaimer that marks out the difference in the analogy between the child's *fort-da* game and the colonial native's response to colonial rule and the absence (*lack*) of a radiant past.

But is the 'past' reconstructible at all, or is this attempted 'historical repetition' an impossibility? Freud agrees that, in the adult mind, repetition is never exactly the same. The mimesis of repetition necesarily has to 'slide away' from its point of origination. Lacan defines and qualifies Freud's interpretation of the *fort-da* game, investing it with more meaning:

> This reel is not the mother reduced to a little ball by some magical game ... —it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained. This is the place to say, in imitation of Aristotle, that man thinks with his object. It is with his object that the child leaps the frontiers of his domain, transformed into a well, and begins the incantation .... To this object we will later give the name it bears in the Lacanian algebra—the *petit a*. (Lacan: 62)

Lacan's '*petit a*' is, thus, the colonized native's constructed view of the past, not necessarily the actual past but what is thought to be the past. This constructed past is standing in for a *lack*—Lacan's '*ditch*, around which one can only play at jumping'—a lack that has been deliberately posited at the heart of the colonizer's historiography of the colonized to justify and consequently solidify the colonial enterprise. And the validity of situating this *lack/ditch* in the theory of colonialism as it worked in the Bengali situation resides in the fact that the colonized intelligentsia *believed* in it and desperately sought to somehow overcome it by putting it on stage in palpable terms, by means of performing that fashioned identity.

* * *

The concept of the Western-style proscenium stage was absorbed into Bengali culture, as a way of imitating the colonial English theatres of Calcutta, very early.[6] In 1795, Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedeff (1749–1817), a Russian violinist, had made the first attempt to produce plays in Bengali that was an isolated attempt and failed to create a tradition of Western-style Bengali theatre. After a few more tentative breaks the impulse solidified into an organized mode of theatrical representation towards the middle of the century. The first patrons of this kind of theatre were the moneyed members of the Bengali intelligentsia, the bābu class. Under their patronage Bengali theatre was entertainment, usually of a loftier high-brow variety—celebrating the cultural heritage of India. The bābu theatre initially produced Bengali (and English) versions of Saṅskṛt classics and popular as well as classical English plays with native actors. The traditional viewing habit of the Bengali audience (sitting all around or, at least, on three sides of the performance space) was challenged and discarded by the bābus in favor of the frontal view of the Western proscenium stage. The traditional performances became the source of entertainment for the lower classes of the city while the nouveau-riche intelligentsia made Western-style theatre their own. In 1831, Bābu Prasanna Kumār Ṭhākur started his Hindu Theatre that decided to put up

[6] See my essay, 'Mise-en-(Colonial-)Scène: The Theatre of Bengal Renaissance', in *Imperialism and Theatre*, J. Ellen Gainor (ed.) (London and New York, Routledge, 1995).

plays in English. It began by producing scenes from *Julius Cæsar* and an English translation (by H.H. Wilson) of an ancient Saṅskṛt play *Uttara Rāma Carita* by Bhavabhūti.[7] However, by the late 1850's things began to change. Bengali theatre responded to the growing middle-class audience of Calcutta that finally led to the birth of two ticketed theatres in 1872, one of which was the Great National.

A little short of a decade and a half before the founding of the Great National Theatre a man had laid the founding stones of the literary tradition of Bengali dramatic literature in the Western style. Michael Madhusūdan Datta (1824–73) wrote some of the earliest and best original plays in Bengali and also gave Bengali literature its own blank verse, sonnet and epic. Datta also wrote in English—original essays and poems, along with translations of both his own plays and those by other contemporaries. Although he was born in a conservative rich Hindu family his education and aspirations were thoroughly English. In 1854, Datta wrote an essay entitled *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu*. In it he hailed the arrival of the English in India with an extraordinarily poetic line translated from *The Æeneid*– 'Who is this stranger that has come to our dwelling?'—thereby justifying an equally unpoetic colonial occupation. As a result, 'Who is this stranger that has come to our dwelling?'—became an almost hypnotic, incantatory leitmotif in the essay, rolling back to justify over and over again the colonizer's presence in the land of the colonized. Quite early on in the essay Datta asks rather ecstatically:

> [W]ho is this fair-headed stranger that has, in the course of a solitary century reared among us a fabric of power, the most wondrous and glorious? [...] Who is this stranger that has bound us, as it were, with chains of adamant, and whose bright sword gleams before our eyes like a fiery meteor—terrifying us into submission and humbling us to the dust? Who is this stranger that has come to our dwelling? (Datta, M.M.: 624)

Even the suggestive wariness of the last part of the passage fails to cover the blind admiration Datta had for his 'fair-headed' Anglo-Saxon.

But, in 1858, Datta underwent a wave of change and returned to his own culture with a desire to *re*-discover his native tongue

[7] 8th century Saṅskṛt dramatist.

and literature. When Datta returned to Calcutta from his stay in Madras, the intellectual scene in the colonial city was agog with great enthusiasm for creating an indigenous Bengali theatre, as part of a larger enterprise of inventing an indigenous literature. In 1859 he translated Rāmnārāyan Tarkaratna's (1822–85) Bengali translation of the Sańskṛt *Ratnāvalī* (by Śrīharṣa[8]) into English. But Datta was, very soon, expressing the need for original plays in Bengali, by discarding 'Sanskrit [sic] models and look[ing] to far higher sources for inspiration' (Datta, M.M.: Beng. seventy six). Datta's 'far higher sources' comprised of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, the classical dramatic theories from the ancient Greeks down to the English Augustan Dryden and the French neo-classicist Racine. But Datta was not ready to discard all that was Indian in him either, thus betraying the seared mind of the colonial artist—wilting and basking, at the same time, under colonial glory—and legitimizing *hybridity* as a valid process of artistic creation. Datta was acutely aware of the differences between the culture he tried all his life to make his own and the one that he was born into. In *Śarmiṣṭhā*, his first original play, one can see Datta struggling to strike a mean between his dual cultural propensities. The cardinal rules of Sańskṛt drama he had broken in the play were all too superficial since in his aesthetic choices—imagery, plot and dialogue—he was not anywhere close to the freedom he cherished from the Bengali bābu's 'servile admiration of everything' Sańskṛt. Datta was visibly caught between two ways in his effort to plant the seeds of Western style drama in Bengali, making cultural translations at several levels: switching back and forth between the aesthetics of Sańskṛt literature, on the one hand, and European drama, on the other.

But whatever be the case, Michael Madhusūdan Datta had proven that a Western-style Bengali drama could not only be thought of but also be written and produced. Creativity in a colonial set-up permits—perhaps even entertains—a certain political ambiguity and ambivalence. It resists and allows at the same time. It causes a tension between form and content—of the kind that the architecture of the Great National Theatre later came

[8] 12th century Sanskṛt author.

to physicalize. This ambivalence of colonial discourse assumed different shapes, in playwrights who came after Datta, and came to define and inform the presentation of nationalist discourse on the Bengali stage.

In the years between the mid-1850s through 1872 a minor literary tradition had developed of original Bengali drama. Rāmnārāyan Tarkaratna's *Kulīnkulasarvaswa*, a protest play on the polygamous practices of the *kulīn* sect of brahmins, the first original Bengali play to have been staged, had actually been produced in 1857, two years before Datta arrived on the scene. *Kulīnkulasarvaswa*, albeit its strong adherence to tenets of Sańskṛt theatre, launched a strong trend of social drama and a host of playwrights appeared on the scene with plays on social issues. This predilection for social plays gradually slipped into making political statements through theatrical means. In 1859, Dīnabandhu Mitra, a Bengali Civil servant, wrote *Nīldarpaṇ*[9] (The Mirror of Indigo), a political play that exposed the exploitative conditions of indigo plantations of Bengal and the British planters. When the democratized ticketed theatre came into being, in 1872, one of the first productions was *Nīldarpaṇ*. But *Nīldarpaṇ*, contrary to popular belief, is hardly the revolutionary 'protest' play it is championed to be. And although its invective is ostensibly directed against British indigo-plantation owners, the political schema of the plot owes more to middle-class conceptions of rebellious behavior rather than the organized, though unsuccessful, subaltern uprising that the indigo movement of 1860 actually had been. The peasant characters of the play display more urban bābu-like behavioural attributes than anything else. The bābu characters in the play, on the contrary, are

[9] By calling it *darpaṇ*. (mirror) Mitra was probably trying to connect to the Sanskṛt tradition of naming treatises with that suffix. One interpretation of the efficacy of the mirror metaphor could be the fact that by a mirrored reflection one could see oneself as an 'other'. For example, Nāndikeśvara's *Abhinayadarpaṇam* (The Mirror of Performance), a well-known 3rd century Sańskṛt treatise on acting, uses the suffix to clarify its explicatory purpose. Also to be noted is that *Nīldarpaṇ* was not the only work in its time to use the darpaṇ concept; Harimohan Mukhopādhyāy, in the same year of 1859, perhaps before Mitra, had named his semi-dramatic account of the sufferings of the agriculture workers of Bengal *Kṛṣidarpaṇ*—Mirror of Agriculture.

much more convincingly portrayed. The play on the whole acts out a middle-class fantasy of rebellion (that can only be *staged* on stage) and the bābu's social anxiety.[10] From the subalternist vantage point, Ranajit Guha sums up Mitra's class-position succinctly:

> *Neeldarpan* [sic], written by a liberal in the midst of a peasant revolt, shows where the liberal stands at the time of a peasant revolt: he stands close to the power of the state seeking cover behind law and bureaucracy. It also shows what happens to him if he does so: he is destroyed. (Guha: 43)

The political position of the native liberal is exposed clearly in an anecdote about a botched performance of *Nīldarpan* in 1875 when it went on tour with the then famous company, National Theatre, to North India. Binodinī, the renowned actress, reminisces about the performance in Lucknow when, after a staged display of attempted rape of a native woman by an Englishman, the feathers of some Anglo Saxon males in the audience were ruffled, and they climbed up to the stage to beat up the actors. The performance stopped but the fight would not. The Magistrate, who happened to be present at the performance, sent for soldiers.

> The trouble petered out once the soldiers came. The Magistrate called the performance off and asked for the manager. But he was to be found nowhere. Finally they discovered him at the back, hiding quietly under the stage .... [Translation mine]. (Dāsī: 95–98)

Besides its amusement value, this anecdote prompts us to interrogate the circumstances behind the popularity of *Nīldarpan*, the role it played as a catalyst for social change. While the performance of the Bengali play did create occasional commotions,[11] like the one Binodinī Dāsī describes, it was the translated version of *Nīldarpan* that was the real miscreant in the eyes of the British administration. It was the controversy generated by the translation which fanned the agricultural agitations in the early 1860s and led to the reforms thereafter. *Nīldarpan* probably would never have had the kind of

[10] For more detailed discussions of the Indigo controversy and the role of Mitra's play in it see *The Blue Devil: Indigo and Colonial Bengal: With an English Translation of Neel Darpan By Dinabandhu Mitra*, by Amiya Rao and B.G. Rao. (Delhi & New York, Oxford University Press, 1992).

[11] There was talk in the English press of Calcutta about censoring performances of the play, but it never happened.

impact that it did on agrarian politics in Bengal had it not been for the translation and the scandal it created.

And the Lord of this Indigo Unrule was none other than another British subject, an Irishman, Reverend James Long (1814–1887) of the Church Missionary Society. With Christian morality as his back-up, Long went on to rally support for the indigo cultivators (*ryots*) part of which exercise was getting *Nīldarpan* translated into English[12]. The translated version was published at the expense of the Government of Bengal under Long's supervision. Some 300 copies of the printed book were sent to England, to people with social power—newspaper editors, philanthropists, politicians and members of the British Parliament. This was done without the knowledge of the Indigo planters who found out about it later. When the Planters' Association complained to the Government it received perfunctory answers. With the help of some supportive newspapers the planters organized an offensive on the Government, James Long and the missionaries in general. Finally the matter was taken to court, where the case was initially directed towards the printer, who upon being charged revealed the name of Rev. Long as the person who 'brought the book to the press'. Having divulged the name of the 'real culprit' the printer was acquitted and James Long brought to court. But instead of trying to cover his connection with the play, Long unhesitantly confessed to his complicity in the matter. The court proceedings began and Long was indicted and prosecuted over three days—July 19, 20 and 24, 1861. Apparently, the news of an Englishman being charged for political actions by the British administration cut ripples in the Calcutta society. The *Calcutta Review*[13] vouches for it:

> The court was crowded on each day of the trial, and more attention and interest were awakened than had ever been witnessed before. Gentlemen of every grade of the Civil Service, Military Officers, members of the press, the Chamber of Commerce and the Traders' Association, merchants and bankers, clergymen and planters were present and watched the

[12] For James Long's account see *Indigo Planters, and All About Them*, compiled by Kumud Behari Bose (A.N. Andini, Calcutta, 1903).

[13] All quotes and references, including page and volume numbers, to the *Calcutta Review* are from the microform holdings of New York University's Bobst Library.

proceedings as persons deeply concerned in the result. Everyone felt that a battle, regulated by the rigid forms of law, was now to be fought; that Government Officials and European Settlers now stood face to face before a judge whom neither could bias. It was no longer a conflict between freedom and despotic power, between the principles of agriculture, trade, and commerce, enunciated by Adam Smith, and those enforced by the Ruler of Bengal. These and all other questions for the moment gave place to the following? Have the people who have come from the mother country to the distant dependency of the Crown, by barbarity and lewdness on the one hand, or cunning and meanness on the other, ceased to be Englishmen? The audience recognised this to be the great point at issue ... (pp. 355–6)

Long was sentenced to a month in prison and would pay a fine of Rs. 1,000. Kālīprasanna Siṅha,[14] a Bengali bābu, volunteered to pay the fine. His lawyers made no solicitation for a mitigation of the sentence. The question, rather, took a different turn: 'but was he morally wrong, is a question which may be raised and is one worthy of calm consideration' (360). The 'consideration', far from being 'calm', was to bring the British rule in Bengal to a different moment, on both sides of the spectrum, native and European. It was James Long, the white missionary, after all, who was imprisoned, not Dinabandhu Mitra, the native civil servant.

Missionaries had around the 1860s developed the reputation of 'mischief makers' from their antioppression (therefore, pro-native) activities in the colonies. Especially noted were their roles in the slave rebellions in the Caribbean colonies and Maoris in New Zealand. Long explained in a letter to the Committee of the Club of the Church Missionary Society in London, a few months before his trial, on 23 April 1860, about how he became involved in the indigo agitation in the first place:

God seems to be working for the ryots in a way we did not calculate on. Last Friday evening ... fifty ryots presented themselves at my door who had fled from Nuddee and Jessore Districts to escape the oppression of the planters, they brought me a letter from Mr B_____ [illegible]–I could not turn the people away, and say be ye warmed and be ye clothed and

[14] Siṅha (1840–70), known for his beneficence, was a thinker and an accomplished writer–humorist as well as translator of Saṅkṛt texts into Bengali, including the *Mahābharata* and a few Saṅkṛt plays.

do nothing myself so I sent down to consult Dr Duff[15] on the question and he called at my house a meeting of some missionaries, friends to consult what was to be done, there were present Dr Duff, Dr Cuthbert,[16] Dandys, Vaughan, W. Yale, a Baptist Missionary and myself along with a Native gentleman. We came to the conclusion unanimously that it was our duty as missionaries to do what we could for these poor people *who cannot help themselves*–that we repudiate taking up the question on any *political* ground but simply that Indigo Planting interfere with our work. [Underscoring authorial][17]

However much Long did advocate the repudiation of 'taking up the question on any *political* ground', it did become political. The whole controversy was seen as a sort of an act of 'betrayal' by the British and European settlers, while to the Bengali natives Long became a champion for the downtrodden, the 'good' Englishman who sought to bring to task the 'rogue' Englishmen (it is ironic that one of the villainous planters in *Nīldarpaṇ* happens to be called Mr. Rogue as well, although in the translation the name becomes Mr. Rose!), embodied by the planters. But Long, in so much as his letters to the Committee of the Club of the Church Missionary Society in London reveals, wrote even from the prison that his purpose was not so much to meddle with the administration of the government of Bengal or the commercial affairs of the indigo planters, as it was to propagate and uphold Christian morality. He considered his actions to be a great booster in promoting Christianity in Bengal. He wrote from his prison cell on 7 August 1860:

Dr. Key of Bishops College called on me lately and said how much he was struck with the tone of the native news papers, who were astonished at the fact of a Christian Missionary cheerfully going to prison in the cause of the oppressed, the Editor of one Bengali paper writes–'If this be Christianity then we wish Christianity would spread all over the country'–who knows

[15] Alexander Duff (1806–78) was a Scottish missionary who worked in India for the Church of Scotland.

[16] Reverend G. G. Cuthbert, another missionary who had, since 1855, been supportive of the Indigo ryots, trying to bring their plight to public attention. His account of the Indigo situation, *Indigo Planting and the Bengal Ryot*, was published in Calcutta in 1856.

[17] From the letters of James Long of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection at the University of Birmingham.

but this imprisonment may have the effect of imprisonment in the days of primitive Christianity...

Although Long's dream of Christian conversion in Bengal in the 'primitive' mode was a far cry from the truth, it is true that the Bengali press of Calcutta was indeed agog with commendations for his heroism.

However, what is peculiarly elided over in all the variations of public discourse—among the native, missionary, as well as, the larger European settler communities—generated by the Indigo controversy is the fact that the literary work that made it what it became was the English translation of *Nīldarpaṇ* and its subsequent distribution in England, not the Bengali work itself or even, thirteen years later, its stage production in Dhaka and Calcutta. Never was Mitra mentioned in the court proceedings, nor was he ever summoned even to testify before the court, let alone being put to trial.[18] It was always Long's involvement that was in question. Why? One can, with due reverence to the complexity of the problem, only conjecture. Perhaps the part of the British community that castigated Long's endeavors were not willing to risk raking up political controversies among the natives, especially in view of the Bengali intelligentsia's general support for the British in the Sepoy Mutiny[19] that racked entire British India,

[18] Mitra was working at this time as an Inspecting Post Master, moving from district to district. In 1871, he was given the honorific title of Rāy Bāhādur by the British Government, to honor his role in restructuring the British postal system during insurgencies in the far-flung North Eastern regions of the empire, which some leaders of the Bengali intelligentsia deemed as loquacious, and not reflective of his true services to the government. Mitra died soon after, in 1873, at a young age of 43, and many blamed his death on the frequent transfers he was subjected to despite his failing health.

[19] Also known at the Great Mutiny or *Sipāhī* (Ang. Sepoy) Rebellion (1856-58), this was a violent movement that raged all over Northern India starting with the Indian soldiers in the British army. The ostensible reason behind it was that both Hindu and Muslim soldiers had to bite one end of greased cartridges while loading their rifles. The problem was that the grease used was either beef or bacon based, which were both taboos for the Hindus and Muslims, respectively. Some soldiers in Bengal protested and were punished, but the cause was picked up by other regiments and soon it turned into a general revolt geared towards overthrowing the rule of the British East India

and then their subsequent reversed position in favor of the Indigo Rebellions.[20] Or maybe the natives did not matter, they regarded this as a matter for the European communities of Bengal. As for the missionaries, they may not have wanted to add fuel to the already raging fire—being an already targeted community amongst European settlers in most British colonies—by bringing in a native. Also, perhaps, they sincerely believed in the cause of supporting the downtrodden (Long was never expelled from his church despite attempts from the outside) and that this would eventually lead to a broader acceptance of (and subsequent conversion to) Christianity among the natives. Moreover, by the early 1860s, the indigo trade, having always been of a highly speculative kind and a sort of anachronism in the liberal world of *laissez faire* economies, was already dwindling.[21] Soon it was to lose its prominence as a cash crop, with competition rising from other parts of the world, and would eventually die a natural death at the hands of artificial indigo. The death of the trade in the wind-fall of time, obviously, ended the story of the planters' oppression and led to a general improvement of the peasants' working and living conditions—often through legal mandates—in the other plantation industries.

But for the Bengalis it seemed that it was *Nīldarpaṇ* itself that mattered, with or without the survival of the Indigo trade. Moreover, in a wayward fashion, the whole affair was justifying British presence in India (or Bengal, at least) by the suggestion that there were two types of colonials—the good ones who ran the administration and the 'rogue' ones that ran insidious

Company. Spearheaded by charismatic leaders like Nānā Sāhib, Queen Lākṣmibāī of Jhānsi, Ṭāntiā Ṭopi, Khān Bāhādur Khān, Maulavi Ahmadullāh and others, the movement led to a ceremonial resurrection of the Mughal throne in Delhi. But the British succeeded in overthrowing the rebels and regaining Delhi through considerable bloodshed. Bāhādur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal Emperor was exiled to Rangoon. In view of what had happened, in 1858, the British Parliament abolished the Company and took over the government of India.

[20] See Blair B. Kling's *The Blue Mutiny; The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859–1862* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966)

[21] The *Calcutta Review* article, quoted earlier, gives a statistical chart at the end which displays the tremendous losses at which most indigo endeavors were running.

operations like Indigo plantations. This is clearly evident even in an anonymously written proto-*Nīldarpaṇ* propaganda pamphlet written in the dramatic form, published by the *Hindoo Patriot* (a leading Bengali periodical that adopted an anti-planter position) three years before the publication of Mitra's play, in 1856. A Hindu bābu character, presumably a government employee, recently transferred to a rural posting indoctrinates an Indigo cultivator:

> The land where our all-protecting rulers are from is where a number of these Indigo planters are from; but they have nothing to do with ruling the land. Just like you they, too, are mere subjects of the Company. Are you calling them rulers simply because they are as white as our [true] rulers? [Translation mine] (Anonymous: 7–8)

The native opposition, thus, was not so much to British rule but rather to its roguish incarnations, best represented by the planters. On one occasion, when the play was performed in Calcutta's Town Hall in 1873, a Bengali bābu supposedly went up on stage during the same scene and started to beat up the native actor playing the English rapist, eventually swooning from the excitement himself! (Datta, K.: 94) The flip side of the same coin is evident in another instance when the Bengali actors who were afraid when the British Deputy Commissioner of Police came to attend a performance of *Nīldarpaṇ* had to be reassured by the Englishman that his friendship with the playwright was the only reason for his presence at the performance (Basu, B.: 69). The cleavage in the native's view of the master–constructing a pseudo 'benevolent' other, for a while at least–stayed on and helped perpetuate British imperialism, and, at the same time, informed nationalism in Bengal.

Nīldarpaṇ, be it Mitra's Bengali or Long's English, had set a precedent. More plays of so-called social protest, a large number of them in the darpan style, began to follow suit; plays that purported to hold up a mirror, as it were, to the oppressive ills of society. Most notable among them were Mīr Maśarraf Hosén's *Jamidār-darpaṇ* (The Landowner's Mirror, 1873), which was about a peasant rebellion against the land-owning bābus, *Cā-Kar-Darpaṇ* (The Tea-Planter's Mirror, 1875), by Dakṣināraṅjan Caṭṭopādhyāy, that dealt with the poor working conditions in the British owned tea-estates in North Bengal and *Jel-darpaṇ* (Mirror of the Prison, 1876) that dealt with the terrible life of prisoners in the jail houses of Bengal, also by Dakṣināraṅjan Caṭṭopādhyāy. All three plays protested the atrocities meted out by colonial agencies of domination, not to the urban middle class, but to the subaltern rural working class majority of Bengal. Obviously, all of the plays risked the ire of the British and even some prominent members of the Bengali intellectual elite, who had, generally, by this time volte-faced from siding with the peasants and/or opposing the European planters to defending their own economic interests as (often absentee) landlords, *zamindārs*. One cannot help but note that almost all of these plays were written in the safety of the cities, by writers who did not belong to the classes that were the immediate subject of the plays. The objectives of the play were not at par with their contents either. As a result they read more like patronizing strokes the urban gentry were giving to their own socio-political contradictions by a theatrically projected protest against the atrocities the colonial rulers performed on the lower classes, to whose exploitation, ironically, the urban gentry also contributed quite directly. One can feel in the dialogue and scene construction of all three plays the nervous excitement of seditious writing, laced more with political adrenaline than ideological commitment. And although, ostensibly addressing the lower working classes, these plays were directed towards the moral heart of a bābu or at least a bābu-sympathizing audience. Dakṣināraṅjan Caṭṭopādhyāy's class-position is even more transparent. The title page of his *Cā-Kar Darpaṇ* (The Tea-Planter's Mirror) came with the following epigraph in French: 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' which was the motto of the Order of the Garter founded by King Edward III of England. The motto, in translation, reads: 'Evil to him who evil thinks'. Obviously, in his pedantic disclaimer (a *French* epigraph for a *Bengali* play in *British* India!), Caṭṭopādhyāy seems to be addressing his possible castigators among the British as well as bābus. In his next 'protest' play, *Jel-darpaṇ* (Mirror of the Prison), Caṭṭopādhyāy went a step further and devised a multi-lingual epigraph with four quotes from four languages: Saṅskṛt , Hindustānī, Bengali and, English, in that order. While the first three in the Indian languages placate and romanticize ideas of rebellion and freedom, the last one, in English, comes as an absolute anti-climax: 'England with

all thy faults I love thee still,' a quote from William Cowper, the early Romantic poet. One is left questioning—should we substitute 'England' with 'India' and then read the quote, or, is this the writer's apology to the colonial administration, an affirmation of his conformity to the British Raj?

But would the government always look the other way? In the same year, 1876, the Great National Theatre came up with a play *Gajadānanda O Juburāj*, by Amṛtalāl Basu. This play was a satirical account of one Jagadānanda, a barrister, who had entertained the visiting Prince of Wales in his house and allowed the womenfolk of his family to meet him. This was regarded a tremendous violation of native practices who, albeit their conformity to colonial rule, believed in keeping the British away from the inner sanctums of their households, the world of women. In the play Jagadānanda became, by a simple twist of syllables, Gajadānanda, the native-supplicant boot-licker. This play was promptly closed down by the government after the second night. It was, after all, referring not to 'rogue' planters but to British royalty, the Prince of Wales himself. The Great National Theatre, in protest, launched a new production overnight, a skit—*The Police of Pig and Sheep*—ridiculing Mr. Hogg and Mr. Lamb, two high ranking British Police officials. That same night Basu and seven others were arrested from the premises of the theatre, not for the satirical piece but the apolitical featured production of the night on account of obscenity. The charge was eventually challenged in the court and the theatre won the case, but not before the Dramatic Performances Control Act[22] had been passed.

The Act effectively marked the end of direct political activism, what little had been demonstrated, in the Bengali public theatre, although some plays continued to be proscribed by a nervous government at the slightest hint of any seditious intent. *Nīldarpaṇ* was staged by the bābu theatre, and soon after by a fledgling public theatre. But Bengali theatre had thereafter graduated to become a ticketed public outfit and could, potentially sway a larger body

[22] Promulgated by Lord Northbrook in February, 1876, and passed as an act by the Viceroy's Council in December. According to this act, all plays needed police sanction prior to public performance.

politic. Under the threat of the government's policed reprimand, most plays produced by the commercial theatre companies, thereafter, started to look towards making money. Garrulous advertisements to attract bigger audiences became commonplace. Intentions of this theatre moved away from any kind of political activism now towards projecting images of a nation that could claim a sort of imagined selfhood even under imperial rule. Making plays commercially viable became the biggest concern, perhaps for reasons of survival, for even creative director-producers like Giriś Candra Ghoṣ. Ghoṣ was one of the leading dramatists and director-actor-regisseurs of the Bengali public theatre in its first phase. Here is an excerpt from an advertisement published in 1881, in English, for *Ānanda Raho*, a play by Ghoṣ, on the life and times of the Mughal Emperor Akbar:

> This drama is not a stale story, told in monotonous dialogue, nor is the work crammed with tremendous tiring octavo speeches and soliloquies. The greatest statesman and mightiest monarch Akbar is portrayed with a truly historic pen.
>
> [...] Betal—A quite original and strictly national character, sublime and magnanimous will be played by Girish Chandra Ghosh [sic].
>
> [...] Please note—This is that well received play in the *finale* of which marble statues are transformed into living beauties.
>
> (Guha-Thakurta: 121)

The one word that jumps out of the advertisement is 'national'. Who (or what) is this 'strictly national character, sublime and original' Betāl? The idea of such a character seems to have occurred to Ghoṣ from the twenty-five parables about the ancient Hindu King Vikramaditya's symbolic journeys into the supernatural world with an ethereal character (the *Vetālpañcaviṅśati*) of the same name, Ghoṣ's Betāl, as in the tales, is also an *a*historical character (who is, however, part of a play claimed to be 'truly historic'). He weaves in and out of the plot, interacts with all characters with godlike ease, demonstrates all the virtues that the other characters lack and, remains unaffected till the end, living out the moral message of the play to the hilt. This kind of omniscient characterization is not uncommon in Shakespeare, it is not uncommon in the

Bengali folk theatre form of *jātrā* either, where it is better known as the *bibek* or the conscience character. Giriś Ghoṣ could have got the idea from either source, but that is not the point. What deserves attention here is the way the character is used as a trope to play up the nationalist symphony that would whet the patriotic sentiments of the audience without, at the same time, incurring the rage of the Raj. Having identified the presence of 'rogues' among the rulers, Bengali theatre now moved towards conceiving a conveniently idealized 'nation' that could flourish even under colonial domination, dressed up theatrically in apolitical cultural terms.

Let us look at some aspects of this evolved construction. Many plays from this period ended with facile invocations of the glory of Mother India, her proud heritage and civilization of which the nineteenth century Indians (Hindus, to be more specific, since Islam does not recognize idol worship) were worthy heirs. This articulation of 'nationalist' discourse is part of what Partha Chatterjee calls the *thematic* of a nationalist ideology: 'an epistemological as well as ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules for establishing relations between elements...'. But the 'framework of elements' cannot but pre-empt other elements that it fails to reconcile with from its agenda. The example, in our case, is the Muslim issue; Hindu nationalism, could not (nay, *would* not) make room for the Muslim in its constructed set of iconography and historiography. This brings us to the *problematic* of nationalist ideology, which, according to Chatterjee, 'consists of concrete statements about possibilities justified by reference to the thematic' (Chatterjee: 38–39). The relationship between the thematic and problematic of nationalist discourse is such that it justifies imagined ideas as reality while pre-empting the actual socio-political situation of its problematized aspects. Nationalism, thus, necessarily bases itself on erasure of history, on the one hand, and generation of myth, on the other. Recognition of this essentially epistemic schism in nationalist ideology brings us back to the issue of Orientalism and its effects we had discussed earlier in this essay. 'The problematic of nationalist thought,' according to Chatterjee, 'is exactly the reverse of that of Orientalism' where the passive subject of Orientalist discourse becomes active within

its nationalist counterpart and begins to assimilate within itself ideas that are not inherently germane to its culture. But on the thematic side of nationalist thought lies the passive acceptance of the principles of Orientalist scholarship, which include the native's internalization of his master's voice that defined him as the subject of scientific study. And ironically, it was the same study that had, in the first place, fed and effectively produced the culture of the colonial native.

The addition, the performative element in the *staged* nationalism of Bengali theatre problematizes the issue further. The physical realization in the theatre of the ideas of nation-hood, through bodies performing in public display, reinforced the imagined national self-fashioning, giving it the look of palpable reality of verifiable physical truth, a suggested near-empiricist proof of the discourse. A parallel can be drawn here with the constructed truth that the vastly attended Orientalist expos, panoramas, museum exhibits, operas and fairs in the West suggested about the Orient.[23] Like the museum and fair exhibits, the bodies of the actors on stage—in this case, corporeal presences gazed upon by the corporeal eyes of the audience—constituted a spectacular site where the nation was being enacted, and thus produced, giving the colonized's desire a physical embodiment. It was, thus, not only filling the displacing void between the thematic and problematic of nationalist discourse but sharpening the tooth of its pronouncement through a system of staged production, working its way out in a semiotic jungle of icons (both the clear and not-too-clear, culled as well as contrived), suturing disjointed segments of imagined pasts and braiding them together as a performed 'whole'. Performances like these left little room for critical thought in an audience's mind. Instead, they inflate it with the hot and 'pure' air of patriotism, fixing the imagined icons of nationhood with indisputable affects of 'truth': 'To see is to believe,' ergo, 'To see Mother India is to believe (in) Mother India'. This reclamatory realization of colonial desire producing the nation in the theatre usually followed an excursive trajectory from a written text (be it a play or a theoretical work,

[23] See Edward Said's chapter (*Consolidated Vision*, Section IV) on the production of Giuseppi Verdi's Egyptian opera, *Aida*, in 1871 in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York and London, Knopf, 1993).

usually the former) to another text enunciated performatively, articulated at a semiotic level.

The start point of one such excursion in the case of Bengali theatre—straddling the thematic/problematic breach in nationalist ideology and the complicated discourse of ambivalence it generates/legitimizes—is Śourindramohan Ṭhākur's (1840–1914) paradigmatic *Bhāratīya Nāṭya Rahasya or A Treatise on Hindu Theatre*, published in 1878. Ṭhākur was a bābu-musicologist with various Indian and international affiliations and a theatre aficionado.[24] And although he subtitles the Bengali name of his study loosely as 'A Treatise on Hindu Drama', in a closer reading the actual title could be translated as 'The Mystery of Indian Theatre'. And mysterious it is. For one, the semantic equivalency for 'Bhāratīya/Indian' in the Bengali title becomes 'Hindu' in the English subtitle.[25] But there are more noteworthy things in the text. The express intention of the treatise is to reclaim the mythic origins of Saṅskṛt theatre as legitimate history, thereby creating an absurd manifesto for a Saṅskṛtic-Bengali theatre. Ṭhākur writes in the introduction:

> The practice of theatre has been around among the Aryan races since time immemorial. The sacred texts have said that it was the Creator Brahma who invented drama. Later on, the sage Bharata adopted the same means to train ascetics living in forests and even wrote a treatise to suit that

[24] Śourindramohan was also a great drama enthusiast. He was the younger brother of one of the most well-known bābu patrons of Bengali theatre, Jatindramohan Ṭhākur, who was also a prominent member of the British Indian Association that played an important role in the Indigo controversy. With help from his brother, Śourindramohan conceptualized an orchestra for Indian instruments and experimented with it in the productions at their private theatre in Pāthuriāghāṭā. He translated plays from Saṅskṛt, even as a teenager, which were published and performed. In 1859 he organized a production of his own translation of Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra*, a 10th century Sanskrit play, and played a female lead in it. The theatre of the Ṭhākur brothers was described a by a contemporary as one that 'changed the times' (Datta, K: 36).

[25] Translation, in the colonial context, has been identified as an area that occasions its own problematic discourse by Tejaswini Niranjana in *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, & the Colonial Context*. She writes, 'English education ... familiarized the Indian with ways of seeing, techniques of translation, or modes of representation that came to be accepted as 'natural' p. 31.

> purpose. There is not a speck of doubt that Bharata is the first creator of drama. [....] Not only did he impart dramatic training to ascetics living in forests, Bharata also gave acting and ... dance lessons to *apsaras* like Ūrvasi and Menakā in the court of Indra, the King of the gods. [Translation mine] (Ṭhākur, 1878: Intro., 1–2)

Ṭhākur does not stop short at this incredulity. He goes on to give a long list of numerous Saṅskṛt texts he has consulted—extant, undiscovered, and lost—to authorize his claim. He also mentions the then undiscovered, *Nāṭyaśāstra*[26] (the manuscript was not found until the early twentieth century) whose theory he reconstructs from quotes salvaged from other sources. The main body of this treatise consists of short descriptions of the types of drama that Saṅskṛt aesthetic principles permit, followed by brief discussions of plays that have been written on that basis. In the latter section, Ṭhākur places relatively obscure but contemporary Bengali plays or fragments thereof, alongside plays from the ancient Saṅskṛt repertoire simply by merit of their allegiance to Saṅskṛt aesthetics! At the end of the book he briefly and superficially compares the differences between Saṅskṛt and European performance theory and goes on to chart what is, nonetheless, acceptable from the latter. This selective list includes lighting technology, theatre architecture, scenic decor and, strangely, the French performance tradition of the *tableaux vivant*—scenes presented on stage by costumed actors who remain silent and motionless as if in a picture—to which he donates the whole last chapter of the book! Perhaps it is to the same *tableaux vivant* tradition that Giriś Ghoṣ owed his idea of 'marble statues [that] are transformed into living beauties' in *Ānanda Raho*!

The politics of colonialism and its concomitant production of Orientalist knowledge had, no doubt, firmly intervened in the native literati's negotiation with its own tradition. It was a negotiation that thrived on a back-handed, disguised negation of the same

[26] An ancient treatise on the art of acting, dance, dramaturgy, and theatre architecture that can be dated, arguably, to the 1st century or even earlier, composed by one Bharatāmūni, a sage who supposedly received the knowledge of the performing art from the gods. The most authoritative critical translation of the text till date is by Manomohan Ghoṣ (Manisha Granthalaya, Calcutta, 1967).

'tradition' to which it owed its very existence, quite like what the string-reel had become for Freud's fort-da child, or Lacan's ditch (see above). This was an agency of colonial domination, a desired effect of colonial rule—whereby the native would be desirous to think he was perpetuating his own tradition, while in actuality he was only confirming his break from it. Sue-Ellen Case convincingly argues that one of the intendments of British Orientalism from the beginning was for Sanskṛt to be converted into a language of literary expression that could be severed by 'esthetics' from its origins and then 'employed to suppress its own tradition'. Through this instance Case demonstrates how 'assimilation and exclusion work together' in the colonial set-up (Case: 115). Ṭhākur's book and the prescription of assimilation that it proposes for the new Sanskṛt-Bengali theatre, in its peculiar self-negating hybridity, helps us unpack the components of nineteenth century Bengali theatre that invoked the imagined ancient Hindu glory of India while situating it in the modernity of colonial Victorianism.

Ṭhākur's position, symptomatic of a larger picture, becomes even clearer in another book he had written a year earlier on music, his field of specialization, entitled, *Bhikṭoria-Gītimālā* (Garland of Songs for Victoria). This book clearly enunciates the flip side of the Bengali bābu's simultaneously assimilatory and exclusionary exercise of self-fashioning—servility. In these songs Ṭhākur uses native Bengali metrical styles, his language lauded/loaded with Sanskṛt root-words, 'in commemoration of the assumption of the Imperial Title [of the Empress of India] by her most gracious Majesty Queen Victoria'. Let us consider, as an example, the interrogatory ending of the poem:

By mercy of this same goddess, the mute man comes to posses,
the rare attribute of eloquence;
At the lotus-feet of the same goddess, [like] a boatman seeking recess,
to cross the waterway from hence,
Goddess, my meagre poetic craft, I have set afloat like a raft,
To touch your feet's end;
But, for me, I don't know what, On Destiny's chronic chart,
Fate ordains provident.

[Translation mine] (Ṭhākur, 1877: 140)

Ṭhākur's writing here reads prophetic and betrays, not perhaps in ways that he intended, truths about colonial servility. British rule has, indeed, granted the colonial the 'eloquence' that easily turns into a maudlin mouthful of poetic excess. And it is through ironic, though not untypical, inversion that the iconic 'lotus-feet' of the Hindu goddesses (an archetypal image in Hindu religious poetry) becomes that of the newly ordained Empress. With similar quizzicality, too, Ṭhākur ends the poem ruminating what the future has in store for him. This was not an uncommon statement to make in a song, since Victoria was being eulogized in other forms in the larger theatre of public discourse as well. Keshub Chunder Sen (Beng. Keśab Candra Sen), the well-known Brahmo[27] reformist, had remarked in a lecture, delivered in English, entitled 'Religion and Madness', in 1877:

Who can deny that Victoria is an instrument in the hands of Providence to elevate this degraded country in the scale of nations, and that in her hands the solemn trust has been most solemnly reposed? Glory then to Empress Victoria! (Applause.) (Majumdar: 112)

Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897, too, occasioned laudatory literature, for instance, the short play, *Jubili-Yajña* (The Jubilee Ritual), by Durgādās Dé. In this playlet, we see a cross-section of both the educated urban society as well a representative group of goddesses of the Hindu pantheon explicating the condition of the Indian Empire of the Queen. Although there is a mild vilification of misrule, it is more than abundantly palliated through surrender to and supplication for benevolent rule. A 'Son of India', for example, says in the second scene:

We are faithful to the Crown. The British Raj has empowered us to speak our minds, express our pains and everything else. Are you not aware that the British have given us the freedom that is not available even in Russia, France, Austria and Germany? We have no other option but to cling to the beauteous feet of our monarch. Royal munificence is for us paradise gained. [Translation mine] (Dé: 7)

[27] Founded by Rām Mohan Rāy (1772?–1833), the Brahmos were a sect among Hindus who believed in and practiced monotheism. Brahmo liberalism had a tremendous impact on the 19th century Bengali intelligentsia, its modernist sensibilities, and led to the abolition of rituals like *sati*.

But it is Bhārat-Mātā (Mother India) who pronounces the ultimate prayer addressed in absolute supplication to the British Empress: 'My whole-hearted wish remains that my sons, unshaken in their faithfulness at your feet, may receive two square meals a day' [Translation mine] (Dé: 4).

On the flip side of these contrite demonstrations of faith in colonial rule lies the reclamatory fantasy of Aryan-hood that ties the master to the menial through inalienable bonds of common ancestry. At the very opening of the play, Saraswatī, the white-visaged Hindu goddess of learning tells her sister Britannia (also white, though for very different reasons!):

> Good Sister! In the olden times, Aryan, Greek, and Roman children had come sincerely to pray to me. It was through the power of their prayers that they climbed the heights of civilization's monument. Alas, once placed in the tornado of Time, they forgot their prayers to me, their rise was razed to humble dust. Today, through your benevolence, your sons have learnt to revere me, dote on me, pray to me. They have dedicated their lives in serving me, to reclaim the treasures of literature, art, science, economics, politics, et cetera, and brighten my visage. Oh, Harbinger of Good Fortune, I lie forever in your debt. [Translation mine] (Dé: 2)

Noticeable here, other than the declaration of obvious subservience to the British sovereign ('I lie forever in your debt') and the fantastic fabrication of the motivation behind Orientalist scholarship ('your sons have learnt to revere me'), is the imagining of the exalted female figures of divinity—the Hindu goddess icons—although they stand behind the foregrounded figure of Britannia like hand-maidens. The female figuration of the Mother Goddess as the image of Mother India had become a critical device in all pronouncements of patriotism at the turn of the century. This is particularly prominent in the theatre because they are not just figures of speech or spoken metaphors; on the contrary, they are visibly powerful and palpable likenesses of abstractions that fix the images in the imagination of the viewers. This conducts us to the moment in nationalist discourse that is marked with the erasure of the woman, ironically, through the very act of elevating her to exalted 'motherhood'.[28]

[28] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak eloquently locates the moment in her seminal essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?': 'Between patriarchy and imperialism [read nationalism], subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third world woman" [read Mother India] caught between tradition and modernization' (Spivak: 102).

The end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw a good number of patriotic plays that intended, in no uncertain terms, to restore, once again, the (familiar) lost magnificence of Bengal/India and/or Mother India. Characters from the past were invoked, historical certainties altered in the name of patriotism, heroes redeemed of their human frailties and follies and raised to the status of native supermen to become role models to the youth of Bengal. Needless to say, these characters were seldom heroines whose figurations in these so-called historical plays were reserved mostly for elevated, evacuated, abstract parables of motherhood. The perfunctory service implicit in the false-exaltation of the female figure in nationalist discourse, especially in Bengali theatre, is harshly contested by the life stories of the numerous actresses who appeared on the Bengali stage, especially Binodinī Dāsī (1863–1941), the famous actress (whose anecdote on *Nīldarpan* is cited earlier in this essay). Ostensibly raised out of fate's severity to social recognition, from prostitute to performer, a number of these actresses were rewarded with no better ignominy, exploitation and neglect than what their former profession could have afforded them.[29] This points out, once again, at the failure of the nationalist agenda to reconcile itself with the reality of the social condition of the 'nation'. And in this, the patriotic theme plays of this period evince a paradigm shift in their participation in the larger nationalist movement that had, by d/ef(f)acing the real 'woman' away, constructed the figure of the *deś-mātā*, Mother of the Land.[30] The only variation to the rule would be female figures who had demonstrated typically manly attributes like warfare

[29] Partha Chatterjee brings this out in his discussion of the many 'betrayals' in Binodinī's life in Chapter Seven, 'Women and the Nation', of *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, pp. 151–5.

[30] See Ghulam Murshid's *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849–1905* (Rajshahi University Press, Rajshahi, 1983), and, Meredith Borthwick's *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984).

and ruling the land, like Rāṇi Durgāvatī, Cānd Bibi or Tārābāī,[31] despite their feminine frailties and, thereby, *become* men—another erasure through elevation. The Bengali patriotic history play, thus, built itself out of erasures, and not only of the genderized kind, as we shall see in due course.

Let us examine a contemporary record of such a dramatic 'restoration' of historical material, on gendered lines, in the memoirs of Apareś Candra Mukhopādhyāy (1875–1934), an accomplished producer-director of the time. He was referring specifically to a play by Kṣirodprasād Vidyāvinod (1863–1927) on the '*life*' and '*times*' of an earlier Hindu ruler of Bengal—King Pratāpāditya. Mukhopādhyāy wrote:

> Impregnating the darkness of history, at the outskirts of ... the forests of Jaśor [a district in Central (undivided) Bengal], before goddess Jaśoreśwarī in the courtyard of her ruined temple a shadowy figure emerged into broad daylight, a son of Bengal born of Kāyastha [a middle caste] lineage, the one who had shattered the pride of the Mughals, Pratāpāditya Rāy– with whom are returning fifty-two thousand shield-bearers ... the result of whose resolute, extreme penance was freedom for Bengal! Bengal was joyous at this. Who dares to call him a tyrant? Who dares to call him Pratāpāditya, the Brigand? [...] All of Bengal started worshipping him.... Like the Śivājī[32] Festival [among the Mārāṭhās in the province of Bombay], Calcutta ... had its Pratāpāditya Festival. [Translation mine] (Mukhopādhyāy: 73)

When the play was produced in 1904, not only did the company producing it make a lot of money, the line 'Either Jāśor—Or Death' from the play turned into a slogan, as the audience in the theatre sang the line with the actors, with Jaśor metonymically

[31] Durgāvatī was the queen of Gondwana who fought to prevent the army of Akbar, the Mughal Emperor, from annexing her kingdom and died in battle in 1564. Cānd Bibi was the regent of the king of Ahmadnagar who fought bravely also to resist Akbar in the first decade of 17th century. Tārā Bāī was the widow of the Mārāṭhā king Rājā Rām who fought to prevent the expansion of the empire of the last great Mughals emperor, Aurangzeb, in the 1690s.

[32] Rājā Śivājī (1627–80) was a charismatic Maratha leader who successfully used guerrilla techniques of warfare to fend off Aurangzeb's aggression. Supposedly, he was a hater of all Muslims. In the 19th century he was revived as an Indian hero, symbolic of national pride.

representing all of (Hindu) Bengal, the goddess Jaśoreśwarī being none other than a proxy for the image of Mother India and, on the whole, (Hindu) Bengal, as a further extended metaphor, was standing in for the further idealized (Hindu) India. Even when such patriotic plays dealt with historical material culled from the Islamic past of Bengal, where the Muslim rulers of Bengal with their Bengali identity foregrounded (although none but few even spoke the language), they were invariably pitted against the mighty Mughals or the British, seldom (if not never) against Hindu rulers. The Muslims had been placed out of the hegemonist Bengali Hindu nationalist agenda, to become the official other, despite lip-service to communal harmony. The tacit implication being—one had to be Hindu in order to be Bengali, a Muslim could not be a Bengali. This had begun to show clearly as early as in January, 1861, when a news announcement appearing in the *Saptāhik Saṅgbad* (Weekly News) spoke of the appearance of an Urdu play in Bombay: 'An Urdu play by the name of *The Reign of King Sekandar* has been published. It is currently being produced in Bombay. But the Muslims of Calcutta seem quite dispirited; they are not trying to improve their language.'[33] This is clearly evidenced in Kṣirodprasād Vidyāvinod's *Ālibābā*. In this dramatized version of the well-known tale of Ali Baba and the forty thieves, from the *1001 Arabian Nights*,[34] Vidyāvinod innovated a style of dialogue-writing that was in a Bengali heavily endowed with Urdu words and phrases in order to make it sound 'Muslim/Middle Eastern'.[35] But Bengali Hindu writers of nationalist plays, waiting for their

[33] From the newspaper holdings of the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library in London.

[34] A long series of fabulous tales told by Sheharzadeh, wife of an Arab Prince, as a life-saving device. The Prince had made a vow to marry a new wife every day, and have her head cut off the next morning, to avenge himself for the disloyalty of his first wife. Sheharzadeh decided to tell the Prince unfinished tales that would prevent him from executing her. Sheharzadeh's stories kept alive the Prince's interest for 1001 nights, after which he decided never to kill her. European language translations, fragmentary and inaccurate, of the *Arabian Nights* have been available since the early 18th century. Sir Richard Francis Burton's (1821–1890) authoritative translation, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, appeared in the 19th century.

[35] However, Urdu's Middle Eastern inheritance is primarily from Persian, while the tales of the *1001 Arabian Nights* are of Arabic origin.

Muslim counterparts to *invent* their own language(s), were padding their plays up with discretionary dramaturgical licenses and innumerable flights of fancy, building on and appending to an already Hindu, elitist, and patriarchal order where Muslim, subaltern and woman were all reduced/erased, rendered silent. Hence, this pseudo-reclamation of national power was enacted largely by and for an elite stage, not to claim independence from colonial rule, not really to revivify national pride among the native (although that was the project under which it was, and continues to be, often presented), but truly to assuage the battered ego of an elite (the privilegentsia, if one may call it that) trying hard to construct an identity while accommodating, at the same time, the ignominy of being understrapped colonial subjects, resting inevitably on elisions and fabrications.

Similar points of elision can be noted even in plays that deal directly with Englishmen appearing as 'real' characters on stage. In *Deś Guljār* (Nation Clamorous), by Surendra Candra Basu, published (ironically) by the New Britannia Press in 1907 (second edition), that was performed by the New Classic Company, we find three Englishmen interacting with each other (the dialogues are originally written in English). While two among them, Mr. Rough and Mr. Graham, are believers (in varying degrees) in coercive colonial rule, the third, Mr. Neville, is a Member of Parliament, who puts his confidence on benevolent despotism. His argument with Rough and Graham lead him to two conclusions. The first inference is expressed in the following words:

> It is wiser, Mr. Rough! To conquer the people by love than by steel. It is a pity that you have not read up your history properly my friend! India was never conquered by us by sword, but *we got it by a wind-fall* through the machinations of its traitors. We always forget this *fact* and it is sheer folly to treat Indians like slaves, when we should be grateful to them for our present position in the world. [Italics mine] (Basu, S.C.: 14)

This facile conclusion, ironically put in the mouth of an Englishman, rests on the native's deferential argument that colonialism in India was more an outcome of the native's inability to oppose it.[36] The second inference, like the examples cited earlier,

[36] This was, and arguably continues to be, one of the most generally accepted 'historical reasons' behind the success of the empire-building project of the British in India. See Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983) for an insightful discussion of India being regarded as both 'senile' and 'juvenile' for the expediencies of establishing British rule in India.

once again signals the European Orientalist's intervention that framed the native's construction of national selfhood, but what is visible here is that the words are put in the mouths of a British parliamentarian. A distinction, obviously, is being made here between the British in India and the British in Britain, as we have seen earlier in the case of *Nīldarpan* and the Indigo controversy. The implication here, symptomatic of the native's Anglophilia, of course, is that the British in Britain are the true benevolent ones, while those who are sent to India are the rogues (like Mr. Rogue in *Nīldarpan*) who come to India for the lack of worthwhile employment in Britain. Thus, the British from Britain lectures the British in India:

> If you study our own history, you will know—the English race, now the first power in the world, were dwellers in forest with birds and beasts at a time, when the Asiatics, and *especially the Hindus* had attained a highly developed civilised life; and we owe these Asians all the credit for making us what we are. [...] If you are fortunate enough to come to India, the ocean of learning and *a second Heaven* in divineness, return not to the shore with a mouthful of salt-water, but dive deep and pick out the inimitable pearls and the precious jewels that rest underneath; and learn to respect so many sages who are known as Indians. [Italics mine] (Basu, S.C.: 14–15)

There is a psychological double entendre implied in the way the speech is constructed—a Bengali author imaging/imagining, as an affect of self-reclamation, notions imbibed from European Orientalist discourse in performative dialogue, but, at the same time, putting it in the mouth of the 'other' who is *almost the same, but not quite* (Bhabha: 86). This *not quite*-ness is evident in the way Basu posits the 'highly civilised life' of 'especially the Hindus' as 'a second Heaven' for the British parliamentarian. The author, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, betrays the ultimate irony in the colonial native's skewed process of self-recovery that Indian (or 'Hindu', or 'Asiatic', for that matter) civilization for the European imperialist could never match up to the Christian heaven, whether

or not they were 'dwellers in forest with birds and beasts at a time' when the Asiatic civilizations flourished.

Basu's benevolent parliamentarian, however, in yet another fanciful departure on the part of the native author, departs from India disillusioned by the empire's project, having seen a bloody massacre of freedom fighters by Rough and Graham's company:

> One by one all the civilized nations of the world will spit on the name of my countrymen for this cowardly act .... Sooner I have left this unfortunate land where tyranny prevails, the better. —Adieu to thee, oh India! Mother of Buddha, Chaitanya (Beng. Caitanya)[37] and other innumerable sages! Count me as one of your admiring friends and allow me to employ each drop of my blood that runs into my veins to wipe off thy miseries and to fight for thy cause. (Basu, S.C.: 65–66)

In a quizzical inversion it is the English parliamentarian who is made to bespeak the glory of Mother India! But, ultimately, it is the native's ventriloquism that stands out as the articulating voice in this pinch-hitter speech, in its contrived apology for benevolent despotism—that colonialism will end by the grace of the same British (the 'true' variety thereof, who warm the seats of the Parliament in Westminster) who massacre freedom fighters, but who will by volition, nonetheless, retrench from the colonies sooner than later. It brings us back to a point made earlier, the component of elision and fabrication that stands at the heart of the native's national self-fashioning.

It is a redaction of the same argument that comes across in the colonial native's imaginings of the consecrated Sankṛtic origins of its theatre that is, nonetheless, performed with all the appurtenances of the other's theatre—the razzle-dazzle technologies of commerce as well as stage effects. Let us consider here an early twentieth century public theatre production of an adapted Bengali version of the 10th century Sańskṛt poet-playwright, the celebrated Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaśī* at the commercially flourishing Star Theatre, by the same Apareś Candra Mukhopādhyāy (producer of Kṣirodprasād Vidyāvinod's play on Pratāpāditya, we had mentioned earlier). The title of the Bengali version had been truncated into *Urvaśī*. It begins

[37] A Hindu Vaiṣñava reformer, Nimāi Caitanya (1485–1533) was from Nadiā in Bengal.

with a dance of the Hindu heavenly nymphs—the *apsarās*—before Bharata, the fabled author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and is followed by a speech by the venerable master of histrionics where he instructs the nymphs to descend on earth and acquire experiences of mortal life. He proclaims that

> *abhinaya* [acting], is one of the best forms of art. [And] although I have taught you all there is to be taught, I would still like you to descend on earth and see the world. *Darśan* [to behold] is the very life of abhinaya [the art of acting]. He who has the eye to behold, has experienced life and can, with all his body and mind, express those qualities earns the renown of the greatest actor or actress. [Translation mine] (Gupta: 26)

This late avatar of Bharata, wallowing in patronizing pedantry, is a far cry from the venerable author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* we know, both from the text as well as the numerous commentaries that have followed it. Bharata, whoever he (or they, as some scholars have argued) may have been, was no generalizer. If indeed he was the author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, we find him in the treatise to be a meticulous taxonomer of numerous categories and subcategories of the refined craft of abhinaya, the propounder of a greatly elaborated conglomeration of the do's and don'ts of the dramatic art—in the fullest possible details. That the Bharata of this play was not the Bharata of the Sanskṛt theatre is proven in the staging which violated Bharata's prescription for a symbolic and sparsely adorned performance space where much was to be left for the performer's skill in the art of miming and the trained audience's powers of imagination. The production, a contemporary critic informs us, exfoliated by very palpable means, with little left for the audience's imagination, through a razzle-dazzle line-up of song, dance, glitzy costumes, picturesque scenery, and a technically accomplished stagecraft showing a bi-level presentation of heaven and earth that was all in all 'sheer magic' (Gupta: 26). This production style relates directly to the latter part of Śourindramohan Ṭhākur's treatise mentioned earlier, where he talks about what can be 'taken' from European theatre to adorn the Bengali stage. The Sańskṛt theatre in its Bengali metamorphosis had surrendered to a tension of content that sat at the heart of its emulation of the illusionist colonial stage, the proscenium style of European theatre, while at the same time staking the polyvalent claim of being native-to-the-soil. Here, as in

most Bengali plays that dealt with Hindu mythological subjects, the allusion to Sanskṛt theatre, had become just a little more than a mouth-mere adherence to a few of its external, formalistic affects. It had been replaced as a site of spectacle where the Other of the colonizer was busy celebrating its own supposed 'tradition' that was actually a version of the native's secret desire to see his own self in the eye of the colonial master, what Homi Bhabha has identified as a 'negative transparency' (Bhabha: 90).

Plays like *Jubilī-Yajña*, *Pratāpāditya*, *Deś Guljār* and *Urvaśī*, and theoretical works like Ṭhākur's *Treatise on Hindu Drama*, by embracing the dual tropes of Orientalism/Hindu Nationalism, on the one side, and Westernization, on the other, bring us back to the questions we had posited at the onset of this essay about the *e*-merging and *sub*-merging of colonial identity, the production of the colonial hybrid in Bengali drama and its resultant problematic. Most of the dramatic literature of the urban Bengali Hindu intelligentsia in the nineteenth century that attempted to stage the nation exemplified the always already ambivalent quality of colonial discourse; a discourse sifting constantly in the uncertain liminal terrain between the *thematic* and *problematic* of nationalist ideology; a discourse that pits the notion of the colonial self against its own frenetic attempt to produce a national self, a mutually disagreeable concord, through fissures/erasures in/through genderized and communalized constructs, working into and around each other in gyre-like formations—continuously, furiously, impossibly, without conclusion. Thus, if we indulge ourselves for a moment in turning Ernest Gellner on his head, we could say, 'the *stage* increasingly defined the largest *state* on which the crucial activities determining human lives as subjects and citizens were played out.'

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Popular Theatre and the Rise of Nationalism in South India

S. Theodore Baskaran

One of the inherent characteristics of the stage is its use as a pulpit from where ideas and value systems are disseminated, even though the audience looks upon it mainly as a recreational form. Playwrights like Ibsen, Shaw and Brecht and political groups like the Nazis have made use of this property of the stage. In south India, the stage was used as an instrument of propaganda by the nationalists from 1919 right upto 1945. The popular theatre, in the process of helping the nationalist movement, assumed a political character and emerged as a popular political theatre.[1] The intent

[1] Political theatre is defined as 'a performance that is intentionally engaged in or consciously takes sides in politics.' The important feature is 'active intent,' whether it passes the message on to the audience or not. Though it may be difficult for such a theatre to change the opinion of the people, it 'can give emotional and intellectual support to those who already agree with its position.' Michael Kirby, 'On Political Theatre,' *The Drama Review*, Vol. XIX, No. 2, June 1975, (USA). There have been instances of such politicization of popular theatre in Asia earlier and all these instances related to nationalism. In West Java in the 1890s the SANDIWARA, a new form of popular theatre, began to stage anti-colonial plays. In Vietnam in the 1930s, anti-colonial themes figured prominently in their KICH drama form, a theatre very much influenced by the French. About the same time in Philippines, the ZARY ZARUELA, a commercial theatre form that enacted dramas of light opera style began to reflect anti-American sentiments. A slightly reversed role

of this chapter is to show how it gave an emotional and intellectual support to the movement and helped in politicizing the masses, and secondly, to examine the reaction of the British government.

The role of popular theatre in south India arose out of an interaction between the stage and the society. Though the tradition of drama goes back to the third and fourth centuries AD, modern drama as we know it, with divisions of acts and scenes, scenography of painted settings and a concealed orchestra, is not more than a century old in south India.[2] Classical drama, staged in dance form in temples during festivals, was not commercially organized and therefore never reached a sizeable section of the community. But modern drama run on commercial lines is open to everyone without any barrier of class or caste. Thus it has all the characteristics of a mass medium and may serve as a reflector of existing social norms. Such a function of the drama deserves notice and can be understood only in terms of the popular stage's interrelationship with the rest of society.[3] When popular, commercial drama appeared on the cultural scene in south India at the end of the nineteenth century, there was no radio or cinema to compete with it in the realm of mass communication.[4] It appeared in an age when the dissemination of ideas and information was crucial to the emergence of nationalism and it soon came to be used as an instrument in the nation's struggle for liberation.

While the press and formal political organizations might influence the literate, for the bulk of the people popular theatre

of the popular theatre was used by the Japanese when they occupied countries in South East Asia during 1940–45. They pressed the popular theatre into service to explain the Japanese aim of Greater East Asia and to glorify Asian nationalism. See James R. Brandon, *Theatre in South East Asia* (Massachusetts, 1967), p. 285. In the latter half of the 19th century the Kabuki theatre of Japan put up plays which voiced people's complaint against the ruling class. *Kabuki*, Pamphlet (Tokyo, 1977).

[2] An inscription chiselled on the walls of Rajarajeswaram temple, Thanjavur (Yamilnadu), refers to a drama *Rajarajeswara Natakam*, which was enacted on every *Vaikasi* festival. The leader of this troupe was awarded a lump sum of money by the King Rajaraja I (AD 985–1016). The drama presumably told the story of Rajaraja's career, culminating in the dedication of the great temple.

[3] John Russell, ed. *The Drama and the Theatre* (London, 1971), p. 150.

[4] J.S.R. Goodlad. *A Sociology of Popular Drama* (London, 1971), pp. 178–79.

served as the only means of mass communication. In a society where the people and their culture were mainly oriented to the spoken word, the appearance of a medium, which packaged ideas of nationalism and social reform with the main ingredients of traditional entertainment such as music and mythological themes, was bound to have a significant impact.[5] Such a stage not only serves as an entertainment form, but does something more to the community. It is likely that the members of an audience watching a drama are not merely escaping from the pressures of their day-to-day life, but are also escaping into a kind of understanding of their own society, an understanding that is necessary for them to participate in society in a meaningful way. By watching a drama, they may be learning how to react to certain new factors that they have to encounter as society gets more and more complex, and how to anticipate what is most appropriate for social behaviour in the changing circumstances. Every society requires a cultural mechanism through which social and political conflicts are analysed, and it is in this sense that the popular drama assumed a political dimension in south India.

PROLOGUE: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE SOUTH INDIAN STAGE

The stage first became popular in south India in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. During the 1870s, Parsi and Marathi drama companies who camped and played in Madras demonstrate that dramatic organizations were a commercial proposition. Soon after, local itinerant companies appeared, such as the Mohana Nataka Company founded by T.R. Govindaswamy Rao. When one of these companies, Sami Nayudu Nataka Company, played to packed houses in Madras, it inspired some educated youth to take a closer look at the popular theatre.

This trend, coupled with a growing interest both in English literature, particularly Shakespeare, and the study of the Sanskrit classics, created a new interest in legitimate theatre, as distinct

[5] Surinder Puri. 'The "Media Revolution".' Cyclostyled paper read at a seminar on 'Media and Politics' in May 1974 at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore.

from the popular variety. In 1891 Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar founded an amateur dramatic club, the Suguna Vilasa Sabha, in Madras and in time several others appeared in the district towns, such as Sudarsana Sabha of Thanjuvar and the Rasika Ranjani Sabha of Tiruchi. V.K. Suryanarayana Sastri, a teacher in Madras Christian College, started to write plays in Tamil following conventions borrowed from Shakespearean and Sanskrit drama. His first play, *Rupavathi*, was staged in 1897, and later he wrote *Nadagaviyal*, a treatise designed to explain the characteristics of classical drama to the small band of drama enthusiasts around him.

But the new interest in legitimate theatre was confined to the city-based elite. It was the growing number of itinerant companies offering popular theatricals, which reached a wider and more varied audience. T.R. Govindaswamy Rao had set the model by running his Mohana Nataka Company, as a theatrical 'family' whose members lived and travelled together and were able to influence one another considerably under these intimate conditions. Out of this and similar companies emerged a number of artistes who eventually formed their own companies in which the process was repeated. By 1920 the number of these itinerant drama companies was considerable.[6]

An offshoot of these troupes was the 'Boys Company,' in which young boys under twelve were recruited and trained in singing. These 'Boys Companies' were easy to run, because problems of discipline were simplified, and cheap, because no wages were paid other than food and clothing. Samarasa Sanmarga Nataka Sabha, founded by Sankaradas Swamigal in 1910, was one of the earliest of such companies,[7] and Thapa Venkatachala Bhagvathar of Kumbakonam started a similar company in 1911. These companies moved from town to town camping for months in one place till they exhausted their repertoire. In addition to these two types there was

[6] N. Subramanyam, 'Paridhimal Kalaignarum Nataka Thamizhum,' *Paridhimal Kalaignar Centenary Souvenir* (Madurai, 1955). See also M.M. Chidambaranathan, 'Nadaga Periyargal,' *Nadigan Kural*, September, 1965 (Madras).

[7] T.K. Shanmugam, *Nataka Kalai* (Madras, 1948), p.37.

a third category known as the 'special drama' which was a kind of virtuoso performance. Playwrights like Sankaradas Swamigal and Ekai Sivashanmugam adapted many popular mythological stories for the stage and these adaptations became the standard versions. On certain occasions, actors who had specialized in specific roles in these plays assembled from different places and enacted the play, each one faithfully reproducing portions from the standard version.[8] This was the 'special drama.' By 1920, the number of companies and the popularity of performance had expanded so much that several drama halls were built in addition to the temporary sheds that served the purpose in smaller towns. Popular theatre had emerged as the single largest mass entertainment. In the first two decades of its existence, however, it remained purely an entertainment.

But the historical context to the period in which popular theatre emerged ensured that the stage would not remain merely recreational for very long. At the start of the period, Madras was not very active politically and was dubbed the 'benighted province.' There was some sporadic activity confined to a small section of the intelligentsia, but political consciousness had not permeated the masses.[9] The political activism kindled by V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramanya Siva in the extreme south of the province during the first decade of this century suffered a severe setback after their conviction in what came to be known as the Tinnevelly Sedition Case in 1911. Only in 1914, when Mrs Besant began to tour the province demanding Home Rule, was there some revival of political activity. Mrs Besant's movement merged into the Non-cooperation and Khilafat Movements in 1919 and these gave a lasting and broad-based character to the nationalist movement in the province. By this time the drama companies had come to stay as a truly popular mass medium, and the nationalists saw in them a much needed tool to spread their message widely and effectively. Once nationalism had acquired a mass base in south India, popular

[8] Narasimha Bharathi (drama and film actor), interview, 26.4.1975, Madras. 'Special dramas' are still staged, particularly in the southern parts of Tamilnadu.

[9] B.S. Baliga. *Madras in the Struggle for Independence* (Madras, 1957), p. 8.

theatre, a major mass entertainment form, began to get involved in political action.

Nationalism was not the only element of this tumultuous period in Indian history which began to affect the concerns of popular theatre. Old beliefs and old patterns of behaviour were weakening in the face of western education, the import of new ideas and the establishment of the press and new forms of political organization. Out of this ferment came a realization that social reforms were a necessary element in the progress towards nationhood. When the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, it was intended to deal primarily with social reforms. In Madras, although the movement for reforms was slow to catch on, there was an active small group of reformers who started the journal *Indian Social Reformer* in 1890. In the same year, the Hindu Social Reforms Association was founded in Madras and soon branches sprang up all over the province. Narayana Ganesh Chandravarkar, the leader of the movement at the national level, visited Madras in 1903 and injected some new vigour into the movement. The leading light in Madras was Chandravarkar's associate Kamatchi Natarajan who proclaimed himself a rational reformer, untrammeled by the canons of the Sastras. Meanwhile, Madhava Rao of the Congress, along with reformers like Sankaran Nair, campaigned for widow re-marriage and temperance. The Depressed Classes Mission Society was established in Madras in 1909 and soon, mainly due to the work of Veeresalingam Pantulu, branch associations were established in the districts.[10] Gandhi lent his charisma to the movement when he declared at the Belgaum Congress that social reforms were essential for *swaraj* and that the Congress should take up this programme seriously. Thus the demand for reforms came to be identified with the cause of nationalism. Gandhi's tour of the province along with the Ali brothers in 1919 created a considerable impact. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, P. Varadarajulu and Thiru Vi. Kalyanasundaram took the message of Gandhi into the rural areas.

[10] S. Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reforms in India* (New Delhi, 1959), passim.

Until 1919, the popular theatre was content with putting on mythologicals with all the ingredients of 'escapist' entertainment. Stage artistes were regarded as veritable outcastes and they kept themselves away from the mainstream of society. It was the wave of anger that swept through the country following the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre in 1919 that triggered the process of politicisation in the popular theatre. The political activity stirred up by the country-wide opposition to the Rowlatt Act and by the Non-cooperation Movement sustained this trend and inaugurated a new phase in the world of mass entertainment.

BUILD-UP: THE TELUGU STAGE AND NON-COOPERATION

The initiative came from the Andhra districts. In the early years of the twentieth century, the number of drama companies operating from Guntur had gradually come under the influence of the nationalist movement.[11] The out-break of war in 1914 and the British anxiety about possible anti-war propaganda in India made the government view the stage with suspicion. Earlier these drama companies had been granted annual licenses and the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, as far as south India was concerned, had not been invoked. But trouble began in Guntur, the headquarters of dramatic activity in the Telugu-speaking area of Madras Presidency. In 1919, the District Magistrates of Guntur, Kistna and Godavary, began to use section 10 of the Dramatic Performances Act to maintain a register of approved plays and

[11] The earliest published political drama of this period is *Arya Sabha*, written and published by K. Gopalachariar, a teacher in Madras Christian College, and billed as 'a drama on one of the most stirring events of the day, the founding of the Indian National Congress.' It spoke about the benefits that Indians were to get through this new organisation, like government employment. The drama opened with a song recalling the promise of Queen Victoria in 1857, extolled the virtues of her government and portrayed the Congress as loyal to the government. The play was set in typical Sanskrit drama format, with *Sutradharan* appearing in the opening scene and explaining the purpose of the play. This 102 page book came under the scrutiny of the Government of Madras, which found 'nothing subversive' in it. However, it is not known if the play was ever produced. G.O. No. 532, Public, 13.5 1896 (Tamilnadu Archives, hereafter referred to as TA).

required all plays to be approved and registered before production. The stand of the District Magistrate of West Godavary was characteristic of the government's attitude to popular theatre. While the government's real objection to these dramas was the fear of generating nationalistic ideas, they stated that control of the stage was necessary to curb possible communal propaganda. He recorded: 'In England the Lord Chamberlaine scrutinizes the plays. I don't see why such scrutiny should be objected to here, especially as to arouse racial and communal feeling can be made a popular and probably profitable amusement.'[12]

The fear of the government was well-founded. The Guntur drama companies soon came out with intensely political documentary dramas. The first play of this type was *Panchala Parabhavamu* (The Glory of Panchali). Written by Dr. Pundarikakshudu of Guntur, this five-act play dealt directly with the events that followed at Jallianwallah Bagh massacre. It depicted people expressing dissatisfaction with the Hunter Committee report and subsequently forming a Congress committee of enquiry. It also featured O'Dwyer and Johnson, the main figures in the Amritsar incidents, and contained a scene in which Mother India, one of the characters, told Gandhi, 'You should devise some means for the emancipation from servitude of the thirty-three crores of your brothers here.' The Punjab was personified as a woman whose hand and feet were tied by O'Dwyer so that she could not move. The play explained the satyagraha movement and concluded with a scene of the Amritsar Congress session featuring Gandhi, Motilal Nehru and Tyabji.[13]

Popular resentment against the Amritsar incidents was expressed in a number of political dramas. Another play that attracted a lot of attention from the public and from the government was *Swarajya Swapnam* (The Dream of Self-Rule) first produced by the Tilak Nataka Samajam in Buttayipet Hall, Guntur. Commenting on the Amritsar incidents the play explained the Khilafat movement, assailed the political activities of the Justice party and propagated boycott of foreign cloths. The Police Inspector who watched the

[12] G.O. No. 1217, Public, 17.12.1925 (TA).
[13] G.O. No. 4872, Home, 2.12.1937 (TA)

play faithfully reported: 'I beg to report that the drama impressed very well on the audience and in my humble opinion even several Non-cooperative meetings could not impress so well.' This play depicted many national leaders, including Gandhi and Tilak, and was charged with anti-British sentiments calculated to excite the feelings of the audience against the British. O'Dwyer was shown kicking Indians and forcing them to crawl in the streets. In depicting only actual events, this play was documentary in nature. Gandhi's visit to Tilak at his death-bed, his avowal of non-violence at the Calcutta Congress and Shaukat Ali's moving plea to support the Khilafat were all enacted on the stage in the true style of documentary drama. The police were alarmed at the increasing popularity of the play and reported: 'The play appears to become more objectionable at each performance. It is highly seditious and will undoubtedly become more so if it is not stopped at once. It is calculated to do a great deal of harm and incites feelings of bitterest enmity towards government and towards loyal subjects of government.' The play was banned throughout the Presidency.[14]

This method of political propaganda through the enactment of actual events soon caught on. In *Navayugarambam or Gandhi Mahodayam*, a play dealing with contemporary issues allegorically, Lord Krishna asked: 'Why does slavery prevail in India which is regarded as the crest of the jewel of the world? Tell us why the rulers have been acting recklessly having forsaken justice.'[15] Amateur drama enthusiasts also began to come up with political dramas. Kopali Chinna Krishna Rao and Bodi Narayan Rao formed a drama company, the Sarasa Vinodhini Sangam, which produced *Tilak's Life*, first in Tenali in February 1921 and then in Guntur.[16]

This group consisted mostly of Guntur lawyers and their clerks. The play was just a series of incidents from the lives of Tilak and

[14] G.O. No. 28, Public, 26.1.1921. Earlier in 1913, consequent on protest in London about cinema shows held in Madras which were harmful to the British image in India, the Commissioner of Police, Madras city, had been empowered under section 39 of the Madras City Police Act of 1888 to call for full information on any performance to be held and to prohibit that if it offended order or decency. Memo. No. 2921-1, Judicial, 11.10.1913 (TA).

[15] G.O. No. 4872, Home, 2.12.1937 (TA)

[16] G.O. No. 360, Public, 9.2.1921 (TA)

Gandhi, including Tilak's prison days and Gandhi's work in South Africa. In the opening scene *Bharatha Matha* appeared and pleaded for boycott of British goods. A number of local political figures were also featured in the play, increasing the immediacy of the message.

Evidently the life of Tilak was a favourite theme among the Telugu playwrights of this period. Sripada Krishnamurthy published *Tilak Maharaj Natakam*, which was banned before it could be produced. *Avataraparivartanam*, which depicted Tilak's role in the Surat Congress, the moderate-extremist split, Gandhi's emergence as a leader, Tilak's imprisonment and the Partition of Bengal, was staged in Guntur but was soon proscribed.[17]

The activities of the nationalist drama groups of Guntur provoked the government into action against patriotic plays and all such plays were proscribed throughout the Presidency. But new drama groups were organized to be sent into the interior and more plays were under production. The police received information that Bankim Chandra's *Anandmat* was being rehearsed in Guntur. The government empowered the district authorities (and the Commissioner of Police of Madras city) to call for information regarding the characters in the drama from the organisers or playwrights when there was reason to suspect that the drama would be seditious. But the rule omitted to provide for any machinery to control the artistes and for some years the nationalists took advantage of this.[18]

The patriotic theatre movement that started in Guntur was fairly well organized. Drama actors formed a Dramatic Association to carry on propaganda for the Congress and to raise money to sustain agitations. The Association also, very ingeniously, began to put folk music, ballads, *harikatha* and street dramas to effective use to gain deeper penetration in the rural areas. The success of this activity at Guntur stimulated similar groups in other centers like Bezwada. A number of zamindars like the zamindar of Vallur patronized these actors and the public extended tremendous support to them. Maylavaram Drama Company, for example, was patronized by a

[17] G.O. No. 131, Public, 9.3. 1921 (TA)

[18] G.O. No. 28, Public, 26.1.1921 (TA)

number of zamindars. Some landlords of Rajahmundry founded and financed the Rajahmundry Hindu Theatrical Company. Stage luminaries like Idavalli Suryanarayana Rao and Kuppalur Sanjivi Rao actively supported this movement.

But the most active of them all was Bellary Raghavachari, a lawyer who brought a new awakening to the stage during the 1920s. By staging reformist plays he made the popular theatre more purposeful and injected into the drama companies and their patrons a new vigour. Being a member of both the Andhra Basha Sabha and the Suguna Vilasa Sabha of Madras, he was able to bring to the world of popular theatre better organization and improved theatrical techniques.[19]

THE SCENE IN MADRAS

The situation was different in Madras. Although commercial drama companies were operating in the Tamil-speaking area, the process of politicization was rather slow. Yet from among the nationalist leaders, the world of performing arts in Madras had one great supporter in S. Sathyamurthy. Himself an amateur actor and deeply interested in drama and music, he firmly believed that these arts could be creatively used for nationalist purposes.[20] Condemning the elitist apathy towards popular arts he would often declare, 'We will sing our way to freedom.' He freely associated himself with stage artistes in spite of the stigma attached to their profession at that time. As a result, a number of artistes led by stage actor M.M. Chidambaranathan gave active support when Sathyamurthy organized non-violent agitation in Madras in 1921. Hundreds of drama performances were held in the villages around Madras and the money collected was used to supply food and clothing to the volunteers who took part in the demonstrations.[21] Suthanandha Bharathi, a nationalist poet, staged his play *Veeru Petru Nillada* (Stand up in Valour) in and

[19] B.N. Reddy (film-maker), interview, 18.11.1975, Madras. Reddy was associated with the Telugu patriotic theatre in his younger days.

[20] S. Sathyamurthy, *Satyamurthy Pesugirar* (Madras, 1945), pp. 156–74.

[21] M.M. Chidambaranathan, 'Viduthalai Porattathil Kalainargal,' *Nadigan Kural*, August 1957, Madras.

around Madras.[22] Subramanya Siva, who was by this time out of prison having served his sentence, organized a drama troupe, Shri Bharatha Vilasa Sabha, and traveled around staging patriotic play like *Desingu Rajan* and *Sivaji*, in which he himself played the role of Ramdas, Sivaji's Guru. R. Srinivasavaradan and N. Somoyajulu, Congress organizers from Madurai, who later attracted much notice in the Neill statue agitation in Madras, were also in this group.[23] When these dramas were banned in Chidambaram by the local magistrate, Sathyamurthy raised the issue on the floor of the legislature.[24] Such encouragement did not only give a fillip to the drama movement but also conferred on the artistes a respectability, which they had not enjoyed hitherto.

ENTR'ACTE: SONGS, SOCIAL REFORM AND NATIONALISM

There were three distinctive elements in the popular theatre of this period: the use of songs; the depiction of social reform; and the use of allegorical and directly political themes.[25] These three elements form a kind of sequence through which political concerns entered into the activity of the stage, and they will now be dealt with in turn.

In the commercial drama, the story was merely a series of excuses for introducing a song. The companies had on their pay-rolls song-writers conversant with classical and folk music who composed songs to suit popular tastes. The main work of the song-writer, known as *vathiar* (teacher), was to write songs and teach them to

[22] Suthanadha Bharathi (poet), interview, 7.1.1976, Madras. He took part in the freedom movement, beginning with the Non-cooperation of 1921, and was a close associate of Aurobindo.

[23] *Madurai Jilla Thyagigal Malar* (Madurai, 1948), p. 31.

[24] Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council, Vol. XVII (Madras, 1924), p. 231.

[25] There is an inherent difficulty in the study of popular theatre, which limits the scope of any research of this kind. The performances cannot be preserved for study, unlike films which can be safely put away in the archives. Therefore, I had to rely heavily on interviews with playwrights and artistes who took a leading part in involving the stage in the struggle for freedom. The scripts of the dramas served as a basic frame for improvisation during the performance and therefore, even if available, could not be relied upon.

the actors. As the only person with some formal education in the company, the vathiar served as its antenna and the dramas reflected his reactions to the political event outside. The Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the Non-cooperation movement supplied grist to his mill. These songs served the very definite purpose of educating the audience on political developments in the country. Earlier, poet Subramanya Bharathi had shown the way in using popular songs for political education. His songs on V.O. Chidamabaram Pillai's trial in the Tinnevelly Sedition Case and on the conflict between the extremists and the moderates in the Congress served as models for later writers. The songs, simple and direct, used one of the traditional modes of mass communication to create an awareness of current political events.

It was M.G. Bairava Sundaram Pillai who began this trend; during the performance of a folk-lore drama *Ali Badusha* in 1921, he sang a nationalist song of his own composition about the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the political scene:

There is a *Khaddar* flag ship—
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi—
The flag ship of India.[26]

The song was timely and became a favourite among play-goers. The style quickly caught on as other song-writers began popularising patriotic songs from the stage. In time such songs became a necessary ingredient in all the dramas of the popular theatre, be it mythological or historical.[27] Typical of this new school of song-writers was Oradi Muthoveerappa Pillai, so named because of his single-lined (*Oradi*) stanza songs through which he commented extempore on the political events of the day. The most well-known song-writers of his class were Madurakavi Baskara Das and Bhumi Balagadas, whose songs were sung by numerous artistes, and

[26] M.M. Chidmbaranathan, 'Nadaga Periargal,' *Nadigan Kural*, October 1965.

[27] T.K. Bhagavathi (drama actor), interview, 30.12.1974, Madras. Bhagvathi is one of the T.K.S. Brothers and has acted in all their dramas in lead roles.

the most active was S.S. Viswanatha Das,[28] who became famous through a moving song on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Set to rather elementary music and rendered in a carrying voice, Viswantha Das' songs ridiculed the alien rulers, appealed to the audience's emotions and were politically informative. His song about the Indians in South Africa appealing to Gandhi for help ran thus:

Like untouchables
We have been living afar—since
Your arrival, we are courageous
So, please listen to our plea.[29]

He advertised his drama on the well-known Kovalan-Kannagi story as *Desiya Kovalan* (Nationalist Kovalan) indicating that the play had a political flavour.

Udumalai Sarabum Muthuswamy Kavirayar, a poet bred in the classical tradition and conversant with grammatical works relating to poetry, was inspired by the Khilafat movement to write simple popular songs supporting the nationalist movement. His students, greatly influenced by his zeal, blossomed in the same mould as their master; they included Udumalai Narayana Kavi, who worked as a freelance drama teacher for a long time and joined films, Kumbakonam K.V. Santhanakrishna Nayudu, who was the manager and teacher in Arya Gana Sabha, and M.M. Chidambaranathan. Arya Gana Sabha was a veritable training ground for nationalistic dramatists. Sunramanya Bharathi used to visit the Sabha and Udumalai Narayana Kavi met him there came under his spell.[30]

Another class of artistes who used songs for purposes of political propaganda were the *pin-pattu* (back-stage) singers. A *pin-pattu* artiste, playing on the harmonium and singing along with the

[28] Ku. Sa. Krishnamurthy (playwright), interview, 20.12.1975, Madras. Krushnamurthy, a well-known playwright and song-writer of the nationalist days, was associated with S.S. Viswanatha Das, K.S. Ananthanarayanan and other nationalist artistes.

[29] G.O. No. 1050, Public (G), 10.10.1931(TA).

[30] Udumalai Narayana Kavi, interview, 4.6.1975, Poolavadi (Coimbatore). Narayana Kavi was a song-writer of the freedom struggle days.

actors on the stage, formed the backbone of a stage performance. He had to be familiar with all the songs and have a good command of music; during intervals in the play he gave solo performances as well. Soon songs acquired a significance independent of the drama and these pin-pattu artistes were sought after for individual performances. Many of them took part in the direct political activities and this display of commitment increased the authenticity of their songs. One such singer was Ramanathapuram P.V. Govindaswamy, who courted arrest as a volunteer in the Non-Cooperation Movement. S.V. Vasudevan Nair, another pin-pattu artiste, started his political career as a volunteer in the Vaikam Sathyagraha in 1924 and later suffered imprisonment during the Civil Disobedience Movement.[31]

The work of pin-pattu artistes brought in a new method of political campaign. These songs were sung from a political platform and during picketing they served to lend emotional support to the volunteers. Song-writers unconnected with the stage began to publish small booklets of nationalist songs, a kind of degenerate sub-literary poetry set to the kind of folk music that had been popularized by the stage. One such writer was Choolai Manicka Naicker. In his book published in 1928, *Mahatma Gandhi Arrestu Pattu* (Song on the Arrest of Gandhi), he comments on Gandhi's arrest thus:

> Along with C.R. Das, Lala Lajpath and the noble/ Ali brothers were jailed on charges of improper/ speeches and for the cause of Non-cooperation/ Tens of thousands of our friends are pining in prison.[32]

The appearance, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, of Tamil novels dealing with contemporary themes pointed to the possibility of 'social' plays. Kasi Viswanatha Mudaiyar wrote and staged *Dumbachari*, one of the earliest 'socials' in Madras in the 1880s. Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar produced *Dasi Penn* and *Kooturavu Natakam*,[33] and he and Kandaswamy Mudaliyar, a graduate trained in Suguna Vilasa Sabha and who later worked for commercial drama companies, served as a link between the legitimate and the

[31] M.M. Chidambaranathan, 'Viduthalai...Kalaignargal.'
[32] G.O. No. 958-959, Public (G), 11.7.1932 (TA).
[33] Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar, *Nadaga Thamizh* (Madras 1933), p. 69.

popular theatre. He produced a fresh crop of reformist dramas through which he satirized certain social attitudes and highlighted the need for reform. J.R. Rangaraju, a writer of the 1920s, wrote popular novels dealing with issues that were agitating the minds of reformers like the emancipation of women.[34] The innovative mind of Kandaswamy Mudaliyar saw the possibility of adapting these novels for the stage. He gave up a comfortable government job and turned a professional dramatist, working as a drama teacher in a number of companies including Madurai Bala Meena Sangitha Sabha. At a time when the popular stage was dealing only with mythologicals, Kandaswamy Mudaliyar's 'socials' with the emphasis on acting (an aspect of drama that had been totally neglected so far) came as a breath of fresh air. The audience welcomed this change and soon other companies like Madurai Original Boys Company also began to stage reformist plays. A new direction was thus given to popular theatre.

Rajendra, one of Rangaraju's works published in 1920 and adapted by Kandaswamy Mudaliyar, was about a newly wedded girl who was rejected by the husband because she had not brought a dowry. The girl was forced into prostitution to earn enough money to make up for this failure. When she eventually joined her husband, she recognized him as one of her clients. *Chandra-Kantha*, telling the story of the Pandara Sannadhi of Tirukallar, exposed

[34] In Bengal, reformist and political plays had appeared much earlier. Even from 1857, the popular theatre in Bengal was handling such themes beginning with *Kulin Sarvasya* (1857), a play attacking polygamy among Hindus, and Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nil-Darpan* (1872) portraying the atrocities of European indigo planters in Bengal. The National Theatres which began operating in Calcutta in 1872 became the main plank of patriotic theatre which opened with *Nil-Darpan* and staged a number of plays of similar vein. This trend slowly gathered momentum till Upendranath Das' *Surendra Vinodbini* (1876), which portrayed a European district magistrate as the villain and a Bengali revolutionary who assassinates him as the hero, provoked the British. The government banned the play, prosecuted the author, arrested the actors, and went on to pass the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, the main weapon with which the government in Madras also tried to control the stage. Manju Chattopadhyaya, 'The Patriotic Theatre in Bengal: National Awakening and Imperialist Reaction 1872–1876,' in *The Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 36th Session, Aligarh, 1975.

the hypocrisy of some fraudulent priests in a dramatic manner. *Rajambal* was a story about an old man marrying a young girl and also included criticisms of corruption of official life.

The reformists soon recognized the role of popular theatre in communicating their ideas to the people. In 1924 Vangalathur Swaminatha Sarma, who had been influenced by the reformist ideas of the Theosophical Society, staged in the Society's campus at Adyar his adaptation of Tagore's Sacrifice as *Jeevabalan*, a play condemning animal sacrifice. Dr. Besant and Arundale watched the performance and persuaded Sarma to take into the villages.[35]

The next development in the sequence was the introduction of political comments and symbols of nationalism into dramas. To begin with, in mythologicals sly references to specific political situations were introduced in the dialogue. For example, the scene in which people in the streets of Ayodhya comment on the royal order exiling Rama was used to make critical references to the repressive measures adopted by the British government following the 1919 movements, and Valli would drive away the flocks of birds that came to feed off the corn, singing:

> From somewhere you have come here
> To stay and exploit India—go away, you birds
> To your native land, go away.[36]

In *Ali Badusha*, an oft-repeated play, there was a court scene in which the king discussed the natural resources of India and wondered why the country remained poor; was it not because of alien rule? Three artistes dressed fully in red, white and green respectively would, at a given moment, stand in a row on the stage, forming the tri-colour Congress flag.

When reputed writers and journalists recognized the force of popular theatre and turned to the stage for expression, the era of

[35] Vengalathur Swaminatha Sarma (playwright), interview, 25.2.1975, Madras.

[36] The story of Valli, consort of Murugan, was one of the most popular themes on the stage. M.P. Sivagnanam, *Viduthalai Poril Thamizh Valarndha Vanularu* (Madras, 1970), p. 193.

direct political propaganda began. Up to this point commercial drama was not considered a medium fit for any serious expression and it was T.P. Krishnaswamy Pavalar, a nationalist playwright, who first moved in this direction. Giving up his job as a Tamil teacher in 1914, for four years he ran a daily *Inraya Samacharam* (Today's News) devoted mainly to the ideas of Tilak and Gandhi and wrote in journals like *Bharathi* and *Vidya Bhushani*. He soon observed that because literacy was very low, some other means should be employed to educate the people politically. Trained in Saguna Vilasa Sabha, Pavalar saw the potential of the stage in this direction. In 1920, he founded Ramanathapuram Bala Manogara Boys Company and initially staged mythologicals like *Sathi Savithri* and *Harishchandra*. Once the company was established, he switched over to historicals with a nationalistic appeal such as *Hyder Ali*, *Desingu Rajan* and *Napoleon*—all stories of battles against the British. Pavalar then went on to produce reformist play like *Pathi Bhakthi* (Devotion to the Husband) in which the hero Rajasekaran became an alcoholic and tortured his wife and children, *Balambal* which dramatized the ideals of Gandhi, and *Governor's Cup*, which condemned horse-racing.[37]

Pavalar's direct nationalistic propaganda began when *Khaddarin Vetri* (Triumph of Khaddar), a dramatization of the ideas of the swadeshi movement, was staged in Royal Theatres, Madras, in 1922. The play explained the economic implications of using indigenous cloth; there was a scene in which the hero, Sundaram, would not allow the heroine, Maragatham to touch him as she was wearing foreign cloth. The play then moved on to the confrontation between the National Congress and the Justice Party; the daughter and the son-in-law on the Congress side argued with the father who was the supporter of the Justice party. Pavalar made good use of symbols like the *charkha* (spinning wheel) and the Gandhi cap in his dramas. Spurred by the enthusiastic welcome this drama had, Pavalar produced *Desiya Kodi* (The National Flag) dealing with the Nagpur flag agitation. His plays set new standards in popular drama and his troupe was invited to perform these two dramas in the Wembley exhibition in London in 1923. When he got back

[37] M.M. Chidambaranathan, 'Viduthalai ... Kalainargal.'

to India, he found that a number of his plays had been banned and many companies were staging them under different names. He gave up the stage and took to full-time political work as the Secretary of the Madras District Congress Committee. Until he died in 1934 he ran the monthly *Desabandhu*.[38]

Swaminathan Sarma published a nationalistic play *Banapurathu Veeran* (The Warrior of Banapuram) in 1924. This vernacular version of the story of Robert Bruce of Scotland, with the names of characters and places suitably tamilized—Bruce became Puresan, Wallace changed into Valisan and Bannockburn became Banapuram—was presented as an allegorical dramatization of the freedom struggle in India. Valisan, a patriot of Banapuram, was tried and executed and his friend Puresan continued the struggle and brought liberation to Banapuram. The play also touched on the role of women in the national struggle, a point stressed by Gandhi. It was promptly banned and Sarma himself fled to Rangoon, but S. Viswanathan, a dramatist of Madras, managed to stage it. This play was literary in style and this characteristic restricted the actors' freedom to modify the play in performances, in contrast to the plays in colloquial language, which gave scope for improvisation.[39]

Meanwhile, the Guntur group of drama companies was still handling documentary and historical dramas. In 1927 they produced *Thalikotta Yuddhamu* (The Battle of Talikota), a play by T. Rangacharyalu, depicting the last phase of the struggle between the Vijayanagar kings and the Deccan Sultans. While playing in Kistna district the play was banned as 'apt to excite the feelings of the audience.' Another historical drama, *Roshanara*, set in a background of Moghul palace intrigues, was banned in Guntur because Aurangzeb's son was shown as a drunkard. The banning of *Roshanara* figured in the Madras Legislative Council.

The Law Member of the Madras government was subjected to some close questioning by R. Veerian, a member who asked whether plays like *Dumbachari* (in which the main character is a Mudaliyar) and *Nandanar Charithram* (in which the hero is a Harijan) also

[38] M.M. Chidambaranathan, 'Viduthalai ...Kalainargal.'
[39] Swaminatha Sarma, *Banapurathu Veeran–Oru Natakam* (Madras, 1924).

wounded the feelings of any particular community.[40] Two more plays of the same type, *Rasaputra Vijayamu* and *Jabunnisa*, came in for rough handling from the district authorities. Local bodies like municipalities also tried to curb the activity of the patriotic drama groups by imposing restrictive conditions relating to the auditorium and the show timings.[41]

CLIMAX: THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE PERIOD AND AFTER

Partly because of the repressive measures taken by the government and partly because of lack of stimuli, the patriotic theatre slackened in the latter half of the 1920s and had to wait until another major wave of political activism gave it new vitality. Such a stimulus was provided by the execution of Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries and by the wave of political activities that followed the inauguration of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Popular theatre once again became politically communicative. The Bhagat Singh episode, dramatic in itself, became a favourite theme for the stage. Sarma's *Banapurathu Veeran* was adapted by Madura Kavi Baskara Das and the drama company of the T.K.S. brothers (T.K. Shanmugam and brothers had been trained by Pavalar and in 1925 had started their own company), Bala Shanmugananda Sabha, staged it as *Desa Bhakthi* (Patriotism) in 1931. The play opened with Valisan's execution scene; he was dressed like Bhagat Singh, as shown in his well-known portraits, complete with felt-hat and clipped moustache; the soldiers and other men in the king's court were in British army officers' costumes. The allegorical reference could not be missed. Valisan was shown hanged (Sarma's original play did not mention the specific mode of execution) and the scene drew shouts of 'Hail Bhagat Singh.' The play was laced with Bharathi's songs and included a *villu-pattu* on the life of Gandhi. T.K.S. brothers also staged *Khaddarin Vetri* by Pavalar and *Jambulingam*, another patriotic play. The District Magistrate of Tirunelveli banned all these plays and recorded, explaining his action, 'one aspect of the activities of the Congress is making

[40] G.O. No. 420, Public, 5.5.1926 (TA).
[41] G.O. No. 5850, Home 6.12.1938 (TA).

the theatres one of the means of its propaganda.'[42] The District Congress protested and eventually got the ban lifted. The troupe ran into trouble in other districts in connection with *Khaddarin Vetri*, and the T.K.S. brothers corresponded with Gandhi about the play and the difficulties it was facing. The play staged under a different name as *Khaddar Bhakthi* (Devotion to Khaddar) with some changes.[43]

Gradually the involvement of popular theatre in the cause of nationalism began to widen in scope. In Madurai, which was the headquarters of drama groups in the Tamil-speaking area, B. Sarangan and other artistes had formed *Thamizhnadu Nadigar Sangam* (Tamilnadu Actors' Association) in 1928 to provide an organisational framework for the political involvement of drama artistes. The Sangam later sponsored its members as volunteers for picketing and other such demonstrations. After years of campaigning from the stage, many artistes began taking part in direct political activity off the stage, thereby demonstrating their commitment to the cause they were supporting through dramas and lending popularity as performing artistes to the cause of the freedom movement. In December 1931, again in Madurai, a conference of drama actors was held in which it was resolved to give all assistance to the Congress and to intensify nationalistic propaganda through the stage. The government responded with an order that no drama could be staged without permission from the district authorities. The nationalist leadership responded with encouragement; Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajagopalachari visited the office of the Tamilnadu Actors' Association in Madurai and appreciated their work. The Association arranged benefit performances to raise money for Gandhi's Harijan Fund and for the Quetta Earthquake Releif Fund. Kamaraj presided over a show of *Desa Bhakthi* (Patriotism) by the T.K.S. brothers in Dindigul in 1937.[44]

[42] G.O. No. 270, Public (G), 17.2.1932 (TA).

[43] T.K. Shanmugam, *Enathu Natakata Ninaivugal* (Madras, 1973), p. 158.

[44] M.M Chidambaranathan, 'Madurai Mudhal Chennai Varai,' *Nadigan Kural*, September, 1965.

S.G. Kittappa, one of the brightest luminaries of the Tamil stage and also the husband of the singer K.B. Sundarambal, took no direct part in political agitations, but always wore a Gandhi cap and dressed only in khaddar. Invariably his dramas ended with Gandhi's prayer song 'Raghupati Raghava Rajaram.'[45] During the Quit India Movement, Kittappa and Sundarambal staged *Valli-Thirumanam* (Valli's Wedding) in Madras for the benefit of the women's wing of the freedom fighters.[46] The agitations that followed the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement attracted a large number of artistes from the stage. B.A. Subbaiya Pillai and actress M.R. Santhanalakshmi picketed toddy shops in Madurai in 1931 and courted arrest.[47] Mannargudi Nataraja Pillai took part in the Vedaranyam salt agitation and was in jail for a year.

As the leading figures of the stage took part in political agitations and courted arrest one after another, the community of stage artistes threw in their lot with the cause of freedom. The audience response was also greatly encouraging to this trend. Every drama now had to have a political flavour—at the very least a few patriotic songs by the pin-pattu artistes—to make the grade in the eyes of the playgoers. Even companies, which had hitherto been playing safe and putting on only religious dramas, began to register a change. Such was the Devi Bala Vinodha Sangitha Sabha of Nawab T.S. Rajamanikkam. Kovai A. Ayyamuthu, a writer doing pioneering work in organizing the Swadeshi Movement in Coimbatore, came into contact with this troupe and tried his hand at play-writing with *Inbasagaran*, which was staged by the Nawab's company at Ponnamaravathi in 1936. The play was set in the period of the Pandyan occupation of Sri Lanka and depicted the struggle of the local people to free themselves by launching a satyagraha type of agitation. The play preached self-rule and used symbols like the charkha and khaddar. It was staged in Madras at the Royal

[45] K.B. Sundarambal (drama and film actress), interview, 9.4.1975, Madras. She continued to campaign for the Congress during elections up to 1967. In 1958 she was nominated a member of the Madras Legislative Council.

[46] S. Ambujammal, *Naan Kanda Bharatham* (Madras, 1973), p. 158.

[47] *Kundusi*, November, 1952 (Madras)

Theatres in 1937. Bulusu Sambamurthy presided over the opening show and complimented Ayyamuthu for introducing nationalistic symbols on the stage. It proved to be a durable drama and was staged 500 times in various towns by 1939.[48] Another such company that changed its fare was Madurai Original Boys Company, which put on the play *Desabhakthi or Sahodhara Dhroham* (Patriotism or the Betrayal of a Brother). The story was set against the background of the Maratha-Moghul conflict, which afforded a lot of scope to express anti-colonial sentiments. A commander addressed his soldiers: 'Friends, you know that though a government may be an excellent one, it cannot equal self-government.' There was also a reference to the no-tax campaign; one farmer told another that if the authorities refused to reduce the land tax, they should refuse to pay it. There was even a mock session of the House of Lords. The government scrutinized the play and recorded that it 'indirectly attacks the present form of Government and is sarcastic. Some of the passages are clearly intended to bring the present administration into contempt.'[49]

While the drama companies of Guntur toured around the Telugu-speaking areas like Kistna, West and East Godavari and Guntur districts, the companies headquartered in Madurai and Madras traveled around Hyderabad, Cochin, Ernakulam and Mysore. These companies found a good number of patrons from among the zamindars, particularly in southern Tamilnadu; the zamindars of Chokkampatti, Andipatti, Ettayapuram, Singampatti and Oorkadu sponsored and patronized patriotic plays.[50]

Encouraged by this support and by the audience response, many companies began to defy the restrictive orders. Sri Lalitya Natya Mandali of Guntur staged three dramas without the prior approval of the District Magistrate. Others devised ways of circumventing the application of the Dramatic Performances Act; for instance, they staged proscribed plays under different titles, or introduced

[48] Kovai A. Ayyamathu, interview, 21.10.1974, Singarampalayam, (Coimbatore).

[49] Narasimha Bharathi, interview.

[50] G.O. No.250, Public (G), 1.2.1936 (TA).

extempore dialogue preaching nationalism.[51] When the Congress came to power in 1937 all the drama companies pleaded that the restrictions on their operations should be lifted. As the President of the Andhra Provincial Congress Committee, Pattabhi Sitaramayya appealed to the government to permit companies to stage plays without prior license. He pointed out that in the Telugu area about five hundred artistes had been rendered jobless by the imposition of restrictions on the drama companies. The District Magistrate of Tirunelveli had banned several of the T.K.S. brothers' plays on episodes from the poligar revolt against the East India Company in the last decades of the eighteenth century—*Oomai Thurai*, *Kattabomman*, *Panchalankurichi Battle* and *Marudu-Pandiyan*[52]—and the Tirunelveli District Congress Committee took up the matter with the newly-formed Congress government; Smt. Lakshmi Ammal raised the issue on the floor of the Legislative Assembly and Rajagopalachari as the Prime Minister removed the ban with the observation that 'there seems to be no reason to maintain such extraordinary jurisdiction now.'[53]

THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN

However, this freedom of action acquired by the popular stage was offset by the appearance of the Tamil 'talkie.' By the late thirties, Tamil films began to come out in a steady flow; many drama halls were converted into cinema houses and the popular stage began to languish. This trend was temporarily reversed when the war broke out and the production of Tamil films dropped considerably. At the same time, the stage received some encouragement from the literati. The Tamil language itself was undergoing a change with an emphasis on pure, literary style; and a conference on drama was organised at Erode in 1944. It considered the preoccupation of the popular theatre with mythologicals and musicals as a sign of decadence, and discussed steps to infuse a new vigour into the stage.[54]

[51] G.O. No. 1992, Home, 25.5.1937 (TA).

[52] G.O. No. 1225, Home, 7.3.1938 (TA).

[53] G.O. No. 4694, Home, 22.11.1937 (TA)

[54] *Tamizh Nataka Kalai Abiviruthi Mahanadu* (Erode, 1944).

Such a mood of introspection on the part of the popular theatre was a result of the stage's role in the national movement. The handling of social and political themes on the stage had incidentally produced a salutary effect on the quality of plays. It marked a definite change in the dramatic content of stage-writing. Until the nationalist period, the company productions barely merited the title of 'drama'; they lacked dramatic merit and were not very theatrical in performance. The principles of legitimate theatre which the amateur clubs tried to popularize did not have any appreciable impact on company productions. The companies mostly staged well-known stories from mythology and folklore, and because the stories were 'second nature' to most of the audience, there was no importance attached to the development of a plot or narrative in the play. Songs dominated the plays and were often interjected without any relevance to the structure of the plot. The only qualification for an 'actor' was the ability to sing, and the most popular character of the drama was the clown who indulged in a lot of ribaldry. Stage-craft and costumes were neglected and there was little respect for sequence; a 'dead' king would come to life and render one of his special songs when the audience clamoured for it.[55] With the arrival of reformist dramas and the consequent didactism of the popular theatre, this pattern slowly changed. Acting and dialogue began to gain some importance.

As long as the dramas were written mainly with a view to exploit the histrionic talents of some particular artiste to the maximum, they were not in the realm of literature. But towards the end of our period the new emphasis on the language used in the stage acted as a link between the stage and literature, and dramas written for the stage then came to be widely read as well. Symptomatic of this trend was *Kaviyin Kanavu* (The Poet's Dream) by S.D. Sundram, a young nationalist who was imprisoned during the Quit India movement. While in jail he wrote this play telling the story of a poet who dreams of his country's liberation and turns it into reality. The play was staged at Nagapattinam in 1944 by Sakthi Nataka Sabha and ran for many months to packed houses. The evening

[55] S.Y. Krishnaswamy, 'The Drama in Three Tenses—A Survey of the Tamil Stage,' *The Hindu*, 31.1.1971.

train which carried the playgoers from Thanjavur to Nagapattinam was referred to as the '*Kaviyin Kanavu* Express.' The same company staged another patriotic play called *Jeevan* (Life).

After the end of the war, the production of Tamil films picked up again and the popular theatre could not hold its ground. Several cinema houses were built as the talkie emerged as the new entertainment colossus, completely eclipsing drama. One after another the drama companies had to fold up, and there was a frantic exodus into the glittering world of cinema.[56] A few well-established companies continued to function, but as Independence came into view nationalism gradually disappeared as a subject for drama. When a particular issue is no longer a matter of conflict, it ceases to be reflected in the popular theatre. A social or political problem which has been solved or which the solution is near at hand will be too dull a subject for the stage. But then there were new issues. Out of the Self-Respect movement emerged a fresh crop of playwrights who were eager to use the stage to put their ideas across to the people. This trend began with Bharathidasan's *Iraniyan or Inaiyatra Veeran* (Iraniyan or the Matchless Warrior) and C.N. Anadurai's *Chandrodhayam* (The Moonrise).

[56] Almost all the leading actors and many of the directors of the post-independence Tamil cinema were from the drama companies.

The Indian People's Theatre Association

A Preliminary Sketch of the Movement and the Organization 1942–47

Malini Bhattacharya

This article will be descriptive rather than analytical. I will try to give an elementary account of some of the activities in and around the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) between 1942–47 which seem to me to demonstrate the character of the theatre movement or the movement in the sphere of the performing arts of which the organization was the spearhead. I am taking it for granted here that such a movement, involving a change in certain dramatic forms, is possible and did happen at the time. I am also assuming that one may talk in terms of there being a close, though indirect and intricate, relationship between the above-mentioned change and a crucial shift in the political-economic situation. These assumptions will remain outside the scope of my discussion, but I hope my examples will, to some extent, bring out the relationship between political-economic change and the change in aesthetic perception and aesthetic forms. Since the object of my enquiry is the movement which developed around the organization, I have paid more attention to the periphery rather than the centre. But the terms periphery and centre are after all metaphors, useful only in so far as they counteract the impression of localized spontaneity.

They are not meant to establish any objective and abstract pre-eminence of the latter over the former. In fact, the organization would not have been formed if the stirrings of a movement had not been felt. It is also true that while the movement gained momentum and went in a particular direction because of the organization, the latter existed for the movement. The extent to which the movement was sustained in the peripheral areas could be an important measure of the success of the organization.

II

The first conference of the Indian People's Theatre Association from which it emerged as an all-India organization was held on 25 May 1943 in Bombay, where at the same time the first congress of the Communist Party of India was going on.[1] But even before the founding of the organization, activities which anticipated it and were beginning to assume the character of a theatre movement manifested themselves in different parts of the country. In Bengal, the dramatic efforts of the Youth Cultural Institute (1940–42) have been documented in the first volume of Sudhi Pradhan's *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*.[2] However, by the beginning of 1942, a certain change in the political context gave a new impetus to such efforts so that in many areas they showed the possibility of acquiring a mass character.

An anti-fascist 'people's war' line was adopted after much debate by the Communist Party of India by the end of 1941. This left the British Government with no option but to lift the ban on the party in 1942; although police vigilance and harassment continued, the opportunity of working in the open helped it grow. The CPI's non-participation in the August movement of 1942 gave it further breathing space. With the bombing of Chittagong, one

[1] The congress of the CPI was held 23–29 May 1943. The name of the People's Theatre Association, however, was first used by the Bangalore unit, formed mainly through the efforts of Anil D'Silva in April 1941. In Bombay too, a cultural squad bearing that name started functioning from May Day 1942 with the performance of *Ye Kiska Khoon* by Ali Sardar Jaffri.

[2] Second edition, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 108–120. Recently, the text of a YCI play in English, *Politicians Take to Rowing*, written by J.M. Kaul, has been published in *Jananatya*, Vol. 1. No. 4, August 1987.

of the easternmost districts of Bengal, by the Japanese the prospect of Fascist aggression seemed imminent, and the communists were faced with the urgent need of popularizing the people's war thesis. It had to be taken to the people as the 'true national policy'[3] and the task the Communists took upon themselves was to interpret the anti-colonial struggle anew. To do this, they had to counteract the tide of populist nationalism released by the August movement on one hand; at the same time they had to distinguish themselves from the Royists who were, at this time, urging collaboration with the British.

The success of the Communist Party in rallying middle-class intellectuals around it can be gauged from the success of organizations like the Friends of the Soviet Union and the Anti-fascist Writers' and Artists' Association in Bengal. Most of the well-known intellectuals and writers of the time took a more or less active role in these organizations and their influence on the urban middle class helped to strengthen the anti-fascist nationalist line. During the Bengal famine of 1943, the work done by the Students' Federation, People's Relief Committee, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti, Kisan Sabha, and such left-oriented mass organizations further made manifest the efficacy of the people's war thesis and generated some sympathy for it. Also, even in 1942, wherever the communists had influence not only within the middle class but among the peasantry and urban workers, they inspired the setting up of People's Defence Committees; and since propaganda was an important part of their work, sometimes cultural squads were also set up for this purpose.

A report in *Janajuddha* describes the function of the people's defence army in Chittagong in the following words:

> They move from village to village at night, rouse the villagers, explain things to them, teach them the techniques of guerilla warfare, train speakers. They go about with illustrated posters slung from their shoulders, and explain them. They sing and perform to spread the message of resistance, and even take classes for school-children...[July 8, 1942, p. 4–5].

[3] 'Party School Lecture Notes on People's War', manuscript documents (1942/32), P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

This must have been a marginal phenomenon, but a new one nonetheless. The AFWAA was at this time advertising for anti-fascist songs and plays; and the performance at least of one such anti-Japanese people's play in a remote area is recorded in *Janajuddha*. This was *Patengar Pratishodh* ('Patenga's Revenge') performed at Dhalghat in Chittagong by a students' squad, although no further details about the play are available (19 August 1942, p. 5). A slightly earlier report from Assam describes the Surma Valley People's defence Committee as spreading the anti-fascist message by 'singing songs and staging plays' in Silchar (*Janajuddha*, 24 June 1942, p. 4). Nibaran Pandit, a great folk artiste from Mymensingh district in Bengal, who was an active member of the Kisan Sabha in 1942, wrote an anti-fascist song in the form of *Kabigan*[4] called *Janajuddher Chhara*, published it in leaflet form and, on his own evidence, was able to sell 73,000 copies at one paisa each.[5] The song became so popular that it was apparently published from other sources too; for instance some worker comrades in Kushtia are reported as having printed the song themselves; not only had they already sold 2000 copies, but they had been going around singing it themselves in the town and the countryside (*Janajuddha*, 2 September 1942, p. 4).

The growth of localized efforts and their dissemination was, as I have said, limited to particular areas. They are noticeable where other mass movements, such as the peasant movement, were strong. That is, the new songs and plays were of a special appeal to politically sensitized audiences. Yet this phenomenon must not be

[4] Kabigan, as it is known in Mymensingh, is a ballad-like poem set to a particular kind of tune and generally with a narrative core. Nibaran Pandit's poem is very powerful musical reportage on the devastation caused by Japanese troops in the occupied areas of China. It ends unconventionally too, with an exhortation to the people to form their own defence committees and fight the new aggressors: 'Some say, let Japan come/Sick of our old lords, let us exchange them for new ones/...let us spend more happy days as slaves/... Peasant brothers, pay heed to me/Hindus or Muslims, let peasants unite/ Unite yourselves to save your own people...' (translation from *Janajuddha*, 1 July 1942, p. 8). I am indebted for musicological details about Nibaran Pandit's songs to Kangkan Bhattacharya of Gananatya Sangha, West Bengal, who has specialized on the subject.

[5] 'Memoirs of Nibaran Pandit', *Gananatya* (Bengali) July 1969, p. 23.

judged by a quantitative standard alone; and while it could grow only within an area that would be predisposed to sympathetic response, the possibility of its diffusion among less conscious audiences cannot be altogether ruled out. With the foundation of the organization, however loose its structure was, these efforts not only became more sustained, but the task of establishing contact among these sporadic activities was more consciously undertaken.

A tradition that had already been in the making in 1942 and was later taken up by the IPTA was that of touring squads and touring cultural workers. At its 1944 conference in Calcutta the AFWAA, of which the Bengal IPTA functioned as a branch, took an organizational resolution that a traveling cultural squad should be set up centrally to keep up links with the district troupes (*Arani*, 4 February 1944, p. 351). How far this could be actualized is questionable, but the effort to establish links that the resolution shows had been anticipated even in pre-IPTA days. In 1942 a student squad from Calcutta visited the easternmost districts of Bengal; another visited Assam in 1944. The purpose of both squads was to boost the morale of the people in areas which had come under Japanese threat; the second squad was also engaged in raising money for famine-stricken Bengal. While the first squad went to interior areas in eastern Bengal, the second squad visited mainly the district towns in Assam. The performances generally covered middle-class audiences, but peasant areas were sometimes touched; the second squad also performed among railway factory workers at Dibrugarh, and the workers enthusiastically helped the squad to set up a makeshift stage and collect funds (*Janajuddha*, 5 July 1944, p. 3). This squad picked up Assamese songs while in Assam and added these to their programmes. Local talent may have been recruited occasionally, at least on the first trip; thus, at Noakhali, some Moulavis initially opposed the programme because local girls were being recruited to sing in public. But the resistance subsided when the items were shown (*Janajuddha*, 29 July 1942, pp. 2 & 8; 5 August 1942, pp. 4–6).

The programme of the second squad shows added resources, talented presentation, and more organized efforts than that of the first squad. The programme of the first squad included anti-fascist

action songs, talks, poster exhibitions, and a very elementary playlet on anti-fascist defence consisting more of speeches than action. Drama was created by the character of an enemy paratrooper who would jump into the makeshift stage at the climactic point.[6] As for the second squad, Jyotirindra Mointra and Haripada Kushari supplied it with a repertoire of new songs and poems for the occasion, particularly pertaining to the defence to Manipur. Dances by Shambhu Bhattacharya accompanied Moitra's songs. There were other group dances too. Sukanto Bhattacharya's play *Japanke Rookhte Hobe* ('Resist Japan') and a second play, or rather a tableau, showing the terrible influence of the famine on the education system were performed. It may be noted that those who directed the programme were artistes in their own right and were associated with IPTA.

In Bengal, before IPTA was formed, Benoy Roy, singer and organizer, took a leading role in utilizing the Communist Party's influence in peasant and working-class areas to recruit local talent and form cultural squads. A report in *Janajuddha* (28 April 1943, p. 12) mentions that Benoy Roy had already toured 13 centres in ten districts and taught 'people's war songs' to about 90 activists. Squads had been formed in places. At the provincial conference of the Communist Party, the district committees sent one squad from each front (*Janajuddha*, 9 July 1943, p. 1).

Benoy Roy himself in a subsequent report (*Janajuddha*, 6 October 1943, p. 3) gives an account of cultural squads having been formed not only in rural areas, but among urban workers like the tramway men and corporation employees. They came up not only with new songs, but even with plays. Benoy Roy's report mentions a play on 'more production' by Gurudas Pal, then a worker in the Metiabruz area in the suburbs of Calcutta. Hieren Mukherji in his memoirs talks of a play by Dasarathlal, a Calcutta tram-worker, which was produced by Anil D'Silva and performed in India Association Hall under the auspices of the Trade Union Congress.[7] A report in *Janajuddha* (21 June 1944, p. 6) on the first provincial conference of spinning and belting mill workers mentions that the sessions were

[6] Oral interview of Saroj Hajra, who had been with both squads and wrote the report of the first tour for *Janajuddha*.

[7] *Tori Hote Tir*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 353.

interspersed with songs and dramatic performances. The songs were mostly composed by the workers; those from Kustia district sang *Jari* songs and the local men staged a play on the strike at Bangaluxmi Cotton Mill. In themselves, such efforts may seem to be localized and ephemeral but in the repeated appearance of such phenomena a pattern may be seen. It was on this soil that IPTA emerged as an organization. The Dhangar women's squad from Bombay which sang on the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh at the cultural programme at the first Congress of the Communist Party (*Janajuddha*, 23 June 1943, p. 8) exemplifies similar efforts outside Bengal where the situation was propitious.

Around the same time, in the Surma valley in Assam, talented singers from Sylhet like Nirmalendu Choudhuri, Gopal Nandi, Prasun Roy, and Khaled Choudhury were going around in the district towns and villages singing songs about the anti-fascist war, about anti-colonialism, and about the Bengal famine.[8] IPTA as an organization was not formally founded in Assam until 1947; but from the touring squad in Sylhet the Surma Valley Cultural Squad was born in 1945 and it went on a tour of Barak valley and Brahmaputra valley in June-July 1946,[9] again preparing the ground for the organization.

It would not perhaps be always correct to say that the formation of local squads reflected the organizational effect of the tours. It is likely that in many areas even after the tours no new cultural activities were visible. Sometimes, the purpose of the touring squad was to perform rather than prepare the soil for more performances. Sometimes, short-lived local groups may have been formed. But even if such events were small in number, they point to an unprecedented fact—that there was a degree of dissemination.

[8] '*Gana Sangit Shilpi Hemanga Biswas*', Khaled Choudhury, *Pratikhshan* (Bengali) January 2-17, 1988, p. 45.

[9] There is some confusion regarding the date of the forming of the Surma Valley Squad. The earliest written reference to it that I have found is in P.C. Joshi's report on the cultural festival at the Netrakona All India Kisan Sabha conference, in *People's War* (6 May 1945, p. 12). That it went on a tour of Brahmaputra and Barak valley in 1946 may be found in Hemanga Biswas's secretarial report submitted at the third Assam IPTA conference in 1955. Surath Pal Choudhuri, a close associate of Hemanga Biswas who was the manger of the Surma Valley Squad, remembers it to be in June-July 1946.

Again, sometimes the touring squads found already existing organized cultural activities in the places visited. The contact not only helped to enrich the repertoire on both sides, but added more than local dimension to the movement.

Surath Pal Choudhuri recalls in an interview that in Surma valley in the early '40s quite often the formation of a Kisan Sabha unit would be followed by the formation of a cultural unit. These obviously drew upon local talent, but new songs either composed by Hemanga Biswas and his associates or brought over from Bengal were also taught to them by occasional visitors. Khaled Choudhury in the previously mentioned article refers to at least one occasion when, during a Kisan Sabha conference at Patharkandi in Karimganj subdivision in Barak valley, Hemanga Biswas wrote a song on the theme of famine using a local Jari tune and Khaled Choudhury, picking up the simple movements of the dance from a local peasant, taught it and the refrain of the song to some young peasants in the Manipuri belt so that they could sing it in their own language (p. 46). At this time Irawat Singh, the great political and cultural leader of Manipur, was working among the Manipuri peasants in Barak valley. He rendered two of the songs composed by Hemanga Biswas into the Manipuri language while retaining the original tune. These two songs, '*Thangol adu maya thangu thouna, he lou-uba*' ('*Kastetare dio jore shān*') and '*Houro awaba ahingi*' (*Jago dukhero ratero ghor tamash bhedi*') became very popular in these areas. When I visited Ramnagar, a predominantly Manipuri village near Silchar a few months ago, I met Bhagirath Singh, a survivor of the old cultural squad formed there in the days of Irawat Singh, and the revered old man sang snatches of the same songs to me.

At the time when the Surma Valley Squad was touring the district towns of Assam, at least in some places squads must have been formed if they had not been there earlier. Otherwise, when the first provincial conference of the Assam IPTA was held on 3-4 May 1947, more than 150 delegates from Sylhet, Cachar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Dhubri, Shillong, Jaintia Hills and Tripura would not have congregated there.[10] Surath Pal Choudhuri recalls that during the Surma Valley Squad's trip to Jorhat, to counteract the apathy of

[10] There is some confusion about the date of this conference too. However, the date given here appears in the only report of this conference I have been

the local Assamese population about the Bengalis from Surma valley, they had advertised themselves as a branch of IPTA. Leaders of the locality had been individually approached. Assamese songs were added to the repertoire, and finally everybody had been won over by the programme. In the wake of their visit to Shillong, a squad which was already in the process of formation there was enriched and strengthened. It included a number of Khasi singers and musicians led by Jesse Peter Shulai.

The possibility of dissemination is evident in the interest manifested at the local level in new songs and performances. From a repot on a Kisan Sabha training class held at Lalpur in Dinajpur (*Janajuddha*, 6 October 1943, p. 5) we learn of the peasant girls Jamuna, Santi and Champa, who had themselves formed a squad and learnt many songs like '*Kastetare dio jore shān*'. Another report on the provincial Kisan Sabha conference at Phulbari notes how an apathetic peasant in a train compartment bestirred himself as soon as Nibaran Pandit's '*Ore o kisan bhai*' was sung to him and asked how the text may be obtained (*Arani*, 17 March 1944, pp. 457–8). When Nagen Saha of Rangpur sang at Pala-kirtan on the theme of saving *aman* rice at the All Parties' Conference at Badarganj, peasant workers took down every line of the song so that they might organize the performance through their own units (*People's War*, 12 December 1943, p. 4). When the song '*Kekra kekra nam bataon*' had traveled from the Bihta All India Kisan Sabha conference (29–30 May 1942) to Calcutta, Liaquat, a paint-factory worker, and another tramway worker quite uninhibitedly added new bits to it to update it.[11] When IPTA began to set up its local branches from 1944, it surely benefitted from these earlier preparations to open up different sections of the audience to new cultural experiences.

Sometimes, this culminated in strange encounters. Cultural forms unfamiliar to a particular section of the audience were presented to them. The realism of plays like *Jabanbandi* and *Nabanna* must have been quite unfamiliar to peasant audiences who were used to performances of a different kind. Yet not only *Jabanbadi*,

able to find so far. It appears in *Swadhinata*, 8 May 1947, p. 4; until more conclusive evidence is found to the contrary this will have to be accepted.

[11] Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. I, p. 131.

but even *Nabanna*, a full-length play requiring sophisticated stagecraft, was on a few occasions performed to rural audiences. On one occasion, it was even staged by local artistes of Beheli-Masalghat Jibandola Natya Sangha in Sunamganj in Sylhet, with men appearing in female roles.[12] Inspired by their bold craving for new forms, local artistes often created their own versions of popular IPTA items. The Bengal squad's famous *Hunger Dance* was rendered by Sandhya Das of Sylhet as part of the Surma Valley Squad's programme. Usha Dutta trained her. In 1946, the Jalpaiguri IPTA toured Darjeeling district with a dance-drama on the model of *Main Bhookha Hoon* composed by themselves.[13] Following IPTA's shadow play *Shahider Dak*, first performed towards the end of 1946, shadow plays were performed in other places. According to participants and eyewitnesses like Surath Pal Choudhuri, Ashu Sen, and Hemanga Biswas, the Surma Valley Squad's programme also had a component of shadow play in it. In that case it seems to have anticipated *Shahider Dak* in its use of this form. In 1948, the Shillong IPTA also used the form to present the story of Tirrot Singh, the Khasi hero who died fighting the British.[14] The script in Khasi language was written by Bijon Roy, Secretary of the Shillong IPTA; it was performed at Cherapunji and Khasi villagers flocked to see it, crossing the hills with burning torches in their hands. This exposure to traditional or new forms with a new content opened up the possibility for the broadening up of the movement.

Among folk artistes themselves an impetus to improvise on their traditional forms and to introduce new content was noticeable. I have already mentioned Nibaran Pandit who used many of the traditional forms of his native Mymensingh district to a new purpose in this period. In his famous song on the uprising of the Hajong tribals set to the local Punthipora tune, his extraordinary sense of the adaptability of new words to a familiar tune is evident.

[12] *Janashakti* (Bengali, Sylhet), 8 August 1945, p. 6.

[13] Oral interview with Paritosh Dutta, one-time Secretary of the Jalpaiguri IPTA.

[14] A report appears in *People's Age* (26 September 1948, p. 8). For the details of the performance, I am indebted to Anjali Lahiri (Das) and Arati Dutta (Das) who were among the organizers. Both of them, however, said that an organizational infrastructure which might sustain such efforts was lacking.

Veterans of the *Tarja* or *Kabi-ladai* form such as Ramesh Seal of Chittagong and Sheikh Gomani of Murshidabad intervened into the tradition and politicized it in a way that has still left its traces on this potent medium. The *Gambhira* form of Malda, another potent and adaptable medium, was also touched by the spirit of the '40s and many Gambhira performances were considered to be subversive enough to be censored by the British government (*People's War*, 14 October 1945, p. 12). In Hooghly, where a cultural squad was active around 1943, the *Panchali* form was used by Dayal Kumar to popularize the story of the Kayyur martyrs of Kerala and the Kirtan was adopted by Dulal Roy to give a rousing account of the defence of Leningrad. The latter recently asserted in an oral interview that he also experimented with the Tarja form, absorbing into it tunes from Mukunda Das's Swadeshi Jatra and from Nazrul's songs to suit his new message. In Andhra, the *Burrakatha* came to be used anew. The Bombay squad, including talented artistes like Annabhau Sathe and Gavankar, gave new life to the *Tamasha* and *Powada* forms, and carried these experiments among Bombay workers and to the countryside and attracted huge audience (*People's War*, 21 January 1945, p. 2).

III

Occasions for exchange of cultural experience were provided by the conferences of different mass organizations which became important rallying points of the theatre movement. Cultural programmes formed a significant part of the first congress of the Communist Party. *Janajuddha* carries no less than two reports on it, although at this stage there was no stated policy at the party level on cultural matters (9 June 1943, p. 8; 23 June 1943, p. 8). Since Sudhi Pradhan's first volume contains the IPTA and PWA documents which give details of the programme, I will not go into it.[15] What I would like to point out here is that a venue was provided for exchange of cultural experience among the different provinces and also among the workers, peasants and urban middle class participants.

[15] Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. 1, pp. 156–157, 194–207.

The conference of the Friends of the Soviet Union held in Calcutta on 24 June 1942 offers an early example of changing performative situations. The meeting was attended not only by middle-class intellectuals, but sections of the Calcutta workers were present. A striking feature was the spontaneous participation of sections of the audience in some of the songs like '*Jag re mazdoor, jag re kisan*' and '*Kekra kekra*'. The new use of performance space was also significant. While '*Barh chalo kisan dhir*' was being sung, two rows of singers advanced from the back of the hall and joined the singers on stage, obliterating the distance between performers and audience (*Janajuddha*, 1 July 1942, p. 5).

The two AFWAA conferences held in Calcutta in 1944 and 1945 also provided a great impetus to a theatre movement. At these conference the Calcutta IPTA presented strikingly innovative performances like *Jabanbandi* and the *Main Bhookha Hoon* playlet by Benoy Roy in 1944 (*Arani*, 4 February 1944, pp. 342, 350–1); in 1945, they did *Nabanna*, which had already gained a high reputation, and Jyotirindra Moitra's *Nabajibaner Gan* (*People's War*, April 1945, p. 12). But side by side a bevy of talented productions from the districts enriched the programme. In 1944, Anu Dasgupta, as part of the Sylhet team, presented a tea-garden workers' dance and the *Hunger Dance* of Panu Pal and Reba Roy from Rangpur was also widely acclaimed. The Sylhet team had a rich repertoire of songs set to folk tunes. There were also singing teams from Khulna, Bankura, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas. Folk artistes like Nibaran Pandit and Nepal Sarkar from Jessore were also said to be present at the delegate session. In 1945, however, the folk artistes acquired much greater prominence in the report. Tagar Adhikari, the blind *Dotara*-player who came with the Rangpur team, was said to be the most popular artiste on the first day. He performed before a 10,000-strong audience. Sheikh Gomani, the Kabial from Murshidabad, was in the presidium and in his speech, which was partly in verse, made an appeal to bridge the gap between the city and the village. On the second day, a Kabi-ladai[16] with Ramesh Seal on one side

[16] Kabi-ladai is a very popular folk form where two groups of artistes, each led by the main singer, engage in an impromptu debate in verse set to music on a given theme. The debate is a test of the poets' training in the *shastras* and religious myths as well as of their grasp over rhetoric. Quite often local and

and Gomani on the other went on from five in the afternoon till midnight before an enthralled audience. In the ivocatory verses they called upon not only the traditional deities, but great men of the recent past, patriots and poets. The theme was how Bengal must be saved, and Ramesh Seal, by far the more politicized of the two, portrayed the devastations of colonialism and sang of national unity. These folk artistes were not only performing before an urban, preeminently middle-class, audience, but also performing side by side with the Central Squad of IPTA which had brought over something so innovative as *Spirit of India*. But the way in which these widely divergent forms were presented on the same stage and given equal prominence was something unprecedented.

The 1942 All India Kisan Sabha conference at Bihta in Bihar had not been without songs. But the two subsequent ones held in 1944 and 1945 respectively at Bezwada in Andhra and Netrakona in Bengal, like the Bengal provincial conferences at Domar, Phulbari or Hatgobindapur, showed more organized cultural activity. The cultural programme at Bezwada was said to be the 'most popular feature of the session' (*People's War*, 9 April 1944, p. 6) and in his report on the cultural festival at the Netrakona conference, Joshi pointed out that no Kisan Sabha or Trade Union Conference in those days was complete without its cultural programme (*People's War*, 6 May 1945, p. 12). At Bezwada, squads from different provinces sang patriotic songs. Among the provincial troupes specially mentioned in the report were those from Andhra and Bengal. The strength of Andhra's repertoire lay in its adaptation of folk forms. There was a Burrakatha on the plight of the agricultural labourer, a *Kolattam* (stick-dance) on the red army, and a street play (*Veedhi Bhagavatam*) on Hitler's downfall. In this farcical feature, Hitler strutted the stage with his entourage of yes-men, two rich peasants who kept on repeating his words, and Mussolini and Tojo appeared weeping on Hitler's shoulder. Andhra also had a *Bhajanam* squad led by a student and consisting of *dhobis*, labourers and peasants. But the 'most popular item' at Bezwada was Usha Dutta's 'hunger and epidemic dance' which she performed undeterred by the

contemporary themes are introduced and the debate may go on for hours. The form may sometimes degenerate to the level of personal abuse, but it can also be a very powerful medium for the dissemination of ideas and information.

bamboo stage. 'Perfect hush swept over the crowd' as she entered, and as the dance went on the audience 'sighed, tears ran down their cheeks', and cash for the relief of the Bengal famine started to pass from hand to hand.

At Netrakoha, Joshi, specially interested in seeing how peasant squads compared with those composed of 'socialist intellectuals' and how effectively they could put across new ideas, was 'pleasantly surprised'. There were many examples of such innovations by folk artistes. Satish Mondol, a Gambhira artiste from Bengal, sang about Amery and the gang of profiteers who were shown to be enemies of the people. Boys from the Chittagong squad sang in 'Muslim folk tunes' of Surya Sen and other fighters against colonialism. Twenty-three local Muslim peasants did the traditional Jari dance to a song composed by Nibaran Pandit. Majid and Rashiduddin, traditional Bauls, had composed new songs for the occasion on the theme of famine. There was also a Kabi-ladai between the veteran Ramesh Seal and his younger opponents on the theme of the hoarder and the peasant. Seal represented the peasant's point of view. When the opposite party spoke for the hoarders, the audience booed. When asked about the programme, some of the onlookers said: 'Why, these are our own things...we feel clearer in the head and bigger in the heart.'

Sunil Jana's excellent photographs which accompany the report on the Netrakona conference in *People's War* give us some idea of the performances. Again we are struck by the way in which the audience consisting of delegates from all over India were exposed to cultural experiences entirely new to them. The Naga spear-dancer seen in action was probably the second from that community to present his art to an all-India audience, the first being the Naga dancer from Assam reported as having performed at the Student Federation Conference in Calcutta in 1944 (*People's War*, 21 January 1945, p. 3). There are two photographs of the harvest dance by the Manipuri team, one giving a close-up of the leader, Irawat Singh, in action. In the subsequent number (13 May 1945, p. 2), there is another photograph of a Manipuri grandmother who, at Joshi's request, said that she did not know any 'Swaraji' dances, but would show them a traditional Radha–Krishna dance and proceeded readily to give a demonstration. The photographs

emphasize the easy informality of the occasion and the eagerness to communicate. The performances seem to have been held under the open sky against a rural backdrop with the performers dressed in their ordinary village costumes. Nibaran Pandit's squad as well as the Manipuri performers were bare-bodied, the latter wearing simple headbands and carrying sickles. The audience sat or stood around at a close distance. No doubt this is how many folk artistes usually perform. But the context, that of a political conference, and the class-based and regional variations within the audience, gave these performances a new impact.

IV

Between 1942–6, the influence of the Communist Party grew apace in certain areas of the nationalist struggle. For IPTA, too, this was a period of growth. After the victory of the allied forces in 1945, the anti-imperialist struggle not only became more intense, but acquired an unprecedented mass character with the workers, peasants and the urban petty bourgeoisie taking a more and more active role. This was the period of struggle for the freedom of INA prisoners, the naval mutiny, the Post and Telegraph strike, the Tebhaga movement, and the armed struggles in Punnapra-Vayalar and Telengana. 'Yet each of these streams passed through little channels and finally petered out.... The leftist parties including the Communist Party were not strong enough to unify them and convert them into a single comprehensive revolutionary upsurge. The bourgeois leadership of the independence movement, on the other hand, adopted the course of bargain and compromise'.[17] As a result the British rulers could convert the popular feelings into Hindu-Muslim riots and when the partition and transfer of power came in 1947, the Communist Party found itself in a state of ideological and organizational crisis. A radically new situation—where the common imperialist enemy had left the scene and the recently empowered bourgeois leadership engaged itself in crushing the various mass upsurges and the influence of the Communists—found the latter unprepared. The vanguard

[17] *A History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Trivandrum, 1986, pp. 885–6.

position which organizations like IPTA had achieved over a broad congregation of intellectuals and artists in the earlier period was being lost in this critical situation, and the problems of growth which it had been facing even in 1945–6 became paralyzing after 1947. At least from early 1948, official and unofficial attacks were also concentrated against IPTA programmes and activists. The theatre movement still went on sporadically, but the character of purposive intercommunication which the organization had given to it was severely hampered. This part of the narrative will require a separate article, so in this concluding part, I will concentrate on some of the internal problems of IPTA up to August 1947 which were later aggravated.

Many erstwhile IPTA activists, when asked today about the formal experimentations undertaken in the '40s, express surprise or even a slight degree of irritation. They point out that they were not interested in experiments but in communicating a message and for this they were willing to take the help of whatever forms were available. Again, many professional artists who were at one time connected with IPTA assert that the tendency of IPTA was to forsake formal excellence for propaganda. These two polarities of opinion in fact supplement each other and arise from the same theoretical preconception that politicization and formal experimentation in art are opposed to each other. The development of this preconception within IPTA was one of the manifestations of the theoretical crisis it came to face.

In the earlier parts of the article, I have tried to show that the theatre movement had to innovate in whatever they produced because they had to perform before newly organized audiences, whether peasants, workers, or the urban middle class. The context in which the audience and performers faced each other was new, their expectations from each other had changed, and very often, as for instance, when sometimes urban middle-class artistes were performing before a predominantly peasant audience, the task of conveying a message could be done only by restructuring the theatre idiom. This could be done by people who had a certain expertise in the idiom. Even then, problems arose. Sudhi Pradhan in an oral interview described the occasion when they were performing *Jabanbandi*, a one-act play on famine, in the 24 Parganas and Khoka

Roy, a peasant leader, rushed backstage to persuade the performers to supply a commentary since the peasants could not understand anything. Such communication gaps were bound to be there and experiments were necessary for the basically political purpose of bridging them. Yet the famous controversy over *Nabanna*,[18] a play which had reached a very high level of technical excellence, leaves out the fact that this technical excellence served a specific purpose, that of revolutionizing the proscenium convention even while using it. It overlooks the possibility that this might have been the starting point of many other experiments within and without the proscenium to reach out to different kinds of audience. *Nabanna* need not have become the sole standard of technical excellence; on the other hand, experiments of other kinds might have set up their own standards suitable to their specific purposes.

For such experiments a close study of and grasp over forms, and intensive rehearsals, were required, even as in the case of *Nabanna*. It seems that when in 1944 the *Nabanna* team was formed in Bengal, and the Central Squad in Bombay, form and content were not yet seen as binary opposites and the question of formal innovation had not acquired such a bad odour within IPTA. As I have suggested before, there are examples of talented artists among peasants and workers putting traditional forms to new uses to evoke new responses from their traditional audience. Middle-class artistes like Hemanga Biswas from Assam or Prem Dhavan from Punjab were also using folk tunes to shake up the cultural habits of other specific audiences. Occasions which permitted a degree of heterogeneity within the audience also helped these experimentations. It was precisely with the purpose of improving the quality of such experiments and carrying them back to the people that the Central Cultural Squad consisting of full-time cultural activists was formed in July 1944;[19] it was financially supported by the Communist Party, though most of the participants

[18] Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. I, pp. 324–34.

[19] In his above-mentioned report on the cultural festival at the Netrakona conference, Joshi compares the local rural squads with the Surma Valley Squad and suggests that the superiority of the latter's productions may be traced to the fact that they were 'ex-students' and full-time cultural workers. In the report produced for the third annual conference of the AFWAA in 1945

were not Party members. Abani Das Gupta and Shanti Bardhan, a leading musician and a leading dancer respectively from Uday Shankar's Almora school, were the trainers, and the artists lived frugally and practiced rigorously. They had rehearsed altogether for 1600 hours for their second programme in 1945 which included *India Immortal* (*People's Age*, 6 January 1946, p. 12) The dresses were planned by the artist Chittaprosad and made by the members of the Squad themselves from cheap gunny cloth, decorated with designs in oil colour and sprinkled with crushed mica. While it was active, the Squad produced two composite programmes consisting of songs, dances and two ballets: *Spirit of India* and *India Immortal*. It also produced the feature film *Dharti ke Lal*, based on the theme of the Bengal famine and deriving both from *Jabanbandi* and *Nabanna*. By the time of the fourth all-India IPTA conference in Calcutta, however, it had been disbanded owing to the 'uncertain situation' in the country and the artists had been sent to work in their respective provinces (*People's Age*, 18 May 1947, p. 13). In this, we find manifestations of some of the problems facing IPTA.

The 'unprecedented success of the work done by the Bengal Squad' had encouraged the decision of forming a central team of artists.[20] This referred to the cultural squad which, sponsored by the People's Relief Committee, had gone to Punjab in November 1943 to bring aid to famine-striken Bengal. This was followed by a second squad with a fuller programme called 'Voice of Bengal', visiting Bombay, Gujarat and Maharashtra in April 1944. In the course of these two trips, not only had two and a quarter lakhs of rupees been raised for the Relief Committee, but a wave of sympathy and fellow feeling for Bengal had been created among large audiences in urban and rural areas. The squads included some highly talented singers and dancers, but few of them were trained. The programmes, particularly of the first squad, were quite elementary if the evidence of eyewitnesses and participants is to be accepted. The second squad's programme included *Antim Abhilasha*, the Hindi version of the play *Jabanbandi*, but the most

(p. 11), the Bengal IPTA also voices the opinion that without full-time artistes and intensive training, first-rate productions are impossible.

[20] Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. 1, p. 279.

popular items common to both trips were *Main Bhookha Hoon*, a very schematic playlet by Benoy Roy, and Usha Dutta's *Hunger Dance*.[21] It was quite clearly the dedication and the excellent teamwork of the participants as well as the dramatic immediacy of the central theme which evoked such a strongly positive response among the middle class, peasants and workers wherever the squads went.

The Central Squad which included many artists from the earlier teams, apart from new ones, was expected to rouse the same kind of enthusiastic response by presenting the rich heritage of Indian culture to varied and broad-based audiences. The presentation was seldom overtly political, but the anti-imperialist theme ran as an undercurrent in most programmes. Also, adaptations of various folk entertainments like the Lambadi dance from Andhra, Ramila and Holi from the United Provinces, and Gajan from Bengal were included. *Spirit of India* itself had a Katha-like commentary composed by Prem Dhavan and sung by Benoy Roy (*People's War*, 21 January 1945, p. 22). The first souvenir of the Central Squad proposed to 'study, revive and utilize folk forms in dance, music and songs'. Obviously the purpose of this too was to make available to people in different regions cultural experiences not familiar to them and, at the same time, to make significant improvisations on traditional forms. Indeed the shows must have been highly impressive. The 1945 programme started with *'Sare jahan se achha'*, set to tune by Ravi Shankar. Then came the *Call of Drum* where Shanti Bardhan's vigorous movements as he rose to strike the drum and the dance of Rajput men and women with swords symbolized the prowess of the Indian people. *Spirit of India* itself was said to be 'more a patriotic pageant than a mere ballet'. It showed the misery of the people under the 'triple curse' of imperialism, feudalism and the new imperial capitalism and ended on a note of hope arising from the people's unity. The second ballet, *India Immortal*, was woven round the parable of a magician who casts his

[21] As far as I have been able to gather, the first *Hunger Dance*, taken to Punjab, was conceived by Harindranath Chattopadhyay and rendered by Usha. At the 1944 AFWAA conference in Calcutta another *Hunger Dance*, planned by Panu Pal of the Rangpur team and rendered by Reba Roy as the peasant girl and Panu Pal as the demon of death, was shown. Especially the duet version was later rendered by many different artistes as well.

spell on a happy country and exploits it. The narrative of colonial exploitation and possible release from it was given a ballet form. Another item in the 1946 programme, the Holi dance, brought in a donkey with a man in a tall hat riding it and being driven out by the others. Again, the underlying anti-imperialist message cannot be missed. It was such polished and artistically superior presentations of the anti-imperialist message by the Central Squad which pleased nationalist leaders like Nehru.

Yet the technical perfection achieved by the Central Squad was of a very special kind. Although the *People's Age* reports repeatedly assert that the performances were not for the 'elite' but for the 'common man in town and village' (6 January 1946, p. 12), the shows were too elaborate to be carried to places where technical facilities were not available. *Voice of Bengal* had travelled to the interiors of Maharashtra and Gujarat. The Tamashas and Powadas of the Bombay Squad could still be taken to remote areas and performed before varied audiences; but the Central Squad, which was meant to provide the model for IPTA performances, could not acquire this mobility for all its technical perfection. Or, rather, the kind of technical perfection which goes with flexibility, with being able to improvise on limited resources, was never achieved by the Central Squad. Its creative experiments with folk forms might have shown the way as to how traditional performative structures might be used anew, but the smoothing out of local characteristics of presentation made it impossible for the lessons in technical improvement to be imparted to the people. The treatment was too synthetic. Particularly, items in the 1946 programme such as *Noukabihar* do not seem to have the concrete political thrust which supplied the basic purpose for improvisation in the theatre movement. Perhaps the limitation of the programmes of the Central Squad also lay in the fact that its generalized presentation of history lacked the immediacy of specific, urgent issues which might move the popular mind.

In that sense, the theme of *Nabanna* had greater possibilities, and its realism, which lay in suggesting the exact visual and linguistic details of peasant life, was certainly a breakthrough. But the means of bringing such realism closer to the cultural forms familiar to rural audiences remained unexplored. The experiment remained

limited to the proscenium form. We hear of small playlets being performed in some districts which seemed to have taken their lessons from *Jabanbandi*, a more flexible and less elaborate play than *Nabanna*, but these efforts remained sporadic. The self-critical 1946 report of the Bengal IPTA talks of going back to folk forms, but this also does not seem to have been taken up in a planned way.

The last pre-independence programme in Bengal which showed a great capacity for being taken to varied audiences was the shadow play *Shabider Dak*. It was shown not only in Bengal, but was sent on a tour of Assam in the turbulent months immediately before 15 August 1947. Obviously, the idea was taken from Uday Shankar's *Ramlila* which, when shown in Almora, was said to have attracted peasant audiences from great distances (*People's War*, 23 January 1944, p. 3). According to eyewitnesses *Shabider Dak*, using a simple white curtain and a powerful electric lamp or even a pressure lamp, and by teaching its team the essentials of movement in shadow, touched the same level of technical excellence.[22] A cut-out of a hut was magnified through lighting to suggest the Indian countryside; a revolving stick was used to visualize the propeller of an aeroplane bringing the Cabinet Mission to Delhi. Specific incidents in the anti-imperialist struggle, still raw in people's memory, were shown. Specificity and mobility were the qualities which gave the shadow play new potency as a form.

[22] The Delhi Squad had first performed a shadow play on a political prisoner during the Bengal famine. Subsequently, immediately after the Calcutta riots in August 1946, an anti-communal shadow play is said to have been shown at Muslim Institute Hall. *Swadhinata* (26 November 1946, p. 3) has a report on another shadow play, *Wavell Tumi Doshi*, which includes most of the incidents shown in *Shabider Dak* and ends with the riots. As I have said earlier, the Surma Valley Squad's programme is also said to have had at least a component of shadow play.

IPTA: A CHRONOLOGICAL CHART

Socio-political Content	Theatre Movement
1942 8 May: Japanese bomb in Chittagong kills dock-worker. 29–30 May: All India Kisan Sabha Conference at Bihta in Bihar. 24 June: Anti-Fascist Conference by Friends of the Soviet Union at University Institute.	1 May: Bombay People's Theatre Squad launched with *Ye Kiska Khoon*. 2–28 June: Students' cultural squad tours eastern districts of Bengal and Tripura. 1 July: Janajuddher Chhara by Nibaran Pandit printed in *Janajuddha*. The anthology *Janajuddher Gan* runs into three editions between July and September.
23 July: Ban on Communist Party of India lifted. 9 August: Congress leaders arrested following August resolution. Outburst of anti-British violence.	
1943 18–21 March: Provincial Conference of Communist Party in Calcutta. 29 March: Kayyur revolutionaries hanged in Kerala.	
23–29 May: First All-India Congress of Communist Party in Bombay.	1 May: *Agun* and *Laboratory*, one-set plays at Natyabharati 22–25 May: Fourth All India Conference of PWA (Progressive Writers' Association). 25 May: Conference from which IPTA was formed. 29 May: Red Flag Mela and cultural programme marking the end of CPI Congress.
29 July: Defeat of Mussolini. September: Intensification of famine conditions in Bengal. People's Relief Committee formed.	November–mid-January 1944: Squad from Bengal led by Harindranath

Chattopadhyay and Benoy Roy tours Punjab.

1944

3 Jan.: *Homoeopathy* and *Jabanbandi* at Star Theatre, Calcutta.
15–17 Jan.: Second Annual Conference of AFWAA in Calcutta.
17 Jan.: *Jabanbandi* at Minerva Theatre, Calcutta.
29–30 Jan.: Uday Shankar's *Ramlila* at Parel Maidan in Bombay organized by IPTA. Money donated to PRC.

15–16 March: All India Kisan Sabha Conference at Bezwada.
March–April: Manipur under Japanese Threat.

April–May: *Voice of Bengal* tours Bombay, Gujarat and Maharashtra.
28 May–27 June: Students' Federation sends squad to eastern districts of Bengal and Assam.
July: Formation of Central Squad in Bombay.
24 Oct.: First performance of *Nabanna* at Srirangam.
December: First show of Central Squad's *Spirit of India* for Bombay students.

1945

13–14 March: Bengal Provincial K.S. Conference at Hatgobindapur.
8–9 April: All India K.S. Conference at Netrakona.

4 Jan.: Annual Conference of Bombay IPTA.
3–8 March: AFWAA Conference in Calcutta.

9 May: Final surrender of Nazi troops.

May: Shadow-play by Delhi IPTA.
2 Sept.: *Dharti ke Lal* launched by Central Squad.

21 Nov.: Students' strike and demonstration in Calcutta demanding release of INA prisoners. Rameshwar and Abdus Salam killed.
Dec.–Jan. '46: Widespread workers strikes.

18 Dec.: Central troupe leaves Bombay with *India Immortal*.

1946

Jan.–March: General elections.
11 Feb.: Rashid Ali day. Monoranjan, Kadam Rasul and others killed.
19 Feb.: RIN mutiny starts.
22 Feb.: Workers' strike in Bombay.
24 March: Cabinet Mission lands.

May: *Dharti ke Lal* shown in Simla to Congress-League leaders.
June–July: Surma Valley Squad tours Assam.

11 July: Post and Telegraph strike.
29 July: General strike.
12 Aug.: Congress accepts Mission plan.
16 Aug.: Great Calcutta killing.
2 Sept.: Interim Government takes oath.
Nov.–Dec.: Beginning of Tebhaga Movement.

11–15 Aug.: Strike by AIR artistes.

23 Nov.: *Wavell Tumi Doshi*, shadow play at Muslim Institute.

March: Bengal Bargadar Temporary Regulation Bill in Assembly.

1947

25–28 April: Fourth Annual Conference of IPTA in Calcutta.
3–4 May: First provincial conference of Assam IPTA.
June–August: IPTA Squad tours Assam and eastern districts of Bengal.

15 Aug.: Partition and transfer of power. Widespread riots and emigration.

Interrogating the Nation from the Margins

The Politics of Translating Indian Dalit Drama with Special Reference to *Bali Adugal* (Scapegoats)[1]

S. Armstrong

I say to the untouchable: Be a lion! Hindus sacrificed goats to the goddess Kali for power. You be your own light—*atta dipa bhav*!

—Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Ambedkar 1980: 130)

The translation of Dalit literatures into English in India and other foreign languages like French and Spanish is a leapfrogging transformation for providing a space for sharing the Indian Dalit's age-old stigma of untouchability with foreign readers. Indian Dalit literatures not only discuss social discriminations now, but also assert their identities and prove their creative potentialities. In this process, the translation of Indian Dalit texts plays a vital role in creating a historical awareness as well as a historical sense through this interlinguistic process. The inference of historical sense will help the historical recovery of the Dalits through the mode of translation. These translations will create a socio-cultural space for intercultural dialogues among other people and the Othered

[1] I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr.Valarmathi, a freelancing scholar, poet, journalist, documentary director, translator, playwright, performer, and a critic, for his critical acumen and insights which helped me complete this article.

or Unempowered or Disoriented peoples in this world. In this historical journey, translation becomes an act of socio-cultural practice, which is an alternative sphere for translation rather than a mere linguistic transformation. Recent translators concentrate more on the transformation of cultural milieus than of mere verbal transformative process into an alien tongue. They also play a crucial role in liberating the Dalits in the existing social system.

This article is an attempt to highlight the problems involved in translating Dalit texts into English with special reference to *Bali Adugal*, a Tamil Dalit play, written by Karu Azhagu Gunasekaran. The article points out that the play itself is a site of multiple layers of translated texts within texts and dialogues within dialogues since the play is built around a fragment of an inscription and threaded with a conversation between Ambedkar, the redoubtable Indian figure and Mulk Raj Anand, the renowned Indian English author. The final part of the article seeks to construct a new theory of translation by taking a cue from one of the characters in the play, who is a eunuch.

The translator who is the second writer of the intended translated text plays a more responsible role than that of the original writer. The translator of a Dalit text tends to become a cultural ambassador and has to bear in mind the social commitment of rendering a literature of a people who have been excluded in all realms of society even before their birth. In this context, translations of Dalit texts assume a pivotal role in the process of transformation of the mindset of people in a country, which practices caste-based discrimination that denies a dignified existence to millions of Dalits.

In the kind of freedom a translator takes, there are chances of 'aberration' and 'misrepresentation' of the source text. Dalit literature deals with socio-cultural liberation and a translator needs to be aware of this. Translation is no longer a mere linguistic transformation and the role of translation and that of the translator has now changed. The translator has become a cultural mediator, who traverses the resonance zone between cultures.

Dalit plays are no longer emotive expressions of pain and suffering. Being liberative, they talk about the Dalit lifestyle, ceremonies, rituals and rites that form the background of their expressions.

They are also intertwined with their real life experiences. As literary texts, they have to survive against distortion and misrepresentation by market forces, both by the mediators within and outside India. Translators who delve deep into these literatures need to be careful in transforming the socio-cultural practices of Dalits. In adapting Western theories in translation and literature, the translator and the writer have to conceptualize the Indian Dalit situation in their minds. A translator who is associated with Dalit literature seems to be in a much better position and can bring a better impact in translating the source text if he/she has:

- Personal association with the author, the people and the native speakers of the source language and can avoid problems in the acquisition of dialects and of Dalit slang.
- Familiarity with the marginalized and submerged experience to translate the milieus with an emotional affinity/sensibility towards the social problems of Dalits.
- An activist's impulse to contribute towards the struggle for liberation.
- Active participation in creating capacity building or affirmative actions to help the mainstreaming and habilitation of Dalits in social space.

These suggestions might help the translator in the process of illumination and representation in a worthwhile and meaningful manner and are likely to impact the target text.

DALIT THEATRE AND TRANSLATIONS OF TAMIL DALIT TEXTS INTO ENGLISH

Translations of Tamil Dalit literatures include Bama's novels *Karukku*, *Sangati* and short stories that were translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. *Sangati* has also been translated into Spanish and French. Imayam's *Koveru Kazhuthaigal* has been translated into English as *The Beast of Burden*. Vizhi Pa Idayavendan's short story has been translated and published by Sahitya Akademi along with other Dalit Tamil translations. The short stories of Imayam, Poomani and Dharman have also been translated into English.

It is surprising to see that only very few books are written and translated by Dalits themselves. Dalit texts, written by a Dalit and translated by another Dalit, are very few in Tamilnadu. For example, the leader of the Dalit Panthers of India Thol Thirumavalavan's *Talisman* and *Uproot Hindutva*, were translated by Meena Kandasamy. Sivakami, an activist writer and administrator, has written *Pazhayana Kazhitalum, Anandayee* and *Kurukkuvettu* and is currently engaged in translating them into English. Orient Longman has published *Pazhayana Kazhitalum* in English as *The Grip Of Change* which was translated with a revisit by the author herself. Captain S. Kaliyaperumal's *Tamilar Unmai Varalaru* is also being translated by the author himself into English as *The True History of Tamils.*

Bali Adugal (Scapegoats) is a Tamil Dalit play written and directed by K.A. Gunasekaran. He is well known as an activist, artist, actor, scholar, folk musician, playwright and director. Being a Dalit artist, he has authored many issue-based plays, which were performed in remote villages in Tamilnadu. He has won many state level honours and awards. His major plays are *Sathiya Sodanai, Pavalakkodi* or *Kudumba Vazhakku, Ariguri, Thodu, Maartram* [a play about the eunuchs], *Mazhi, Kandan* or *Valli, Kanavulagavasi, Parayai Pilandhukondu* and *Thottil Thodangi. Bali Adugal* was performed more than 250 times, both at the regional and at the national levels, including once at the National School of Drama's 5th National Theatre Festival, held from 20 March–8 April 2003, where it premiered on the 26th of March 2003.

In the Indian theatre scenario, Dalit plays have been performed based on the themes of caste annihilation, conversion to Buddhism, Dalit icons, leaders, Kings in states such as Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Uttar Pradesh, Goa and Andhra Pradesh. Bhimrao Kardak from Maharashtra, Achuthanand and Valmiki from Uttarpradesh, and Iyothee Thassar in Tamilnadu were the early proponents of Dalit Theatre in India. The National Dalit Theatre Festival-2007 was held for the first time in India at the Corporation grounds of Villupuram, a town near Chennai on May 25, 2007. The Festival was coordinated by leading Dalit literary arts organizations such as ADECOM NETWORK (a non-Dalit NGO), Pondicherry, *Kootukural Nataka Iyakkam*, Pondicherry and Dalit

Resource Centre, Madurai. This festival was a collective of many-in-one events held from 5 p.m. till the early morning of May 26 2007. There were paper presentations on Dalit Theatre Festivals/Theatre, play performances, voiceovers, speeches and music concerts.

It was only after the Centennial Celebrations of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the national leader and the chief architect of Indian Constitution, that there have been uprisings in Dalit arts and more particularly the performances, which represent the symbols of Dalit cultural recovery and awareness. Indian Dalit Theatre has emerged as a powerful forum for caste annihilation and liberation of 250 million Dalits in India. It tries to forge a new ground for cultural transformation based on equality, freedom, self-respect and social recognition. In his speech delivered at the All India Dalit Drama Convention of the year 1992, Cavhan, an exponent of the Dalit Drama Movement, points the following:

> Friends, this theatre belongs to all those whom the Hindu religion, caste and creed system have kept away from social, economic and educational benefits. It is the theatre of those who have been denied status as human beings. It is the theatre, which concerns itself with the pain, sorrows and sufferings of these neglected people. It is the theatre of protest, which aspires to get back basic human dignity for those from whom it was snatched away. It is the theatre, which offers a challenge to the casteists. It offers a critique of religion. It exposes and presents the naked reality of injustice and atrocities. It demands an explanation of your sins and total neglect. It is the theatre, which demands proof, without which nothing is acceptable to it.'[2]

Furthermore, Dalit Theatre links the day-to day affairs of Dalits, encourages the participation spirit of the people with emancipatory impulse, re-evaluates Dalit arts and restructures/reconstitutes the misrepresentation made by the dominant castes. Additionally, it provides an alternative forum against the sacred art boundaries of the dominant castes, accelerates the reaction against the demeaning endeavors of the dominant castes over the Dalits, and retells the history, culture and lifestyle of Dalits. Dalit theatre

[2] Excerpts from Ramnath Cavhan's Presidential Address of the Seventh All India Dalit Drama Convention, held in Nashik, Maharashtra, in December 1992. Published in Marathi at A. Jnaneshvara & M. Bhosale, Pune. (Translation: J.N. Paranjape)

tries to disseminate the liberation ideas and ideologies among the Dalits and non-Dalits. It has become a channel/forum for media social transformation. Ramnath Cavhan continues:

> As a writer belonging to the Dalit theatre, I would like to tell you something. The Dalit play is certainly a play of protest; but it is not a betrayal of the 'soil'. Those who reveal bitter truth are bitter. They are devastating, but not unreal. Implicit in these writings is a thought of social change, of destroying the caste system and of national integration. Such thoughts point to the need of realignment. Canvassing the thoughts we advocate is also inevitable. The framework of the caste system will not break, unless we make a frontal and powerful attack on its very foundation. Dalit theatre has come into being in order to destroy the caste system.[3]

PLAYS AND THEATRE GROUPS

Some prominent plays (including the theatre groups) performed in Villupuram include *Sambam* by Ottigai Group, *Ukram* by Puvi Arangam, *Pavun Kunju* by Chennai Arts Collective, *Buddharum Shobaganum* by Chennai Cherri Arts Group, *Padukalam Sathya-mangalam* by Sakya Arts Movement, *Vellupu* by Neyveli Arts and Literary Movement, *Naiyandi Melam* by Naghu Group, *Sivagangai* from Tamilnadu, *Lokayatha Neruvambakkam Nataka Veedi* by Kerala, Tiser Hunting *Sanskritic Andolan* (Cultural Revolution) by Orissa, *Veera Telungana Dumtham* by Andhra Pradesh, Buddhist Musical Play by Nagpur, Ash Wagosh team, Maharastra, and *Untouchability* by Tumkur Booshakthi Cultural Group, Karnataka. Some representative Dalit plays and Dalit feminist theatre groups include *Death Day* or *Liberation Day* by Kamloakar Dahat (Nagpur-based author) written in the late 70s, *Arart* (whirlpool) a one-act place by Prof. Datta Bhagat, *Dharmantar* (conversion to another religion), *A jalsa* by Bhimrao Kardak (written after 1935 Ambedkar's 'Speech on conversion') from Maharashtra, *Amma* by Valmiki, *Shambuka Vadh* and *Ram Rajya* by Achuthanand in 1920s. Others include plays based on the lives of Bijilipasi, Uda Devi Pasi and Jhakari Bai Kori,

[3] Excerpts from Ramnath Cavhan's Presidential Address of the Seventh All India Dalit Drama Convention, held in Nashik, Maharashtra, in December 1992. Published in Marathi at A. Jnaneshvara & M. Bhosale, Pune. (Translation: J.N. Paranjape)

Ek Baar Phir (Once Again), *Bhrama Nyaya* (Justice of Brahmins) and *Apni Jaat* (Our caste) written, acted and directed by Sunil Kumar of Jawaharlal Nehru University of New Delhi. The active Dalit feminist theatre groups in India are Dalit Women Theatre (DWT) of Andhra Pradesh, Chemmini of Thirunelveli and Aptist of Pondicherry.

Thannane Theatre Group headed by K.A. Gunasekaran often premieres plays related to Dalit issues, Dalit empowerment and Dalit women's issues. Thannane appeared on the theatre scene in 1995. Since then, the group has been creating an awareness of suppression of the oppressed and underprivileged people. It meets the people in every nook and corner of the interior villages of Tamilnadu and Pondicherry through theatre and folk musical concerts. It is also actively involved in Dalit movements for creating an awareness among these people. The group also conducts workshops at the national, state and village levels to help educate theatre aspirants and trains eunuchs as performers. He also tries to construct a theatre for eunuchs to highlight the problems faced by them. This group has successfully staged *Bali Adugal* in many places in India.

Bali Adugal takes its cue from an inscription, found in a temple of a village in Tamilnadu, particularly in Kongu Nadu. The inscription is about a human sacrifice that took place in the past. The author with contemporaneity has successfully interpreted this text and highlighted the social oppression that the Dalits suffered in the past. The play has textually blended yet another historic dialogue between Ambedkar and Mulk Raj Anand on social oppression which has been extracted from the book *Annihilation of Caste* written by Ambedkar.

The play depicts the practice of scapegoating and the conflicts between the dominant Brahmins and the downtrodden Dalits of the village who are ridiculed and suppressed. The play features a scene where a '*rath*' (chariot) is carried by Dalits and it accidentally breaks. This damage of the rath is attributed to the Dalits because a Dalit designed it. In order to pacify the village goddess, the Brahmin priests demand a human sacrifice. Hearing the news everyone flees in fear. In the end, a person is identified as the one to be sacrificed but the latter, to save his own skin, bargains with

the priests. He places his wife as the sacrificial lamb and saves himself from being killed. Thus, the play deals with the problem of Dalits and how they are victimized by the 'system'. Though in the beginning the play tries to put forward the concept of Dalit theatre and to popularize it as a major tool against their atrocities, in the end, the play turns out to be a strong Dalit feminist manifesto.

The songs and music have to be heard and felt during the performance. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to translate the emotive language of this play. Dalits' songs and music differ for death, marriage and war. The introductory and also recurring musical song in *Bali Adugal* is '*Thanthana*'. 'Thanthana' is a song of lamentation played often by the Dalits to free themselves of the pain they undergo from oppression. It can be positively compared to the Blues of Afro-American music.

The second song in *Bali Adugal* begins with (*naaluvarna sadhiyela*) the description of four Varnas. The music tuned for this song is tragic. The holy thread of the Brahmins and the ropes of the tied Dalits are symbolic. The 'threads' and the 'ropes' are intertwined with the rhythm of the music and songs. One can find the fusion of the language of music and the language of body in the performance where the Brahmins beat the Dalits with their holy threads. This scene is symbolically enacted to bring out the centuries-old oppression of the Dalits. The symbolic usage of thread, the author said, was designed for the audience.

The third song in *Bali Adugal* is on '*lahirtham*'. In Pondicherry children sing this 'song' in schools and on the streets. Children jumping across a child who is made to bow down utter this word. Literally speaking the word has no meaning and in the play it is used as a pun to mock at the meaninglessness of the Sanskrit mantras uttered in rituals practiced by the dominant castes. In their very breath, in the tunes hummed, in their simple mocking songs, in their very use of language, Dalits have imbued a rebuffing attitude towards the hegemonic dominance that inheres in the caste hierarchy and it is a Herculean task that befalls the translator to transfer these cultural and linguistic nuances into the target language.

HUMAN SCAPEGOATS AND BALI ADUGAL

The practice of human sacrifice was widely prevalent among the ancient Greeks, and in Slavonic ceremonies. In ancient Rome human scapegoats such as *Mamurius Returius* (Frazer 1993–4) were too common. The King of the Bean on Twelfth Night, the Medieval Bishops of Fools, Abbot of Unreason, or the Lord of Misrule are figures of the same sort in Italy, Spain, and France. A close reading of Frazer's chapters (Frazer 1993–4 LVII and LVIII) on scapegoats in *The Golden Bough* show how the servile classes, such as slaves, serfs, bondsmen, and generally the poor were used as human scapegoats. Athenians regularly maintained a number of degraded and 'useless' beings for human sacrifice during the period of calamities such as plague, drought or famine in the city. They used to sacrifice two of the outcasts as scapegoats. One of the victims was sacrificed for the men and the other for the women.

The play *Bali Adugal* takes its cue from this practice of human sacrifice that was widely prevalent in India. In the Indian social context the people chosen as the scapegoats were often people from the backwaters of society and quite often Dalits who refused to abide by the norms of the caste hierarchy. They were chosen as scapegoats with the explicit motive of removing the 'evil' from the body politic by ritualizing the whole event and making it look divinely ordained in the eyes of the public. The playwright questions this practice of scapegoating Dalits, at the same time subtly criticising the point of the transference of this oppression on Dalit women.

TEXTS WITHIN TEXTS IN *BALI ADUGAL*

The play opens up multi-layered levels of texts within texts. The text incorporates the conversation between Dr B.R. Ambedkar [BRA] and Mulk Raj Anand [MRA], which took place on an evening in May 1950, on a beach in Cuffe Parade Colaba, Mumbai. The conversation has been extracted from Appendix III of Dr B.R. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste*. The play, apart from taking a cue from an inscription, also blends/intertwines the historic conversation throughout the text and turns the text into a dialogue. It blends different pasts that become histories and reinterprets

them with the contemporary problems in mind. The very opening of the play puts forward the question of meaning and brings forth the politics of translating culture and language. The conversation is as follows:

MULK RAJ ANAND: Namaskar, Dr Ambedkar

AMBEDKAR: I prefer the Buddhist greeting-Om Mani Padmaye!

MULK RAJ ANAND: I agree. How thoughtless we are! We inherit words without questioning their meanings! Of, course, Namaskar means I bow before you...

AMBEDKAR: That perpetuates submission! May the lotuses awake is a prayer for enlightenment!

(Ambedkar 1980:130)

This text of the '50s [a historical text] is about the Buddhist text [and practice] of addressing, which itself is 2000 years old. These are the opening lines of the play, a conversation about the form of addressing, which itself becomes a form of addressing the audience. Further, the conversation also strengthens the meaning-making process of words by explaining the meaning of the particular word 'idiocy', which means, 'going round and round in a circle' [which has not been included in the Tamil translation but is found in the English version of the conversation].

Later, in a conversation that interludes the play, Dr Ambedkar confesses his participation in the Constitution Drafting Committee viz. that he was merely a scapegoat, which is the title of the play. Such inter-textual references reverberate throughout the play. It opens up layers of texts within texts. Basically, the play revolves around a fragment of an inscription which has the dominant people's history or social text inscribed on the stones. The play is a careful intertwining of the historical text—the inscription, expanded and extended into a performance text—the play. In other words, there seems to be a translation of one text into another text or one genre into another. At another level, the play is a blend of dialogues in between the dialogues between Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Dr M.R. Anand. The play opens and ends with the dialogue between two—whereas the dialogues of the characters of the play become a subtext. Again, the dialogue between B.R. Ambedkar and M.R. Anand is a subtext taken from Appendix III of the main text, *The Annihilation of Caste*. The dialogue as a subtext of a historical text becomes the main text in the play, which spins around the dialogue of the characters. The play is built upon such translation and transformation into an innovative framework of texts and genres.

As noted earlier, the play begins with a conversation between Dr Ambedkar and Anand. Dr Ambedkar alerts Anand on the first word he utters 'namaskar', and thereby the politics of language is brought to the forefront. The translator is in a unique position with regard to this text i.e., the text of conversation between the two which itself is a translation in Tamil from English (which probably might be a translation from Marathi). One has to note here that the play itself is a site of a translated text. In this context, it is appropriate to recall the views of Octavio Paz, who, in his short work on translation, claims that all texts, being part of a literary system descended from and related to other systems, are 'translations of translations of translations'. He continues:

Every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text. No text is entirely original because language itself, in its essence, is already a translation: firstly, of the non-verbal world and secondly, since every sign and every phrase is the translation of another sign and another phrase. However, this argument can be turned around without losing any of its validity: all texts are original because every translation, up to a certain point, is an invention and as such it constitutes a unique text. (quoted in Bassnett 1996)

The whole text itself is an 'inspiration' from a fragment of an inscription. The inscription itself is a round-shaped script ['*vattezhuthu*' script] which often has to go through a rigorous process of decoding, i.e., a translation into modern Tamil script.

BALI ADUGAL AND THE LIMITS OF HERMENEUTICS

From another perspective, the play also raises important questions about the limits of interpretation. The first problem one faces is that of recovering the voice of the Dalit who was 'sacrificed' according to the inscription. The act of inscription itself is a project of the dominant at the expense of annihilating, effacing the body of the Dalit and silencing the voice of the oppressed. To recover the

voice of the Dalit from a 'document' of the dominant is a project of history, which is basically a hermeneutical project.

As often happens, historical hermeneutics falls into a meta-discourse/grand narrative of the nation, the citizen, and as a final recourse, that of history itself. This is an inevitable risk and pitfall. It would be appropriate here to recall two attempts at resuscitating fragments. Ranajit Guha, in his influential essay '*Chandra's Death*', reconstructs and reinterprets a fragment of the testimony of judicial discourse for the project of history. In his meticulous analysis of the piece of judicial document, he recovers the voice of the subjugated Dalit woman. It is a laudable attempt at recovering the suppressed voices of history from a document of the dominant group but there remains the problem of falling into the labyrinth of history for its own sake. The other attempt by Gyanendra Pandey (1994) problematizes the project of history itself. Pandey captures the core of the problem as being located in the 'historians' history, which at least the history of the last few centuries, has been predominantly a history of transition.' One can translate this as a history of translation. How are we to translate the *lived experience* of violence, subjugation, of the oppressed, for us, the experience of Dalits? Criticizing the historians' history i.e., the academic writing of history on Partition as a 'prose of otherness', he contrasts it with the representation of Partition in the fictional works of Saadat Hasan Manto. Implicitly, he suggests that historical hermeneutics as a project has serious limitations in bringing out the violence and pain that is lived and suffered by the oppressed people and probably art and literature can be the appropriate spheres in bringing out the lived experience of the oppressed, in giving voice to the oppressed who are deprived of their own voices. To recover the voice of the effaced Dalit body is invariably and inevitably a political project of the arts enmeshed in the present, not that of evoking the past for its own sake. In *Bali Adugal*, this task has been successfully taken up by the artist/activist K. A. Gunasekaran through an artistic reinterpretation of the 'inscribed' event.

BALI ADUGAL, TRANSLATION, AND CHALLENGES

The translator's relationship to the text he/she has taken up to translate is enmeshed in a matrix of power relations. Who

translates a particular work makes all the difference. There is a politics of the text, of the author, of the translator and of the publisher. The problem that arises here for the translator is: can s/he can transcend this matrix of the power relationship in the act of translating any particular text? Or, perform the act of translation in a way that gets beyond the interpretative maneuver? Unexpectedly, the text *Bali Adugal* offers one such figure. Out of the blue, a eunuch emerges from nowhere and laments over the unfairness of the prejudice of sacrificing the Dalit woman. The whole text becomes a *limit-text or border-text* at this juncture in the play. The Dalit female who bears the whole brunt of oppression, who is at the extreme receiving end of the oppressive caste system, subject even to the Dalit male, is given voice by a eunuch: a group of people, who are in close proximity to the oppressed. The figure of the eunuch functions as a site of translation. This is not to deny 'seriousness' or 'responsibility' on the part of the translator and interpretation on the whole, but to move beyond interpretation, just as the figure of the eunuch is at the liminal point—both inside the system, oppressed by the system, in close proximity with the oppressed, yet defying classification and out of the system.

The process of translating Dalit texts involves additional challenges. The first pertains to publishing. Publishing today is a highly competitive arena and the Dalits, already a marginalized group, find it difficult to find a space whereby they can get their works published. Several factors work against their interests and getting a foothold in the publishing industry is definitely a Sisyphean task for Dalit writers. Meeting the demands of the market, which is dominated by several factors such as the banner of the publishing house and the popularity of a translator, becomes an important problem to be grappled with by Dalit authors. There is a felt need for instituting a publishing industry, which is completely managed by Dalits. The Dalits need to make their strong presence in all the wings of the mass media—from the editorial to the marketing teams. For example, in Canada there is a Press for the First Nations' peoples and women. A similar move would be welcome with the Dalits in India. Dalit publishing networks, along with Dalit news agency and Dalit media network, must have links with the mainstream counterparts for generating counter-productive programmes. Additionally, as far as Dalit

literature is concerned, there is a small body of readers. Readers to a great extent decide the success or failure of a book.

There is no need for specific target audience for Dalit Theatre since the social problem of untouchability is common to India. Each individual has the responsibility to uproot this inhuman practice. But it is meaningful if the social message reaches the non-Dalits and influences the beliefs and conventions of the entire audience. The target audience of a Dalit theatre performance must include both genders of different castes and of different classes. Dalit theatre must be a public space or a channel for communicating the social message for information, sensitization, emancipation, socio-cultural transformation, participation and liberation. So, it must reach more particularly, the non-Dalit audience. Even within the Dalit communities there are several layers of differences ranging from their cultural practices to their linguistic preferences. Slang and other forms of language are different among Dalits themselves in the districts of Thanjavur, Ramanathapuram and Madurai of Tamilnadu. A Dalit from one of these districts has some difficulty in understanding the slang of a Dalit from another district. The translator thus has to mediate between these extremes and find the appropriate mode of expression while translating literatures written by Dalits of different districts.

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Retreating into Tribal Mansions

Race and Religion in Plays Written by Parsi Zoroastrians in India

Nilufer E. Bharucha

The current explosion of politics in the Indian sub-continent, Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sudan and the continuing racial/religious conflicts in Ireland and Spain, has forced the recognition that racial/religious identities cannot be easily subordinated to indices of 'secular' modernity or postmodernist post-nationalisms. In the face of global market-economies and the cultural hegemony of satellite communication, ethnicity is often the last refuge into which great masses all over the world are retreating. It appears that in a postcolonial, postmodernist, postmarxist world, there are millions of human beings who have retreated into what Harold R. Isaacs calls the 'House of Mumbi,' the home of the progenital mother of the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya.

One of the standard sociological definitions of ethnicity is ' a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance' (Blumer 54). Ethnic identity is thus fundamental and composed of primordial affinities and attachments. At this point it needs to be noted that in any society, that ethnic group which becomes dominant, ceases to be 'ethnic' and becomes the 'norm.' So

British or American literature is not ethnic. However, Black writing within these countries is marked ethnic. Given the economic and political power enjoyed by Britain in the imperial period, its national culture, especially its literature, transcended its national boundaries and attained the status of a universal literature. The sole Superpower status of the USA today has guaranteed a similar privileged position for its culture and values. The ethnic marker therefore usually means the marginal or the subaltern.

The politics of ethnicity also operates within postcolonial spaces. In such societies the dominant group becomes the norm and the rest ethnically marked. So postcolonial texts do not merely foreground resistance to the colonial past or resultant ongoing psychic traumas. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee has put it, postcolonial discourse also offers resistance to domination and marginalisation within the national space (*World Literatures Written in English*, 30.2:1-9). In independent India, even in secular Nehruvian India and not just in today's BJP Hindu dominated India, the term 'Indian' generally meant and means Hindu. When one wishes to speak of Muslim, Christian, Jewish or Parsi culture, one has to specifically say one is doing this. During India's independence movement, leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru sought to play down the ethno-religious divide but it flared up in the resentments—real or imagined—of Mohammed Ali Jinnah and resulted in the division of India into India and Pakistan. Nehruvian India however stubbornly clung to secular politics, but even in those days India's huge hydro-electric projects were inaugurated with the chanting of Hindu prayers and the breaking of the auspicious coconut. In those early euphoric years this was not challenged by India's minorities. However, by the time Nehru died in 1964, minority disenchantment with Delhi's Hindu, Hindi-speaking, upper caste domination had expressed itself in language riots, caste unrest and greater assertion of distinct identities by religious minority groups. Since then the chanting of Sanskrit hymns has been downplayed in favour of multi-denominational prayers to mark state events such as the death anniversaries of Gandhi and Nehru.

Notwithstanding this 'Political Correctness,' ethnic minorities in India have been subjected to increasing domination by the Hindu majority. Approximately 80 per cent of the Indian population is

Hindu. Of the remaining 20 per cent, about 15 per cent are Muslims and the rest are Christians, Jews and Parsi Zoroastrians—in that descending order. Thanks to their dominance during the 500 years of Muslim kingdoms and empires in India, as well as the Muslim-friendly, divide and rule policies practised by the British Raj, the Muslims in India have always had a strong sense of ethno-religious identity. The Hindu-Muslim riots, which flared up before and after the partitioning of India, further intensified the Muslim's sense of 'otherness.' This was however not so in the case of the other religious/racial minorities.

The British Raj had for very practical reasons, discouraged missionary activities in British India. The majority of Christians in India are the Goan Catholics, who became a part of India only in the 1960s, when Goa was liberated from Portuguese rule. So in the first two decades of its postcolonial existence India did not have to contend with an assertion or otherwise of a Christian Indian identity. Today, however, an increasing number of Indian Christian writers are beginning to write in ethno-religious terms—chiefly the poet Eunice D'souza.

As for the Jews, the Jewish presence on the Western coast of India goes back nearly two thousand years in the case of the Bene-Israeli Jews and over two hundred years in the case of the Baghdadi Jews. Jews in India have adopted the local languages and costumes and given the fact that there has been no anti-semitism in India, they have not felt the need to assert their identities as Jews elsewhere did. This is reflected in their literary and non-literary discourse. The Indian English poet, Nissim Ezekiel is a Bene-Israeli Jew but in his poetry has never identified himself as such. The majority of Ezekiel's poetry however dates back to the more idealistic years when India's minorities did not feel threatened. The Jewish community in India today has dwindled considerably, as in the 1960s and '70s, very large numbers of young Jews migrated to Israel in search of better economic conditions. Interestingly, some diasporic discourse in Marathi (the language adopted by the Jews in India) has been emerging in recent years from among this community in Israel.

Current ethno-religious discourse in India is in direct response to her increasing engagement with Hindu fundamentalism. The

inner disputes within the Congress Party and the discrediting of its 'secular,' pro-lower caste image has meant that the political arena in India is being dominated by the extreme right wing Hindu party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and regional parties with strong lower-caste affiliations. This has alarmed the smaller minorities in India who saw the nominally secular politics practised by the Congress Party as a protection and guarantee of their rights and freedoms. They feel threatened by the militant Hinduism of the BJP and even though they are currently not the targets of their anger, they do feel disturbed by their slogans of Hindu India and anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Even the Parsi Zoroastrians who number only 70,000 in India and a 100,000 worldwide, feel threatened enough to produce distinctly ethno-religious discourse. The history of Parsis in India goes back to circa 785 AC or 936 AC, depending on which historical version you wish to privilege.[1] After the fall of the Persian Empire, the Parsis fled Iran to escape the religious and economic oppression of their Arab conquerors. In India, they came to be called Parsis after the Iranian province of Pars or maybe after the Farsi language they spoke. They landed on the western coast of India and were given refuge and allowed to practice their ancient monotheistic religion Zoroastrianism, but had to give up their arms, language and Iranian costumes. So the Parsis adopted the local language, customs and costumes but fiercely protected their racial and religious identities. This was done through strict rules of endogamy and a ban on conversion to Zoroastrianism. You cannot become a Parsi, you can only be born one. The ban on conversion to Zoroastrianism does not apply in modern day Iran which still has a small number of Zoroastrians—approximately 25,000. However, converts to Zoroastrianism in Iran or any other part of the world, cannot legally be defined as Parsis in India. The promises made at the time of refuge in India are today observed

[1] For details on the controversy regarding the dates on which the Parsis sought refuge in India, see J.J. Modi, *A Few Events in the Early History of the Parsis and their Dates* (Bombay, 1905), 9–10; K.N. Seervai and K.B. Patel, *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, ed. J.M. Campbell (Bombay, 1899), 185; S.K. Hodivala, *Parsis in Ancient India*, 31; D.F.Karaka, *History of the Parsis*, Vol. I (London: 1884) 30.

more for economic reasons than theological. Historically these promises and self-imposed conditions were a means of self-protection and self-definition. However, today there are other, not often voiced, reasons for the ban on proselytisation. During the British colonial period the Parsis prospered tremendously in economic terms and today the Parsi Panchayat Trust Funds are very rich indeed in terms of property, bonds, shares and even liquid cash. Given the sky-high property prices in Bombay and other metros in India, conversion to Zoroastrianism would give the new converts the right to reside in the sprawling housing complexes owned by the Parsi Panchayats and claim rights also to their other welfare schemes. This is a scenario not too many Parsis would welcome with open arms.

The reasons for the wealth the Parsis amassed during the British Colonial period can be traced back to the fact that the Parsis became mediators between the imperial power and the Indian peoples. Hitherto they had been small land owners and merchants in what is today the state of Gujarat on the western coast of India. As a diasporic people they had kept a low profile and tried their best to please their Hindu hosts. With the conquest of Gujarat by the Muslims from Central Asia, the Parsis had further retreated into their ethno-religious shell, so as not to annoy their new rulers, whose co-religionists had originally caused them to flee from their homeland Iran. With the coming of the Imperial European powers, the Parsis who were unhampered by the caste taboos of the Hindus or the psychological trauma of the Muslims caused by their defeat at the hands of the British, surged ahead. They were among the first Indians to accept English language education and became one of the most westernised of Indian communities. However, liberal Western education which was meant to provide the East India Company with a battalion of clerks boomeranged badly on the Raj, when educated Indians became 'infected' with notions of liberal humanism and even worse began to think of themselves as a nation.

So while the majority of Parsis continued to foster close links with the colonial rulers, a small but very powerful number of Parsis became active in India's anti-colonial freedom struggle. Dadabhai Naoroji and M.M. Bhownugree became the first Indian members

of the British Parliament and represented India's interests there. Naoroji was also one of the founder members of the Indian National Congress. Phirozsha Mehta became the Mayor of Bombay and took the British administration head on in several well documented and colourful conflicts. Bhikaji Cama was a radical revolutionary who was exiled by the Raj. She had the distinction of unfurling India's first national flag at an international forum. Thus in the colonial period while many Parsis aligned themselves with the British, some began to image themselves as Nationalist Indians.

Among the latter group were the growing band of Parsi creative writers. In the pre-colonial times Parsis had not produced much literature. The only available piece from that period is the foundational text, *Kissah-e-Sanjan* written in Persian around 1600 AD by Kaikobad Sanjana. This text details the arrival of the Parsis in India and their settlement in the Kingdom of Sanjan. The oral tradition has the Parsi folk songs the Gujarati *garba*, which also tells the story of the Parsis' flight from Iran and their subsequent settling down in India. Also available are the *Rivayats*—religious tracts—which were written between 1478 and 1766.[2] So the extant pre-colonial literature, oral and written, is comprised of religious tracts and narratives of valour. These texts displays some of the classic features of diasporic discourse noted by William Safran, viz., the insecurity and a sense of alienation from the host country. However, this discourse lacks some of the other diasporic features detailed by him, particularly the belief in the restoration of the homeland and the definition of self in terms of this lost homeland. Instead, as Eckhard Kulke has noted, there is the shared history of flight from Iran, refuge in India and pride in the Persian lineage (the Parsi race) and Zoroastrian religion (232).

Colonial Parsi discourse was written mainly in English but there are also some texts in Gujarati. Prominent writers of this period were Behram Malabari, a bilingual poet, travel writer and journalist;

[2] Khan Bahadur Bomanji Byramji Patel in a paper contributed to the *Cama Memorial Volume*, in 1900, has written how the Parsis in the year 1478 had sent one Nariman Hoshang to Persia to ascertain the authenticity of their religious practices and rites. More emissaries were sent between the 15th and 18th centuries to Iran and the resultant data was collected in the *Rivayats*—codes of usages and rituals. For more details see Dhalla.

Cornelia Sorabji, a lawyer by profession who wrote short fiction and other autobiographical texts; Fredoon Kabarji and A.F. Khabardar who were poets and wrote poems in English and Jamshedji Petit and Jehangir Marazban who wrote poetry in Gujarati. There were also the Parsi playwrights, C.S. Nazir, *The First Parsi Baronet*, 1866, D.M. Wadia, *The Indian Heroine*, 1877, P.P. Mherji, *Dolly Parsen*, 1918. These Parsi playwrights founded the Parsi Theatre movement, which had a major impact on Indian theatre and even the cinema. The Parsi Theatre in the late nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries operated mainly in Gujarati and Hindustani. None of these text displayed overt ethno-religious tones. The Parsi muse in the colonial period was happy with the newly emergent nationalist label of Indian.

With the end of colonial rule, the Parsi writers once again went into a kind of hibernation. The independence of India was won at a high cost and the country was divided into India and Pakistan. The carnage of Hindus and Muslims on both sides of the new border made the tiny Parsi community feel very insecure again as it was spread out in both the new nations. So the Parsis withdrew into prudent silence. This silence was sometimes punctuated by stray stories and novels in English and plays in Gujarati, but was broken in a major way only in the late 1970s and early '80s. This postcolonial Parsi literature was mainly in the form of novels and short stories written by Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai. All these texts displayed ethno-religious attributes not evident in the writing of the colonial Parsis. Apart from the novelists, this period also saw the growth of Parsi poets and playwrights—Keki Daruwala, the poet, Gieve Patel, poet, playwright and painter and Cyrus Mistry the playwright. The feeling of alienation and insecurity experienced by diasporic communities is evident in most of these texts. By the 1970s India's engagement with Nehruvian secular politics had been brought to an end by Mrs Indira Gandhi's practice of power politics and her initial abatement of Sikh fundamentalists. These decades also saw the rise of Hindu revivalism, initially as a response to Governmental appeasement of the Muslim minority. This resulted in an atmosphere in which the tiny minority of Parsis began to retreat into their tribal mansion.

The postcolonial Indian novel in English has many high-profile Parsi practitioners, especially Rohinton Mistry but the field of drama has fewer Parsis. This can also be attributed to the fact that drama in English is a rather low-key activity in India and there are very few Indian dramatists who write in English—Girish Karnad, Pratap Sharma, Gieve Patel, Gurcharan Das, Cyrus Mistry and Mahesh Dattani. It is extremely difficult for original plays in English to be staged in India and few producers are willing to put up the necessary finances. The audience too is very limited and even that limited number prefers to watch re-hashes of Broadway plays. Most of the Indian theatre in English is thus amateur. Moreover, theatrical activity is restricted to the big metropolitan cities of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Madras. However, in the last three to four years there is a growing audience even in smaller cities like Bangalore, which is Dattani's home town.

Among the contemporary Indian playwrights, Gieve Patel and Cyrus Mistry are the only Parsis. All the three plays that Patel has written—'Princes' (1970), 'Savaksa' (1982 but published 1989) and *Mister Behram* (1988) are focused on the Parsi world. Mistry's first play, the Sultan Padamsee award-winning *Doongaji House*, was written in 1978, but was performed for the first time only in 1991 (it was also published in that year), since then it has had 25 shows in Bombay, Goa and Bangalore. In an interview with me Mistry displayed understandable bitterness about this long delay in the staging of *Doongaji House* and felt that the theatre company that gave him the award, the Theatre Group, should have staged his play. He also said that they and other companies in India were not interested in original English plays as they feel they are not commercially viable. Patel on the other hand was more optimistic. In his interview with me, he said that the audience response has been growing and from 1970 to 1998 there has been an over 50 per cent increase in the audience for original English plays. However, he too felt that there should be more outlets for such plays. Patel would also like more newspaper coverage for original plays in English. Such plays are often ignored by the press in favour of the Broadway imports and Shakespearean plays put up by visiting British theatre companies, sponsored by the British Council. This of course strengthens the arguments put forward by postcolonial

critics like Edward Said (*Culture and Imperialism*), Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin White Masks*) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (*Decolonisation of the Mind*) who say that colonialism breeds a slave mentality that often survives the end of empire.

Neither Patel nor Mistry write in the tradition of the old Parsi Theatre which tackled large, epic subjects from Indian history which were very clearly nationalistic in tone. Both these dramatists in fact actively resist the overblown style and melodrama of the old Parsi Theatre. They react even more strongly to any attempt to link their plays to those of another Parsi playwright, Adi Marzban, who wrote in Gujarati in the immediate postcolonial period. Marzban was a force to reckon with on the Gujarati stage in Bombay in the 1950s and '60s. His plays were the first ethnocentric dramatic texts written by a Parsi. They detailed Parsi society, customs, cuisine and above all humour. However, this humour often bordered on the farcical and his characters were caricatures and stereotypes rather than real people. He specialised in clownish old Parsi men and women—the *Bawajis* and *Maijis*. Like most Parsis today, Mistry and Patel disassociate themselves from these caricatures, but these clownish characters could have been clever ploys on the part of Marzban. They drew attention away from the Parsis' elite status in the colonial period. By portraying Parsis as a rather comic, harmless minority he made them objects of love and affection among the majority of the Gujarati Hindu community. In fact till date Gujarati Hindus are die-hard fans of Marzban's theatre and after his death have taken to reviving his plays, with a Parsi cast but with Gujarati Hindu directors.

Patel and Mistry's inspirations have been European and American dramatists. Patel's acknowledged influences are Ibsen and Racine, while Mistry has been inspired by Chekov, Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill. Neither acknowledges the Indian dramatic traditions, classical or folk. Both of them prefer the western nineteenth century realistic mode and do not, unlike the other Indian dramatists, Karnad or Dattani go in for Indian folk or Brechtian experimentation. Mistry has said that for him content is more important than form and that there should be very good textual reasons for experimentation. If there is to be a break from reality it has to come naturally (Personal Interview). In Patel's

opinion taking on the folk tradition in contemporary metropolitan drama is like carrying artificial baggage. In his own words: 'For me, modern theatre is a metropolitan construct. You could call me a purist if you like but I stick to this view' (Personal Interview).

Patel is equally clear about the focus on Parsi race and Zoroastrian religion in his plays. He says that he has done this deliberately as he is most comfortable with that ethos and knows it most closely. However, he is quick to add that his plays are not just documents of the Parsi race and religion. In fact, Patel is not an orthodox Zoroastrian—he is a liberal who has married an Indian Christian woman. Incidentally so has Cyrus Mistry. Patel says that he identifies with the Parsi ethos at the level of the social and cultural rather than the theological. For him this ethos has been the filter through which he has explored the dramatic possibilities of life. He very strongly refutes the idea that writing about Parsis reduces his plays to the level of ghetto discourse. For him the ethnoreligious nature of his drama is a means of reasserting the Parsi space within the wider Indian context. Patel also offers the interesting contention that all communities in India are ghettoised and not just the Parsis. In his opinion, Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* (1989), which is focused on the South Indian Brahmin ethos, language, accents, culture, etc. should also be called ethnic discourse, rather than an 'Indian' play (Personal Interview).

However, Patel's Parsi characters and backdrop have not been obstacles to the wider Indian acceptance and appreciation of his plays. Patel feels that 'the more faithful a play is to its origins, the more universal it becomes. All three of my plays have been seen by a wide range of Indian audiences' (Personal Interview).

Patel, who wears four hats simultaneously, medical doctor, poet, painter and playwright claims that he feels most complete when he is being all four of his selves. He practices medicine every evening and paints almost every day in his studio, where he also writes his poetry and plays. His wife Toni is a theatre director with her own company called Stage Two. Most of Patel's plays as well as that of Mistry's have been put up by Stage Two.

'Princes' written in 1970 was Patel's first performed play. It is set in a small village in Gujarat, with a large Parsi population. The play centres around the confrontation between two families over a male

child. The boy dies at the end of the play so that neither family gets him. The play is not overtly biographical but Patel has drawn upon his family background. It is located in the village where his parents lived and the contested boy was his own elder cousin who died tragically young of rheumatic heart disease while the family squabbled above his deathbed.

In 'Princes' as in 'Savaksa' and *Mister Behram*, Patel has juxtaposed the Parsi race with the indigenous Warli race in Coastal Gujarat. The Warlis are tribals who are outside the pale of the Hindu caste system and live on subsistence farming and hunting. They were displaced from the margins of the Hindu villages where they used to live, by the newly arrived Parsis. The Parsis cleared the land, planted guava and chikoo orchards and became the big landlords for whom the Warlis worked as servants. So in Patel's plays one has him trying to work out the ambivalence of being at one and the same time the dominating, even oppressing class, and the ethnoreligious minority, which is anxious about the dominant Hindu community. Thus while on the one hand Patel's discourse is resistant to political and ideological domination, on the other it emerges from a socially and economically successful group. This raises the same questions that Sander L. Gilman has asked: 'In a culture of victims, does being ethnic mean being oppressed? Can successful ethnics be considered ethnic? Do ethnics have to be subalterns?'(23) Homi Bhabha has related ethnicity to anxiety. He has quoted Freud to strengthen his argument, 'As Freud writes, anxiety, like ontopology is an archaic, atavistic, cathexis of longing [...] a defensive reaction to the felt loss (or displacement) of the object (*Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*). Anxiety keeps visible and present both the moment of birth as a trace and the displaced state and in that sense constitutes a transition where strangeness and contradiction cannot be negated and must be continually negotiated and worked through. Anxiety is a culture's longing for place and its borderline existence [...]'(35).

The anxiety and borderline existence in the context of dominance in the postcolonial Indian context is tackled more centrally in *Savaksa*, while the guilt *vis-à-vis* the oppression of the Warlis is sensitively worked out in *Mister Behram*. *Savaksa* revolves around the eponymous ageing landlord and his passion for a

young girl called Perin. Savaksa who is 64 wants to marry Perin who is only 20. Savaksa's wealth outweighs his age in the minds of Perin and her mother Khorshedmai. So Khorshedmai along with Perin and her elder daughter Hutoxi pay a visit to Savaksa's home. This upsets Savaksa's grown up children and his daughter-in-law. Matters become further complicated when Hutoxi in a cunning and calculated move decides to seduce Savaksa's younger son Adersar, who is somewhat mentally retarded.

The daily routine of a Parsi household, the cuisine and customs as well as colourful Parsi Gujarati idiom, translated into English, provides ethnic particularity to the play. Patel has said that he writes in English rather than in Gujarati because that is the language he is most familiar with. However, it is an English he has 'moulded' to suit his Parsi characters. In the interview with me Patel had said, 'It is often ungrammatical, it is not correct English'. However, he is not interested in merely reproducing the errors that Indians normally make when they speak English. 'I wanted to recreate a language. The language of theatre is an artifice, but it is not artificial. It is something created and so I would change the syntax. I would change the grammar in order to get the right rhythms of the characters' (Personal Interview).

The character of Savaksa is the most colourful one in the play and so is his language: 'Put courage inside your husband Jermai', he says to his daughter-in-law. 'He is frightened by colours.' 'My son, some red colour on a flag must not frighten you' (77), he continues, this time directly addressing his son with reference to the red flags carried by their striking labourers. Khorshedmai's language is equally interesting: 'I won't talk now. My mind is free. I can see from you face that all my worries were wrong! No, don't go away, I am telling you I have cleaned all these thoughts out of my brain'(79), she says to Jer, Savaksa's daughter-in-law, in relation to the acceptance of her own daughter by Savaksa's family.

The red flags, which Savaksa dismisses so airily, are signposts of the declining power and prestige of the Parsi landlords in rural Gujarat. The political jockeying for power outside the home is duplicated within Savaksa's family as his son Dorab aspires to become the dominant force within the family by displacing his father. The decline in the fortunes of the rural Parsis is mirrored in

an even more intense fashion among the urban Parsis. The object of Savaksa's attention, Perin and her sister Hutoxi are aware that unless Perin manages to marry the rich old man, their financial situation would be extremely precarious. Jobs for not-so-well educated Parsi girls are not available as easily in postcolonial India as they were during the colonial period when such girls would have been snapped up as secretaries thanks to their Westernised looks and good English.

However, Savaksa's own glory days are coming to an end. His position as head of the village Panchayat is challenged by a tailor. This would have been inconceivable in colonial India. As his shocked son Dorab puts it: 'Pappa I have found it all out! He sits on a machine all day, he bites thread and talks. And our workers sit on the ground around him—and they listen! Imagine it!'(103). The tailor thus not only hopes to replace Savaksa in the Panchayat, but he also instigates his workers against him. Savaksa's troubles come to a head when his beloved Perin runs away from him and his ambitious son Dorab squeezes more and more concessions out of the old patriarch. At the end of the play, the stage directions indicate Savaksa 'with his head down, looking around him with the tormented, restless eyes, like a snared bull' (146).

Mister Behram which is set in late-nineteenth century India is a play that fits in very well within the framework of resistant postcolonial discourse. *Mister Behram* also fits into what Edward Said has called the second stage of postcolonialism (*Culture and Imperialism*, 252–3). When a country wins its freedom from its colonial masters, its first priority is to consolidate its political sovereignty and to secure its external and internal boundaries. This is the first stage of postcolonialism. In the second stage the political sovereignty becomes a given and the delineation of borders more or less accomplished, the postcolonial society turns its attention to asserting its distinct cultural identity. At this stage the erstwhile colonised subjects begin mapping their cultural territories and repossessing their histories. When *Mister Behram* was written in 1987, India was well into the second stage of postcolonisalism. The wars for authoritative borders it had fought with Pakistan and China were well in the past and with the exception of Kashmir, the external borders were finalised. India had now moved into the

age of self-definition and the conquest of its cultural domains, which included the repossession of its histories. That this is happening in the time of globalisation and what some have called neo-colonisation, lends this stage an even more intriguing edge. At such times it becomes very important to recall the colonial past and repossess it rather than shun it, as is usually done, in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation. This is essential as the impact of European domination does not automatically cease with the end of Empire. It continues to be felt in postcolonial societies at all levels—social, cultural, literary and economic. Vast sections of postcolonial India continue to 'image' themselves in the mirror of Eurocentricism. They still see themselves as a mirror image of the West—'the other' of Europe.

In *Mister Behram*, the titular hero images himself in the mirror of the colonising West. A product of English language education and a lawyer who practises in the courts of the British Raj, he is what Salman Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, calls 'Macaulay's Minutemen' (165). By the end of the nineteenth century, imperial educational policies, supported by British institutions of law and administration, had ascertained what Antonio Gramsci has termed the complicity of the colonised in their subjugation. At that stage what the Raj needed were collaborators to ensure a smooth functioning of the colonial administration and an uninterrupted flow of the colony's wealth, into the imperial coffers. The Raj at that point, however, had to be vigilant against people like Behram who could at any time cease being collaborators and move into more autonomous nationalist spaces. It was Behram's reputation as a powerful, independent-minded lawyer, sympathetic towards his countrymen that became a threat to the power of the Raj and hence had to be sabotaged by the District Collector Mr. Watts.

Behram is not just a challenger of the Raj, he is a very complex character. The complexity arises from the fact that he is obsessed with his adopted son Naval. Naval is a Warli tribal who was taken into the Behram household as a young orphan and then educated to become a fine lawyer in his own right. Naval's tribal name is Nahnu and in re-naming him Naval, Behram tries to assimilate him into the Parsi Zoroastrian fold. To further validate this adoption, Behram marries Naval off to his only child, his daughter

Dolly. Lurking under the surface of this play are several tensions and conflicts that deal with not just the colonial backdrop but also concern the Parsi race and Zoroastrian religion.

Behram's projection of Nahnu as Naval refers to the dilemma among Parsis in India on whether or not to accept converts to Zoroastrian as Parsis. The fact that powerful Parsis like Behram flout the laws against conversion and adoption, is an indirect comment on how in the past several Warli tribal youths like Naval/Nahnu and common law wives from among other tribes too, had been smuggled into the Zoroastrian community. This of course makes a mockery of the present day Parsis' contention that allowing converts to Zoroastrianism would despoil their 'pure' Persian lineage.

Another area in which Patel's plays offer challenges and resistance is that of gender equity and alternative sexuality. Behram is an unabashed patriarch and though he sends his daughter to England to acquire an education in law, he doesn't allow her to complete her degree. When he is pressurised by Dolly, he does let her join him and Naval in court, but treats her like a junior clerk rather than as a legal assistant. Dolly imputes this behaviour not so much to his patriarchal values as to his obsession with Naval. Here we have the piquant situation of a father and daughter who are rivals for a young man's attentions. Behram's interest in Naval has definite homosexual overtones, but his pride in Naval's mind and body could also be seen as the ultimate involvement of creator with his creation—a Pygmalion admiring his Galatea. One of the most powerful scenes in the play is when Behram makes Naval strip off his Western clothes and put on his tribal loincloth. This is done to show Naval's body off to the visiting British District Collector Mr. Watts: 'See that body Mr. Watts! A repository of secrets! Under trousers and suits and lawyer's gown is that essential Warli body. Our bodies Mr. Watts, yours and mine, are dull dough before this vision' (22). It is ironic that Behram here aligns himself with the westerner in reducing the tribal man to an object for study and aesthetic appreciation, thereby possessing him in much the same way as western orientalists appropriated Eastern lands, people and cultures. This is also a marker of how elitist groups in colonised countries internalise the coloniser's notions of the civilised and the savage.

Behram's fascination with his protegé horrifies his daughter. She cries out to her mother Rati: 'He is snatching my husband from me... for himself!'(71). She confronts her father who very proudly claims that Naval means everything to him. 'To me there is no part of him that is not a source of rapture ... I could enter his entrails and eat the foul wastes of his bowels! Can you claim a commensurate devotion?'(83), he challenges her. Dolly hits back with 'I can see now father, why you consented to our marriage in the first place. It was to retain Nahnu securely by your side. You are no different from men who nurture little infants over the years, waiting for the unspeakable pleasures that will be theirs when their charges have ripened'(83). Naval, however, rebuffs Behram's final advances and as a result Behram suffers a paralytic stroke. The play ends with Naval and Dolly leaving Behram's house.

Cyrus Mistry's *Doongaji House* could be seen as a metaphor for the Parsi community. Doongaji House is a dilapidated building full of old people and ageing single women. All the young people and families have left. As the main protagonist Hormusji says: 'First our Rusi went away to Canada. Then Fali went to Chikalwadi. The Bogdawalas and their children moved out lock, stock and barrel. Who is left in the building now? Only old people'(1–2). 'When I think of the old times, I feel so brittle. I feel I could pluck the fingers off my hand and toss them away. Then my toes, my nose, my ears, my tongue ... till nothing remains'(8). This feeling of disintegration is further intensified when Hormusji once again sees the ghost of his old neighbour Dhanjisha Bapasola, who had died when Hormusji was still a boy. The ghost is in a sense the moral conscience of the Parsi community, which has fallen upon bad times and forgotten its old Zoroastrian ethics.

In addition to this focus on the disintegration of the Parsi community, the play is also full of ethnoreligious details. The characters speak of the Parsi Roj, i.e. the day of the week according to the Parsi calendar. There is also constant reference to Parsi food.

Mistry's language too is in the tradition of the colourful Parsi Gujarati. Piroja says to her husband Hormusji when he comes

home smelling of alcohol: 'This is poison for you, poison! Dr. Lalkaka has warned you thousand of times. When you are flat on your back, your liver all chewed up and rotted, then don't expect me to bring the bedpan to your cot' (4).

The increasing sociopolitical tension between the Indian minorities and the Hindu majority is also focussed upon in this play. Hormusji's son Fali brings the old people the news that 'Last night two Maharashtrian (Hindu) boys were stabbed in a fight. Some political thing. They were members of that group—Yuvak Sangh or something. So their gang retaliated. Some shops in Null Bazaar were looted. Some Muslim fellows were beaten up. That's all' (19–20). He assures them, 'No one's going to bother you'(20).

Hormusji however is not convinced. 'This is serious. No laughing matter. In 1921 when the Prince of Wales came to Bombay, the same thing happened. Parsis vs Hindus. Soon we were fighting to save our lives. What a licking we gave them'(20). But he soon realises that 'those days are gone ...This is a generation of sissies. The blood has been polluted'—a snide reference to Parsis marrying outside the fold. There are also many other statements by Hormusji about the changed status of the Parsis—'Snatch, snatch! Maharashtra for Maharashtrians indeed! After the Parsis have built the whole city! Now if the British were here, they would have just flogged one or two in a public place' (26).

Hormusji's feeling of being under siege in a wider sociopolitical context, is exacerbated by his daughter Avan turning against her father and aligning herself with her cousin Cavas. This wounds Hormusji deeply as he and his brother, Cavas' father, had been estranged for a very long time. The problem ostensibly had been business and property related but in actualitywas the attraction between Piroja, Hormusji's wife, and his brother. Even as Hormusji's life is falling apart and his building is becoming more and more dilapidated by the day, riots break out in the city. He is caught up in the violence and returns home in a bloodied state.

The last act opens with the chanting of Zoroastrian prayers in the ancient Avestan language. The prayers are being chanted for the soul of one of the oldest residents of Doongaji House, who had been killed when the roof had caved in and fallen on him as he lay asleep in his bed. This results in the evacuation of the

building. The man who is in charge of relocating the residents in a sanatorium—a temporary shelter—advises them to get rid of most of their old and heavy furniture. Hormusji is distraught and rages, 'Leave me here alone. Let these walls collapse on me. I'd rather be buried alive under Doongaji House, then found dead in some rat-ridden gutter' (58). Yet, Piroja is able to persuade him to leave with her and as he follows her he says: 'Slowly Piroja...I'm not so young as I used to be. You'll have to help me'(62). This could be the exit line of the Parsis in India too. The question, however, is will India 'help' its minorities assimilate into the mainstream or will it push them further into their tribal mansions.

Ethnoreligious self-esteem does not preclude interaction with other ethnic groups. As Werner Sollor has put it, 'after deconstruction, ethnicity can no longer be an essentialising truth. It must be something constructed, potentially multiple, hybridized and interstitial?'(xi). However, this presupposes that the dividing lines of anxiety and fear that 'enclose' give way to the hybridising, interstitial seepage. This can happen only when the dominant spaces expand and become more inclusive. Then ethnoreligious minorities' existence need not stop at the edge of their skins.

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In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843 to 1933

Neera Adarkar

In July 1990, 'Expressions,' a women's cultural festival was organized by some women from various women's groups. Since the focal point of the festival was 'theatre' an effort was made to invite some of the first generation stage actresses of the 1930s to share their experiences. It was soon realized that the task undertaken was rather difficult as very few women of that generation were alive and amongst those who were, most were confined to the house because of their age. The third important factor was that actresses from the upper caste background were comparatively easier to contact than the actresses of Devadasi origin. We were denied access to them by their family members who were rather ashamed of their past.

The study which follows, is the result of further research undertaken to explore women's presence in, and their contribution to theatre in the recorded history. History of Marathi theatre in addition to a chronological documentation presents a comprehensive analysis of the various aspects and issues related to theatre.

Annual events of *Natya Sammelans* (annual conferences on theatre), magazines like *Rangabhoomi* published by a theatre company and dedicated only to theatre, many literary periodicals and frequently held seminars, discussions, lectures provided a

continuous platform to raise, discuss and debate, to the minutest details, issues connected with theatre—from aesthetics and techniques of the theatre to the political, social and moral values of the people involved in theatre. From the study of the available material it is seen that the actual contribution of women to theatre is marginalized in the otherwise comprehensive analysis of the theatre. Thus an important component of women's cultural tradition is missing. On the other hand, one can find extensive material to show how women in the context of their 'use' to the theatre were viewed by the patriarchal society. This paper deals with these two aspects.

DOCUMENTATION OF WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THEATRE

Women as performers, as theatre company owners, as playwrights are practically invisible as only a brief mention of the names of a few of these women with cursory one line remarks about their work in the history is made. This stands out starkly against the backdrop of glorious accounts of the contribution made to the theatre by men, especially those who performed female characters on stage. It is interesting to note that historians of different periods have given the same information about women theatre companies while male theatre is reviewed with a revised analysis over the years.

The earliest record of women performers is of 1865. Women performed in theatre companies, which were very often owned and founded by women. Although specific information about their background is not available, one can conclude from their names that these were prostitutes or from the low caste communities perhaps earlier associated with '*tamasha*' (a folk form). These theatre companies were 'all women' theatre companies and the female as well as male roles were enacted by women. There is not a single mixed theatre company mentioned till 1929 when it was founded by the well known classical singer Hirabai Badodekar although Kamlabai Gokhale performed both female and male roles in the company owned by her husband and later managed by her. Barring these exceptions, women actresses were not part of mainstream theatre.

The recorded documentation is given below. I have quoted some cursory remarks available in history books, specially the ridiculing comments of the women's enactment of male characters.

The earliest mention of women performers in the theatre company as per historical record is of 'Vibhujanchitta-chatak-swativarsha Punekar Hindu Stree Natak Mandali.' The main heroine's name was Mhalsa 'who was young and beautiful.'[1] This company was owned by Brahmin and the cast was composed of prostitutes. The company performed the play 'Padmavati' which dealt with child marriage, widow marriage and world religious principles.[2] In 1867 was set up the Natakankar Manoranjak Mumbai Hindu Stree Mishrit Natak Mandali where Neerabai, Taibai, Vithabai, Mhalsabai were in the cast.[3] Manik Prabhu Prasadik Purnachandroday Sanglikar Mandali was also owned by a Brahmin, Joshi. Soni Punekarin was the main performer, who was 'beautiful and was a good dancer.'[4] Purnachandroday Sanglikar Natak Mandali seems to have been a mixed company where Krishnabai acted as Draupadi. She is described as being 'fair, slim, medium height but the quality of her voice and singing ability was average.'[5]

From 1908–1925 three companies performed regularly—Belgaonkar, Satarkar and Manohar.[6] Belgaonkar Stree Sangeet Mandali was a popular all-women theatre company founded by a prostitute Ekamba which performed a 'pro-Tilak' play *Dandadhari*. The women performing male characters looked like '*ardhanari*,' 'ugly' and 'abnormal.'[7] A prostitute named Sheshasani founded a company where male and female actors performed.[8] Sarubhai owned Satarkar Street Sangeet Natak Mandali.[9] Kamlabai Gokhale from 1914 onwards performed male and female roles in

[1] R.S. Valimbe, *Marathi Natya Samiksha*, 1865-1935, 2.
[2] Valimbe, *Marathi Natya Samiksha*, 1865-1935, 3.
[3] Appaji Vishnu Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhoomi*, 1903.
[4] Valimbe, *Marathi Natya Samiksha*, 1865-1935.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] P.G. Kanekar, *Mazya Kahi Natya Smriti*, 1944.
[8] Valimbe, *Marathi Natya Samiksha*, 1865-1935, 4.
[9] Ibid.

the company owned by her husband. In 1929, Hirabai Badodekar, a famous classical singer, along with her two sisters and one brother founded a 'mix caste' company.[10] In some memoirs there are a couple of other local companies mentioned, one of them at Sawantwadi, where a local trader collected the local prostitutes to form a theatre company.

MARATHI THEATRE AND SOCIO-POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

The growth of Marathi theatre has paralleled the political and social movements in Maharashtra. The year 1843 marks the beginning of Marathi theatre when Vishnudas Bhave with the performance of *Seeta Swayamvar* started a tradition of mythological plays (which lasted till 1860). This was the period when religious resentment, especially of the upper caste Hindus, towards the Christian missionaries had reached its peak. The theatre companies of this period were in the hands of Brahmins, pundits and shastris. The objective of these mythological plays, according to Bhave was 'national entertainment.' The concept 'national' includes consolidation of religious sentiments and moral values. The plays were mostly based on Ramayana to show Ram as an ideal of manhood against the effeminate males portrayed by tamasha (a folk form of decadent Maratha period) which was still continuing at the time.

From 1861 a new tradition of historical plays started to evoke the emotions of patriotism rather than religious fervour. These plays were termed 'bookish' plays since for the first time the script of the play was written down. The establishment of universities and the exposure to English literature encouraged many college students and teachers to translate Shakespearean plays as well as old Sanskrit plays and stage their shows in the colleges of Bombay and Pune. These historical plays, in addition to evoking the patriotic sentiments, also upheld orthodox, conservative and moral values. The plays reflecting social reform issues had to take the form of 'social plays.'

[10] Sumant Joshi, *Marathi Natyasrishtitali Mushfiri*, 1966.

Although nearly 35 plays seem to have been written on the theme of social reforms pertaining to women till the 1930s, the 'golden era' of Marathi theatre is identified only with musical historical plays between 1885 to 1920, which had a patriotic message and very high standards of production and music. This is also characterized by the era of glorification of some of the male actors performing female roles. Actors like Balgandharva were legends.

Most theatre company owners, playwrights (especially Khadilkar), actors (such as Balgandharva) were highly influenced by the personality and political ideology of Lokmanya Tilak. Plays like *Rana Bhimdev*, *Khara Rajput* (Real Rajput) glorified virtues of self-righteousness, strength, valour, national and religious pride and martyrdom. All these plays were not subtle in conveying the messages and directly provoked the British rulers by characters and situations identical to the then prevailing political events.

Almost all the political events of that period, especially those taken up Lokmaya Tilak in his paper *Kesari* and *Maratha*, became ready material for plays. A few examples: the Swadeshi movement and boycott on foreign goods advocated by Tilak reflected in the play *Swadeshi Chalwal*. In the first Natya Sammelan of 1906, a resolution was passed to use only 'swadeshi' material for theatre company requirements.

Partition of Bengal, the *Vang Bhang* movement got reflected in *Divya Arunoday* and British atrocities on the people demanding their right to sing 'Vande Mataram' under the presidentship of Surendranath Bannerjee, a close friend of Lokmanya Tilak (were reflected) in the Marathi play *Barisalchi Dhamdhum*.

For Tilak the priority was political freedom and not social reforms which according to him would divide the people by isolating the orthodoxy, whereas leaders like Agarkar, Bhandarkar, Lokhitwadi stressed on the social reforms, specially those related to women. These differences among the leaders on social and political priority are well known. Since the theatre was more influenced by Tilak, plays on women's issues although not directed against the reforms reflect Tilak's low priority for women's issues. The plays were structured to depict the characters and views of both the sides, the traditional and the reformist; however, characterizations and the situations created in a very shrewd and clever way, always

showed the reformist as westernized, over-enthusiastic, ridiculous and a hypocrite.

There were during that time a few examples of famous leaders like Justice Ranade who advocated widow remarriage but himself remarried a young girl of 11 years. Such hypocritical behaviour of a reformist was quoted frequently in the plays to undermine the reformist movement in general. Educated women were often portrayed as immature, juvenile, flippant and anglicized.

The play *Sampati Kaydyache Natak* was written on the 'Consent Act' of 1891 which prevented a husband from having intercourse with his wife under 12 years. The play showed how one of the sections of the act becomes responsible for ruining the married life of an innocent young man. Another play on the same act, *Indira Madhav Sadhyasthiti*, was written to oppose the views expressed by the former play as it exposed the hypocrisy of Tilak's supporters and their shortcomings. It is difficult to slot these plays as being pro- or anti-reforms for women since many plays which were considered pro-women by the writers and the viewers of that time will not be so considered in today's context.

It is an interesting fact that, with the exception of *Dandadhari*, which was produced by a women's company founded by a prostitute, almost all these plays on social reforms dealing with women's education, child marriages, love marriages, infanticide by widows, divorce, dowry marriages were enacted by a totally male cast. This contradiction is never mentioned in any of the debates about women and theatre. Women theatre companies which existed during 1885 and 1925 had male roles enacted by women. These roles were severely criticized and ridiculed by the historians of Marathi theatre with derogatory remarks like 'ugly, cheap, abnormal.'[11]

The play *Dandadhari* provides a good example. This was performed by an all-women company, Balgaonkar Stree Mandali founded by a prostitute named Ekamba. The play was in the tradition of the pro-Tilak plays. *Dandadhari* is the '*nayak*' of the play who advocated a cautious and restrained attitude towards remarriages of widows, not hurting social sentiments. In contrast,

[11] Kanekar, *Mazya Kahi Natya Smriti*, 1944.

the character of a reformist stresses the immediate importance of remarriages. Both these characters dressed like Lokmanya Tilak and Justice Gokhale respectively, were performed by women. The review of the play in one of the memoir books states that the audience applauded when Dandadhari appeared on the stage and both the actresses playing Tilak and Gokhale showed their acting talents but they looked like 'Ardhanari Nateshwar, Brihananda.'[12] They looked ugly and unnatural. A paradoxical situation of this play is worth noting. The play on widow remarriage was performed by a cast of actresses who were prostitutes and conveyed the message against widow remarriage.

Glorious accounts of some of the male actors who performed female roles mainly showed how these male actors even when outside the theatre could fool society by posing as women. A frequently quoted example is how Vishnu Watwa enacting the character of Sati Ramabai is worshipped by the women in the audience. There is at least one record to show how women looked at male actors who performed female roles. At the Natya Sammelan in 1912, held at Amravati, an educated woman Mathurabai Dravid read out a paper titled 'Actors and their Acting'[13] criticizing very boldly males enacting female roles, their entire appearance, mannerisms and acting calibre.

She has described the way the actors wore low-necked blouses and the manner in which the saree was stretched over the front emphasizing the breast in a vulgar fashion. She has observed that the young boys acting as grown up women do not do justice to the language the characters speak and how even if an actor was enacting an elderly married woman, he used seductive gestures all the time. She wonders whether these actors believed that they could replace good performance by ornamentary gimmicks. 'Certainly, at least the women cannot stand this obscenity,' she says. This paper must have had a fair impact because in the debate which took place in *Rangabhoomi* magazine later many participants have taken note of the criticism and supported it.

[12] Kanekar, *Mazya Kahi Natya Smriti*, 1944.

[13] *Rangabhoomi* (monthly), 1912.

DEBATE ON WOMEN AND THEATRE

While women performers are cursorily mentioned, the debate around this issue is documented extensively. The debate is carried on from 1903 till 1940 on the platforms of theatre conferences and literary conferences, periodicals and daily newspapers, public lecture series and seminars and is conducted and participated by urban educated middle class men only. Careful scrutiny of the debate shows that the patriarchy initially justified the exclusion of women from mainstream theatre but later to retain the commercial viability within the changing society, the same system justified the inclusion of women but within narrow and restricted confines. The discussion on this subject started in 1903 but an intense debate took place in two phases after 1910, the deciding factor was 'the change in society's attitude towards male enactment of female roles.' The debate only centred around the possibility of women as actresses, to replace male actors enacting female roles. Women as playwrights, company owners and music composers were not considered.

The period between 1903 to 1915 was the peak period of the 'golden era' of Marathi theatre. Male actors like Balgandharva, Keshavrao Bhosale, Tipnis, and Vishnu Pagnis were creating history by their mass appeal. Therefore, during this period there was not much discussion on women entering theatre, and whenever there was, it only assumed the possibility of prostitutes as actresses. In 1903 Abaji Kulkarni, a historian, talked of the disadvantages of having women on stage. To support his statements he described an unbelievable situation in a play on Radha and Krishna. 'Just before the curtains opened 'evil thoughts' entered the minds of the performers playing Radha and Krishna and they were overcome by lust and could not take their entry on stage. The curtain of course could not be raised and the theatre company was ridiculed by the audience.'[14] According to him, there was no art in women enacting female roles but there was art in men enacting female roles. For Abaji Vishnu Kulkarni who shows in his book his intellectual and scholarly approach to the analysis of history of Marathi theatre in

[14] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhoomi*, 1903.

a manner which may be appreciated even today, the statement he makes against women appearing on stage (as mentioned above) sounds superficial, hollow and ridiculous.

The first phase of the debate was the latter half of the 'golden era' of theatre. Society had seen and appreciated male enactment of female roles but at the same time, with exposure to western literature and western thoughts the shortcomings of the male enactment were noticed sharply. Simultaneously, because of women's education and their increased visibility in society the possibility of '*kulin*' (of upper caste origin) women enacting female roles in theatre was considered for the first time. Hence the focus of the debate was whether the kulin women should enter theatre to replace the male actors performing female roles.

In the second phase between 1925 to 1933 the complexity of the debate increased. The theatre trade was declining because of a stiff competition from cinema. Educated women in good numbers were emerging in the so far prohibited fields and the theatre trade needed all possible props for its financial sustenance. So the trend was more towards kulin educated women joining the theatre. In both these phases the arguments, whether against or in favour of kulin women's entry into theatre, were firmly rooted in the base of patriarchal moral values. This patriarchal bias was sometimes shrewdly camouflaged in the arguments, which were in favour of women's entry.

In the first phase in 1915, *Rangabhoomi* invited open debate from readers on the subject of kulin women and theatre, by publishing a questionnaire which dealt with the questions of moral values, development of art and the advantages and disadvantages of kulin women entering the theatre.[15] The response from the men, most of them well known in either theatre or literature, was tremendous. Only one woman seems to have participated in the debate.

The arguments given in favour of women's entry only concerned the 'development of theatre art.'[16] It is very clear that in this period the only relevant issue was the growing dissatisfaction in society towards the male enactment of female roles and towards the

[15] *Rangabhoomi* (monthly), 1915.
[16] *Rangabhoomi* (monthly), 1916.

obscenity, vulgarity and artificiality which followed in the script, in the acting, as well as in the production in general. Development of art in practical terms actually meant improving the above situation with women enacting female roles to replace men.

In theory most men agree to the concept of the 'development of art' but assumed that there was an inherent contradiction between art and morality. The choice was of morality over art for the stability of the society. The advocates of morality seemed quite sure that if women and men came together in the 'vulnerable' field of theatre, morals would be adversely affected. It was said that to imagine any man other than the husband, in the role of husband, was in itself immoral.

There were some very 'practical' objections raised by these men, 'if women take to theatre as a career, then during the menstruating period, is the company going to stop the shows? Even the spoiled actors of the theatre trade would not dare touch this actress in her impure days.' It was further asked whether the purity of theatre as conceived by Bharat (author of *Bharat Natya Shastra*) would be retained by such impure behaviour.[17]

It is important to see how society viewed prostitutes and widows in the context of the theatre. For those who thought women necessary for the 'art of theatre' but who did not want kulin women to lose their morality, gave reluctant 'consent' to the prostitutes but with conditions that they should be *'neeteeman,'* fit into the moral standard of the society; or else these prostitutes would spoil the morality of the men in the theatre companies.

They were willing to accept prostitutes in theatre under the guise of 'reforming the prostitute' by offering them an opportunity for a decent profession which in turn would improve their immoral behaviour. Prostitutes' entry into theatre is justified by saying that their minds are full of evil thoughts rather than sensible thoughts which would help them enact all kinds of emotions.[18] Those who were not happy with the choice of prostitutes suggested that

[17] Kale, *Lalit Kalechya Sahwasat*, 1956.
[18] *Rangabhoomi* (monthly), 1915.

widows could take up acting with necessary training in theatre craft.[19]

In the second phase of the debate, i.e. after 1925, the arguments against the kulin women's entry are almost the same, but the argments in favour become stronger and very elaborate to make them sound convincing. The women were required in theatre, as popular male actors performing female roles were getting older and new men did not find the enacting of female roles very lucrative. The earlier glorified examples of male actors were at this stage replaced by giving examples of their ridiculous appearance and acting. Examples like these were given to illustrate the 'degradation of the art of theatre.' Govind Tembe, a very well known personality in the world of theatre, mentioned that young men in our society were beginning to imitate popular actors enacting female roles. He maintained that at a time when the nation required strong men, this tendency to look effeminate was to be discouraged.[20]

The technical side of production by this period was quite advanced. Three-dimensional realistic sets replaced 'painted back drops.' One finds description of how the entry of the artists used to be purposely delayed to allow audience in the thatre to appreciate the set of a pool side garden.[21] Changes in social attitude came about due to a combination of more realism in techniques of production, and in the contents of the plays and due to the greater visibility of women in various fields so far. A shrewd twist was now given to the earlier objections on the grounds of morality versus art. It was argued that the danger of any degradation of moral values was not so acute any more because the women joining theatre would be educated, cultured, and kulin, unlike the women of the earlier period.[22] It is clear that at this stage the supporters of women's entry into theatre did not visualize women as independent and responsible persons but as women who fit in the mould of the

[19] *Rangabhoomi* (monthly), 1916.
[20] Govindrao Tembe, 'Rangabhoomi Ani Striya,' Part I *Ratnakar* (Monthly), 1928.
[21] P.S. Kale, *Lalit Kalechya Sahwasat*, 1956.
[22] P.G. Kanekar, *Mazya Kahi Natya Smriti*, 1944.

moral values put across by the reformer men with women only in supportive roles.

'Natural feminine' qualities of women were romanticized to pave their entry into theatre. Much was written about the natural grace of movements, flair for music and natural inclination towards the emotions. The most amusing comparison between the two sexes made in order to prove that women were beneficial for the art of acting is 'the imitating qualities' seen in young girls playing with dolls. How they imitate and transform themselves into the roles of mother, wife, grandmother with utmost involvement as against boys of that age who cannot concentrate in a single game. It was further added that this quality in women ought to be encouraged and purposely used for the art of theatre.[23]

The inclusion of kulin women had another aspect. It was openly admitted that the theatre trade in its prevaling low financial state, could not afford prostitutes because the prostitutes earned Rs 1000 per night whereas the theatre trade could only afford Rs 150 per month. Yet the needs of the trade were greater than the number of kulin women who were available. Therefore, a very clever move of expanding the definition of kulin to include more women was made after an elaborate, intricate analysis of the concept of kulin.[24] According to the traditional concept, kulin is linked with 'higher' birth whereas the modified version included women who were not necessarily kulin by birth, but by moral behaviour. It had two expectations, one being loyal to one man and secondly of having an aspiration of giving birth to a new kulin 'Khandan.' The true intentions of this modification of the definition should be seen in the context of the social scene in Maharashtra. There was a class of devadasis from Goa who had a concubine status. They had a high standard of artistic talents, specially in music which the theatre trade could not afford to waste. In order to be able to be called 'neetiman,' with high morals, they could be pressurized to follow a lifestyle prescribed by the middle class patriarchy. One can find examples of such women, some of them still alive today, who must have been emotionally pressurized to modify their lifestyle in

[23] P. G. Kanekar, *Mazya Kahi Natya Smriti*, 1944.
[24] P.S. Kale, *Lalit Kalechya Sahwasat*, 1956.

order to be called kulin. On the other hand, educated urban high caste kulin women had to be trained in the art of theatre. Quite pertinently nobody questioned whether male actors needed any training at all. Both these classes of women had to follow a strict code of conduct prescribed by the 'well wishers of the theatre.'

In 1915, when *Rangabhoomi* invited people to react to the debate only one woman Kashibai Herlekar had responded. In 1933, when the periodical *Sanjiwani* in its special issue on women and theatre invited reactions, seven upper class educated (all degree holders) women from places like Indore, Nagpur, Khandwa, Pune and Bombay responded. Out of these eight women who responded, two were totally opposed to the idea whereas six were in favour and were very clear in advocating their views.

Some of the important points which emerge from these reactions are: (1) Whatever women should act on stage, should be considered their personal choice based on their personal inclination, in the same way they would make a choice of careers as a school teacher or a doctor. Concepts like woman's urge for art, their ability for self expressions are pointed out by these women, which were never mentioned by men at any stage. (2) Art need not be linked to morality or with being kulin. (3) Women should not hesitate to take the risk of entering theatre as any new venture has its own risks. They should not allow men to make a mess of the theatre. (4) There is no need to wait for society to accept women in theatre but women should overcome societal prejudices. One should follow the examples of the courageous women who have already taken to acting to satisfy their extreme urge to act.[25] (5) Women should accept and encourage free mixing of men and women to overcome inhibitions. It is a matter of our own opinion and not that of society. (6) There are some very bold statements by Yamunabai Dravid regarding Khadilkar, the famous playwright, and Balgandharva.[26] According to her, playwrights cannot portray women characters and Khadilkar is no exception. She has criticized the way Khadilkar in the pay *Maneka*, has insulted womanhood and motherhood by

[25] Jyotsna Bhole and Padma Vartak, 'Striya va Rangabhoomi,' Special issue of *Sanjiwani*, 1933.
[26] Yamunabai Dravid, 'Striya va Rangabhoomi.'

making Maneka run after Rishi Vishwamitra urging him to make her the mother of his child. She says, 'Every woman has an urge to become a mother but certainly women are not so crazy as to run after a man. How can a male writer like Khadilkar understand this? No wonder that a male actor like Balgandharva is not ashamed to portray this Maneka. She adds that Rukmini and Draupadi portrayed by Khadilkar in his famous play *Swayamwar* are similarly 'male nayikas'.'[27] (7) Many women thought it would be ideal if both partners were in the field of theatre, not necessarily as husband and wife. That any form requires total dedication, therefore the woman should marry only if she can select a husband who also respects and loves art, otherwise one should remain unmarried to serve theatre.

Therefore, in conclusion, we see that when female roles were performed by men were appreciated by society, there was a trend against including women performers whereas at a later stage, when the demands of 'realism' appear, the trend not only changed in favour of women but sought to lure women into joining theatre by romanticizing femininity and by widening the definition of kulin women to include even the devadasis so that the needs of the trade were fulfilled, but at the same time containing them by not allowing them to deviate from a code of conduct based on patriarchal standards of morality. There is no mention of women's creativity or of their own inclinations.

Thus on the one hand the 'well wishers of theatre' looked down upon prostitutes as having a commercial attitude towards the art. They were called greedy for wealth and were accused of not having a genuine love for the art. One the other had, when women performers became necessary, the same 'well wishers' blatantly used the language of 'using' women as a commodity to help the theatre trade to elevate its financial and social status.

[27] Yamunabai Dravid, 'Striya va Rangabhoomi.'

Reform and Revival

The Devadasi and Her Dance

Amrit Srinivasan

INTRODUCTION

The term devadasī is a shortened form of the Tamil *tevaradiyal* which translates (not very well) as 'slave of the god'. Literally it means 'at the feet of the god' and refers to the class of women who

Note: An earlier draft of this paper was read at the Asian Regional Conference on Women and the Household at New Delhi in January 1985. I wish to thank the organisers and participants of the Conference particularly those of Sub Theme 4, for their invaluable criticisms and suggestions on the paper. The paper draws upon my research work for the doctoral degree at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, England. Data on the devadasis were collected through both field and library research. The documentary material focused on (i) the specifically British, official and non-official tradition of scholarship on India in the colonial period and (ii) on the orthogenetic textual tradition. In the field, research was carried out in two stretches covering a total of one and a half years in the 1979–81 period and was focused primarily in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu. The main aim of field research was to contact and interview the devadasis—the living representatives of a changed cultural position in order to grasp their evaluations and interpretations of the past. All those who could provide eye-witness accounts of the institution of temple dancing as a working system such as dance teachers, temple priest, musicians and local landlords were interviewed as well. Supplementing these interviews were the collection of biographies, extended case studies and genealogies, archival accounts, temple and social histories, court and temple records and scripts of dance lyrics and ritual songs.

through various ceremonies of 'marriage' dedicated themselves to the deities of temples and other ritual objects. One of the most basic errors to emerge in the course of research was the misuse of the term 'caste' in relation to the devadasis in the colonial literature. According to the devadasis themselves there exists a devadasi 'way of life' or 'professional ethic' (*vrtti murai*) but not a devadasi *jati*. The office of devadasi was hereditary but it did not confer the right to work *without adequate qualification*. There were of course local communities associated with the devadasis such as the Melakkarar, the Nayanakkarar and the Dasi in Tanjore district who either recruited (though birth and/or adoption) and trained them; or were functionally connected with them in the tasks of temple service. But it was only *after* the reforms that these individual and distinctive service categories merged under the prestigious 'caste' title *Isai Vellala*[1] in a bid to overcome the disrepute attaching to their past association with the devadasis. In a very real sense this marked the transition from a loosely integrated occupational temple social system to a highly politicised, communal caste association which utilised the cultural propaganda of the regional non-Brahmin party organisations, the DK and the DMK to achieve corporate identity and prestige.

The first half of the paper reconstructs the devadasi system as it prevailed prior to the legislation in 1947, banning all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls were dedicated to Hindu shrines. The second half describes the 'reforms' instituted in the social, religious and domestic status of the devadasis in the wake of the legislation, and questions to what extent these changes constituted an 'improvement' over their past position. Since in Madras Province it was the devadasi alone who danced *sadir* (the solo, feminine and graceful variant of the classical tradition) the reforms aimed against her whole way of life and person began

[1] The term *icai* appears in classical Tamil literature and refers to a special music played in the courts of kings. In association with Vellala, a respected caste name for dominant Tamil non-Brahmins, it represents a modern version of the term *icai-karar* or *icai-panar* which referred to the prestigious bards and court minstrels who performed this music in ancient times (Tamil Lexicon Vol. I: 272-3). This title was adopted by the caste association the *Isai Vellala Sangam* at a conference in Kumbakonam in 1948.

initially by attacking the dance and its public patronage in temples and in rich men's homes. The social pressures associated with this Anti-Nautch campaign as it came to be known, led to the complete suppression of the regional dance tradition of sadir in Madras by the early twentieth century. Its revival as the ancient and 'pure' Indian art of Bharata Natyam, almost simultaneous with the passing of various legislations against the devadasi and her traditional profession, provides the paper with a major experimental focus. The widespread popularity of Bharata Natyam today as an elite hobby and amateur theatre art dates from about the same period as the *Madras Devadasis Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947*.[2] The colonial context of the devadasi debate which kept the whole issue of reform and revival very much at the forefront of native political activity will be examined in order to explain this paradox.

I

Traditionally the young devadasi underwent a ceremony of dedication to the deity of the local temple which resembled in its ritual structure the upper-caste Tamil marriage ceremony. Following this ceremony she was set apart from her non-dedicated sisters in that she was not *permitted* to marry and her celibate or unmarried status was legal in customary terms. Significantly however she was not prevented from leading a 'normal' life involving economic activity, sex and child-bearing.[3] The very rituals which

[2] The full text of the Act is found in the archives of the Government of Madras, Law (Legislative), Department GO No. 23, January 26, 1948: Acts—The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947, Public Madras Act XXXI of 1947.

[3] In Christian traditions of celibacy for the priesthood and the consecrated life, sexual chastity is a normative aspect of the vows taken. Before the reformation however the prevalence of priestly concubinage provides sufficient evidence to indicate that in an earlier period the institutionalised stipulation against marriage was more crucial than rigorous sexual chastity. In the Concise Oxford Dictionary 'celibate' is in fact defined as '...unmarried person especially one bound or resolved not to marry' (6th ed., 1976: 159). There is no denying however that the ordinary understanding of celibacy today implies sexual abstinence. Particularly in the case of nuns the passionless ideal is more strictly enforced and adhered to. This remains true even in the Buddhist and Jain traditions of religious celibacy for women. For both the reform and

marked and confirmed her incorporation into temple service also committed her to the rigorous emotional and physical training in the classical dance, her hereditary profession. In addition, they served to advertise in a perfectly open and public manner her availability for sexual liaisons with a proper patron and protector. Very often in fact, the costs of temple dedication were met by a man who wished thus to anticipate a particular devadasi's favours after she had attained puberty.

It was crucially a women's 'dedicated' status which made it a symbol of social prestige and privilege to maintain her. The devadasi's sexual partner was always chosen by 'arrangement' with her mother and grandmother acting as prime movers in the veto system. Alliance with a Muslim, a Christian or a lower caste man was forbidden while a Brahmin or member of the landed and commercial elite was preferred for the good breeding and/or wealth he would bring into the family. The non-domestic nature of the contract was an understood part of the agreement with the devadasi owing the man neither any householding services nor her offspring. The children in turn could not hope to make any legal claims on the ancestral property of their father whom they met largely in their mother's home when he came to visit.

The temple institution's sanction to the pursuit of feminine skills and the exercise of sex and child-bearing functions outside the conventional domestic (*grhasta*)[4] context was evident in many ways. Till 1910 the rituals of dedication were public and elaborately advertised ceremonies which required the permission and full co-

revival lobbies strongly influenced by Christian monastic ideals in the colonial period, it made more sense consequently to publicise the devadasi system as a degenerate one. Ancient ideals of sexual purity they propogandised had been corrupted by the strength of commercialism and modern-day immorality. But if one is to understand the devadasi system it is crucial to accept that the ceremony of dedication prevented her from contracting a legal marriage but it never demanded sexual abstinence. If anything the Tamil Bhakti tradition of which the devadasi was an integral part, rejected puritanism as a valid religious ethic for its female votaries.

[4] In the indigenous tradition grhasta refers specifically to householding life based on the marriage of man and a woman and the duties and rights that flow from it. The devadasis always lived as members of a household but it was not a 'domestic' (grhasta) structure.

operation of the religious authorities for their proper performance. The *Pottukattu* or tali-tying ceremony which initiated the young dasi into her profession was performed in the temple through the mediation of the priest. The insistence on the prepubertal state of the girl was in imitation of Brahminical custom which saw marriage as the only religious initiation (*diksha*) permissible to women. Similarly, the *sadanku* or puberty ceremonies of the devadasi which confirmed her 'married' status as wife-of-the-god, were performed with an emblem of god borrowed from the temple as stand-in 'bridegroom'. On this occasion the procreative and nuptial rites performed at the time of actual consummation of a Brahmin marriage, (shortly after the girl attains maturity) were also carried out and auspicious wedding songs celebrating sexual union sung before the 'couple'. From now onwards the devadasi was considered *nitya sumangali*, a woman eternally free from the adversity of widowhood and in that auspicious capacity, she performed for the first time her ritual and artistic duties in the temple. The puberty ceremonies were an occasion not only for temple honour but for community feasting and celebration in which the local elite also participated. The music and dance and public display of the girl was meant to attract patrons just as amongst upper-caste non-Brahmin groups they served to invite marriage proposals from the family network.

A variety of competitive social pressures and traditional community obligations worked towards the setting up of particular arrangements between dancing girls and rich, landed or business households. The men of the patron class were expected to accept a young devadasi as a concubine despite the enormous expense it eventually entailed. The fact that it was the eldest son alone (and that too one who was already married) who had the right to take on such a partnership showed the *normative* co-existence of a private 'decent' way of life with one that was more wayward and idiosyncratic. For the devadasis their temple attachment granted sectarian purity and the promotional avenues to pursue a prosperous career. The economic and professional benefits were considerable and most importantly, not lacking in social honour.

Touching the dancing women, speaking to them or looking at them was mentioned as a ritual offence in the sectarian texts laying

out the etiquette to be followed by worshippers when visiting temples. This misconduct was considered equivalent in blame to other varieties of desecration such as spitting in the temple, turning one's back to the shrine, looking covetously at consecrated property, etc. Life honours were granted to the devadasi at the time of her death. Flowers, sandal paste and a garland from the god of the temple were sent on the occasion of her last rites. In some temples the fire of the kitchen in the temple was used to light her pyre and the deity observed 'pollution' for a token period of one day when no puja was performed at the shrine. Usually a funeral procession is not meant to stop anywhere but in the case of the devadasi the bier was placed for a moment on the floor near the entrance to the temple when the gifts mentioned above were made.

As *nityasumangali*, a woman with the protection of a living husband—the deity and lord of the temple corporation—the devadasi was provided with the excuse to enter secular society and improve her artistic skills amongst the connoisseurs and their families who were obliged to respect her and treat her with chivalry. What in ordinary homes was performed by the sumangalis of the family ceremonies welcoming the bridegroom and guests, singing songs of festivity at marriages and puberty ceremonies, tying the red beads on a woman's marriage necklace etc.—were in the big houses of the locality performed by the devadasi. As a picture of good luck, beauty and fame the devadasi was welcome in all rich men's homes on happy occasions of celebration and honour. Her strict professionalism made her an adjunct to conservative domestic society, not its ravager. It is this which lay behind the customary acceptance of married and financially secure family men as patrons. As the wives of men who had maintained dancing women often said, they far preferred a devadasi to a second wife as a rival as the latter would make domestic life intolerable. Even amongst some non-Brahmin groups where the devadasi could assume the status of a common-law wife of her patron, she never resided with him.

By co-operating in the ceremonies which conferred prestigious sumangali status on a section of its female personnel, the temple permitted the most intimate connections to develop between sectarian specialists and the laity. Crucially however its mediation

helped to simultaneously institutionalise and depersonalise these dyadic, erotic relationships. The triple-cornered communication between the temple, the devadasi and her patron permitted the legitimate pursuit of interests even in the absence of market conditions. For the civil elite a sexual relationship with temple women did not reflect secret needs of a ritual or orgiastic nature. As far as my field information went, the man did not go to her to get special powers or *sakti* or any such magical returns. The very publicity and singularity of the connections between a devadasi and her patron ruled out the cultic context more typical of Tantrik rites which involve high-caste men with female partners who are 'low' with a vengeance—usually untouchables. The competitiveness of the enterprise was evident from the fact that it was the devadasi's original sacramental husband, the Lord of the temple who provided the momentum for her subsequent attraction for men who wished to approximate and imitate it in human terms. The fascination of a 'wife of the god' may be mythic just as the fascination for a bed in which Napoleon slept or a saint's relic. But what is crucial for us is that it converts itself into exchange value when the socialite-client, collector or believer wishes to own the commodity in question or touch it for himself. Intimacy with a devadasi consequently demonstrated public success which visibly marked a man apart from his peers.

Seen in this light, the devadasi represented a badge of fortune, a form of honour managed for civil society by the temple. Land grants were given to individuals by rulers and patrons expressly for meeting their 'entertainment' expenses—the upkeep of a devadasi and her band of musicians. The whole idiom of temple 'honours' (*mariyadai*) in which the devadasi participated permitted a privilege contact with the deity and/or his possessions to have a more clearly secular significance and value. The temple for its own part was no disinterested participant—the patronage extended to the devadasi was by no means passive. It recognised that her art and physical charms attracted connoisseurs (in the garb of devotes) to the temple eager to promote her as their protegée in the world at large. The devadasi acted as a conduit for honour, divine acceptance and competitive reward at the same time that she invited 'investment'—economic, political and emotional—in

the deity. In this way the competitive vanities of local patrons, their weakness for oneupmanship with their equals and rivals became inextricably linked with the temple institution. The efficacy of the devadasi as a woman and dancer began to converge with the efficacy of the temple as a living centre of religious and social life—political, commercial and cultural.

The temple's sanction to the system of extra-marital alliance described above was particularly evident from the fact that it was the offspring of these 'mixed-unions' who were given prime monopoly over temple service. The temple also ensured in this way a permanent task-force committed to temple duties over all others. In an inter-caste context, the religious sanction given to female celibacy institutionalised sexual intimacy between devadasis and patrons. In an intra-caste context, it enforced sexual separation in excess of incest prohibitions normally operating within the kin group. The devadasi was permanently denied to all and every man of her community as a marriage or sexual partner. The artificial dichotomy within the community between the householding and the celibate female population gave rise to the 'pure' or 'closed' and the 'mixed' or 'open' sections of the community. The former perpetuated itself through marriage, the latter through both marriage and 'mixed' sex. (The sons and brothers of the devadasi were permitted to marry as also the non-dedicated girls of the group.) These internal divisions were closely linked to aesthetic specialisation within the community.

The allied arts of Tamil Bhakti worship—sadir (dance), *nagaswaram* (instrumental music) and *nattuvangam* (dance-conducting) were traditionally organised into two orchestras: the *periamelam* (in Tamil literature 'big drum') and the *cinnamelam* (in Tamil literature 'small drum').[5] The periamelam was focused around the male nagaswaram virtuoso and was the hereditary specialisation of the 'pure' section of the community. The cinnamelam on the other hand was focused around the devadasi or female dancer and

[5] The periamelam was constituted of the nagaswaram (a kind of oboe), the *tavil* or 'big', outdoor drum, the *ottu* (drone) and cymbals. The *mukha-vina* (a diminutive nagaswaram), the *mrdangam* or 'small', concert drum, the *tutti* (a bag-pipe shaped drone) and cymbals.

her male guru or *nattuvanar*, and was the hereditary specialisation of the 'mixed' section of the community. Recruitment to the profession was restricted from within each group on the basis of various natural and cultural criteria such as (i) sex—the nagaswaram as also dance-conducting was meant to be performed only by men while the sadir was danced only by women, (ii) inheritance—'shares' in the local service rights to the periamelam were transmitted through male links and to the cinnamelam through female links, (iii) initiation—dedication to the deity seen as a simple rite of incorporation for the men and as a special ceremony of 'marriage' for the women, marked entrance into the profession and was compulsory for the attainment for privileges associated with temple office, and (iv) training—the public demonstration of skill in one's art subsequent to a ritual and social apprenticeship to one's teacher was the necessary preliminary to a professional career. Participation in each orchestra consequently required both technical and hereditary qualification.

The requirement for both heredity and skill in temple positions presumed a tightly-integrated community context. Self-sufficiency in the training and performance of skills heightened local group corporatism and professionalism through the internal organisation of the population into specialist and lay sections. It was not enough to be born into the community, one had to be competent in order to gain rights to temple service. Just as it was difficult to be competent in the particular service unless born or adopted and resident in the community with its internal training facilities. Professional divisions such as peria and cinnamelam reflected an involution and great sophistication of the artistic services rendered by the community under the influence of the Bhakti temple institution. Both the technical instrumental organisation as also the aesthetic and functional speciality of the music provided by the two orchestras reflected this fact.

The promotional advantages of a temple position for a professional career were obvious both in terms of publicity and income. The invitation to perform at marriages and other auspicious ceremonies in elite homes flowed from the artists' special status as god's servants. In this respect they were clearly superior to low-caste drummers and musicians who were the

hereditary clients of private households. The public entitlements of temple office—a house site, cooked food and token payments—only partly accounted for the strong monopolies that operated in the filed. Temple service provided a kind of 'union' membership without which no artist could count as a professional performer. It was the side benefits, the access to material advantage and artistic patronage in the secular world which made temple positions so lucrative.

By providing the cultural context for the competitive fever of art to display and prove itself, the south Indian temple institution proved itself a valuable patron. It also gave a degree of respectability to professional skills by encouraging their excellence and ceremonially sanctioning as 'auspicious', not impure, the unusual ways of life that went with them. In the big temple centres of Tamil Nadu there is no denying that the involvement of the community with the secular elite, their celebrations and artistic patronage, improved the Bhakti dance and music as a concert performance. In the process the devadasis and their menfolk were able to amass considerable wealth and prestige and organise themselves better professionally. The statutory requirement to live proximate to the deity intensified local community relations which (as they saw it) had helped 'concentrate' and develop their skills. Art as a corporate function and mode of livelihood ensured competence and continuity of practice. An extremely telling metaphor used to justify their artistic capacities was that of the plantain (*vadai*) which kept perpetuating itself over the years form the original parent stock (*vadai-adi-vadai*).

TWO TRADITIONS

What is significant to our purpose however, is that in the context of an otherwise shared community culture where the dance 'people' (also referred to as the cinamelam) and the nagaswaram 'people' (also referred to as the periamelam) lived, married and worked together, it was the *female* profession which instituted competitiveness. Most of the nagaswaram players remarked on the greater wealth, fame and glamour that had been possible for the dancing girls as compared to themselves. Significantly, they claimed this to be the effect of an unfair advantage arising out of the natural attraction of women. According to them the temple

authorities used to give the dance preeminence at festivals knowing that the people would flock to see the devadasis. The devadasis were certainly permitted privileges and honours and a physical closeness to the deity denied to the men of her community. The artistic and monetary dominance of the female art form was also linked to its earnings as a concert item—before the 1940s nagaswaram played only at outdoor occasions. Even their sense of comparative social superiority ('we take our father's initials'), offered the nagaswaram artistes little recompense since they were forced to acknowledge that it was the devadasi's distinctive life-style which permitted her greater artistic and worldly success. In addition, one cannot help feeling, the privileged access of women artistes to rich patrons and their wealth underscored more sharply their absolute non-availability to their own men. The antagonism felt for the cinnamelam was in recognition consequently, of the power and influence the devadasis had *as women* and as artistes. The leading role played by the men of the community in the subsequent reform campaign to abolish the female profession of temple-dancing, cannot be understood without reference to this potent fact.

It was the radical factor of female celibacy further more which permitted the group to go beyond the domestic mode of production seen as characteristic of internal caste organisation. The sexual division of labour within the community between the male and female art forms clearly related to professional not household divisions. In the nagaswaram tradition, this was evident from the fact that the women of the group were scrupulously kept out of public, professional life. In the dance tradition too despite the involvement of both men and women in the occupational tasks of the group, various mechanisms operated which kept the relationship free of any domestic obligations. As we have seen, married girls were not permitted to specialise in the classical temple dance and its allied music. Conversely, those girls who were dedicated to the deity were not permitted to cook or perform mundane domestic tasks either for the men of their own household or for their guru. The latter in fact was necessarily a man from a separate household tradition to that of his student even though they might reside together for the period of training.

The peria and cinna social organisation clearly did not reflect the mechanical repetitiveness of internal divisions found in other caste populations of Tamil Nadu. The 'rationalisation' of diffuse kinship structures and the 'pre-industrial' caste economy was most evident in the structure and organisation of the devadasi household. The methods and means employed here to encourage artistic excellence, monetary profit and a great systematisation in the achievement of life's goals reflected an unusual household and cultural tradition which saw itself as perpetuated in a natural *and* moral/social sense, by its women. The direct link that obtained between women as the bread-winners, the kind of income they fetched and their household supremacy, not only in spending and managerial matters but in a political sense as well, will now be briefly described.

It was conscious economic motivations which lay behind the temple dedications (whatever the voiced religious reasons for their performance). Although the temple co-operated in the rituals, pressures to perform the ceremony remained internal to the household and reflected not only the self-interest of the family against 'outsiders' but also internal mechanisms of competition and rivalry which often raised disputes over claims.[6] The insistence on the minor status of the girl to be dedicated reflected this fact since it ensured the retention of hereditary rights to service and land benefits in a given temple. The temple tenurial system of pre-colonial India granted a service allotment or *maniam* which was meant for the enjoyment 'over the generations' (*vamshaparam-birayam*) of a set of dasis attached to a given shrine. They had no right to alienate it since it was not in their name but the temple's, more specifically in the name of the deity or the head of the controlling *matha*. The organisation of shares (*panku*) in this land just as the organisation of training and arrangement of daily duties was a matter of internal management by the community.

[6] In the section on devadasis in his prodigious work on the ethnography of south India, E. Thurston, Superintendent of the Madras Government Museum, gives evidence of the increasing involvement of secular law with the devadasis and their disputes in the late nineteenth century (*Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, in 7 volumes, 1909, Madras).

The property transmission within the household recognised the joint and inalienable nature of privileged land-use which could only remain with the family so long as there was a member actively employed in the temple.

The clear desire to keep the economic backbone of the household a female one was consequently linked to the fact that it was the women who were the primary source of both earned and ancestral property. But it was also in recognition of the fact, with no recriminations involved, that the moment a boy made good in an independent career, be it in music or dance or trade, he would move out and maintain a separate household with his own wife and children. Men stayed on as appendages of their sister's or mother's household only on sufferance. A man who had made his own name in his particular field of musical specialisation could not allow professional pride to be compromised by continuing to depend on his womenfolk. In any case in purely economic terms, he would be able to move out only once he had established his own reputation and consolidated his earnings. Under ordinary circumstances, it was the womenfolk who provided the men with a livelihood, arranged their marriages and gave them a home. The men it was further felt, always had the choice and the opportunity, to make their livelihood elsewhere, not necessarily in the art field. But the women were restricted and had no freedom in the matter. For these various reasons women were favoured over men in property matters. Devadasis were the only women allowed to adopt a child under customary Hindu law and often an adopted daughter was favoured over an only son in the matter of inheritance.

The dominance of women even at the level of formal authority within the home was in a large sense due to the very nature of its economic base. Household property was largely earned income acquired in the form of cash, jewellery and goods and it was through its women that the household made profits in this sphere. The land endowments, by the very terms of their enjoyment, could not be alienated or capitalized on. Neither did the community have the agricultural skills necessary to profit from the land they owned—they saw themselves primarily as artists and professionals. The person 'in charge' in the dasi establishment, the *Taikkizhavi* or 'old mother' was the senior-most female member who was

normally one of the more renowned dancers of her time who after retirement exercised control over the younger members. The strict discipline of this old lady over both the private and professional lives of her relatives, her control over joint income, its pooling and expenditure provided the fundamental source of unity for the dasi household. The critical role she thereby played in the status and prestige of an establishment was appreciable. Considering that much of the income brought into the house was made on an individual basis it was the intervention and managerial control of the old woman which prevented household fission. All community members agreed in this and referred to their mothers' or grandmothers' special gifts with honour and reverence. Most homes had photographs on the walls of previous such leading lights of the family before whom daily worship was offered.

Quite clearly, it was the women who were considered precious in any given household for its social and professional reputation and continuity. The menfolk acquiesced in the priorities of the household for they too saw their future prosperity as inextricably linked up with the emergence of a beautiful and talented sister or niece who would consolidate resources. The alliances made by one's female relatives were significant both for the material and symbolic wealth of the household and the caste status of the 'father' provided a kind of axis along which different members of the group were graded. Given the peculiarities of the domestic economy in the charge of women, it would not be far wrong to say that it suited men to stay in the background. For not only was household wealth linked to the rather shaming (for men) category of 'women's earnings' but it reflected an area of insecurity and periodic want.

The money flow into a devadasi household remained rather uneven and individual prosperity varied greatly. The excessive life style and lavish spending on hospitality, food and clothing rarely left anything over to be invested in more profitable ways. The Taikkizhavi's office furthermore lacked public recognition or any specific material advantage for its incumbent. Given all this, the brothers and uncles of the devadasis acquiesced in their subordinate position because it relieved them of economic cares and responsibilities. The truth of this is particularly evident

when we contrast it with the Nayar case where despite matrilineal transmission of property, it was men who exercised control over the *taravad*. The power of *Karnavan* (mother's brother) was linked to the *landed* wealth of the Nayars. A woman's 'earnings' were in the nature of transference of rights of control over land from her patron to her uncle (the effective manager). He enjoyed furthermore *public* esteem as the legal and moral representative of the taravad in the local community.

Significantly, all these various matricentred features of the devadasi household encouraged a greater functional specificity and technical excellence of the dance tradition. As mentioned earlier the sexual division of labour underlying the dance was of a non-domestic nature.

THE DANCE TRADITION

Despite female household authority, in the professional sphere it was the male guru who exercised control over the dancer. Even when a nattuvanar resided with his mother or sister, his superior authority *vis-à-vis* the female student was ensured by the fact that she came from a separate household. With the achievement of a special renown however his subordinate position in his own household clearly led to an ambiguous situation. Given the strong force of the Taikkizhavi and her complete authority in the household, any man with self-esteem would, it was considered, move out whenever possible and rule supreme in his own domain. Financially as well the nattuvanar who set up on his own had much to gain since he was under no further obligation to pool his earnings with his mother and sisters. Residential separation consequently for the dance-guru who continued to be associated with women professionally, conclusively asserted his position of dominance over them.

The self-conscious and competitive functional division within the dance tradition between 'male' (teaching) and 'female' (performing) skill was reflected most dramatically in the emergence of two distinct structures of household organisation. The socio-spatial forces underlying this process related specially to men and their need to develop an independent tradition for themselves matching in wealth and prestige that of their illustrious

womenfolk.[7] The dasi or matrifocal household was characterised by the following features: (1) large size (an average of thirty residents) (women married into the house but few married out. Besides girls were adopted for professional purposes); (2) dichotomous power structure (female members exercised household control, male members exercised professional control); and (3) dichotomous ethical structure (conjugal and celibate codes both co-existed within it). The guru or patrifocal household on the other hand, displayed a consistency of political and moral structure and had a smaller size made up on an average of an equal number of males and females.

The flexibility and heterogeneity of the dance social organisation described above paid considerable artistic and economic dividends. Members of the community often related the sophistication of their art as a concert item to the introversion of their tradition with respect to the teaching of the dance. It was the access of the women of the community to closely related gurus, specialists in the female classical dance, which made the sadir tradition aesthetically perfect. The non-domestic nature of the teacher-student relationship had distinct professional advantages over other forms of community art organisation. The dasis feared and respected their guru *as teachers* and artists and informal religious leaders of the community whose curse could ruin a girl's career and prospects. The honour and worship due to the nattuvanar at the various rites of passage in a dasi's life could not be subsumed under any diffuse kinship obligation.

Dance teaching was more closely modelled on the Tamil sectarian traditions of spiritual teaching and secular education which required a close and intimate life-long relationship between the adept and the student. The devadasi, we must not forget, was permitted to learn to read and write and pursue a vocation—skills traditionally denied to all other women in India. The institution of the *gurukulam* (*gharana* in North India), its ethical

[7] The discussion, rather than view the process of household formation as wholly influenced and controlled by customary, kinship factors, seeks to emphasise the play of rational choices and competitive pressures in this area of internal caste organisation.

and technical structure accounted for high artistic standards, the distinctiveness of 'styles' and studied professionalism even in the realm of 'community' art. At the same time the community context prevented the inherent asymmetry of the guru-shishya relationship from becoming exploitative. Households very often stood in a 'student' relationship to some and a 'teaching' relationship to others. The chances of permanent structural asymmetry within the dance organisation were in this way obviated. The continuity of marriage exchange furthermore between gurus and undedicated women of student households balanced the tensions inherent to the gurukulam.

It was the more wealthy and prestigious patrifocal nattuvanar households which showed a marked tendency not only to prohibit their women a professional career but also to restrict the circle of marriage exchange. Quite understandably, this aggrevated specialisation and claim to 'purity' was seen by community members as being detrimental to art. According to them such extreme professionalism on the part of gurus made it unprofitable for the girls to dance. The accumulation of wealth and power through the exploitation of students and their earnings destroyed community and its 'give and take'. It was only through the continuity of the gurukulam—the transgenerational exchange between the teaching and practising adepts and their respective households—that the excellence of a particular 'school' of dance could be maintained. Real motivations of economic self-interest lay behind this professional and community code of conduct. The skill of a particular nattuvanar belonging to a famous tradition could directly affect for the better a student's 'market' both in the dance and entertainment world and enhance her household's prosperity. Equally for the nattuvanar she was the proverbial goose that laid the golden egg whose talents if handled properly, yielded steady financial dividends over the years in the shape of fees and gifts.

II

The unusual social tradition described above sanctioned: (i) a particular model of women which constituted a unique religious office. The conscious theological rejection of the harsh, puritanical ascetic ideal for women in the Bhakti sects, softened for the

devadasi the rigours of domestic asceticism in the shape of the widow and of religious asceticism in the shape of the Jain and Buddhist nun; (ii) a particular community or 'caste' which was a necessary corollary to the institutionalisation *both* of celibacy with sexuality in the devadasi's person. The devadasi stood at the root of a rather unique and specialised temple artisan caste, which displayed in its internal organisation the operation of pragmatic, competitive and economic considerations encouraging sophisticated, professional and artistic activity. The innovations introduced into the community through the fact of independent *female* professional skills contrasted well with the more conservative male profession which was also poorer economically. The abstract sectarian truths of Hinduism which see the male element as 'passive' and the female as 'active' in their cosmologies appear here to receive confirmation on the sociological plane.

For the reform lobbyists—missionaries, doctors, journalists, administrators and social workers—strongly influenced by Christian morality and religion, it was precisely these features of the devadasi institution which were reprehensible in the utmost. The publication of the devadasi system as prostitution sought to advertise the moral grotesqueness of the subject population for political ends. For those who supported imperialism, on the grounds of its 'civilising' function, programmes of reform it must be remembered were not without their ideological rewards. The movement urging the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls dedicated themselves as devadasis to Hindu temples, was articulated in the first instance as an Anti-Nautch campaign. The very use of the term 'nautch' (a corruption of the Hindi term *nach* which was performed by a more common class of northern dancing girl) suggested the smear campaign that was to follow.

The Anti-Nautch supporters, largely educated professionals and Hindus, began their attack on the devadasis' dance in 1892 using the declamatory and journalistic skills at their disposal to full effect. Collective public action took the form of signature protests and marches to the homes of the elite who refused to heed the call for boycotting the dance at private celebrations. At the official level memoranda urging legislative action and a

ban on the dance were presented to the Viceroy of India and the Governor of Madras who were assured that these performances were '...of women who as everybody knows are prostitutes and their Excellencies hereafter at least must know to be such....' After much pressure and recrimination both from the missionaries and the lobbyists, the government agreed to take sides and by 1911 a dispatch was issued desiring nationwide action to be taken against these performances.

The vigour of the Anti-Nautch campaign led to the complete suppression of the sadir and its secular performance much *before* formal legislation was enacted against temple dedication in 1947. Paradoxically however, almost simultaneously with the reform movement there emerged a movement urging the 'revival' of the devadasi's dance. Fears had been voiced from the very inception of the Anti-Nautch campaign as to the effect the ban would have on the future of the classical dance which was performed by no none else but the devadasi. But if we may ask, the devadasi's dance was a sacred tradition worth preserving and if the legislation (justified though it was on the grounds of anti-prostitution) came down with a punitive hand not on prostitutes in general but on the devadasi alone—why did the devadasi need to go? An examination of the colonial context of the dance provides some answers.

The emergence of parallel, equally vociferous reform and revival movements focusing on the devadasi's dance was a consequence of their politicisation. The so-called 'reformist' and 'extremist' approach which characterised native political activity in the latter half of colonial rule was reflected in their organisation. By the 1920s the Anti-Nautch agitation had become inextricably linked up with the communal politics of the Dravidian movement. The abolition of the practice of female dedication became a powerful political and legislative cause espoused by the backward non-Brahmins as part of the overall Self-Respect campaign initiated by Ramaswami Naicker in 1925.

The extraordinary success of the reforms was not unconnected with the fact that the community menfolk stood to gain by the legislation. Given the shastric sanction to the devadasis' celibate professional ethic and duty, their marriage could not become valid till the passing of the Act in 1947. In the interim period, the

tremendous social disabilities they faced worked to the advantage of the men of the community. For most devadasis there was opposition to their getting married particularly if they had been through the dedication ceremony already. People would either demand huge sums of money as dowry before agreeing to marry the girl or opposition would emerge in other forms. The astrologer would tell the boy's family that if married such a girl would surely die and so on. At the time of the reform campaign some eminent men did take devadasis as wives in symbolic assertion of their emancipation and public spirit. But these exceptions (as in the case of the few reported widow remarriages of the time) only served to prove the rule. It was the very beautiful or gifted dasis alone who managed to make good matches—M.S. Subbulakshmi, today's renowned singer married a Brahmin despite her dasi parentage; Jayalakshmi, the famous dancing girl of Pandanallur became the Rani of Ramnad, to mention only two. For the majority however, marriage remained an expensive and difficult proposition.

The reform campaign forced the devadasis to acknowledge the moral supremacy of grhasta values. Even more importantly, it obliged them to relinquish all rights to temple service and its privileges. The men on the other hand continued to perform both in the temples and in peoples' homes. The immense patronage they received from the DK/DMK regional party organisations favoured them financially. The nagaswaram, even today, is performed as a concert art. With respect to land rights as well, the abolition of the devadasi system benefited the men of the community over the women in direct contrast to the historical situation.

In the 1920s the non-Brahmin Justice Party (the more elitist precursor of the DK) had taken great care to protect service benefits, in terms of lands and buildings attached to the devadasi's office before finally pushing through the legislature Bill in 1930. The Madras Act of 1929 enfranchising *inams* and maniams as the tax-free land privileges were called, was justified on the grounds of social justice: The devadasi 'bond-slave' to the temple authorities could now own the house and land without the extortion of service. The process of converting traditional usufructuary rights to public land (attached to office) into private taxable 'property' however favoured the men over their womenfolk in that they too could

now inherit the shares earlier kept aside for their dedicated sisters. With land coming into the market, through the introduction of the *patta* (land deed) system under the British, the economic and moral infrastructure of matricentred joint householding suffered. Internal strife over property division increased and the wealthier sections of the community benefitted over the less fortunate. Most interestingly furthermore, the process of rational, western social change initiated by the reform campaign, far from reducing casteism actually increased communal tendencies within the community. The imperial census data of the 1901–1921 period reveal this process of transition of the devadasi community from a professional class with a *higher* percentage of women (quite unusual for India) to a 'caste' with a more typical sex distribution.[8]

The resentment freely expressed by the devadasis at the loss of power and privilege through the legislation provided ample, verbal testimony that the 'reforms' had been pushed through largely by a politically aware minority of the community, predominantly men. By contrast, the far greater resistance at the time to reforms seeking to change Brahmin female institutions such as dowry, virgin-widowhood and child-marriage was a consequence of the threat they posed to the landed, patrilineal interests of the elite. The aggressive anti-Brahminism and anti-ritualism of the Backward Classes Movement of the South provided the men of the devadasi group with a powerful ideology with which to overcome the humiliation of the Anti-Nautch campaign and fight for dominance both within the household and wider political society.

[8] The census returns (showed) the following statistical variations for the Dasi group:

Census Year	Dasi	
	Males	Females
1901	1568	5294
1911	1691	3290
1921	5050	5970

Source: Francis, W, 'Census of India', 1901, Vol. XV-A, Pt 2, Madras 1902: 158. Molony, J.C., 'Census of India', 1911, Vol. XII, Pt 2, Madras 1912: 112–13. Boag, G.T., 'Census of India', 1921, Vol. XIII, Pt 2, Madras 1922: 114.

With the increased politicisation of Brahmin-non-Brahmin cleavages in Madras State, it was entirely to be expected that the revival of the dance in more 'correct' society would be pressed forward by the Brahmin-dominated Congress and those sympathetic to the cause of Indian cultural and political nationalism. At the same time, these antagonisms surfaced in the form they did because of the imposition of a colonial framework of formal confrontation which (i) greatly accelerated the politicisation of the Indian people and (ii) provided the very rhetoric and the facts on which political action was based. I refer here to the alien, essentially western currents of thought utilised by the reform and revival lobbies to propagate and advertise their public campaigns.

British officialdom's stake in encouraging regionalism and cultural divisiveness directly linked them with those who pressed for its ban. Even in sensitive areas such as women's reforms it was the power of 'facts' and arguments based on western rationality and reason and not the authority of the sanskrit shastras that was increasingly invoked by Indians, to bring about socio-cultural change. The reform movement associated with the Hindu temple-dancer continued on the scientific plane, 'civilising' arguments pushed forward earlier (with far less success) on the religious plane by the missionaries and the British government. The atheist programme of the Backward Classes Movement clearly stressed the benefits of Western education and 'rationalism' to bring about desired social change.

Science, religion and the politics of reform became absolutely intertwined in the person of the female missionary/doctor towards the close of the 20th century. Through the sensational and selective publicisation of the medical 'facts' of immature sex, missionaries sought to discredit upper-caste customs and habits on humanistic grounds. The patronage of temple dancers and the practice of pre-pubertal marriage were declared equally abominable, and despite official policies of neutrality in civil affairs, the prestige of science gave missionary interference a renewed legitimacy. It is significant that even with direct community involvement, it was a professional, Dr S. Muthulakshmi Reddy who headed the legislative battle for the abolition of temple dedication.

'REVIVAL' OF CLASSICAL DANCE

The reform movement utilized the British machinery of regional party politics and the rhetoric of empiricism to achieve its local ends. The revival movement on the other hand consciously stepped outside the requirements of state electoral politics and western scientific traditions to achieve its particular ends. The Theosophical Society's notoriously anti-official stance and interest in Indian Home Rule bound them with the revival of the dance. At the same time the nationalisation of Indian art and life and its almost 'religious' idealisation by the Theosophists and thinkers such as Coomaraswamy, Havell and Tagore was in no small measure itself an effect of westernisation. The re-classification of regional, artistic traditions within a unique territorially-defined framework of unity was now proposed in terms of the spiritual and civilisational advantages of Indian and eastern philosophies and techniques.

At the time of its initiation, the founding lights of the Theosophical Movement Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott had toured the southern parts of India and gained support from all sections of the native elite by their public denouncement and denigration of western Christian morality and materialsim. In 1882, the Society had set up its headquarters in Adyar, Madras with the set goal of working towards the restoration of India's ancient glory, her art, science and philosophy. The support later given to the revival of sadir as Bharata Natyam by the Theosophical Society was largely due to the efforts of Rukmini Arundale, an eminent Theosophist herself. The direction the dance took under her protective wing cannot be severed from the all-embracing influence to Theosophy on her life and career.

At an impressionable age, Rukmini Arundale had been groomed by Annie Besant and the Elders of the Theosophical Hierarchy as the chosen Vehicle for the World Mother. Why this idea never took root the way the parallel, male conception of a World Teacher did (in the person of young J. Krishnamurthy) is not of immediate concern to us here. What remains significant is that such an intention existed and that it was Rukmini Arundale who was the medium through which it was sought to be expressed. It was the

languishing feminine art of the sadir which in the 1930s gave the Theosophical Society the specific opportunity to resurrect the World Mother programme in a new form. Even a perfunctory scan of the history of the Theosophical Society in this period reveals the growing emergence of Rukmini (now married to G.S. Arundale, President of the Theosophical Society) as a public figure in the filed of dance and 'national' culture in general. The Theosophical Society provided the necessary funds and organisation to back her as the champion for India's renaissance in the arts specificially the Bharata Natyam, its women's ancient spiritual heritage. At the International Convention of the Theosophists held at Adyar, Madras in 1935–36, she made her own debut as a Bharata Natyam artiste and became elected President of the newly-founded International Academy of Arts—*Kalakshetra*. Both these events were to have a critical effect on the revival of the art and the extent of its success. On the one hand, with her appearance in public as a dancer, all social prejudice against married, society women taking to the art disappeared; and on the other the enormous success of Kalakshetra as a pristine Academy of the Arts led to the mushrooming of hundreds of dance schools all over the country.[9]

The British government officials and missionaries were not slow to play up non-Brahmin suspicion of Indian nationalism, coming as it did from the largely Brahmin-dominated Theosophical circles and Congress alike. With political lines drawn in twentieth century Madras between the British (official)—Christian (missionary)—'Backward' non-Brahmin complex on the one hand and the British (unofficial)—Theosophist[10]—Brahmin complex on the other, it

[9] For a more detailed discussion of Rukmini Devi's career in the Theosophical Society in the period under discussion, readers are referred to Josephine Ransom, 1938, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, Madras: A.H. Nethercot, 1963, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*, London: Geoffrey West, 1929. *The Life of Annie Besant*, London.

[10] In the existing literature on the Theosophical Society's activities in India, it is their anti-Christian image which is constantly portrayed to justify its appeal to the Hindus. Things however were never as simple as all that. Theosophy was rebelling not against Christianity *per se*, but against a particular version of it—non-conformist Protestantism—espoused by the missionaries in India. The antipathy of the latter to Roman Catholicism and to Tractarian, High Church doctrines is well known. Quite predictably therefore, it was

should not be difficult to understand why by the time the former had done their best to kill the dance and its 'caste' of performers, it should be the latter who would promote it as a 'national' art. When Reddy's Bill of 1930 asking for the abolition of temple dedications finally came to be passed into law (1947) it seemed to have been pushed through not so much to deal the death of the Tamil caste of professional temple dancers as to approve and permit the birth of a new elite class of amateur performers.

The legislation came at a time when the practice of dedication was already quite dead and it was the official sponsorship and patronage of traditional arts which was at a premium. With newly-won independence to spur on the Congress Party Ministry of that time the Bill was passed into law with the qualification that '...This legislation should not cut at the root of art and culture...This culture has come to us from generations past.... These things should not be killed in our jealousy for social reform.' (B. Subbarayan in the Legislative Assembly Debates on the Bill, 9 October 1947.) By 1947, the programme for the revival of sadir as Bharata Natyam India's ancient classical dance, was already well underway with the patronage and support of a Brahmin-dominated, Congress lobby of elite Indians drawn from all parts of the country.

All revivals however present a utopian view of the past which is usually an interpretation fitting in with a changed *contemporary* situation. Given the upper-class Christian religious biases of the Theosophists and the deep influence of evolutionary theories on their 'science' it was the model of the ancient temple dancer as a pure and holy, sexually chaste woman which was stressed in their programme. By thus marking her off from the 'living' devadasi, they hoped to attract the right sort of clientele for the dance. The argument that without the attendant immorality the dance was a form of yoga—an individual spiritual exercise—abstracted from its specific community context permitting its re-birth amongst the urban, educated and westernised elite. The preeminence of the women of this class in the field of Bharata Natyam today conclusively indicates that the art has come to be preserved in that

precisely these streams within Christianity which the Theosophists sought to incorporate into the Universal Religion they preached.

very section of Indian society that had been drawn to Theosophy in the first place. The modifications introduced into the content of the dance-style were a consequence not so much of its 'purification' (as the revivalists liked to see it) but its re-birth in a more 'proper' class. In essence the dance technique remained unchanged and was learnt from the very community nattuvanars and performers who had now become professionally redundant. The new features to emerge reflecting the altered social context both of the dancer and her dance were as follows:

(i) An increased 'textualisation' of the dance. The classical Sanskrit literature was invoked as a means to purifying the classical tradition as also reviving lost forms. Ancient dance-dramas were revived by Sanskrit scholars and introduced into the female genre. Traditionally they were supposed to be the preserve of male ritual performance.

(ii) The 'sanskritisation' of the organisation of dance training. Elite schools such as Kalakshetra run by the Theosophical Society of Madras, supported upper-caste social practices at the institutional level—vegetarian diet, early rising and prayer, *puja* on the stage. The superior, more 'pure' dance was thereby brought into relation with the social mores of an appropriately superior class of dancer.

(iii) The puritanical reform of the content and presentation of the dance concert. The more erotic and bawdy songs of the devadasi's repertoire were excluded and the image of the *melam* or dance band was done away with by giving the dancer prime focus on the stage. The social inferiority of the accompanists was evident in their spatial position on the stage. They sat out of the limelight in the corner of the stage. Earlier the dance-conductor and his assistant also used to stand behind the dancer as she danced. The visible predominance of men in the devadasi's band was done away with and more women were employed to provide accompaniment for the dance. The low-key approach to *sringara* or the artistic convention of love between man and woman in the dance mimetic sequence was justified as a means of reducing its overt eroticism and replacing it with an 'inward essence'. The learning of

cultural skills by upper-caste girls in surroundings removed from the domestic sphere had in a sense made such changes necessary. What was significant however was that they were considered authoritative and were carried out in the name of 'improvement' of the art or the regeneration of its lost classicism.

(iv) The teaching *and* performing functions combined for the first time in the woman dancer who now saw herself not merely as a practitioner of the art but its interpreter as well. The changed orientation of the dance from an inferior 'community' to a superior 'individual' practice helped these changes to acquire legitimacy.

The art of sadir/Bharata Natyam is now monopolised by Brahmins in Tamil Nadu who clearly see themselves as having 'rescued' the art from the fallen 'prostitute'—the devadasi. Yet in a very real and practical sense it is only the devadasi dance they are perpetuating. Many of the best known artists in the field proudly acknowledge training in the secrets of the art from old, defunct devadasis. In the absence of any textual choreography, the widespread renaissance of the dance was really only possible with the help of the jobless nattuvanars and the dasis themselves. In all the promotion of the Bharata Natyam going on today it must always be kept in mind that for those involved the dance they are dancing is none other than the sadir of yesteryear, the preserve of the corrupt devadasi. In the midst of new forms of profanity surrounding the dance profession today, such as the commercial cinema, it is the devadasi tradition alone which is propagated by the elite schools as representative of the ancient and pure Bharata Natyam.

Both the reform and revival movements associated with the devadasi and her dance were precipitated by the alien context of understanding within which she was placed. The reformers presented the Hindu temple dancer as a 'prostitute' in order to do away with her; the revivalists presented her as something of a 'nun' in order to incarnate her afresh. The piecemeal and crude nature of these formulations reflected the primarily pragmatic necessity on which they were based as (official) rhetoric for rival political parties

in the Tamil region. The reform and revival of the sadir are already accomplished facts, it is only the structure of 'incomprehension' underlying the huge success of these twin programmes that this paper has attempted to explain.

'I am a Hindu'

Assertions and Queries

Vasudha Dalmia

At the close of the twentieth century, the fixed assumptions on which IPTA enthusiasts had once operated, had long since ceased to be regarded as affording a sound base for theatre with any political intent. Nationalism had been hijacked by the Hindu Right and Indianness debased by its commercialization in the global market. The 'masses' that IPTA had once set out to address had been consigned to a folksiness, which prettified rural arts in order to serve as the backdrop to urban needs. Even this folksiness was to give way to the theatre of 'roots', which subsumed folk traditions once again under the larger umbrella of the 'traditional' and relegated them to the subterranean. And lastly, the space created by the radical feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s was coming, at least partially, to be occupied by the firebrand rhetoric of Right Wing Hindu women ideologues, who assimilated the emancipatory idiom under the old heads of 'wife' and 'mother', allowing for some agency which could, however, only move within the well-defined parameters of Hindutva (see Sarkar 2001).

However, brittle or not, the labels, nation and nationalism, tradition and roots, Hindutva and Hindu woman, enjoyed wide circulation and in the hands of demagogues could at all times serve vital mobilizing functions. The challenge of prising open the categories in circulation, of questioning stereotypes and the

very basis on which they operated, was taken up by a set of women directors, largely concentrated in Delhi and the North, acquainted with each other, yet working autonomously and in very different experimental idioms. I shall discuss their work briefly, tracing the range of operational modes and the converging and diverging strands, before focusing on one production, an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Gora* (1910) which engages with notions of identity and gender, particularly with Hinduness, at a crucial period in the subcontinent's history: the mounting communal tension of the late 1980s which would lead to the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

IPTA had, as in so many other spheres, played a pioneering role in paving once again the way for women to play a crucial role both as artistes and directors in the performing arts by making culture a broad-based nationalist concern. Shanta and Dina Gandhi (later Pathak) had played a leading role in the Association's activities, as also Zohra Sehgal, and from the 1950s, directors such as Sheila Bhatia had worked in Delhi; Bhatia called her peculiar mix of rural and urban 'Punjabi Opera'. Joy Michaels was director of 'Yatrik', one of most active English language theatre groups in the capital. In Bengal, there were at least two well-known women directors, Usha Ganguly, foregrounding social concerns in the best IPTA lineage, and Saoli Mitra, known all over India for her brilliant solo performance, as director and sole actress in *Nathabati Anathabat*, which dramatized the plight of Draupadi, who in the last instance was left to fend for herself, in spite of her five husbands. And Vijaya Mehta was to play a pioneering role in combining the folk traditions of the region with the modern in a broad range of plays in Bombay from the 1960s on.

WOMEN DIRECTORS OF THE 1990S

It was from their midst that the avant-garde work of women directors of the 1990s emerged. It took up the many strands, which had evolved through the post-independence decades, the folk, the classical, Western high bourgeois, but also the feminist and the cinematic, to weave them together into a self-reflective modernist idiom. The particular focus as also the idiom differed vastly. Kirti Jain, who had served as director of the National School of Drama,

working in the liberal tradition spawned by IPTA, dramatized such works as Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, relating the experience, particularly of the women and children, who had survived the trauma of partition. In Chandigarh, Neelam Man Singh, who had worked with B.V. Karanth in Bhopal and was to enter into long-term collaborative work with him, reverted to the folk idiom in a novel way, working with the performance traditions of Punjab, but in an ensemble made up of urban and rural artistes, who pooled together their knowledge of a range of performance traditions, to explore the multiple facets of female sexuality, of womanhood, and of motherhood. Words, music, movement formed their own texts that clashed or came together in the dissonances of a heightened everyday. The musical score of Man Singh's plays was generally composed by Karanth; the compilation of the play script, reworked and adapted from novels as much as from plays, was often in collaboration with the well known Panjabi poet, Surjit Singh Pattar. If Neelam Man Singh turned to the folk repertoire in her explorations, Maya Rao, brought the intense grace and versatility of the highly codified kathakali, of which she was a trained performer, to create angular modernist performances that ranged from abstract symbolism to political cabaret. She transported the gestural language of kathakali onto the bare modern stage, and shorn of the costume and makeup, the performance gained another kind of power, at once expressive and impassive.

Anamika Haksar, trained in erstwhile Soviet Union, with her deep insight into Stanisklavskian modes of exploring interiority and its externalization in narrative, and her subsequent, equally formative training in the National School of Drama under B.V. Karanth, dramatized works as different as the Tamil epic *Silappadhikaran*, and Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, to explore the overlapping selves of wife and courtesan, ascetic and madman. The range was immense. If Tripurari Sharma, playwright and director, elected to work with marginalized groups, peasants, factory workers, slums-dwellers, most often women and children, to produce and direct plays about and sometimes with them, Amal Allana worked most often with the monumental. She staged a spectacular *King Lear* with veteran character-actor Manohar Singh in a memorable performance

as the king. But she also cast Manohar Singh as *Himmat Mai* in the play of the same name, a Hindi adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage*. She dropped standard Hindi to use the regional languages of the Hindi belt, but with the kind of deliberation that had come a long way from the folksy dialect adaptations of the 1980s. She has described the process of discovering the format she and Manohar Singh finally found for a Brecht play, which had acquired canonical status in the classic performance by an actress as powerful as Helene Weigel.

Manohar Singh was beginning to evolve the 'gestures, postures, gait and stance' of a woman performing domestic tasks. However, in order to ensure that he did not disappear into the role, it was decided that his voice remain unchanged. Yet it was an awkward fit. He sounded more like a eunuch than like a man playing a woman. Allana's casual suggestion that he speak like a woman from his native Himachal changed the whole cast of the play. With the musical sing-song of Himachali 'a certain feminine quality seemed to seep in through the words, now spoken with a peculiar rhythm and lilt', locating the character firmly in a specific landscape and shifting the location of the entire play to the northern mountains and central plains. Manohar Singh, who had been an eminently 'male' actor, could recur creatively to his Himachali past; his father had been a female impersonator, though he based the figure of Himmat Mai as it evolved on his mother. The Hindi broadcaster and translator Neelabh, who was writing the script, was asked to transfer it from Hindi to Himachali, interspersing it with Haryanvi, northern Panjabi and Bhojpuri, the regions through which Himmat Bai would pull her covered wagon; a broad language belt, 'encompassing the much vaster sense of territory, which helped to give the play a certain epic dimension' (Allana 2002: 176–8).

Allana also experimented with shifting gender identities, of being a woman, becoming a woman, in her next play: the Hindi version of Satish Altekar's Marathi play, *Begum Barve*, in which an old actor who had once played bit parts, enacts the grand roles of the Marathi stage performed by Bal Gandharva, the legendary female impersonator of the Marathi stage.

There was a sense of whimsical innocence in Manohar Singh's portrayal of Barve, a certain transparency and guilelessness to this old actor's yearning

to play female roles and through them live out his deepest fantasies. In visually trying to represent the male-female aspects of his divided self, we clothed him in a wispy, shredded, skin-toned kurta-dhoti which, in a sense, became a statement of his nakedness and vulnerability, both actual and metaphoric. On this was planted, in the second half of the play, a practically clown-like painted female face. The foundation was whitish-pink (generally used by folk performers to appear fair, upper caste or as divinities), bringing into sharp contrast the lurid bright red lips, pink cheeks and kajalled eyes (183).

It is impossible to do justice in this brief survey to the range of experiment in the theatre work of this last decade and a half, which is by no means confined to women directors alone.[1] But they figure prominently therein and their work does have certain features in common. It slits open the certainties of gender roles, of the stereotype of wife, mother and courtesan, and it dissolves the boundaries between public and private, between outer and inner selves. The old definitions of character no longer hold. As Anuradha Kapur, whose work I will introduce in the following discussion, points out,

This is in a sense a rejection (especially via Bertolt Brecht) of essence, of psychological characterization, which is often seen as making what it is—without which that something would have been something else—as constituting unique individual identity.... In order to highlight the idea of character as a product, a focal point of forces (desire, loss, fulfillment, plenitude, among others) rather than a sum and substance of basic nature, an intact and impervious and determined agent, the cultural aggregation that the world makes sense, is overturned and replaced by a condition in which words and actions can be incompatible, creating their own inner logic, resilient patterns, unpredictability. Consequently in some feminist work, plot is frequently circular, and refuses any resolution, character can change status, personality, and even gender, crossing society's often artificially maintained boundaries of gender roles; and objects can bring about social relationships, realities and imaginary landscapes (as in Neelam Man Singh and Anamika Haksar's work). Thus coherent structures, traditional plot devices, and a dependence on dialogic communication are derailed and called into question in order to unsettle expectations of portrayals. (Kapur, 2001: 6–7)

[1] See the important programmatic essay by Kapur (2001) and the survey by Jain (2002).

These layered portrayals are then again viewed from multiple perspectives. The body of the play is not constituted by words alone, thus the importance of gesture and gestus, of music and visuals, which serve as parallel texts. The choreography of the whole is a collective process, the parallel texts 'put in place a different set of authorial and professional relationships' (5). This layeredness has particular significance for the performance of gender:

> If the body is a social script then the performance of gender is a social act governed and engineered by codes that are embedded in prevailing social structures. Women directors are concerned to surface and make visible this process of gendering: the process of showing, after Judith Butler, how bodies are 'materialized as sexed': how men and women are made. Shifting the elements of gender, of the social codes of masculinity and femininity, would mean destablizing them and refocusing on them. This destablization has a modernist history; Bertolt Brecht's *Good Person of Sezuan* comes immediately to mind as a strongly ideological restructuring of the elements of gender. Lately life scripts such as these [Mother Courage: *Himmat Mai*, Manohar Singh] are not authored alone or singularly—these are social scripts formed by communities and individuals alike and may be full of contradictions that might not be resolved or brought together in a powerfully coherent or focused narrative. (Kapur 2001: 10–11)

THE VIVADI COLLECTIVE

Anuradha Kapur is the director and coordinator of the plays staged by the Vivadi collective since the late 1980s. Kapur is an unusual combination of a finely analytical and articulate theatre scholar, who has written an extensive study of a traditional form, the *Ramlila* of Ramnagar, as also of an avant-garde director, who has not shied away from taking risks. She has worked since 1989 with Vivadi, an artiste's collective, of which she is a co-founder, to produce plays which range from Tagore to Brecht, from a late nineteenth century Urdu novel to the autobiography of Jaishankar Sundari, a famed female impersonator of the early twentieth century. The play which has gratified a large number of audiences has been the fresh interpretation of an old favourite: *Umrao*, the dramatization of a famous turn of the nineteenth century Urdu novel, the first person narrative of a famous *tawaif*, courtesan, of Lucknow.[2] In the

[2]The novel inspired the Pakistani (1976) and the Indian (1981) films. The Indian film was to become an all-time favourite. See Dar (2002) for an analysis of the respective constructions of the figure of the Lucknow courtesan in the two films.

novel, Umrao had reminiscenced in old age, acquiring the figure of youth as her narrative progressed from girlhood to full-fledged womanhood. In the play, it was the process of ageing, of age, which was present throughout. Kapur chose to cast the middle aged Uttara Baorkar, one of the most versatile character-actresses of the Hindi stage, in the leading role. Her lack of coquetry as Umrao was a figuration crucial for the self-understanding sought while reminiscencing: it was her middle-aged body that went back in time to inhabit the world of ephemeral youth. Umrao herself was seen from shifting perspectives:

> This emphasis on point of view produces a character with dissolving contours, a character that appears, if you like, frame within frame. Just as Umrao sees people in many personae, so do *they* see her from many perspectives. The coherent constitution of *tawaif* is dispersed, to be located in many subjectivities. This delicate balance of constructing a subject which is itself made up by a crisscross of subjectivities requires flexibility with respect to performance. (Kapur 2001: 8)

The changing skies of the beautiful set of images recalling miniature painting, which could be wheeled in and out, were conceived and painted by well known artist Neelima Sheikh.

The script was a literary transcreation by Geetanjali Shree, avant-garde Hindi novelist and short story writer. Geetanjali Shree's first novel, *Mai*, was a nuanced portrayal of the mother with an honesty and intimacy as yet untried in Hindi, and the second, *Hamara Shahar Us Baras (Our town, that year)*, was a deeply troubled and finely honed reading of communal antagonisms and violence in a university town in north India. Geetanjali Shree's handling of the *Umrao* script was an open and multilayered process:

> Her readings are aggregates, as it were, for performance, as they question the nature of subjectivity. Subjectivity is not seen as unified sovereign rational consciousness but as something that is discursively produced, encompassing unconscious and subconscious dimensions of the self and implying contradictions, process and change. (Kapur, 2001: 8)

Music in Vivadi productions is an integral part of the narrative; it was particularly so in *Umrao Jan*, woven as it was around the life of a

poet and dancer-singer of high calibre. It was chosen and rendered by Vidya Rao, a performer known most of all for her rendition of *thumri*, the form honed to such high perfection in courtesan culture.[3]

There was similar cooperation of art forms, visual and performative in *The Job* (1997) a deeply moving dramatization of a short story by Bertolt Brecht, with immediate political implications in an economy industrializing at a brutally fast pace. A man long unemployed finds a job as a watchman only to die of ill health on his way to the factory where he is to work. These are the years of the Great Depression and his family hovers on the brink of starvation. His wife decides to slip into his role to take up his position as a watchman. Her disguise is discovered when she is injured in a factory accident. The set consisted of an extensive installation by well-known artist Nalini Malani. There were a series of objects:

> food jars which are inverted and contain plastic foetuses, grains and other food stuff, are akin to the subversion of the nurturing function of the breasts. These lead to what Malani terms the 'memory membrane'– a film which reveals like a subtext, the inner space of the woman. The sepia on the screen deepens, then becomes bound by black, then erased like a continuous flux of emotions and identity. On the other side is a peep-show and a silver tent, which is a kaleidoscope, zooming in on the woman, sewing mechanically. Heaped cardboard cartons form the walls of the theatre space in which the large pistons, painted by Malani, are suspended ... made of acrylic sheets, these cylinders are painted in reverse, each carrying images provoked by the story.[4]

Malani worked with the acute awareness of the live performance which would once again transform the objects she had assembled: 'I've tried to work a presence into various objects—including the sets and costumes. In fact, many of the things I've planned will come alive only because of the performance.'[5]

This intensely interactive process of creation contributes to the subtle layeredness which has become characteristic of Vivadi's very

[3] See Rao's sensitive reading of thumri (1996). I am grateful to Nalini Delvoye for drawing my attention to this essay.

[4] From a review of the play by Yashodhara Dalmia (1997).

[5] Note in the production brochure.

different creations, which range from the creative ingenuity of a woman factory worker masquerading as a man to the process of artistic creation itself, as in *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (1998). The he played Sundari (Desdemona) in adaptation of *Othello*. Vivadi's play was an adaptation of Sundari's autobiography, once again by Geetanjali Shree, focussing on his most active years (1901–32) as female impersonator in the Gujarati Natak Mandali and working within the conventions of the Parsi theatre, then at the peak of its popularity. Kapur has written about the multilayered composition of the narrative:

> The visual narrative is layered, so the narrative of the auto/biography is layered by presenting thirty years of Sundari's performing life in three parts, three different bodies, three presences, three sexualities that describe a career from childhood, to young adulthood, to middle age. The child Sundari is almost ungendered and so is the middle-aged one. They are the brackets within which the youthful Sundari glides. Both man/woman and woman/man, he pulls towards himself the desire of both men and women. These three stylisations code femininity equally in skill, costumes, deportment, convention and fantasy. (Kapur 2001:104)

I reproduce here a part of the interview held with three central figures in this production, Anuradha Kapur, Geetanjali Shree and Vidya Rao, since it illustrates the collective creative process and leads up to my own discussion of *Gora*:

GEETANJALI SHREE: The way we collaborate is quite special. I don't think there is a hierarchy of one script over another. Scripts run parallel to each other and come together to make the play. At some point as I start writing, Vidya works on the music and Nilima works on the sets. Very soon, we are exchanging ideas with each other. Each of us has her own strong parallel script and we might be deliberately taking different directions.

ANURADHA KAPUR: The decision to work on a script is more or less collective. As Geetanjali says, most of the scripts choose us. For example, we chose Tagore's *Gora* in 1991, as we felt it was an apt text at that time when national and regional identities were discussed and questions of purity of identity were being focussed upon. Generally, we begin working with our individual scripts after initial discussions. I begin working with the actors, at the same time as Geetanjali and Vidya are working on their written and music texts respectively. At some stage in this process we look at each other's text. Input from the actors is very important and after watching

the rehearsals, Geetanjali might even substantially change the script, or Vidya might suggest a break in the scene with an introduction of music. Or, I might improvise a scene with the actors on which Geetanjali and Nilima are already working. So the whole process is extremely complex and entails a good deal of work and emotional energy. Even the actors are very good about it.

VIDYA RAO: Sometimes a word or an idea that Geetanjali may be using may suggest a certain kind of musical form to crystallise. (in Subramanyam 2002: 236–7)

Nalini Malani had felt that it was the performance, which brought her installations to life. But the director and the performer could as well have said, given the nature of the collaborative creative process, that it was the installations, which gave the performance life. Word, image, music and choreography of movement coalesce, then, in a process that does not attempt to cover the jagged edges of the pieces, which came together to make the whole.

NATION AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

TAGORE'S *GORA* 1907–1909

The Vivadi collective has turned twice to the novels of Tagore for major productions. Both *Gora* and *The Home and the World* are novels which revolve around similar themes: public and private spaces, nation and religion as identity markers, and the subjectivities of women relegated to serving as public and private icons. In the following brief discussion, which will form a prelude to an excerpt from the text itself, I shall focus on Vivadi's production of *Gora*. The novel is of particular interest since it questions notions of identity, anticipating and deconstructing the ideologies of Hinduness, which would be fully articulated in the 1920s. The novel's political concerns acquired new significance in the early in the early 1990s, as Hindu-Muslim tensions were brought to an escalation, which was to peak in the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

Gora was serialized in the journal *Prabasi* from 1907 to 1909 and published in book form in 1910. It was a critical period of transition for Tagore. He seriously questioned the claims of the Brahmo Samaj to be the sole arbiter of truth and its arrogantly virulent

rejection of Hinduism. At the same time, he questioned the radical Hindu enthusiasts who claimed in their turn, that Hinduism was the sole repository of values eternal, *sanatana dharma*, and chose to demonize the West. Tagore critiqued both positions. And he showed little patience with the mindless rejection of the West. Western traditions had filtrated Indian thinking, they could not be thought away:

The time has come now to discuss this change because an element of doubt has certainly crept in. We seem to be sitting undecided at the crossroads of ancient India and modern civilization. Even a few years ago our educated people had no genuine hesitation. Whatever the nationalists might have professed verbally, their faith in Western values was unshakeable. The emotional effusion generated by the French Revolution, the effort to abolish slavery, and English poetry written at the dawn of the nineteenth century had not yet subsided. Western civilization seemed to proclaim an inclusiveness for all humanity irrespective of race and colour. We were spellbound by Europe. We contrasted the generosity of that civilization with the narrow-mindedness of our own, and applauded the West.[6]

And thus it was that he drew fire from all sides, from Brahmos, Sanatani Hindus and nationalists at large:

In late 1911 and early 1912, he was particularly oppressed by his countrymen. Orthodoxy—Hindu and Brahmo—was up in arms about *Gora*, his satirical play *Achalayatan* and a lecture to Brahmo sectarians in which Tagore stated provocatively: 'How can we utter this great lie that only what is dull and lifeless is part of Hinduism, whereas its ideal and its striving toward freedom are things which belong to the world but not to the Hindus?' And jealousy of his position as a writer, recognized by a unique fiftieth birthday reception for him at Calcutta's Town Hall in January 1912, added fuel to the attacks of the bigots (Hindus and Brahmo). (Dutta and Robinson 1995: 160–1)

But the most controversial of his publicly expressed opinions was his stand on the exuberant nationalism, *Swadeshi*, which was ready to trample over all other interests, particularly of the impoverished peasants of East Bengal, Hindu and Muslim, thought the latter were clearly in the majority. 'A movement predominantly of upper

[6] *Rabindra Rachnabali* (Vol. 6: 702). Cited in Meenakshi Mukherjee's introduction to the English translation of *Gora* (2003: x).

caste Hindu bhadralok who tended to have rentier interests in land cultivated, in the main, by lower caste Hindus and Muslims, Swadeshi often sought mass contact through a highly emotional Hindu revivalism, particularly as it turned militant or extremist.' And further, 'Swadeshi nationalism simultaneously exalted and subordinated womanhood' (Sarkar 2002: 118, 132). Tagore publicly parted ways with the Swadeshi movement when Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in several East Bengal villages in 1907. The riots called for a serious revision of his own thinking, which had gone along with the revivalist stream up to this point, also with respect to the problematic deification of women. He delivered a series of lectures attacking nationalism on his lecture tours through Japan and the USA which were later published in book form as *Nationalism* (1917). Ashis Nandy has quoted from these lectures in writing of Tagore's decisive turn away from this uncritical brand of nationalism:

> Not merely the subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are every day sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism...It is no consolation to us to know that the weakening of humanity from which the present age is suffering is not limited to the subject races, and that its ravages are even more radical because insidious and voluntary in peoples who are hypnotized into believing that they are free.[7]

Tagore did not resort to the invocation of 'tradition' as the antidote to 'this fetish of nationalism'. He sought to go beyond nationalism, not regress to some utopia, which had preceded it. Tagore was a convinced modernist—Nandy has duly noted this in his important study (1994:1). Yet in his subsequent reading of *Gora,* Nandy tends to take recourse to his familiar anti-modernist positions. He sees the reaction to the narrow Hindu nationalism which Gora represents as resting on his mistaken reading of Indian tradition. The truly Indian traditions that tolerate plurality rest, for Nandy, in the positions taken by Paresh Babu and Anandamayi, both of whom disregard the narrow confines not only of caste but of orthodox Hinduism and Brahmoism respectively:

[7] *Nationalism* [1917] Reprint, Madras: Macmillan (1985: 18), cited by Nandy (1994: 6).

> Four persons play crucial roles in this [Gora's] self confrontation—Binay, Paresh, Anandmayi and Sucharita. Of the four, Paresh provides the metaphysical and moral fulcrum for the story and is the main agent of change in Gora's personality. But it is Anandmayi who emerges as the most powerful presence in the narrative...
>
> That shared moral universe, Tagore suggests, is a universal one and, if Anandmayi can so effortlessly make it her own and defend it, it is in continuity with Indian traditions. What Paresh has acquired through self-discipline, Anandmayi has acquired through everyday womanliness, by being herself. (Nandy 1994: 40–41)

Nandy elaborates further on this mode of being which is 'in continuity with Indian traditions' and which at another place he calls 'the inner strengths of the Indian tradition' (47). He views this tradition as an organic state to which persons such as Anadamayi and Paresh have natural access:

> Anandmayi, whose resistance is the deepest and most 'natural'. She fathoms the inauthenticity of Gora's nationalism from the beginning... In Tagore's world, motherliness questions the dominant consciousness and resists it more radically and effectively than does conjugality. Hence, when Gora goes through his climactic transformation to arrive at a political position that anticipates the Gandhian worldview in significant ways, his first reconciliation is with his mother and childhood nurse. (49–50)

In idealizing Anandamayi's position as naturally given and as setting forth tradition rather than renewing it, Nandy bypasses a major concern of the novel and indeed of the phase through which Tagore was passing. As Sumit Sarkar has noted: 'Revivalist nationalism was often associated with certain conceptions of ideal Hindu womanhood that, once again, Rabindranath had briefly shared, but then came to very sharply repudiate. *Gora* is marked by the signs of this second debate, possibly as one not yet decisively resolved' (2002: 119).

This debate takes place primarily between Gora and Vinay. Considering that Gora himself is an aggressive propagator of orthodox Hindu values, but that both he and Vinay[8] are attracted to Brahmo women, Sucharita and Lalita, who seem radically progressive in their ways, it is natural that there are never-ending discussions about the ideal women they seek:

[8] The alternate forms are Binay and Benoy. I have consistently used Vinay.

The two friends, Gora and Benoy, endlessly argue about the true nature of womanhood. For the major part of the novel Gora aggressively upholds a home/world type of disjunction as authentically national, and also as a thing of beauty and grace by itself. Benoy is much more critical, and even suggests at one point a homologue between the confinement of women to purely domestic functions and the bhadralok tendency to categorise peasants and other plebian folk by their service to their social superiors alone. The conversations of the two Brahmo girls, Sucharita and Lalita, go much further.... But the men still seem quite far from any recognition of the autonomous subjectivity of women ... The figure of Anandamoi, quintessentially maternal but free of all social taboos and prejudices, helps in a way to smooth over an unresolved debate. Gora's peroration denouncing all sectarian barriers remains silent about gender.' (Sarkar 2002: 133–4)

Even if they seem far removed from any theoretical recognition of the autonomous subjectivity of women, the very fact that both Gora and Vinay come together with Brahmo women without demanding sacrifices from them would show that a journey's end has indeed been reached. Yet if being Hindu or Brahmo determines social identity, on what foundation is religion, dharma to be based? Birth? Hard upon the heels of his realization that he is truly *gora*, a white man of Irish birth, comes the radical reversal in Gora's thinking. He is freed from the constraints of caste Hinduism. He tells Paresh Babu 'I am not a Hindu,' which means, '(n)o longer do I need to fear that I shall fall away from caste or be defiled. I shall no longer have to look at the ground at every step to avoid pollution' (Tagore [1910] 2003: 474). By this definition, a person *is* a Hindu by birth, and *being* Hindu consists of observing caste mores, which are seen as universally applicable. Yet, living in a manifestly diverse social situation, maintaining this illusion means inhabiting an imaginary universe, a Hindu India that exists primarily, but no less dangerously for that, in the minds of Gora and his friends and allies. There is thus much violence involved in keeping the image of this Bharat intact:

> How much I have struggled against forces all around me in order to build in my mind a Bharat that was without problems or distortions, and hold my devotion safely within that impregnable fort. Today in a matter of moments that imagined fort has vanished like a dream. I have been released completely and find myself in the midst of a vast truth. The good and the bad, the joys and sorrows, the wisdom and follies, of all of Bharatvarsha have suddenly come very close to my heart. At last I have gained the right to serve, and my true area of work has appeared before me. It is not an area of my mind—it is the area outside where the welfare of twenty five crores is to be served...
>
> Can you follow what I am saying? That which I sought day and night to become but could not, today I have indeed become that. Today I am Bharatiya. Within me there is no conflict between communities, whether Hindu or Muslim or Krishtan. Today all castes of Bharat are my caste. Whatever everybody eats is my food. (475)

Gora's passionate pledge of allegiance to a Bharat devoid of the notion of difference marks his swing of opinion from one extreme to what almost seems like another extreme. For there are indeed differences to be negotiated and a process which needs to be undergone in order to do so. It is true that his cumulative experience as an activist undergirds his new conviction, but the complete reversal of his original position is nevertheless sudden.

Gora has, by the end of the novel, ceased to be a Hindu and has become Bharatiya or Indian instead. Yet what if one were to remain Hindu? And marry a Brahmo girl who remained Brahmo? Vivadi's dramatization of the novel focused not only upon Gora but also on Vinay, the less spectacular figure, who had to struggle with the Hinduness into which he was born in order to overcome its Brahminically interpreted bounds and marry a Brahmo girl.

'HINDU' IN THE AGE OF HINDUTVA: GORA (1991)

The decision to turn to Tagore's *Gora* in summer 1991 had been taken in the wake of the mounting communal tension in the country. The melodramatic *rathyatras* staged by the Hindu Right, the cross-country processional expedition in a chariot mounted on a Toyota van, had generated the kind of mass agitation which was hurtling towards its gory conclusion at the end of the year: the demolition of the Babri masjid and the Hindu-Muslim riots that would follow. As Geetanjali Shree relates it, *Gora* was chosen because it dealt with notions of belonging, of inclusion and exclusion. The idea was, in fact, not to restrict it to the Muslim question alone, but address wider issues of modern communitarian identities.[9]

[9] Conversation with Geetanjali Shree and Anuradha Kapur on 28 November 2003.

The script was written by Geetanjali Shree, working with S.H. Vatsyayan's beautifully rendered Hindi translation, which was then constantly reworked in the course of rehearsals. As Anuradha Kapur elucidated in the 'Director's Note' to the production brochure, the novel brought 'several debates centre stage, about the meaning of nation, nationalism and national identity.' While retaining a sense of its history—the action of the novel is placed in the late 1870s—the play made no hale of the fact that the tussle with identity, so closely related to choosing life partnerships, was being enacted in another time and in another medium; the re-enactment of these tussles could not exhaust itself in a reproduction of Tagore's 1910 positions:

> While the audience knows that Gora is a white man, Gora himself struggles with the question 'who am I' posed in tandem with the question 'what makes a nation'. Gora sees his friend Binay moving away from Hinduness. Meanwhile, the main woman protagonist, Sucharita, who is an enlightened Brahmo Samaji, moves away from the Samaj, but further complicates issues by questioning religion. This production attempts a strategic repositioning of the characters of Vinay and Sucharita ... Gora is torn between orthodox Hinduism, Western education and the colour of his skin. His whiteness has metaphoric implications, suggesting both the presence of the white colonialist and the incorporation of his alien presence into the social body of India. Whether Gora will follow a path similar to that of Vinay is left unresolved in this production. Indeed how we construct the meaning of the word citizen in today's India is a vexed question.[10]

The focus was on characters who reflect on their given identities, thus on Sucharita, who was to come to see the limitations of Brahmo progressivism and on Vinay, who would be brought to probe what he meant when he proclaimed 'I am a Hindu' to affirm and negate it, only to revise his position and then revert once again to being Hindu. How could one 'be' a Hindu? Could it be a process rather than a received notion?

Though the individual roles were carefully cast, the attempt was to let characters emerge in the interaction; the person was a changeable entity, caught in the very process of change. The lines of the characters were often spoken by the chorus, which was also

[10] 'Director's Note,' production brochure.

not a fixed set of people. Rather, the lines spoken by the chorus were also redistributed amongst the characters present on stage. The chorus was thus not a single impersonal voice or a collective, which voiced approval or disapproval. The mode of staging was deliberately decentered, constructing a modernist stage vocabulary without resorting to essentialist notions of 'Indianness'.[11]

The play fleshed out spoken and unspoken clashes, the conflicts and ideas suggested by the novel. If Sucharita, still caught in the Brahmo world, insists that Vinay must convert before he can marry Lalita, she herself has, at the same time, begun to anticipate a state of affairs where such conversions will be seen as accouterments, which can be dispensed with. Implicated as she is in their deliberations, the course of her future action does indeed hang in the balance and will be affected by the decisions taken in the Vinay-Lalita conflict of dharma and Samaj:

> SUCHARITA: Baba, whatever happens, Lalita and Vinay must get married.
> PARESH: But you were just insisting that without initiation...
> SUCHARITA: It is necessary for Lalita's happiness.
> PANU: Do you want them to set a precedence?
>
> (Vivadi script)

Panu, fanatic Brahmo and self-interested advocate of conversion into the Brahmo fold, hopes to marry Sucharita and coerce her into a more submissive role. He plays the devil's advocate in the debates that follow. He insists on the need to conform, while Paresh Babu takes the much more nuanced stance and advises caution in the matter of conversion. He is clearly modernist in the intensely reflexive stance he adopts; he sees partnerships based on choice as the coming together of two souls leading to a state higher than any other in individual life, which can transcend difference. As he proclaims: 'Only love can tolerate difference.'

However, the truly radical modernist stand is that taken by Anandamayi. She is a caste-Hindu who does not observe caste. She remains within the walls of her hidebound Hindu household, resisting and bypassing the thousand do's and don't's laid down by her husband and her son Gora. She has adopted a white child,

[11] Conversation with Anuradha Kapur on 21 November 2003.

left orphaned in the 1857 uprising, and has had subsequently to bear all the consequences of taking in a *mleccha* who does not know that he is one and regards himself as purer than the pure. She has learnt through suffering and experience. As the Chorus says: 'She seems more modern than Paresh Babu to me. One by one, she has managed to transcend all societal bounds. For her, God and truth now reside in the human being, in his soul (*atma*). No Samaj, no dharma is greater than that.'

But what can being Hindu signify to an intellectual such as Vinay? Can it be more or less than social habits? Vinay confesses that Hindu rites have never meant much to him and that he does not possess the knowledge to expressly agree or disagree with dharma precepts. In the switching to and fro from the one to the other on this slim basis, from Hindu to Brahmo to Hindu again, in the interest of his union with Lalita, there dawns the realization that he does not need to change his Hindu social identity, in order to marry Brahmo Lalita. The realization emerges in the course of his conversations with Anandamayi and Paresh Babu.

Though Paresh Babu advises caution in the matter of conversion, he asks Vinay to throw himself into stormy waters, to not rest in given belief systems but to tussle with them. A Hindu or Brahmo identity can be an outer shell, in which case it would, of course, be possible to step out of it. But there can be tolerance of difference, if being either one of them, Brahmo or Hindu, involves a search for inner truth. As Paresh Babu sees it, truth has also to prove itself, it has also to stand the test of time, for no truth can congeal into dogma.

Vinay has then to realize that being Hindu in this sense can equally give freedom. He needs neither to leave Hindu society nor take an oppositional stand. It is quite another matter, if Hindu society decides to excommunicate him. But then Anandamayi had once told him that the Hindu Samaj has made space for a myriad faiths. Perhaps it would create space for a wife from the Brahmo Samaj?

In an almost parallel process and in the course of these very conversations, Sucharita is also made to realize the narrowness of Brahmo beliefs. Would the world around her really fall apart

if the wedding ceremony were indeed performed according to Hindu rites? The presence of a *Shaligram* could neither hold a marriage together nor keep it from breaking apart. The Shaligram could be present, it could, as well, not be present. The final scene in the play concludes with the question: is it necessary to identify oneself as Hindu? In a given historical and political juncture the designating oneself 'Hindu' as an exclusive identity marker could become a manifest act of violence. In 1991 it was no longer possible to proclaim that one was a Hindu in any 1910 sense, as yet unburdened with the subsequent misuse and manipulation of the term. It had by this time become tarnished and tainted with the tawdry paint of the chariots employed in the rathyatras.

In a tense political situation, Vivadi's *Gora* could not be received other than with some reserve. Once again, an extraordinarily talented set of artistes had come together for the production. Vivan Sundaram had designed the stage set. The all-pervasive luminous blue screen lightened and darkened the stage to create night or day. A golden *thali* glowed within it, to become the sun but also to serve as platter that stood for food, for purity, as much as for pollution. Purity and pollution were the themes of the heated debates between Anandmayi and Gora, who would not eat in her rooms because she employed a Christian maid. The white, ochre and red costumes against the blue and the gold were startlingly beautiful.

Both Sucharita and Anandmayi sat on the swing at crucial moments. The swing was a quotation from Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata*, swinging to and fro, weighing and balancing ideas and personas. The music provided its own text. While rehearsing the *Merchant of Venice* scene, the music changed from the haunting Baul music of the Bengal countryside to the ironic citation of a popular Mozart played by the Cambridge Buskers. Portia's famous speech, '(t)he quality of mercy is not strained' acquired an absurd note: the Brahmo elite performing Shakespeare at the house of District Magistrate Brownlow for an after-dinner function, which would be graced by the presence of the Lieutenant Governor and the Commissioner, a bucolic idyll held in blissful disregard of a ravaged countryside and an exploited peasantry.

Vibha Chibber gave a radiant performance as Anandmayi, 'a fluent character, resolved by modernity, not by tradition'.[12] Lines such as 'But who wants to marry the Brahmo Samaj? No, Vinay?' could then be delivered in an easy, tranquil, mode. Sima Biswas as Sucharita was a much more agitated, riven character, in the process of resolution. Her brisk modern walk revealed the tension of unresolved conflict: a new, individualistic 'love' and desire for romance in partnership, which pulled in a direction other than the socially sanctioned. Both Gora and Sucharita pulled in opposite directions even as they sought to converge. Jitu Shastri as Gora was warm, passionate. He convinced Sucharita with the intensity of his beliefs and he kept Vinay in tow. He had a noisy footfall. Deepak Chibber as Vinay had the physical mannerisms, the gait of a Brahmo, though his ostensible position was that of a Hindu. He sought to align his exterior with his interior, to overcome its disjunction; he entered always with a book. He was already 'modern', rational in a style of debate which was as impassioned as it was reserved.

As conclusion to this essay, I cite in full the last scene of Geetanjali Shree's *Gora* in English translation, which dramatizes the conflict involved in retaining a social-political identity as Hindu or Brahmo while seeking a marital partnership with the other. The resolutions exist alongside questions, which are left deliberately open.[13]

[12] This phrase, as also many of the terms used to describe the various roles in the play in the following paragraphs, stem from Anuradha Kapur (conversation on 21 November 2003).

[13] There are two key terms, 'Samaj' and 'dharma' which need to be glossed, since I have often left them untranslated. Samaj comes from the Sanskrit [prefix *sam* with the root *aj*] and carries a wide range of meanings: 'to bring or collect together; as a masculine noun it means 'meeting with, falling in with.' It later came to mean 'congregation, meeting, assembly, conclave, society, company, association, collection.' From the early nineteenth century on, it was used for 'society, community, religious community.' When 'samaj' is used in the larger, more comprehensive sense, I have used 'society' so that the translation reads better. 'Samaj' as in Hindu Samaj has the sense of societal, social, social customs and so on, and is clearly a translation of the English term, society. In conjunction with Brahmo, it acquires the sense of religious congregation, surely inspired by English compounds such as the Bible Society and the like. Suchitra says, 'Our Samaj is founded on belief, whereas yours is bound by social custom.' These are two different conceptions of Samaj. One has to do with exclusionary belief, the other with social custom. Brahmo Samaj is founded on belief, Hindu Samaj is seen as a conglomeration of belief and social custom, where custom outweighs. Hindu Samaj then, as it defines itself in this new period, recurs to its most structured stratum, which is the Brahmanical and also seeks to become more exclusionary; it needs to be oppositional in order to define its own contours. This is the position represented by Gora and his father. 'Dharma' also has several meanings; it can mean social status, social and moral *varna* and *jati* expectations, but also stage in life. But most of all, in later usage 'dharma' has come to mean religion in the modern sense that includes belief systems. Thus Suchitra is only half right when she distinguishes between Brahmo and Hindu Samaj on the basis of belief. Hindu Samaj has increasingly sought to portray itself as also founded on a shared belief system.

'I AM A HINDU'

VINAY: I am a Hindu.

CHORUS: Is this a statement or a query?

PANU: Of course you're a Hindu and you won't leave your Samaj. Why on earth are you going around spreading rumours about these girls?

CHORUS: Well, and what about you? You and your friends dash off article after article, proclaiming that the Brahmo Samaj is in danger. Its members have begun to wonder: once this marriage takes place, will they be considered part of the Hindu Samaj again?

PANU: What makes you go in and out of this house constantly?

CHORUS: Paresh Babu's drawing room.

Sucharita's small clock is ticking away on the writing table. It's around nine-thirty, the hubbub in the lane has subsided. Embroidered sofa covers. Deerskin spread before the armchair, Lalita has yet to come back.

She was just sitting on the cane chair. The curtain behind it is still swaying gently.

It seems to Vinay as if Lalita just went past. She must have swished past that curtain.

CHORUS: Where could she have gone?

CHORUS: To Anandmayi. Paresh Babu sent her there; go to her, he said, you'll find some peace of mind there. Lalita is sick of it. The same disputes, day in and day out. Ugly articles in the

press. Sometimes, that a renegade Hindu youth is out to trap an innocent Brahmo girl. Sometimes that a fast Brahmo girl is bent upon debasing the dharma of a devout Hindu boy. Paresh Babu has asked her to go speak to Anandmayi.

CHORUS: Anandmayi has asked Vinay to go talk to Paresh Babu.. When she saw Vinay looking bothered, she said, go pour out your heart to him.

CHORUS: But before he could do so, Panu Babu spotted Vinay at the street corner. And he landed there to play the wet blanket.

CHORUS: Sucharita is also here. Why would Panu Babu not show off now?

PANU: Our Samaj is going to make life difficult for these people.

VINAY: That's something your Samaj should be ashamed of.

PANU: While you bear no responsibility for that?

VINAY Someone in the Samaj is choosing to make a mountain out of a molehill. Do you expect me to hold that in check?

PANU: And which Samaj will tolerate that a young man, alone with a young girl, in the dark of the night...

PARESH: Can we equate an external incident with internal transgression? If we were going to indulge in such practice, we needn't have left the Hindu Samaj to join the Brahmo Samaj.

PANU: Paresh Babu, philosophizing is hardly going to help now. We'll have to take action.

VINAY: I've said, haven't I, that I am ready to marry Lalita?

PANU: You, a Hindu...

VINAY: Yes, I, a Hindu...

SUCHARITA: Could you leave your Samaj?

VINAY: You put that question to Anandmayi just yesterday.

PARESH: What did she say?

CHORUS: The same as what Vinay is saying now.

VINAY: Let the Hindu Samaj throw me out, why should I leave it?

SUCHARITA: But how can a Brahmo marry a Hindu? What are you saying Vinay?

PANU: We won't allow this to happen.

CHORUS: Paresh Babu? (looking at him)

CHORUS: He is silent. He is concerned. His beliefs take shape slowly within him. This is the first time that he's been challenged by a situation outside himself. He's also being tested.

CHORUS: It's also a test for Vinay, a confrontation with dharma and with the Hindu Samaj, a test of his forgotten dispositions and beliefs. It's easier to cross the limits of the Samaj in the mind than in deeds.

CHORUS: But you love Lalita, isn't that what it's about, you're keeping that under cover.

CHORUS: Place it right at the center and look at it. It's Anandmayi's main concern and because it's there, it's only right to engage with both dharma and the Hindu Samaj.

CHORUS: Anandmayi seems more modern than Paresh Babu to me. One by one, she has managed to transcend all societal bounds. For her, God and truth now reside in the human being, in his soul (*atma*). No Samaj, no dharma is greater than that.

CHORUS: She has achieved her release (*moksha*) by breaking bounds and adopting Gora. She tells us that again and again. Once Paresh Babu's had some such experience, he'll also speak up fearlessly.

SUCHARITA: Baba, why don't you say something?

PANU: He's upset. His children regress, they don't progress.

PARESH: Who's progressing, who's regressing? Only the Supreme One knows. I want my children to be happy and I want their reputation to grow. That's my one concern.

CHORUS: This marriage will surely bring happiness. But reputation?

CHORUS: Anandmayi is not unhappy even though she's already acquired a bad reputation. Gora won't drink even a sip of water in her room. Does that make her happy?

CHORUS: Well, will this marriage happen or not?

CHORUS: Of course it'll happen. The boy's party will set out from Anandmayi's house.

CHORUS: What! So is Vinay going to marry Shashi after all?

CHORUS: It's Vinay and Lalita; she has shifted to Anandmayi's because even her mother won't help her out. So Anandmayi will represent the girl's side also.

CHORUS: Oh, is that why Lalita's gone there?

CHORUS: But there's still a problem, no initiation, no marriage...
CHORUS: Initiation? Who's taking initiation?
VINAY: May I be permitted to ask, why Lalita can't become a Hindu?
SUCHARITA: Our Samaj is founded on belief, whereas yours is bound by social custom. It'll be less bothersome for you to leave the Hindu Samaj than for Lalita to leave hers...
PARESH: (to himself) Can dharma be socially determined? Doesn't it come rather from personal striving (*sadhana*)?
SUCHARITA: Did you say something Baba?
PARESH: You'll have to be larger than the Samaj, if you want to cross its bounds.
PANU: Which is impossible.
PARESH: At your age, we cast off our moorings and plunged our boat into stormy waters. And we haven't lived to regret it. One makes mistakes, runs aground and suffers, but one doesn't just wait. One struggles for whatever one considers right.
PANU: One loses all sense of direction if one opposes the Samaj.
PARESH: One can't test truth without opposing it. Truth has always been tested. In each age, truth needs to renew itself; it has to overcome obstacles, only then can it stand its ground as truth.
PANU: If you plan to give men so much freedom...
PARESH: It's the pain caused by this freedom which will show us which truth is eternal and which the illusion of the moment. Herein lies the good of society.
VINAY: Baba, then...
PARESH: Think it over well, Vinay...
VINAY: That's precisely what I find I cannot do.
PARESH: Speak to your mother.
VINAY: She says I should speak to you.
PARESH: No, she is not as assailed by doubt as I am. If she were here she would dispel all doubt, honestly and clearly.
CHORUS: She comes here.
CHORUS: She came, but she left after meeting the girls.
CHORUS: She didn't appear in front of Paresh Babu?
CHORUS: If there'd been need to come before him, she would have done so, she wouldn't have thought twice about it.

CHORUS: There was need, wasn't there? In this matter of initiation?
CHORUS: The matter was resolved slowly. The girls went to her house, then they talked to Paresh; Vinay also...
CHORUS: But it took a long time. Just suppose she were here today, would it have taken quite so long?
CHORUS: She is so clear about this matter; she would never have given in.
CHORUS: Firmness rather than obstinacy.
CHORUS: Of course.
CHORUS: How quickly she would have resolved everything, if she'd come here today.
CHORUS: She'd say, look, dharma and Samaj...
CHORUS: Never, she'd say '*namaste*' and cover her head with the *sari*.
CHORUS: No, she would not, and everyone would be shocked.
SUCHARITA: Ma ji.
VINAY: You?
ANANDMAYI: Paresh Babu, do you recognize me? I know you well.
PARESH: I know you well too, though I've never met you. Vinay speaks of you with such respect.....
ANANDMAYI: He'd write such a wonderful biography of me, if I died right now.
PARESH: We won't let you let you off quite so easily.
VINAY: Is everything alright?
SUCHARITA: Here...meet Panu Babu.
ANANDMAYI: Bless you. Lalita has come to me.
PANU: Was there any need for her to do that?
ANANDMAYI: She came with Sucharita.
SUCHARITA: Where did she go? She went upstairs right away.
PARESH: She must have felt better after talking to you.
PANU: Is there a special recipe for making people feel better?
ANANDMAYI: Panu ji, we older people have seen life and understood some things about it.
SUCHARITA: Have you started using the handbag?
ANANDMAYI: Are you happy now? See, Sucharita has made it for me. But where on earth would I go swinging such a handbag, at this age?
VINAY: And what's that?
ANANDMAYI: It's for sister Baradasundari

SUCHARITA: Ma, you...

ANANDMAYI: Why can't we allow two people to come together? Because their belief systems clash? Do human beings meet in belief systems (*matvad*)?

PANU: It's wrong to force the Samaj to bend this way or that.

ANANDMAYI: Son, it's wrong to force people to bend this way or that.

PANU: Is there call for this kind of controversy here?

PARESH: There *is* call for this kind of controversy here. Please feel free to speak!

ANANDMAYI: Will your Brahmo Samaj forbid human being to meet human being? Will the Brahmo Samaj continue to hold them apart even if the Lord created them the same from inside?

PANU: The Lord is not discrete from the Samaj.

ANANDMAYI: What are you saying, son? Do you want to swallow the Lord whole?

PANU: Our dharma....

ANANDMAYI: Paresh Babu, will man (*insan*) continue to battle the Lord? Do we form a Samaj for that reason?

PARESH: A Samaj which doesn't take note of petty difference, which draws people into vaster harmony...

VINAY: Is it possible to craft such a Samaj?

ANANDMAYI: Wasn't this the ultimate goal of the Brahmo Samaj?

PANU: I, Baradasundari, Sucharita and Paresh believe that Vinay has to take initiation into the Brahmo Samaj. Only then can the Brahmo Samaj begin to consider the matter of this marriage.

ANANDMAYI: But who wants to marry the Brahmo Samaj? No, Vinay?

PANU: Forgive me, but Vinay will have to become a member of the Brahmo Samaj. We'll have to exert pressure.

SUCHARITA: Even Lalita....

ANANDMAYI: Forgive me, but pressure won't work here.

Chrorus: Her resolution stunned them into silence.

CHORUS: Paresh Babu, why are you listening so intently? Have you seen his shining eye?

CHORUS: Because all that he tries to suppresses he hears Anandmayi say openly. Look, he speaks.

PARESH: Vinay, you don't have to play Lalita's saviour.

ANANDMAYI: Absolutely, that would be most unfair to her.

VINAY: I can't bear it, because of me, you people...

PARESH: People don't have a long memory. They'll stop talking, if not tomorrow, then the day after...

VINAY: That will be my good fortune...

CHORUS: Stuttered words, why can't he admit that this has nothing to do with being her saviour, that he loves her?

VINAY: I love Lalita with all my heart...

ANANDMAYI: And she cares for you.

SUCHARITA: Yes, I know Lalita's mind.

PANU: Then you'll have to take initiation into the Samaj.

SUCHARITA: You used to say that you appreciate the Brahmo Samaj.

VINAY: On the other hand, I ask myself whether I mean nothing to the Hindu Samaj. Baba, what do you think?

SUCHARITA: Baba, why don't you speak?

PARESH: Anandmayi, you speak so clearly, why don't you tell us?

ANANDMAYI: That's why I've come here, quite uninvited. I feel removed from the rules and regulations of my house, but that doesn't stop it from being my house. Why should I stop calling it my own? I'll think about what to do, if at some point in time they cast me out.

VINAY: No, Ma, I won't allow yet more blame to be heaped upon me.

They leave.

CHORUS: And they both leave. But you were saying that if Anandmayi were to come, the decision would be taken like this (snaps fingers).

CHORUS: Do you remember how long they took to resolve this in the book?

CHORUS: In the book Anandmayi did not come in the nick of time. We just supposed that if she were to come, she would take care of the matter in no time...

CHORUS: Now, think of all that could happen. Once Mother and son left, what would these people have done?

CHORUS: Panu smiles when he hears Vinay's words of defeat.

CHORUS: Sucharita is getting more and more restless.

SUCHARITA: Baba, whatever happens, Lalita and Vinay must get married.

PARESH: But you were just insisting that without initiation...
SUCHARITA: It is necessary for Lalita's happiness.
PANU: Do you want them to set a precedent?
PARESH: Vinay is a good person of course.
PANU: We've been hearing that a traditionally dressed person comes here everyday to initiate you into the Hindu Samaj.
PARESH: Tell Gora to come here also. The two houses are so near each other.
SUCHARITA: He came last evening; he wanted to meet you. I brought him here.
PARESH: But you were by yourself.
SUCHARITA: You were doing puja. Gora bowed and went away silently.
PARESH: Why didn't you ask him to wait?
PANU: Yes, yes, why didn't you ask him to wait?
SUCHARITA: I'll go to Vinay again tomorrow.
PARESH: This room is so cold.
PANU: Vinay is running back. What's up, brother? Someone called out from the window in the upper storey. Did someone stop you from going away?
VINAY: Paresh Babu, I've come back.
PARESH: Whatever happened?
VINAY: Paresh Babu, I'll take initiation from you.
PANU: Hey?
VINAY: I break one or the other ritual prescriptions of the Hindu Samaj every day.
PARESH: After much reflection, these things...
VINAY: I respect the Brahmo Samaj...
SUCHARITA: Are you saying this to reassure yourself...
VINAY: The truth is that I cause hurt to each Samaj. The truth is that I cannot in all honesty accept the ritual prescriptions of any Samaj fully.
PARESH: Regarding the dharma of the Brahmo Samaj...
VINAY: Baba, dharma has yet to bear any fruit in my life. I've never been particularly attached to dharma.
PANU: Are you listening?
SUCHARITA: Then you were being needlessly partisan about the dharma of your own Samaj?

VINAY: Which dharma is truer? I never gave the matter particular thought, I never felt any particular need for dharma.
PANU: But you indulged in very subtle analysis of dharma in your articles, in your discussions.
VINAY: Perhaps I have a head for debate.
PANU: And you are indulging in just that now?
VINAY: There's no debating this time around. Paresh Babu, I'll take initiation from you this coming Sunday.
PARESH: I can't do it.
SUCHARITA: Why?
PANU: Which way does the wind blow now?
PARESH: I can't perform an initiation from which I stand to gain. Write to the Brahmo Samaj.
VINAY: Write to all the people who are raking up such muck about us? Who...how'll I be able to write...They'll all read it...my head (bows it).
PARESH: Don't allow your head to hang. Does Anandmayi know that you want initiation? Why did you come back?
CHORUS: Does she know?
CHORUS: How should I know what happens next if we are not following the sequence given in the book?
CHORUS: Then try and imagine it. Just suppose he'd told Anandamayi of this before coming here.
CHORUS: She would have said; you're doing something absolutely wrong. Think for yourself.
CHORUS: Does she really believe there's a way out for these two, without one or the other kind of initiation?
CHORUS: Don't you remember, she once said to Vinay that there was space for a million belief systems within Hindu dharma. Won't there be space for just one more?
CHORUS: She said that in a particular context. She believes that it's possible for people of different belief systems to marry.
CHORUS: Anyway, Vinay has another problem. He is confused about being aligned to any dharma, not just Hindu dharma.
CHORUS: Does he place himself outside dharma? He'll have to find out, won't he? The question at the moment is whether the marriage took place or not.

CHORUS: It took place and without the initiation. Without the presence of the *Shaligram*. For two human beings to come together, it was necessary neither to leave the Samaj nor dharma.

CHORUS: But Vinay left after he heard Paresh Babu's words about his initiation.

PANU: He'd come to take initiation. To pollute that pure moment for the sake of his love. We would never forgive you, if the chronicles of the Samaj recorded that you were responsible for its downfall.

SUCHARITA: Who can tolerate condescension and pity? People are used to being assaulted by you.

PARESH: Only love can tolerate difference.

CHORUS: But remember, Baradasundari made Vinay put down in writing that he was willing to become a Brahmo Samaji. The condition was that she would speak to the secretary so that he could do the initiation without any fuss and bother.

CHORUS: That letter suffered the only fate which could come befall it once it got into the hands of person as self-respecting as Lalita.

CHORUS: The letter torn into shreds? The shreds scattered? Well then, Vinay and Lalita decided to do what Anandmayi had considered proper right from the start.

CHORUS: But Vinay decided to do all this because of personal love?

CHORUS: What is that supposed to mean? One way or the other, he would have worked it out at some point in time, when something else came in his way.

CHORUS: Hmmm...well, the marriage did take place. Anandmayi gave the bride away and Paresh Babu was the bridegroom's party. As for Gora, he stayed away entirely.

CHORUS: It just occurs to me. Vinay doesn't go to Gora for advice any more, for the old question and answer sessions.

CHORUS: Who knows where he is, even if Vinay does go to see him. Meanwhile, Gora and Sucharita meet almost every day.

CHORUS: Then after the wedding...

CHORUS: The wedding hasn't taken place. It will take place.

CHORUS: Tell me, has Vinay remained a Hindu?

CHORUS: I don't really feel like asking him. Can't one let this question be?

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Rethinking the Rural/Urban and Folk/Classical Binaries in Post-Independence India

In Defence of the 'Theatre of Roots'

Suresh Awasthi

I am taking the risk of giving a label—'theatre of roots'—to the new unconventional theatre, which has been evolving as a result of its encounter with tradition for some two decades. It has finally made its presence felt. It has compelling power, it thrills audiences, and is receiving institutional recognition. It is deeply rooted in regional theatrical culture, but cuts across linguistic barriers, and has a pan-Indian character in idiom and communicability. Never before during the last one century and more was theatre practised in such diversified form, and at the same time with such unity in essential theatrical values.

Apart from giving a label, I would also like to own my 'guilt' (my friend director Shyamanand Jalan, talking about this 'new' theatre, calls me the 'guilty' man) for raising the question of relevance of traditional theatre for contemporary theatre work more than two decades ago. So if it was my destiny to commit 'sin' and receive condemnation, it also becomes my responsibility to speak in defence of the 'theatre of roots', evolved as a result of the encounter with traditional theatre.

As part of the great cultural renaissance generated during the post-Independence period, there has occurred a most meaningful encounter with tradition in various fields of creative activity. The return to and discovery of tradition was inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This was part of the whole process of decolonization of our lifestyle, values, social institutions, creative forms and cultural modes.

The modern Indian theatre, product of a colonial theatrical culture, felt the need to search for roots most intensely to match its violent dislocation from the traditional course. Directors like B.V. Karanth, K.N. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam have had a most meaningful encounter with tradition and, with their work, have reversed the colonial course of contemporary theatre and put it back on the track of the great *Natyashastra* tradition. It sounds paradoxical, but their theatre is both avant-garde in the context of conventional realistic theatre, and still belongs to the *Natyashastra* theatrical tradition.

In this context it will be of interest to note that the search for roots, and liberation from Western realistic theatre and its values, is an Asian phenomenon. It is roughly during the same period that directors in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan discarded the realistic mode of theatre, and utilizing the rich theatrical heritage of their respective countries, evolved a style in tune with indigenous values and aesthetics. It is also of significance that the 'theatre of roots' in Asian countries has emerged at a time when the avant-garde theatre in the West inspired by Asian theatrical traditions and values has declined.

It was in 1961 that in a national seminar on 'Contemporary Playwriting and Play Production' organized by the Bharatiya Natya Sangh I raised in a paper the question of traditional theatre and its relevance for contemporary theatre work. I was also responsible for planning and organizing the seminar as General Secretary of the Natya Sangh. The idea was then ridiculed, and I was dubbed a revivalist and reactionary by practitioners of the colonial theatre and reporters of theatre events. They maintained that traditional theatre has no relevance for contemporary work which, with its inspiration in Western theatre, had to follow its own course. They also spoke as prophets of the doom of traditional theatre.

It was during that time and even earlier, in the mid-'50s, that Habib Tanvir had broken away from realistic theatre, and started on a journey of search for roots. With his two productions—*Mitti ki Gaadi*, a popular operatic version of *Mrichchhakatikam* and *Agra Bazaar*, his own unconventional play on the life and poetic works of the popular Urdu poet Nazir of Agra—he brought back music and poetry to the theatre, and a sense of gaiety and celebration

traditionally associated with a theatrical event. Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, which begins with the prayer 'Jai Gajavadane'—and its most innovative and improvisatory production by B.V. Karanth using music, mime and movement—heralded the return of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre; and with this contemporary theatre began its march on its present course, and within a short period of little over a decade has taken such leap that many of us are left dazed.

Working with the Sangeet Natak Akademi (1965–1975), I launched a programme of sponsored traditional performances, festivals and exhibitions in Delhi and other centres. Initially, there were whispering voices of disapproval from the cultural elitists, and an attitude of indifference from theatre artists, but gradually the programme acquired the character of a movement, and a whole generation of theatre artists were exposed to the richness and vitality of traditional theatre. By the early '70s, many started changing their attitudes, and some decided to encounter tradition, and got creatively involved.

I remained concerned with this question, and when I saw some interesting theatre work, I organized a 'National Round-table on Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre' in 1971. In the formulation of the theme of the round-table, the question of contemporary relevance was emphasized. The round-table was attended by a large number of directors, playwrights, actors and theatre critics from all over the country. It provided a forum for them to exchange ideas and experiences of their work, and discuss the aesthetics of the new theatre. It also served as a reassuring factor, and the new theatre moved with greater confidence and vigour. In any discussion of this subject—the encounter with tradition and the resultant 'theatre of roots'—these two events, the national seminar of 1961, and the round-table of 1971, will always remain a point of reference for students and historians of contemporary Indian theatre.

In working out the preliminary aesthetics of the 'theatre of roots', some of its distinctive features have to be seen against the backdrop of the past one century of Western realistic theatre that we practiced. The models and conventions of the borrowed realistic theatre always remained alien to our theatrical tradition, and

the inherent conflict between the two could never be resolved. A creative visionary like Tagore understood the nature of this conflict and tried to resolve it in his lyric plays through a synthesis of two opposite dramatic traditions. But he also failed in his attempt to evolve an indigenous non-realistic style of production. Even the theatrical power of his plays could be revealed only in mid '50s by Shombhu Mitra in his productions of *Rakta-karabi*, *Raja*, etc.

One of the several features important for an understanding of the aesthetics of the 'theatre of roots' is the rejection of the proscenium theatre by most of the directors, and their use of a variety of performance spaces to bring about a closer relationship between the actor and spectator, and afford a new perception of the performance by spectators. The first feeble efforts to liberate the actor from the inhibiting influence of proscenium theatre were made by violating its conventions even while performing in accordance with them. These efforts manifested themselves in a variety of ways: in actors' entrances and exits through the auditorium—some of them sitting in the auditorium and speaking their lines from there—and enactment of some scenes, such as processional and crowd scenes, in the auditorium.

It is paradoxical that in a theatrical tradition which provides a great variety of spaces with most exciting environmental and spatial configurations, the modern theatre that arose during the mid-nineteenth century as a product of colonial theatrical culture chose for itself proscenium theatre. The first proscenium theatres were built in Bombay and Calcutta in the 1860s. In England, the first proscenium theatre was built in 1576. So it took three centuries and colonial rule for the proscenium theatre to find a place in India. But when it came, it totally changed the traditional concept and character of theatrical space, both from the point of view of the actor and the spectator. It brought about separation between the two, vitally affecting their traditional intimate relationship. It also fixed on the spectators a frontal view of the performance, from a fixed seat and a fixed angle. Traditionally Indian audiences had watched a performance from different angles and levels, having a constantly changing perception of the performance. Even temple sculpture is designed to be seen while moving, a practice

conventionalized by the rite of *pradakshina*, circumambulation of the temple.

Some directors started using from the early sixties both closed and open spaces in preference to the proscenium theatre. E. Alkazi used his terrace as a theatre in Bombay in the late '50s. In the early '60s, after moving to Delhi as Director of the National School of Drama, he used a variety of spaces—from the School's small closed Studio Theatre to the platform-stage of the open-air Meghdoot, as also unusual environmental spaces with ramparts, gates and multilevel platforms at the sites of historical monuments. This also happened because the School never had a proscenium theatre.

Badal Sircar, bidding farewell to the proscenium theatre, has been using for over a decade ordinary halls and public parks, manipulating spaces to create a variety of spatial relationships between the actors and spectators. In recent years, several directors of the new theatre have discarded the proscenium theatre and are using a variety of open spaces to suit their scripts and designs of production. They fully realize the importance of space in shaping a performance, and the role of the spectators in determining the character of a performance.

Theatre does not simply occur in available space. It creates its own space, and alters available space. The character of the performance and most of the elements of a theatrical event—the physical setting and placing of the spectators in relation to the performance space—have a role to play in shaping and determining theatrical space. But the main source is the presence of the possessed body of the actor. A given space acquires new forms, and its dimensions change according to where the actors take up their positions. Performance space is the spatialization of the actor's 'otherness.' In the traditional environment theatre of the Lila plays, the entire space, both the performance space and the audience space, is animated and transformed in endless ways by the actor's moving through both the spaces, and the spectators occupying and treading on both the spaces. In such a performance situation, the border between the two spaces is constantly blurred.

Stylization is the essence of the 'theatre of roots.' After breaking away from the realistic mode and in its search for roots, the new

theatre had to take stylization, which has been the hallmark of Indian traditional theatre for two thousand years. Traditional forms have resisted the onslaught of realistic theatre. So the 'theatre of roots' developed its aesthetics by using informal performance spaces, providing a new perception of the performance, and evolving a whole scheme of stylization covering various aspects and elements of performance. The stylized approach to theatre brought about a revolutionary change in the art and techniques of the actor, and in the whole process of treating and transforming the dramatic text into performance, or what in the semiotics of theatre has come to be known as performance text.

It is ironical that while in the 'theatre of roots' the director's main concern is with the treatment of the text in theatrical terms and its transformation into performance text, he is accused of negating and suppressing the text. It should be noted that the treatment of text and its transformation into performance has become totally different from that in realistic theatre. In realistic theatre the number of staging signs is kept as low as possible and their impact minimized to preserve the integrity of the verbal signs. In the stylized new theatre, the impact of staging signs is maximized and their number multiplied. It is because of this that while the reading time of plays like *Urubhangam*, *Madhyama Vyayoga* and *Karna-Bhar* is thirty to forty minutes, their performing time is nearly two hours. The difference in the reading-performing-time ratios of the stylized and realistic theatre is the most obvious feature of the former.

The approach to and treatment of dramatic text is in fact the primary determining factor in the conception and design of the production. All the materials and tools used are chosen to realize the performance text. It is this concern which brings into use the elements and conventions of a variety of traditional performance forms. It is not the other way round. The observation that directors of the 'theatre of roots' use in their productions certain elements from traditional forms is both superfluous and misleading.

In this context, it should be of interest that the transformation of dramatic text into performance text has been the primary concern of Indian dramatic theory and practice. Even the *Rasa* theory in its essence as formulated by Bharata in the *Natyashastra* has a strong

performance orientation. It takes into account the performer-spectator interaction and their mutual reciprocal relationship. Our aesthetics even provides a separate word for it. Drama as text is Drishya-kavya, 'visual poetry', and as performance it is Prayoga, 'skilfully arranged'. The performance text is a new avatar of the dramatic text. It has its own laws and its own semantic world. Theatrical practice has also been concerned with this problem of the fashioning of the performance text. The factors and elements involved in realizing the performance text are the highly evolved and codified art of the actor, theatrical space and it conventions, the whole scheme of stylization, and a set of conventions for treating the text.

Because of the stylized character of the production and the developed art of the actor, it is often said that directors of the 'theatre of roots' are obsessed with form, and that form dominates the content of the play. Having practised realistic non-stylized theatre for over a century, we seem to forget that the Indian theatrical tradition, both in theory and practice, has been greatly concerned with the whole range of form in theatre. But form which is integral to the content, not imposed on it; form that is primarily concerned with the art of the actor, form which illuminates the dramatic text and helps in transforming it into a performance text of plastic, visual images. Theatrical modes like Kathakali, Kutiyattam and Yakshagana show this concern for form, by implication for the highly developed art of the actor. Form in theatre is of vital concern in all Asian theatrical traditions; in Noh and Kabuki of Japan, the Peking Opera of China, the mask-dance theatre of South Korea, Thailand and Java.

Form in the 'theatre of roots' involves the art of the actor. It does not dominate or suppress the content of the play. In the productions of *Chakravyuha* and *Urubhangam* by Ratam Thiyam, of *Madhyama Vyayoga* and *Karna-Bhab* by K.N. Panikkar, *Barnam Van* (*Macbeth*) and *Malavikagnimitram* by B.V. Karanth, the form that emerges is not oppressive and dominating; it is light, it harmonizes with content and illuminates the dramatic text.

As a result of this wrong notion of the dominance of form in the 'theatre of roots', it is also often said that these productions show the 'tyranny of the director'. We have to see the changed role

of the director in the new theatre. The director as an important functionary of a theatrical event is the product of the Western realistic theatre, and his role acquired greater importance over the years with the elaboration of stagecraft. In the new stylized theatre, his role has become totally different. It is the actor who has acquired greater importance. The director's primary concern is to exploit the potential of the actor, and it is through his art that he attempts to realize his conception of a production.

Also in this new theatre, various conventional elements of stagecraft have become secondary and their character and function have changed. They have also become more integral to the action of the play and the actors' stage business. Thus, rather than the 'tyranny of the director', what we witness is really the return of the actor after his ineffective presence for a century. Some of these productions are so highly stylized and codified that what the actor does is to decode the performance score conceived by the director. This is as in traditional performance forms like Kathakali, in which the actor decodes a performance score evolved and fixed by the aesthetics of theatre and the performing tradition.

In this connection it is also important to note that in the work of these directors, actors' training and preparatory workshops have become more important than conventional rehearsals. This again is in line with indigenous theatrical tradition. For Kathakali and Yakshagana actors there is no such thing as a rehearsal, what they go through is training and preparation before performance. It is amazing that while in the other performing arts there is a fully developed system of training, and we expect a musician or dancer to go through it, in theatre we neither expect nor have evolved a system of training for the modern actor. With the emergence of the new theatre and its trained actors, the amateur untrained actor is fast becoming irrelevant. After 2000 AD, there will be no place for an untrained actor in Indian theatre.

The urge to use the actor's body as the main source of theatrical language has been so great in recent years that young directors like Probir Guha are practicing what they prefer to call 'physical theatre'. Badal Sircar, having decided to break away from the theatre of the spoken word, has greatly depended on the actor's body connotation. Bansi Kaul and Kanhailal have made a most

imaginative and creative use of the actor's body. In some of Kanhailal's productions, the body-connotation creates an unusual poetry of theatre.

Physicality has always been a great concern in our theatrical tradition. The *Natyashastra* gives great attention to the discussion of Angikabhinaya. In forms like Kutiyattam, Kathakali and Yakshagana, the physicality of the performance and the actor's body connotation play a vital role. But in these, the text is not denounced as in the contemporary 'physical theatre'. There is constant tension generated between the actor's body and the dramatic text. A Kutiyattam actor speaks forty to fifty words, and then his body 'speaks' for forty to fifty minutes, transforming the multiple semantic layers of text into visual images. Kutiyattam has retained this from the classical Sanskrit theatrical tradition.

Stylized performance invested with plasticity was the essential feature of classical Sanskrit theatre, which developed parallel to painting and sculpture. There has always been mutual exchange between the performing and pictorial tradition. Theatre forms never ceased to integrate a variety of visual and plastic modes, and the pictorial tradition took from the performing tradition conventions of treating space and organizing narrative. The actor's body dynamics, the stylized movements and static poses of Sanskrit theatre can be seen not only in theatrical forms like Kutiyattam and Kathakali, but also in the Ajanta murals and the sculptural tradition. The dynamics of carved figures in sculpture reflect a frozen moment in a mobile plastic pageant. In the same way, in a given moment in a performance, the actor's movement can be frozen in a pose—the crystallization of an emotion.

Such frozen postures, called Mie in Japanese, are typical of certain roles in Kabuki. Very much like the Sanskrit, the ancient Greek theatre was also highly stylized, and emphasized plasticity and spectacle in a performance. In our classical tradition, a spectator was a Prekshaka, one who sees, and sat in a theatre-hall called Prekshagriha, a 'seeing place'. So also in the Greek tradition, a spectator, Theatai, sat in a Theatron, a 'seeing place', and not in an auditorium, a 'hearing place'.

It was this quality of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition that drew Panikkar and Thiyam and Karanth to the Sanskrit classics.

All of them have given highly stylized and theatrically satisfying productions of Sanskrit plays. It is also during this period, in 1969, that Karanth gave an astonishingly unconventional production of *Macbeth* (*Barnam Van*) in Hindi, using highly stylized movements for actors' entrances and exits based on Yakshagana. With a stylized production and a strong Indian flavour, Karanth made Shakespeare our 'contemporary' and meaningful for us in our own theatrical terms. We have been doing Shakespeare for over a century, badly or in imitation of Western style; Karanth made him meaningful as contemporary theatrical experience. The production was denounced by critics and theatre artistes who are not ready to depart from the realistic conventional approaches to classics, our own or foreign, and have not developed a sensitivity to the new theatre which seeks and emphasizes values and elements of stylization.

In this connection, I would also like to refer to the two productions of *Antigone* by the young directors M. Ramaswamy and Kartik Awasthi, staged in 1984 with the assistance of Sangeet Natak Akademi's scheme to encourage young directors to attempt experimental productions using elements from traditional forms. Even though the two productions lacked professionalism in execution, they were theatrically more satisfying than conventional productions of Greek tragedy seen in the last thirty years or so. In both the productions the chorus, the first time ever, danced beautifully, especially in Ramaswamy's production using traditional performers—the movements and choreography based on the ritualistic dance *Devarattam* ('Dance of the gods') of Tamil Nadu. The main actors' entrances and exits were based on traditional dance forms. In both the productions, the chorus assumed different roles and, making interesting formations, performed a variety of functions. It was made a most active and participative unit of the production in accordance with its true nature. In the ancient Greek theatre, the orchestra where the chorus performed was not a place for musicians but a 'dancing place'. The famous director Kun in his unconventional productions of Greek plays in Athens gives the chorus a most theatrical choreography and splits its lines, offering a view of ancient Greek theatre in its essence.

A return to the Sanskrit classics with some most successful productions is a noteworthy feature of the new movement when seen in historical perspective. In the very first phase of modern theatre in mid-nineteenth century, our interest was awakened in the classics, and *Shakuntala* was produced in translation or adaptation in most of the major Indian languages. This interest in the classics, however, was not inspired by a search for roots, or a creative urge. It was more a matter of orientalism in reverse gear. *Shakuntala* was received with great enthusiasm and glorified as part of the strong wave of orientalism in Europe. So our interest in classics was largely romantic, and our approach to them was conditioned by the newly borrowed ideas and models of a decadent Victorian realistic theatre.

It was with the same romanticism and nostalgia that in 1954, when Sangeet Natak Akademi organized its first National Drama Festival, it began with a production of *Shakuntala* to give the Festival a ceremonial character. The production was in a most decadent Western realistic style totally against the nature and spirit of Sanskrit drama. For all these three decades, Sanskrit plays have been produced, both in original and in translation, in poor realistic style, and could never become an important and meaningful part of contemporary theatre activity and experience.

It is only now during the last five years that the production of some Sanskrit plays by these directors have given us an authentic and deep theatrical experience. It is also interesting to note that the most significant productions by Panikkar and Thiyam are of plays of Bhasa discovered only in 1912. For more than half a century scholars of Sanskrit drama, both Indian and foreign, kept expressing the view that these plays were descriptive in character and totally unsuited for theatre. In regard to *Karna-Bhar*, scholars even expressed the view that the play was incomplete and that there should be a second act. Their observation was based on the fact that in this short play no action occurs in the Western sense of dramatic action. The play begins with a dialogue by Karna: 'Take my chariot to the place where Arjuna is camping.' After a brief flashback sequence, he repeats: 'Take my chariot to the place where Arjuna is camping,' and the chariot does not move. Then there follows Karna's gift-giving scene, which is in the form of a

conversation between Karna and Indra disguised as a Brahman. Finally Karna utters the same line for the third time and the play ends. Bhasa's plays, close to the epic tradition, are descriptive but also rich in poetic images. In the productions of Panikkar and Thiyam these poetic images were translated into powerful plastic visual images, employing the art of the actor. This approach to dramatic images and their transformation into visual images is in accordance with the concept of theatre in our tradition.

The return to Sanskrit classics has given a sense of dignity to the new theatre and strengthened its values. The classics preserve the utterances and behaviour of a whole era of our history. Their words and images strike us as overwhelmingly pertinent. Their interpretations must have contemporaneity and relevance, but the pressure of relevance should not wipe out and annul the sense of history that they preserve. There can be no such thing as relevance of classics objectively determined; it has to be subjective and emerge from the director's theatrical vision. The productions of Panikkar and Thiyam, while making the classics relevant, retain a sense of history integral to their spirit. These productions, however, have been seen with suspicion by the purists, literary scholars and historians of theatre, who often raise the question of authenticity in regard to Sanskrit classics. Authenticity of style is a self-defeating objective. It negates the very purpose of doing a classic, which by its very nature lends itself to different interpretations and approaches in accordance with contemporary tastes and values of theatre practice.

In the light of the preliminary aesthetics of the 'theatre of roots' discussed earlier, we will have a quick look at the work of three major directors, and see the distinctive qualities of their styles. Karanth depends on a great variety and range of source material both for his repertoire of movements and musical modes. His approach to creating the performance text is innovative and improvistory. He places great emphasis on theatricality in his productions, and there is a strong sense of playfulness in his actors. In his *Andher Nagari*, a nineteenth-century Hindi Prahasana by Bharatendu Harishchandra produced in 1979, the actors not only play *Andher Nagari*, they play at playing *Andher Nagari*. This playfulness is a special trait of most of Karanth's productions. In

his *Malavikagnimitram*, a harem comedy, he has two Vidushakas who with their exaggerated movements make for a delightful production which, however, was upsetting to those who attach a certain sanctity to the classics.

When *Andher Nagari* was presented on the Delhi University campus during a theatre seminar to discuss the playscript-performance relationship to an audience of Hindi teachers, the comment made after the show was that in the production the script was lost. Such a reaction is the result of the conditioning of our theatre sensibilities by realistic theatre and its values. From an academic audience it was only to be expected, because for more than half a century our understanding of the art of drama has wrongly been based on Aristotle's *Poetics*. We forget that the *Poetics* discusses drama as literature, and not in its vital relationship to the theatre, performer and audience. Such a reaction is all the more shocking in a theatrical tradition where more than two thousand years ago Bharata had explained the relationship between the dramatic text and the performance. His entire discussion of drama is based on its performability.

Karanth's approach to performance is very Brechtian. He seems to have got it because of his childhood theatrical experience in Yakshagana. The Yakshagana actor enters the performance arena and the *Bhagvata*, reciter of the dramatic text, sings his entrance in the third person. Then there follows a brief question-answer sequence between the Bhagvata and the actor about his identity. It is only after this that the actor starts speaking directly, in first person. The actor maintains this duality throughout his performance, and performs as if 'outside the radius of the character', to use an expression by Brecht. Also, he never erases his face as a performer to assume the face of the character. Again using Brecht's expression, 'he keeps the two faces overlapping'.

Karanth uses music in a variety of ways to sustain and enhance the theatricality of a performance. The nature and function of music in Karanth's productions, as also those of Panikkar's and Thiyam's, are totally different from conventional theatre. Music has become much more functional and organic to the performance. In some of their productions, as in *Chakravyuha* of Thiyam, it acquires the character of a text with its own semantic world. They use a variety

of musical instruments, even unconventional ones, belonging to different regions of the country. They also use chant and *Swara* and *Tala* patterns integrated with the Vachika and Angika.

Music has also become more integral to the actors' gaits, movements and physical acting. It accentuates actors' entrances and exits, highlights their movements, and provides a frame for visual images. It is no wonder that all these directors use a variety of drums. Drums are used all over the country in operatic folk performances as well as highly developed forms like Kutiyattam and Kathakali. In many traditional forms, such as Ankia Nat of Assam, elaborate drumming is part of the preliminaries of a performance. It is interesting to note that *Nandi*, according to some scholars, also means drum, and Nandi is an important element of the preliminaries of Sanskrit drama.

K.N. Panikkar's productions, especially of Sanskrit plays, are marked for their broad, sculptural, visual images based on the poetic images of the text; and most Sanskrit plays are rich in poetic images that are meant to be transformed by the art of the actor. To create visual images Panikkar uses movement patterns from Kutiyattam, Kathakali, and the martial art Kalari. In Kerala, the poses and movement patterns of Kalari have made a significant contribution to the evolution of a variety of performance forms –from the folk dance Vellakali to the ritual dance Theyyam to the highly evolved Kathakali. The role of martial arts in the evolution of traditional performances is an Asian phenomenon, especially in Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, and China; but nowhere is this role so vital as in Kerala, and in Manipur, where the martial art Thang-Ta is the basis of almost all forms of traditional performance.

Panikkar achieves a plastic, sculptural quality by extended gestures and freezes, and even uses the sing-song delivery of Kutiyattam, a thousand-year old form and the only survivor of the tradition of Sanskrit drama. It is this careful interlocking of Vachika and Angika that is the most distinctive feature of Panikkar's productions, and it has its roots in the theatrical traditions of Kerala. The interlocking of the two is so designed that even an unusual treatment of Vachika in a contemporary production carries conviction. When *Madhyama Vyayoga* was

presented in 1980 to a Delhi audience used to realistic delivery, it was found easily acceptable.

Panikkar has deep roots in the Shastric tradition of Indian theatre. He even explains his methodology of production by using Shastric terminology. He writes Attaprakaras—a director's manual of the performance score—for his productions. Attaprakaras in manuscript form can be found with the families of traditional actors of Sanskrit plays in the Kutiyattam repertoire. No other director so steeped in classical theatrical traditional [sic] has been able to give us productions echoing a contemporary sensibility. Through his productions of Sanskrit plays, he has brought the *Natyashastra* and its whole tradition up to date.

Panikkar has given great importance to the actors' highly dramatized and prolonged entrances and exits. In *Madhyama Vyayogya*, the entrances of Bhima and Ghatotkacha to the accompaniment of drums have a tremendous impact and are unique in contemporary theatre. Here also Panikkar follows traditional theatre and *Natyashastra* prescription. In Kathakali, the entrance of ferocious and brave characters like Ravana and Hanumana is dramatized and prolonged with the use of a half-curtain. The curtain-look, as executed by a famous actor in the role of Ravana or Hanumana, becomes an autonomous unit of the performance. Actors' entrances, exits and movements are so fixed for different types of characters that one can recognize a role-type just by seeing the leg movements, as one can recognize a role-type by make-up or headdress.

Actors' entrances in stylized gait are common to most theatrical traditions. In popular open-air performances, passageways and gangways are used, often running through the audience, to dramatize entrances and exits. In Kabuki, Hanamichi—a raised platform running through the auditorium and joining the stage proper—is used. The entrances and exits of some characters are made most spectacular using the Hanamichi, and these executed by famous actors are thrilling moments in a Kabuki performance, and a great favourite with the audience.

With his approach and ability to transform the poetic images of a text into visual images infused with great dramatic power, Panikkar has made a unique contribution to the production of

Sanskrit plays. He dramatizes effectively the descriptive verses of Sanskrit plays and converts them into visual images. One has to see this in *Madhayama Vyayogya*, its scene of confrontation between Bhima and Ghatotkacha. In one of the verses, Ghatotkacha vividly describes Bhima's appearance and his reactions; while Ghatotkacha recites the verse, Bhima dramatizes it and translates it into visual forms, image by image. Similarly, when Bhima delivers the verse describing Ghatotkacha, the latter transforms it into visual images. Such a treatment of Vachika and its relationship to Angika is also part of our theatrical tradition. It is amazing that for decades, because of these descriptive verses and dialogues for describing locale and action, Sanskrit plays were considered unfit for theatre. Panikkar has proved their relevance and revealed the theatricality inherent in them.

Ratan Thiyam often writes his own plays based on Manipuri myths and legends, or constructs a play-script such as *Chakravyuha* during rehearsals—product of his interaction with, and between, the actors. The variety of scripts also ensures variety in his production design. Like Kerala, Manipur has a varied and rich theatrical tradition, and that provides Thiyam with varied source material. Depending on the production design, he uses elements from a great variety of performance forms—minor oral forms of recitation and story-telling dealing with the two epics and Manipuri legends, the martial art Thang-Ta, ceremonial and ritualistic performances, and the complex and composite form of Natasankirtana, which involves recitation, chant, drumming, cymbal-playing and intricate movement patterns. Thiyam's productions have thus a powerful echo of his regional theatrical culture and ethos, which is pronounced even when he does epic themes and Sanskrit plays.

Thiyam's treatment of Vachika utilizing the techniques of the oral forms of recitation of the epics is his primary source of theatrical power. It is interesting to note that Panikkar takes inspiration for treating Vachika from the classical form Kutiyattam. Thiyam's communication through speech, supported by the strong body movements of actors, has such a compelling power that the Manipuri language, totally unintelligible to the audiences outside Manipur, remains no more a barrier in theatrical communication.

A sensitive spectator can all the time see and feel the tensions built up between the Vachika and Angika.

In his production of *Urubhangam*, the description by the soldiers of the devastation caused by the great war, conveyed with appropriate mime, is unique in contemporary theatre. Nearly one-third of the play is this description, but the delivery of speech carries such power that in spite of our Western notion of dramatic action we are greatly moved. In treating Vachika his concern, like Panikkar's, is with the transformation of poetic images and action into visual and plastic forms; he, however, does this with a lesser degree of stylization, but is stronger in execution, employing the sharp body lines of the actors. His actors are superbly trained, both in speech and body movements based on Thang-Ta, and give a strong performance using their entire bodies.

Thiyam too lays great emphasis on actors' entrances and exits with stylized gait and a perfect sense of rhythm. In *Chakravyuha*, the characters enter with colourful shawls loosely hanging from their shoulders, their hand movements accentuated, giving a sense of solidity. Some enter holding banners and umbrellas, and in the stage groupings and formations, these create fantastic visual images. In his production design, visual images, movements, gaits, speech, all are reinforced musically, mostly by the beat of drums. In *Chakravyuha*, Thiyam conceives a musical structure that is part of the performance structure; he uses drums, gongs, bells, conches, recitation and chant, and creates a most expensive acoustic communication channel.

In conception of a production and its execution, one finds high professionalism in Thiyam's work. One is impressed by his sense of timing and precision. There is almost split-second timing in entrances and exits, delivery, music and lighting effects. He seems to conceive his productions frame by frame, like a film. He also makes very effective use of montage in regard to image, sound, form and colour. His productions have great pictorial charm and are a delight to watch, a Charavyuha-yajna, to use Kalidasa's phrase.

Enacting the Life of Rama

Classical Traditions in Contemporary Religious Folk Theatre of Northern India

Lothar Lutze

METROPOLITAN THEATRE: BLIND ALLEYS, WAYS HOME

Any outside observer who, like the present one, entered the theatrical scene of the Indian capital about thirty years ago, must have been struck by the predominance of English amateur theatre groups then. These groups, composed of English-speaking Indians and foreigners, tried their best to continue the exclusive practices of the former rulers, providing entertainment both on and off the stage for whoever felt he 'belonged'; their productions were social events more than anything else. The average Indian—whoever he may be—was left out.

Only with the emergence and the vision and energy of directors like Habib Tanvir and Ebrahim Alkazi, and the foundation, in 1959, of the National School of Drama (whose director Alkazi became in 1962), did a process of experimentation and professionalization start which has since changed the Indian theatrical scene altogether and is still going on.

In this process, directors, actors and stage technicians as well as their audiences tried, among other things, to make themselves familiar with non-Indian theatrical traditions and practices. As was

to be expected, Western theatre was represented by classics such as ancient Greek tragedy, Shakespeare and Molière. More than proportionate importance was given, at least in the initial stages, to European turn of the century illusionist drama (Ibsen, Čechov), perhaps because of some fundamental difficulties it presents to Indian students of theatre as opposed to their Western collegues: it is a variety of drama which, in its theoretical concepts as well as their practical consequences, is quite contrary to Indian theatrical traditions. As a result, even in successful productions like the National School of Drama's *The Three Sisters*, a general uneasiness and clumsiness pervaded the stage and made itself felt among the more sensitive of the spectators. Moreover, some of the most important Indian plays written and produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s were influence by, if not modelled after, Western illusionist drama. The play Mohan Rakesh completed towards the end of his career as an experimental Hindi playwright, *Adhe-adhure* (The Incomplete, 1969), is an outstanding example—in its own way, a point of no return. Rakesh died in 1972; one wonders how he would have continued, if at all, as a playwright, had he remained alive.

Again, it was for directors like Alkazi and Tanvir to show a way, if not *the* way out of this dilemma: it led out into the Indian countryside. While the urban theatre seemed to be passing through a phase of stagnation, its rural counterpart (until recently looked down upon by most of the city dwellers) was going strong as usual, as would appear natural in a country about four fifths of whose population live outside the cities.

In the course of the centuries, Indian folk theatre—or traditional (as opposed to classical) theatre, as Nemi Chandra Jain would prefer calling it—has formed a number of regional varieties, which, in spite of cinema and television, still attract large audiences in their respective regions—*yakshagana* in Karnataka, *bhavai* in Gujarat, *nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, *jatra* in Bengal, or, as a popular variety of religious folk theatre, the annual presentation of the Ramlila, the life and deeds of Rama, incarnation of the God Vishnu, all over Northern India.

For quite some time now, such folk theatre forms have had a considerable influence on modern 'author' theatre (theatre which

has an author in the modern sense as opposed to 'authorless' folk theatre), which has since brought forth a number of important plays in regional folk theatre styles such as *Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad (whose first major play, *Tughlaq* had been a history *à la* Shakespeare), *Ghasiram Kotwal* by Vijay Tendulkar, or *Bakri* by Sarveshwar Dayal Saksena. Now, in retrospect, this large-scale borrowing appears to have been most natural, at least in the Indian context, where there has never been a sharp dividing line between 'classical' and 'folk', 'élite' and 'mass', 'serious' and 'trivial' forms of art, with the result that in the field of theatre, many of the principles and practices of classical Indian theatre have, as it were, hibernated in regional folk theatre and in the present century come to light even in mass media such as the commercial Hindi film.[1]

If, on its way from illusion to imagination, the Indian urban theatre of today should have succeeded in re-discovering and reviving Indian theatrical traditions without turning provincial, it would not least be due to another discovery: that of Brecht's epic theatre. The tremendous success of Brecht's plays all over India, which was initiated sometime during the 1960s, can only be explained by a certain affinity of his theatrical theories and practices with those of traditional Indian theatre.[2] Thus, the appearance of Brecht on the Indian stage has had a liberating, stimulating effect—indeed, it has been a crowning moment of transculturalism, with contemporary world theatre reinforcing an inherent tendency towards India's own theatrical traditions and thus helping to bridge the gulf between regional folk theatre and the theatre of the cities. One need not be an optimist to find that the ground is now prepared for the forthcoming Indian contributions to modern world theatre.[3]

[1] See Lothar Lutze, 'From Bharata to Bombay: Change in Continuity in Hindi Film Aesthetics', in B. Pfleiderer and L. Lutze eds., *The Hindi Film, Agent and Re-Agent of Cultural Change*, New Delhi 1985, pp. 3–15.

[2] See an early attempt to describe this phenomenon, in Lothar Lutze, *Indian Classical Drama in the Light of Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory and Practice*, New Delhi 1962, pp. 29–50.

[3] For further description of the contemporary Indian theatrical scene, see N.C. Jain's contribution in this volume and R. Beer's *Vorwort* to his forthcoming German edition of four contemporary Indian plays.

THE RAMLILA OF BHIMTAL

SOME PECULIARITIES

We shall now try and demonstrate the functioning of some of the principles and practices of traditional Indian theatre, using for an example the presentation of the Ramila at Bhimtal, a village area around the Bhim Lake in the mountainous north of the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh. Bhimtal is located in the division of Kumaun, an administrative unit in which the linguistic situation—which is of particular interest in the present context—is characterized by widespread bi-lingualism. Kumauni, the regional language concerned, is fighting a losing battle against the growing predominance of Hindi, which is explained by the prestige increasingly attributed to the use and the users of the national language as against the absence of a genuine prestige dialect and the all too rudimentary steps towards a standardization of the regional language—a situation typical of Kumaun, as other linguistic regions of Northern India.

The Ramlila, organized at Bhimtal and so many other places as a joint community effort, owes most of its tremendous popularity throughout Northern India, and even far beyond its boundaries, to its most important, and often exclusive, textual base, the *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas, an epic begun in 1574 and composed in Old Avadhi, the language once spoken around Ayodhya, the legendary birthplace of Lord Rama, in the former province of Avadh (Oudh). According to Induja Avasthi, Tulsidas must have had theatrical presentability in mind while composing his Ramayana version—a contention supported by a certain single-strandedness of plot and a handling of dialogue which makes whole episodes appear as parts of a drama.[4] And indeed, drama seems to be omnipresent in the *Ramcharitmanas*; after all, the divine hero himself is only acting a part:

Just as some actor acts in various costumes
And shows different emotions without identifying himself with them

[4] Induja Avasthi, *Ramila: parampara aur shailiyan* (The Ramila: tradition and styles), Delhi 1979, pp. 49–50.

Thus Raghupati (Rama) plays his part
In order to delude the demons and make people happy.[5]

With Avasthi, we may distinguish between two major varieties of the Ramlila: one, probably the more original of the two, is characterized by a co-existence of mimic and epic elements; the other, dramatized variety, is based on dialogue and an especially prepared libretto. For more than a hundred years now, both these varieties have existed in song style.

The Bhimtal Ramlila is a representative of the dramatized and sung variety—a theatrical form which is bound to remind the Western listener of European *Nummernoper* (such as *The Magic Flute*), with its rather indifferent prose dialogues meant to urge along the plot and making one feel the impatience of all the participants to hear it blossom out into the next aria.[6] However, at fairly regular intervals the Bhimtal presentation of the Ramlila is articulated by a so-called *jhanki* (*tableau vivant*) accompanied by community singing, obviously a traditional element, which, along with the occasional imposition of a *jaykar* (cheer) for one of the heroes, serves the subsidiary purpose of disciplining the audience back to attention. Another traditional element is the *julus* (procession), which around the Bhim Lake, quite naturally becomes an aqueous affair: a fleet of rowing boats is led from the upper to the lower end of the lake by the boat occupied by Rama and his company, who on arriving at their destination, join in a perfect staging of their meeting with Bharata, one of Rama's brothers. In this manner, the natural environment helps to build up one of the climaxes of the play.

Watching the Ramlila is open to all; acting in it is reserved to members of the Brahman (priest) and Thakur (warrior) castes; being chosen for a *svarup*, i.e. an impersonation of Rama and his three brothers or, of course, his wife Sita, is the prerogative of Brahman boys as yet unaffected by puberty, who are then

[5] *Ramcharitmanas, Uttarakanda, doha 72/chaupai 71*, New Delhi edition 1954.

[6] See the observations on the poeticity and the operatic conventionality of traditional Indian drama below (3).

considered more than mere actors on the stage: during the eleven days' performance, and most probably quite some time before and after it, they are supposed to live their parts twenty-four hours a day. Females, as a rule, are not allowed on the stage; however, in the 1979 production, quite sensationally, a solitary girl played the part of Sita's *sakhi* (girl companion).

While the performance is on, the actors receive spontaneous awards from the audience. In 1979, for example, such awards amounted to a total of 34 rupees on the first night; whereas later, on a successful night, when the spectators had warmed up, Rama alone received 37 rupees, Sita as much as 43 rupees. Apart from this, more or less substantial donations may be paid to the Ramlila committee; both being a member of this committee and being publicly announced as one of the donators considerably enhances one's social prestige within the community.

Language Presentation and Perception

After pointing out some of the peculiarities of the Bhimtal presentation of the Ramila, the attempt will now be made to interpret the use of language in the performance. Using certain concepts and ideas of cultural semiotics as points of departure,[7] the author will try to present the Bhimtal Ramlila as an event that happens *through* the participants as well as *to* the participants within the field of language. Linguistic stratification is a phenomenon well known to readers or spectators of Sanskrit plays; there is linguistic stratification in the Ramlila as well, but instead of interpreting this linguistic pluralism hierarchically, the author would prefer distinguishing between degrees of familiarity and strangeness, of closeness and distance to the respective linguistic environment, as they are manifested (1) in the text itself, (2) in its presentation by the actors, and (3) in its perception by the audience.

[7] See especially Jury Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, Munich 1972; Jury Lotman and A.M. Pjatigorskij, 'Tekst i funkcija', in K. Eimermacher (ed.), *Teksty sovetskogo literaturovedceskogo strukturalizma*, Munich 1971.

TULSIDAS' OLD AVADHI: THE DIGNITY OF TRADITION

Having in mind the local linguistic situation and the fact that in a mountainous region like Kumaun the rate of illiteracy is bound to be higher than the average two thirds of the population, one cannot but wonder how, with the *Ramcharitmanas* serving as the textual basis, Tulsi's Old Avadhi—*l'avadhi littéraire* in Vaudeville's terminology[8]—can function as a theatrical medium in a Ramlila presentation in a place like Bhimtal—i.e. more precisely, how it is rendered by local actors, communicated to and perceived ('understood') by a local audience. Vaudeville's observation that Tulsi's Ramayana version is immensely popular has already been supported here; the point we would make now is that it is popular not *in spite of* the fact that its language is archaic and heavily Sanskritized, but *because of* it.

In order to comprehend the aesthetic functioning of the Ramlila, it is first of all important to realize that practically every Indian, whether Hindu or not, is familiar, from his very infancy, with the *charit*, the life and deeds of Lord Rama; he is fortunate enough to grow up and old with an operative mythology, i.e. a reservoir of mental images arranged in stories known throughout his society—in which he, in his role as both producer and recipient of art, has the advantage over his Western counterpart.[9] Thus as a rule, the aesthetic, and for that matter, religious pleasure (*ananda*) the Indian spectator takes in a Ramlila performance is not evoked by unexpectedness and surprise, but on the contrary, the artistic

[8] Charlotte Vaudeville, *Le Rāmāyan de Tulsī-Dās*, Paris 1977, p. 4.

[9] 'It may sound hyperbolic, but I am prepared to state that almost every individual among the five hundred millions living in India [before 1977, L.L.] is aware of the story of the Ramayana in some measure or other. Everyone of whatever age, outlook, education, or station in life knows the essential part of the epic and adores the main figures in it—Rama and Sita. Every child is told the story at bedtime...The Ramayana pervades our cultural life in one form or another at all times...Whatever the medium, the audience is always an eager one. Everyone knows the story but loves to listen to it again.' R.K. Narayan in the introduction to his English prose version of Kamban's Tamil Ramayana (11th century AD), Harmondsworth 1977, p. ix.

fulfilment of his expectations by his *vis-à-vis* on the stage. He is, literally speaking, part of the game, prides himself on being an insider; the question he will want to ask will not be 'What happened next?' but 'How will the story be told this time?', and perhaps, 'Will it be told authentically?' In other words, Ramlila aesthetics is based on conventionality, on the general acceptance of rules known to all the participants. Within this aesthetic system—Lotman's *éstetika tožestva* (aesthetics of identity)[10]—whatever is peculiar, whatever is 'new' in an artistic act and its outcome can only consist of the variation in the familiar. Much of what is considered 'typically Indian' in Indian art (including folk and trivial art) is determined by this interplay of *sahridayas* (connoisseurs), both at the producing and the receiving end.

Since in the Ramlila, Tulsidas' Old Avadhi is used for telling a well-known tale once again, much of its informative function is temporarily suspended, and along with it its ordinary, everyday semantics. Instead, it is rendered and perceived as language beyond rational understanding, as *zaúm*, a term introduced by early 20th century Russian criticism in order to designate language produced with a poetic purpose on the base of, and deviating from, ordinary Russian; in the present context, we propose to speak of *zaúm* in the sense of language not, or no longer, understood rationally but accepted and appreciated for its very difference from everyday language, as art at a distance from non-art.[11] Thus, Tulsi's language serves as an artistic instrument in a Ramlila performance to build up an atmosphere of sacredness—an effect reinforced by an inclination still prevalent in India, perhaps more than anywhere else, to be impressed by the sacredness of *shabda*, authentic word-sound, as opposed to and sometimes even divorced from *artha*, word-sense.[12]

We may safely assume that the *Ramcharitmanas* passages, many of them sung, are received as oral tradition by an audience composed of a majority of illiterates; what is more important here is that

[10] See Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, pp. 410–416.

[11] Ibid., footnote p. 144.

[12] See the perception of 'sacred' language by Russian peasants in Čechov's *Peasants* in Lotman/Pjatigorskij, 'Tekst i funkcija', p. 490.

enunciating Tulsi's words, as well as listening to them, evokes a feeling of elevation among the participants, a conviction that every member of the Ramlila community at least once every year partakes in the dignity of tradition. At Bhimtal, like anywhere else in India, the Ramlila is exceptional in the sense that it constitutes a jointly organized attempt to break away from the dreariness of everyday routine; this exceptionality is reflected in the 'otherness' of the language used on this occasion.

'Our Book': Prestige Through Print

During the 1979 Ramlila days, one of the participants told me about *hamari pustak* (our book), and his use of the prestigious Sanskritic Hindi word for 'book' was indicative of his pride in the existence of a printed version of the Bhimtal Ramlila. 'Our book' turned out to be a paper-bound publication entitled *Ramlila Natak* (The Ramlila drama) and sold in the local bazaar at the price of 3 rupees; in 1979 it was in its 10th edition. It has a *lekhak* (author)—who under a photo inside is upgraded to *rachayita* (creator) of the 'drama'—Pandit Ramadatta Jyotirvid Mahopadeshaka, a *nivasi* (resident) of Bhimtal and Nainital.

There is a definite programme and purpose behind this self-presentation on the very cover of the book. By claiming authorship of the text, by showing off—in the name—all the insignia of immigrant brahmanhood and appealing to local patriotism, the pundit is trying to convert what from his own point of view is an inferior fold tradition into 'serious' literature. This attempt should be seen as part of a competition for texthood taking place between the different linguistic layers of the play—'text' used here in the restricted sense of a communication of special cultural significance[13]—it is continued and reinforced in the *bhumika* (introduction) to the *Ramlila natak*.

In Indian culture, the *natak* has traditionally been seen as much closer to music and dance than to verbal art. Quite naturally therefore, and 'in accordance with our pure, ancient faith' (an oblique condemnation of local folk-religious deviations from it), the pundit starts with a reference to the 'musical knowledge of

[13] See Lotman/Pjatigorskji, 'Tekst i funkcija', esp. p. 485.

the Aryan race', the crowning achievement of which is the classical Sanskrit drama. He then complains of the present general state of degeneracy in the Ramlilas, for which the remedy he has to offer is to compose a *lila*, '*natak ki riti par hi*', in the style of a drama, which implies the consistent transformation of borrowings from Tulsidas' epic into dramatic dialogue. Thus in a *Ramcharitmanas* passage like 'Listen, gracious Lord Raghuvira (Rama), this gazelle has an extremely beautiful skin. My truthful Master, kill it and bring the hide, said Vaidehi (Sita)' (*Aranyakanda, chaupai 29*), the end is changed into '...bring this hide, do me the favour' (*Ramlila natak* 5/6; trans. Lutze).

So far so good. Unfortunately, however, the pundit feels obliged to safeguard that this passage is understood by his audience by repeating, in clumsy Hindi prose, 'O Noble one! How strange this charming gazelle is, its hide will certainly be of top quality'. It is this school-masterish inclination towards over-clarification which again and again spoils the pundit's attempts to build up a poetic atmosphere. Similarly, in order to make sure that Lakshmana, Rama's younger brother, is undisturbed while describing in a solo recital the charms of the rainy season and of *viraha* (love in separation)—in which the author endeavours to follow classical patterns—he removes Lord Rama from the stage under the most human of pretexts: 'Hey, Lakshmana, I'll go and relieve my bowels.' The effect of this rather downright statement, by the way, is not necessarily comic, at least to an Indian audience: defecating and urinating are common features in folklore, and Indian deities can easily out-human the humans.

In his introduction, the pundit makes no secret of his overall intent: his natak is meant to provide *shiksha* (education) to ordinary people, so that, after spending a happy life in this world, they may at last find eternal peace in the other, and he is well aware that the lesson taught by the lila should be presented in well-worded—i.e. poetic—speech. As we have seen, he is bound to fail: his heavily Sanskritized Hindi is extremely non-poetic and must appear forbiddingly bookish to the villagers if at all they are able and disposed to 'understand' it. Again, one is tempted to speak of *zaúm*, but this language, with its neo-Sanskritic artificiality, lacks the time-honoured dignity as well as the fascinating blend of

strangeness and familiarity of Tulsi's Old Avadhi. Consequently, it arouses awe rather than affection in the participants (notwithstanding their pride in 'our book'), it intimidates rather than stimulates, with the practical result that, difficult as it is to memorize, it makes the prompter the busiest person on stage—he almost becomes the reciter of non-dramatized Ramlila versions. Meanwhile, the audience, restless and noisy, wait for the next appearance of the Jokers.

JOKERS: LIBERATION THROUGH LAUGHTER

The comic interludes in the Bhimtal Ramlila, all of them improvised and most probably reflecting similar—unrecorded—improvisations in the production of classical Sanskrit plays, are not restricted to the Joker scenes. Thus the public presentation of the various royal competitors for Sita's favour has traditionally been a welcome occasion for comic improvisation. In the Bhimtal Ramlila, for example, one of the *rajas* is presented as a contemporary victim of urbanization: he enters staggering, in 'bell-bottom pant(s)', a bottle in his hand, has been 'married 16 to 17 times', and is introduced and addressed as 'Mr. Up-to-date/but you are late'—obviously, he is to impersonate our *kaliyuga*, the present age of degeneracy, in sharp contrast to Lord Rama, the ideal ruler and husband, exponent of a past age of perfection.

The most popular figure on the stage is privately known as Badridatta Pande, a Brahman by caste; in the Ramlila he is the leading Joker, and it is said of him that *'usi ke lie hi ate hain/nahin ho to chillate hain'* (for him only do they come/if he's not there they shout). For his improvisations, topics of current interest are provided by bazaar gossip, local politics or, as in the present case, by the presence of foreign guests among the audience, which provokes the following (abbreviated) dialogue with his assistant:

A: *yar, ham fauran jaega* (Man, I'm going now).
B: *faurin jaega* (You going abroad)?
A: *faurin nahin, fauran* (Not 'abroad', 'now').
B: *jarman jaega* (You going to Germany)?
A: *tin kilomitar age* (Three kilometres beyond that)
B: *inglained* (To England)?
A: *nahin, jarmani se tin kilomitar age* (No, three kilometres beyond Germany).

B: *yar, hamara idhar ji nahin lagta, tumhara sath ham bhi aega* (Man, I don't like it here, I'll come along with you).
A: *nahin, yar* (No way).
B: (sings) *yar, mujhko sang le jena hoga* (Man, you'll have to take me along).

This dialogue is conducted in the substandard variety of Hindi called, somewhat contemptuously, 'Bazaar Hindustani'; at the same time it is the kind of language that would be used in a Hindi context in order to caricature the way British sahib would handle the 'vernacular'. Thus while one makes fun of the former masters and their contemporary imitations, one may still participate in their prestige. The closest we get in our own culture to this kind of language use—including puns like the one on *fauran*—'right now', and *faurin*—'foreign', 'abroad'—are perhaps the dialogues of Shakespearian clowns, which are remarkable for a similar language consciousness. Not surprisingly, therefore, one of the Jokers—which is what they are called in the Hindi original as well—in another improvised scene, is converted into a language teacher:

Look here son, don't be afraid. I'll get you a first-class job...You are a very good boy, I have examined you, you passed right away. You've passed in English. You've passed in Naipali, too. You've passed in Gorkhali, too. You've passed in Pahari, too. Understand? Well, today I'll go on examining you. And this assistant here will note down your marks. Tell me, what in Hindi is called 'dog'—in Hindi it is called 'dog' and in English '*Kutta*'—tell me then, how does it talk? Dog, give tongue! (The candidate barks).

POETICITY AND OPERATIC CONVENTIONALITY: REFLECTIONS ON TRADITIONAL INDIAN DRAMATURGY

The Jokers, no doubt, are the legitimate folk theatrical descendants of the *vidushaka* (fool) of the classical Sanskrit drama. Literally, vidushaka means something like 'spoil-sport', or 'kill-joy', which indicated his part in the play: he is the one who obstructs the action (if there is any) and, even more important, violates the poetic good taste without which there can be no rasa, sublime aesthetic enjoyment.[14] But this fulfilment, by its very nature, is a momentary

[14] See J. Gonda, 'Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung und Wesen des indischen Dramas', in *Acta Orientalia* XIX/I, 1941, pp. 329–453, esp. 395f.

one, it cannot last, and it is for the vidushaka to 'spoil' *rasa* so that, after his intervention, another moment of extreme pleasure can be built up.

At this point, we may perhaps presume to ask some fundamental questions regarding traditional Indian drama, folk as well as classical. What is dramatic in Indian drama? Is it all dramatic in the Western sense of the world? There may be an answer to these questions in the traditional Indian designation used for 'drama': *drishya kavya*—visible poetry. Indian drama is poetic drama, and it is meant to be seen. In this context it may be permissible to quote from the autobiography of Anthony Burgess:

> We are concerned with the function of the poetry of the poetic drama. I wrote an essay which set forth the notion that the drama was there for the poetry, not the other way round. A generation of dramatic emotion led to the setting up of what I called 'lyric point-instants'...and these were the justification of the drama—eternal poetic truths not stated nakedly but in the context of an emotional situation which explained them.[15]

The length of this quotation is perhaps justified by its topicality: even if, when he made this observation, Burgess had Western drama in mind, it applies to traditional Indian drama as well—and was echoed, by the way, in what was said about the European *Nummernpoer* above. It is what may be called operatic conventionality, the expectation and expectedness of the next emotional and aesthetic climax that, with all the fundamental differences, European opera on the one hand, and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* or the Bhimtal Ramlila on the other, have in common.

Indian traditional drama can be visualized as a sequence of ups and downs, of moments of highest poetic joy and the down-to-earth clowns' jokes; however, in the rasa-less context of the *Ramlila* natak, it appears the other way round: here the Jokers provide the emotional climaxes—comic relief in the truest sense of the world, liberation on earth without which this life might no longer be worth living.

[15] Anthony Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God, Being the First Part of the Confessions of Anthony Burgess*, Harmondsworth 1988, p. 173.

Language, Myth, and Media

Reconstruction of Legend in Contemporary Panjabi Drama in India

Pankaj K. Singh

A significant section of Hindi and Punjabi drama (which emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively) has engaged itself with subjects derived from myth, legend, and history of India. The choice might have been partly a pragmatic one because the narratives from the past provided a structure of shared beliefs; yet it was also a conscious attempt to infuse the country with cultural vitality and to awaken the national spirit. The past was invoked to portray models of endurance, self-sacrifice, courage, and undaunted resistance in the characters of Sita, Savitri, Abhimanyu, Maharana Pratap, Rani Padmini, and others to inspire the writers' countrymen to fight against oppression and colonial rule. The return to the past was inevitably characterised by 'revivalistic romanticism' which countered the colonizer's image of the inferior, the barbaric, the uncivilized of the colonized.[1] However, in the post-colonial phase, the use of myth, legend, or history is problematic and multidimensional; in addition to using the past to clarify and comment on the present, playwrights (particularly from the sixties onwards) present a critique of their

[1] G.N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (Bombay, 1992), p. 4.

own cultural traditions which they confront, question, subvert, and at times even reject.

Legend, despite its specific differences from myth, performs similar psycho-social functions. Like myth, legend is a cultural construct which records, presents, and further regulates and validates the moral system of a society. With its precepts and examples, legend, like many myths, is a rationale for the value and practices of a society. The legendary narrative, like the mythical, is privileged as the collective wisdom of the elders and as the wisdom of the ages, and becomes a pervasive component in the consciousness of a society. While the use of legend in drama has definite aesthetic advantages, both as a thematic statement and as a structural principle—as a shared belief-system and as a shorthand for handling a multiplicity of time and space—it also serves as the ideological and cultural code of the society which the creative writer has to negotiate in trying to come to terms with his or her own cultural heritage. In the process, he is able to foreground the contradictions blurred in the traditional discourse, as he also fills in the motivated gaps, retrieves the erased text, and thus subverts it from within.

The legends of the Punjab, going back to medieval times and before, are essentially patriarchal in their values and structure, whether as the legends of love or those of morality which posit models of ideal human conduct. The woman stands either marginalized or misrepresented; at the most she is a person of no consequence who is unfit to be noticed, and at her worst she is an evil, wicked temptation ever ready to entice man, someone against whom the virtuous man should carefully guard himself. While playwrights of an earlier age were content to focus on the images of woman glorified in the myths, of woman steeped in endurance, self-sacrifice, and steadfast virtue (for example, Brij Lal Shastri's plays *Savitri* and *Sukanya* (1925) derived from the Mahabharata), playwrights in the postcolonial phase focus instead on the image of the wronged woman and recreate legends from her point of view. Even though drama in the Punjab, as in the rest of India, remains men's forte, the contemporary renderings of the traditional patriarchal narrative take a feminist form in a bid to make them more realistic, just, and open to question and analysis.

While retaining the broad structure of the legend, the plays which recount the love-legends foreground the suffering and tragedy of the woman which remain suppressed or largely submerged in the wealth of generalizations and digressions in the legendary narrative that, at times, even blame the woman for the tragedy, as in the legend 'Mirza Sahiban.' However, some other plays build on a more radical deconstruction of the patriarchal legend inasmuch as the victim is retrieved from the margins and is situated at the centre. She is given voice and visibility, enabling her to question patriarchy and to demystify and deflate its constructs (including father, husband, king, and *Jogi* [one who has renounced the world]), which involve tremendous violence to women.

One of the numerous popular love legends of the Punjab is the legend of 'Heer Ranjha' of the sixteenth century. Heer, the daughter of Chuchak, one of the Chaudharis (chieftains) of the Siyals, falls in love with Ranjha, the youngest son of Mauju Chaudhri to Takht Hazara. Ranjha, who had left his home after his parents' deaths, lives as a shepherd at Heer's place for twelve years (an expression used in the folk narratives in Punjabi to denote an indefinite duration of time), where he tends their buffalo because he has been promised Heer in marriage. Heer's uncle Kaidu reports to her father about their love and secret meetings. Chuchak is willing to permit Heer's marriage to Ranjha, but the clan of the Siyals opposes her marriage to a servant of the family and fixes her marriage to Saida, a son of the Kheras. Heer offers to elope with Ranjha but he does not come forward. After her marriage, Ranjha goes to Jogi Bal Nath to become a Jogi, but on an impulse, when he reaches Khera's home he claims Heer as his love. She elopes with him and they go to her family's house where her parents ask Ranjha to come with his brothers so they can witness his marriage to Heer. In the meantime Heer is poisoned by her family, who fear that her marriage to Ranjha will bring a bad name to the family and stain its honour. When Ranjha hears of her death he also instantly dies of grief.

Another daughter of the Siyals, Sahiban is the subject of another famous love legend, 'Mirza Sahiban,' as narrated by Pilu, an early seventeenth-century poet. Sahiban falls in love with her cousin Mirza, a son of the Kharals. However, her marriage is fixed

elsewhere. In desperation she sends a message to Mirza to take her away. On her wedding day Mirza elopes with her, carrying her off on his mare Bakki, and is chased by Sahiban's brothers, father, and fiancé. Over-confident of his valour and blinded by his pride, Mirza sleeps under a tree, paying no heed to Sahiban's warnings not to stop midway as her brothers will kill him. Sahiban's brothers reach there and challenge Mirza. Waking, he finds that his quiver has been hidden in the branches of the tree by Sahiban, who had feared that Mirza would kill her brothers. Instead Mirza is killed by the brothers. In Pilu's version, Sahiban is dragged back to her village, while in some later versions she falls down dead beside her lover.

In various renderings of the legend and in proverbial utterances, Sahiban is a byword for the infidelity of woman. Minimizing Sahiban's warnings to Mirza and his haughty refusal to pay heed to her advice, the legend's repeated strain is that Sahiban 'betrayed' Mirza. 'Thou didst practise deceit on me, Sahiban,...Thou didst play me false,' complains Mirza;[2] while the narrator warns: 'They that love woman fall into trouble.'[3] Similarly, quickly passing over Heer's offer to elope with Ranjha just before her marriage, the legend as composed by Waris Shah (in 1767) repeatedly and rhetorically emphasizes the complaint of Ranjha to Heer that he has become a *fakir* (a sadhu) for her sake while she is happily married. Equally frequently, Heer's sister-in-law Sahiti boasts about the evil power of women who were agents of Ravana's destruction (along with his Lanka) and who instigated Kauravas's and Pandavas's fight.[4] From the particular event, without a valid connection, the legend leaps on to make wide generalizations about the evil nature of the women who bring sorrow to men. Contemporary playwrights not only redeem these women from the charge of infidelity and betrayal, but also present them as more complete, complex, and humane persons in comparison with men, who, blinded by their egos, have only a partial understanding of life and who are, in fact, responsible for women's suffering. While maintaining the broad outlines of the narratives of the past, by slightly shifting the emphasis in character or incident or by filling in some gaps

[2] R.C. Temple, *The Legends of the Punjab*, 3 (Patiala, 1963), p. 22.
[3] Temple, p. 15.
[4] Waris Shah, *Heer Waris*, (ed.) Jeet Singh Seetal (Patiala, n.d.), pp. 43, 93.

the playwrights attempt to draw attention to certain unjustified assumptions and fallacies in the legends.

In his one-act play *Heer da Dukhant* (*The Tragedy of Heer* [1982]) Harsaran Singh focuses on the moment when Ranjha reaches Heer's in-laws' house, highlighting how Heer has been wronged both by her husband and by her lover. Working on the argument at greater length in a later play *Heer Ranjha* (1990), Harsaran Singh dramatizes the entire narrative and reveals how Heer is in fact wronged by all the men in her life—by her father who forces her to marry Saida in the name of family honour even after she has revealed the true identity of Ranjha as the son of a chieftain, by her lover who failed her when she offered to elope with him but later reaches her in-laws' house in the guise of a fakir, and by her husband who neither fulfils the duty of a husband in that he does not protect her from the fakir nor accepts her leaving the house and runs after her with a sickle to murder her.

Heer is presented as a playful and vivacious person who is bold and determined and who has the courage to fight her uncle Kaidu and question her father when he sacrifices her happiness in the name of convention: 'Why can't we change the prevalent customs?' Heer, the protagonist of the play, is not the still, romantic, and dreamy woman of the legend who elopes with her former lover when given the chance. Singh's Heer is an embittered woman disillusioned with both her husband and her lover, who make her lose both the worlds—of married life and of love. She walks out of her husband's house all alone, asking Ranjha not to follow her.

Ajmer Singh Aulakh, in his one-act play *Bal Nath de Tille Te* (1978), vindicates woman by giving Ranjha a language different from that in the legend. Woman's love is glorified as the love of God. The play recounts the moment when Ranjha goes to guru Bal Nath to become a Jogi after Heer is married to Saida. The guru's preaching that woman is an impediment in the way of salvation is countered by Ranjha's emotional assertion: 'Only that man can step on towards salvation/Who has fallen in love with the daughter of God.'[5] Ranjha finds that Jog (renunciation) meaningless which restrains him from thinking of Heer. The author seems to be

[5] Ajmer Singh Aulakh, *Bal Nath de Tille Te* in *Arbad Kharbad Dhundukara* by Ajmer Singh Aulakh (Chandigarh, 1983), pp. 81–82.

directly countering the legend when he makes Ranjha say: 'To blame women for their own lapses/Has been the nature of man.'[6] He further corrects the biased patriarchal vision by asserting 'Man is incomplete without woman/In her womb is his origin.'[7] The play also demystifies the concept of Jog (renunciation) by presenting the so-called Jogis, Bal Nath's disciples, as idlers, indulging in intoxicants and given to anger and impatience.

Several playwrights have been fascinated with Sahiban's character who, unlike other Panjabi heroines, is torn between the contrary pulls of natural desire and filial commitments. They variously have tried to redeem her from the charge of betrayal. Balwant Gargi, the playwright who transferred Panjabi drama from the literary page to the world of theatre and has been enriching it for the last fifty years, in his play *Mirza Sahiban* (1976, pub. 1984) tries to establish Sahiban's innocence by stressing the role of destiny which determined that any choice meant tragedy for her. Had she not hidden the quiver, Mirza would have killed her brothers. The play's opening, with a scene of irrational beliefs comprising some kind of religious ritual,[8] and the first appearance of Mirza and Sahiban, when Sahiban playfully runs away with his sword which Mirza takes to be an ill omen,[9] stresses the role of destiny, and associates a kind of inevitability with Mirza and Sahiban's fate. Another step towards redeeming the woman from blame is the polarity Gargi builds (in scenes 1, 6, and 12 particularly) between the male and female characters, with reason, compassion, complexity, and a humane vision attributed to women and ego, selfishness, and a lopsided vision to men, thus indirectly implicating men in the violent catastrophe. Finally the moment under the tree highlights the suffering of the woman torn between her love for Mirza and concern for her brothers.

Sahiban's crucial position is more fully spelt out in Aulakh's brief poetic play *Mirze di Maut* (i.e., *The Death of Mirza*, 1978), which also focuses on the moment of crisis under the wild tree where Mirza

[6] Aulakh, *Bal Nath de Tille Te*, p. 82.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Balwant Gargi, *Mirza Sahiban* (Delhi, 1984), p. 18.
[9] Gargi, *Mirza Sahiban*, p. 20.

stops half-way through his flight with Sahiban. Mirza's response to all Sahiban's warnings and protestations is 'Angels are afraid of Bakki [his mare] and God is afraid of me,'[10] so she need not fear about his safety, because her brothers will be 'shed like leaves' with his arrows.[11] He fails to perceive Sahiban's tragic situation: 'I am torn in the middle, no one listened to my pain/One half of me is the sister, the other half is the beloved.'[12] To externalize the extended conflict in her mind, whether to hide the quiver or not, Aulakh introduces two characters, Love and Duty, who articulate her pulls towards contrary directions.

The most complex handling of this legend is seen is Joginder Bahrla's compact but rich play *Sahiban* (1975, pub. 1990) which presents Sahiban's and Heer's tragedies as identical, resulting from the pride and ego of the men. While waiting for Mirza near Heer's grave when Sahiban turns to Heer for consolation, the spirit of Heer comes out of the grave, dressed in white, to say:

Like children in the lap of witches
Daughters grow in the homes of the Jats
Their tongues remain tied for ever
Though flames rage within their hearts
Father may be Chuchak or Khiva Khan
Sahiban! Their actions remain the same[13]

The daughter's happiness, wishes or words are of no importance in the male-oriented scheme which privileges male happiness, ego, and honour. Daughters, be it Heer or Sahiban, are used as pawns in the game of power, and their marriages are fixed to form alliances with other powerful families to enhance their own influence and authority. As Mirza goes off to sleep, after an extended scene externalizing her conflict, Sahiban breaks his arrows, hoping she will be able to previl upon her brothers not to kill Mirza. When they arrive, Sahiban pleads with her brother Shamshir not to kill her husband and tells him that it was she who insisted on

[10] Ajmer Singh Aulakh, *Mirze di Maut* in *Arbaid Kharbad Dhundukara*, p. 88.
[11] Ibid., p. 89.
[12] Ibid., p. 93.
[13] Joginder Bahrla, *Sahiban* (Sirhind, 1990), p. 35.

running away whereas Mirza is innocent. Her requests once again fall on deaf ears. Her brothers, like Mirza himself, are products of patriarchy, which teaches them to ignore women's words as of no consequence.

Not only Sahiban but other female characters, however marginal, are given a voice in this play. In the legend woman also adopts man's language which sets woman against woman; for example, Mirza's mother warns him against going to Sahiban:

> Evil the women of the Siyals: be not bewitched by them.
> They will take out thy liver and eat it...
> Thou goest for the sake of a woman, thou wilt return with loss of life.[14]

In the play, however, the warning to Mirza is mixed with compassion for Sahiban. The dissenting voices, suppressed in the traditional narrative, surface in the play. While making a futile attempt to persuade Khiva Khan to let Sahiban marry Mirza for her happiness, Sahiban's aunt protests:

> Listen, Sahiban's father, Sahiban has no say.
> Untying her from the stake of home you may send her where you wish
> Man always has his way even if we endlessly protest.[15]

More radical reconstructions of the legendary narratives are made in the plays which decentre the legends of morality, such as *Puran Bhagat* and *Raja Rasalu*, both dating from the eighth or ninth centuries. Puran is born to King Salwan and his wife Ichhran, but is confined to a dungeon for twelve years because he is considered a liability to his father. King Salwan, in his old age, marries a young and beautiful woman, Luna, who, seeing her stepson, who is her age, falls in love with him. When he refuses her love, she tells a lie to Salwan that Puran tried to molest her. The angry father has Puran's body mutilated and thrown into a well. After twelve years Gorakh Nath Jogi passes by the well, taking Puran out of it and making him whole again. Puran becomes his disciple and proves his steadfast virtue by withstanding the love of the beautiful princess Sundran, who wins Puran from the guru for seven days

[14] Temple, p. 13.
[15] Bahrla, p. 26.

in return for the hospitality extended to the guru and his disciples. Puran deserts Sundran, who then commits suicide. Wandering far and wide, Puran reaches his father's city and restores the eyesight of his mother, Ichhran, who had gone blind weeping because he had been mutilated. He also blesses the childless King Salwan and Luna by giving them a son to be named as Rasalu, whom Puran curses, so that, as his mother pined for her son, so shall Luna suffer for her son. Immediately after his birth, Rasalu, like Puran, is put in a dungeon for twelve years. He, however, does not have the patience to stay in the dungeon for that long and he comes out after eleven years. Not welcome at his father's court, he turns into a vagrant king.

There are numerous folk tales celebrating the exploits of Raja Rasalu (King Rasalu), one of which relates to his defeating King Sirkup in the game of *chaupar* (chess), which results in the threat of the King being beheaded. Rasalu, however, spares the King and marries his infant daughter Kokilan, who is brought up in an isolated palace. She longs for a lover-husband, but Rasalu, a jealous husband who chops off the ears and the tail of a deer, Hira, which sits in Kokilan's lap, is always out hunting. She falls in love with King Hodi, who steals into her palace. On discovering this, Rasalu kills Hodi and makes the ignorant Kokilan eat Hodi's roasted heart. When Kokilan realises the truth, she jumps down from the palace wall and dies.

Kadar Yar, the nineteenth-century poet who was the first to write down the ancient narrative of *Puran Bhagat*, marginalizes Puran's mother Ichhran, maligns his stepmother Luna as a pernicious woman who sought the love of her 'son' and who was responsible for his mutilation, and mentions Sundran as merely a temptation Puran has to overcome on his way to salvation. In various narratives and songs about Rasalu, Kokilan is mentioned as a woman who is punished for betraying her husband and seeking the love of another man. She is also responsible for King Hodi's losing his life.

Shiv Kumar's *Luna* (1965), Kapur Singh Ghumman's *Rani Koklan* (1979), and Manjit Pal Kaur's *Sundran* (1991) retrieve these women from the periphery and situate them at the centre of the plays. The closed discourse of the traditional narratives which denies any

room for doubt or questioning gets displaced by the interrogative discourse of these plays. The victims who are *narrated* in the legend in fact become *narrators* in the plays. The most vehement critique of patriarchy is the brilliant poetic play *Luna* by Shiv Kumar Batalvi (who dies in 1973). He makes Luna the narrator who bemoans at length, before her friends Ira and Mathuri, her forced marriage to 'paralysed limbs,'[16] to the King who is old enough to be her father. Significantly, Luna articulates the deprivation she experiences within marriage through strong, sensual imagery. The sexually abused woman stands vindicated in her uninhibited expressions of sexual desire, which had been negated or male-controlled in patriarchy.

Another aspect of her suffering is her love for Puran, which is condemned by society. Unlike the legend, here Luna's love is fraught with suffering and in Puran's mutilation she too suffers, watching him helplessly as she sits weeping by the side of his mutilated body.[17] She does not blackmail Puran, as in the legend, but reports against him only after his letter is delivered in Salwan's presence. The politics of the dominant discourse is such that it keeps the victims divided and the oppressor above questioning, as does this legendary narrative, which sets woman against woman. Ichhran warns Puran against visiting Luna, who she already apprehends will try to make him into a husband,[18] and afterwards chides him for going to 'the harlot's palace,'[19] whereas King Salwan, like a divinity, stands above reproach or interrogation. The play, however, projects Salwan as guilty of having wronged both the women: Luna unfulfilled in her marriage and Ichhran humiliated by his second marriage. The play also foregrounds the suffering of Ichhran, who, refusing to be humiliated any more, goes back to her father's house.

The oral legend as recorded by Temple is even more patriarchal than Kadar Yar's account. It constantly overplays Puran's virtue

[16] Shiv Kumar, *Luna*, trans. Sant Singh Sekhon. *Bharati Journal of Comparative Literature*, I: 1 (1985), p. 89.
[17] Kumar, p. 158.
[18] R.C. Temple, *The Legends of the Panjab*, 2 (Patiala, 1963), p. 399.
[19] Ibid., p. 407.

and Luna's wickedness; she is repeatedly referred to as 'a great horror'[20] who openly invites Puran to mount her bed, and on being denied is thirsty for his blood like a witch:

Cut off Puran's hands and place them beneath my pillow
Take out his eyes that I may make eye-salve of them!
Bring me his blood, that I may put it to my jewels and clothes[21]

Moreover, the male voice of the traditional narrative is quick to generalize from the particular case of Luna, as the Minister warns King Salwan:

Women are poisonous pests, however carefully they be kept:
Keep them in seclusion and they will play in the wilds,
They regard not right and wrong, they regard not the honour of their families.[22]

Puran, a little later, advises his father, 'Make not thy wife a darling, or someday she will ruin thee.'[23]

Shiv Kumar, however, reverses this process of broad generalisations because the victims of injustice have some general truths to tell about themselves and their oppression. Back in her father's home after Salwan's second marriage, Ichharan talks to her maid:

I could understand the black cobra's poisonous bite
But the sting of man I never could understand.[24]

Pondering over her own state, she bemoans:

Woman is ever born of injustice
Woman is the name of a feeling
Like that of pain in a wound.[25]

Ira, Luna's friend, advises her to forget about her youthful dreams before marriage:

In this land every woman
Falls ill the moment she is married

[20] Ibid., pp. 398, 402.
[21] Ibid., p. 417.
[22] Ibid., p. 413.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Kumar, p. 95.
[25] Ibid., p. 97.

She buries the dream in her father's house
And carries its shadow to her husband's,
Every Luna gets the Luna inside her killed
She measures her life out in sighs...[26]

Articulating Shiv Kumar's objection to the social system, Luna questions the injustice and hypocrisy of the patriarchal system:

...I am like a daughter of Salwan!
Should a father ravish his daughter
This world is not scandalised
But if Luna desires Puran
Why should the world's tongue wag
And condemn her as a whore?[27]

Luna, the protagonist of Shiv Kumar's play, may still be a helpless victim but she is certainly *not* a *silent* one.

A more argumentative, questioning and rebellious victim is the protagonist of Kapur Singh Ghumman's play *Rani Koklan*. Keeping close to the folk-tale structure of the original narrative, where animals (like a parrot, a *maina* [a blackbird known for its melodious voice], and a deer speak to the mortals) have roles in the plot, the author makes us see and hear what Koklan feels in being married to Raja Rasalu and in growing up in isolation. The legend paints Raja Rasalu as a handsome man with whom women instantly fall in love, as a noble, virtuous, God-fearing man, kind to animals and people, whereas Koklan is portrayed as an unfaithful wife and as an evil beloved who is responsible for Hodi's death and who eats his heart. The play, however, builds on the cruelty of Raja Rasalu, who marries a newly born baby girl because he thinks she has proved auspicious for him, for he defeated King Sirkup in the game of *chaupar* that day. Infant Koklan is offered to him as a wife on a platter along with a sapling of a mango tree. Rasalu puts her in an isolated palace with the word that he will come for her when the mango tree blossoms and she is fit to be a wife.

Koklan, as she grows up in the palace, feels like a prisoner who is deprived right from birth of the loving care of her mother, of the

[26] Ibid., p. 113.
[27] Ibid., p. 108.

company of friends, and of childhood playfulness. Looking at the doll sent with her at the time of her birth/marriage, she moans, 'Why couldn't I remain like a doll?' which always looks happy, does not miss anyone, mother, father, friends, or the King.[28] Resenting her situation, she starts putting questions to Gulabo, the maid and surrogate mother who has been the wet-nurse to the infant. Koklan asks, 'Why did this King loot me like a doll and throw me in this cage imprisoned for life?'[29] (There are unmistakable echoes of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, here and also in the ending of the play.) She is crestfallen to learn that the king, her husband for whom she is waiting, is of her father's age and could be even older.[30]

When King Rasalu finally arrives, his ego and jealousy further alienate Koklan from him, and she ultimately finds love and fulfilment in King Hodi, who steals into the palace in Rasalu's absence. She realizes herself in Hodi, but Gulabo, the conventional woman who has internalized the patriarchal norms, instead tells her that she has committed a sin. Koklan's reply to this accusation questions definitions of *paap* (sin) and *punya* (virtue):

Is it a virtue to live like a lifeless doll?
Speaking, moving your hands and feet, seeing and hearing are a sin? Is it a sin if grapes sprout on a dry branch? Is it a sin if a bud blossoms into a flower? Is it a sin if two flowers laugh together?[31]

Gulabo still tries to make Koklan understand the fate of woman in patriarchy and warns her of the consequence, and their argument continues:

GULABO: Your words, like the rustling of the leaves, have no meaning. Only the wish of the Raja will prevail.
KOKLAN: I'll tell the Raja, I'll tell world. What I wish will happen.
GULABO: In this world only that happens which man wishes. And when man also happens to be king he is God.
KOKLAN: The king who is cruel, wicked, I refuse to accept him as God.[32]

[28] Kapur Singh Ghumman, *Rani Koklan* (Jalandhar, 1979), p. 24.
[29] Ibid., p. 25.
[30] Ibid., p. 29.
[31] Ibid., p. 40.
[32] Ibid., p. 41.

Gulabo now argues in the name of 'scriptures' and in the name of society. Koklan, however, believes in learning from her own experience and she is determined: 'I kick the society which didn't treat me as a human being.'[33]

The Parrot, set to guard Koklan, informs Rasalu about Hodi's meeting Koklan. Rasalu kills Hodi in the forest and offers his heart to Koklan, asking her to identify the animal whose meat she is eating. The devilish king feels elated at having killed his rival and having made his wife literally eat the heart of her dead lover. However, Koklan had already preferred a short life of love to a long life of subjugation and imprisonment. She asserts her choice and jumps down from the palace wall, thus defeating the king in what he supposed was his victory, slamming his triumph and authority in his face. The victim-wife asserts herself in her death, even if she could not do so in her life.

A more positive rejection of patriarchal norms is found in Manjit Pal Kaur's sleek poetic play *Sundran* (1991), which alters not only the narrative structure of the original by giving centrality to Sundran, but also revises some of the episodes so that Sundran does not commit suicide after Puran deserts her. Manjit Pal Kaur builds the play around Sundran's love for Puran, which, unlike Luna's passionate craving, is an overwhelming transcendent emotion in which she completely forgets herself. While the legend is silent on their sexual union, the play includes it, and it results in Sundran's pregnancy. However, the play vindicates Sundran not only in her body and emotion but also in her intellect. Once Sundran is able to win Puran for seven days she starts arguing with him and starts questioning the whole concept of becoming a Jogi, so extravagantly glorified in the legend. While Puran maintains a distance from her, believing her to be 'fire' as told by his guru, Sundran sees him as ignorant and immature like a child who quotes his guru at every step. She tells him that the best lesson one can learn is from life.[34] Gradually conflict begins in Puran's mind.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Manjit Pal Kaur, *Sundran*, bilingual ed. with trans. by T.S. Gill (Amritsar, 1994), p. 48. I have preferred to use my translation of *Sundran* throughout this essay.

The play develops as a contest between love and asceticism, with Sundran trying to teach Puran about the complexity and richness of life, so simplified by his guru, insisting that asceticism and passion live together in the human soul and that ideologies and principles are just illusions.[35] Sundran is conceived as a more complete person than Puran. Doubt does engulf Puran's mind and he has a moment of union with Sundran, but true to his prototype he quietly deserts her. She does contemplate suicide for a while, but then decides to live on to give birth to the child and to realise her own independent identity. As she stands at the top of the palace after overcoming her initial wish to die, she talks directly to the audience: 'Why do you all wish/To impart me/A martyr's status?'[36] Her friends, Soma and Seema, arrive on the scene and together address the audience:

She wants to live
Her womb is
Full and fragrant...
Only woman's womb
Has the touch of completeness.[37]

Sundran thus not only questions the patriarchal norms but also propounds an alternate vision of complementarity of man and woman in her final assertion:

Sundran is not at all beautiful
Without Puran
And you are also
Only half truth
Without Sundran.[38]

The biased and simplified discourse of the legend becomes complex and more realistic in these modern plays, wherein women grow into fully developed characters and cease to be mere 'functions' in the grandiloquent design of the narratives glorifying

[35] Ibid., p. 50.
[36] Ibid., p. 72.
[37] Ibid., p. 73.
[38] Ibid., p. 74.

man. Even though most of these plays coincide with the revival of the feminist movement in the West (*Luna*, in fact, pre-dates it), they are not the result of any women's movement in the Punjab. Interestingly, all these feminist variations of the traditional discourse are created by male playwrights, with the exception of *Sundran*. The distinction is significant, though. The feminism of the male playwrights forms part of their larger, more generally humanistic vision, which believes in the essential humanity of all people and subscribes to an ethos of dignity, respect, freedom and justice for all human beings; when these principles are violated, the playwrights use their dramas to speak for the violated victim. With Manjit Pal Kaur the rendering afresh of the legend is a conscious and more specifically ideologically feminist statement. As a result, while other protagonists, despite their protest and rebellion, continue to remain victims of patriarchy, Sundran transcends the patriarchal structure of the legend: she would not commit suicide, she is 'incomplete' but not utterly dependent on Puran, her sexuality and motherhood are realised at her own will and not at the dictates of man. Even more significantly she substitutes for the patriarchal order of binary oppositions of the oppressor and oppressed, the ruler and the ruled, an alternative vision of complementarity of man and woman where both can live in mutual harmony and reciprocity instead of one having to suppress the other for one's own being.

To impart a dramatic structure to the meandering narratives of the legend, these playwrights turn to indigenous theatrical traditions, both classical and folk. From Sanskrit drama they derive the characters of the *Sutradhar* (i.e., the director, controller or stage-manager, though literally it means 'one who holds the strings') and *Nati* (actress) and adapt them to individual requirements. In *Sundran* they are given the traditional role of introducing the play and stand outside the body of the play. In *Luna*, Shiv Kumar extends their traditional role by giving a long first scene to them. They figure as creatures from heaven who on one side in rich poetic delight dwell on the beauty of this earth and on the other question the 'irrational' cruel practices like animal sacrifice to be performed by the king.[39] In *Mirza Sahiban*, Balwant Gargi gives the Sutradhar

[39] Kumar, p. 68.

a recurrent appearance in the play, and he punctuates the action with his comments.

From the folk theatres the playwrights derive a narrator-like character to sum up the action and to direct the audience's attention. For example, the *Dhadi*, a folk-singer who traditionally sang these legends, is a frequent choice, serving as a chorus who sings excerpts from the legend while the action progress, sometimes in accordance with the legend and sometimes contrary to it. Gargi makes a pronounced use of this character. Others, like Harsaran Singh in *Heer Ranjha*, Ghumman in *Rani Koklan*, and Bahrla in *Sahiban*, prefer to use a Voice, which creates the effect of timelessness, similarly to narrate the legend; or to sum up and comment on the action; or to externalize the feelings of the characters. In *Rani Koklan* a chorus is also used, first to sing excerpts from the legend and then to counter it by pointing to Koklan's experience. Scenes flow one after the other with simple alternation of darkness and light. Like the poetic narratives of the legends, many of these plays are poetic plays, e.g. *Luna*, *Sahiban*, *Sundran*, and Aulakh's one-act plays. Even those written in prose are frequently interspersed with excerpts from the legends and snatches of folk songs and closely maintain the poetic rhythm of the legends, while occasional introduction of folk dances like *Gidhha* and *Bhangra* add to the folk atmosphere. Engaging themselves with the paradigms of the oppressor and the oppressed in the larger socio-cultural context, the post-colonial playwrights in the Punjab thus realize their creative instinct in their own native linguistic and cultural context by updating the traditional discourses as well as theatrical conventions.[40]

[40] All translation of the excerpts from the plays are my own, except in the case of *Luna*, where Skehon's translation has been used.

Indian Drama in English

Transcreation and the Indigenous Performance Tradition

Christopher Balme

Butcher them [the Indo-Anglian] playwrights, castrate them, and force them to write in their native Hindi or Urdu or whatever languages their fathers and mothers used to speak.

—Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni[1]

Anglophone Indian drama occupies a unique position in the development of colonial and postcolonial theatre. It can look back on possibly the longest tradition of post-imperial drama and at the same time it enjoys probably the worst reputation of any postcolonial literary or artistic endeavour. From its outset until the present day, Indian drama in English has suffered from the economic, artistic and ideological pressures of being submerged in a rich theatrical culture of popular, religious and commercial performance traditions. The metaphorically intended injunction by Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni to butcher and castrate Indian playwrights working in the English language is a somewhat hyperbolic arti-culation of the problematic relationship pertaining between Anglophone dramatists and their audiences. This relationship can be summarized and necessarily oversimplified as the situation in

[1] Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, 'Butcher the Anglo-Indians,' *Enact*, Vol. 85, No. 86 (1974), n.p.

which dramatists create theatre in the language of the colonizer because they wish to work in the form of the colonizer. The link between form and language is crucial to this issue and will be explored in detail here.

Indian dramatists have tended to link performance conventions very closely with language. This has meant that English drama since the nineteenth century has been narrowly epigonic in form. Initially, Shakespearean verse drama, and, since the 1930s, the theatrical realism of Ibsen and Shaw provided the most important models, in line with prevailing Western fashions and developments. M.K. Naik writes: 'Most Indian verse drama in English is a vast whispering gallery of Shakespearean echoes'.[2] The striking exception to this epigonic straitjacket is the tradition of a 'transcreated' drama, the generic term used in India to refer to works translated and adapted by the author from one language and performance tradition to another, usually English. India has a long tradition of this practice, dating back at least to the beginning of the century with Rabindranath Tagore's renderings of his plays into English. In the work of writers such as Tagore and Girish Karnad, to be considered below, it is only through the process of transcreation that a form of *syncretic* drama and theatre is realized that combines the English language with indigenous performance codes. That this, however, is not necessarily welcomed by the Western and Indian academy alike provides one of the interesting contradictions of critical discourse on Indian Drama in English.

Syncretic theatre can be defined as those theatrical products which result from the interplay between the Western theatrico-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms of a postcolonial culture. Syncretic theatre is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or post-colonial experience. It is very often written and performed in a Europhone language but most always manifests varying degrees of bi- or multi-lingualism. This essay does not intend to attempt a linguistic comparison of the plays, but rather

[2] M.K. Naik, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1984), p. 159.

to consider to what extent the process of linguistic translation also affects their theatrical conventions.

Anglophone Indian drama has generally remained outside a strong performative tradition, a factor informing most critical literature devoted to it: 'Enterprising Indians have for nearly a hundred years occasionally essayed drama in English—but seldom for actual stage production.'[3] This appraisal by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (1961) becomes something of a leitmotif in subsequent studies, as does his comment on the question of language: 'the natural medium of conversation with us—excepting with the super-sophisticated who live in the cities and the larger towns, in the Universities or in certain Government offices or business houses—is the mother tongue rather than English.'[4] The problem of making English dialogue between Indians sound convincing is a recurrent criticism levelled at Indian English dramatists and is part of a continuing debate over the function and status of Indian English literature written as a medium of artistic expression.[5]

A survey of the critical literature written on Anglophone drama since Iyengar's early essay reveals a plethora of statements along the lines of 'poor relation,' 'poor stageworthiness,' and 'imitative,' to name only the more restrained epithets. S. Krishna Bhatta's 1987 study of Indian English drama concludes with a chapter entitled: 'Indian English Drama: Why Meagre Achievement?' Among the reasons listed are, firstly, an unwillingness to tap Indian mythological and performance traditions; secondly, the lack of a 'living theatre'—Indian English playwrights seem to write for the reader; thirdly, an unwillingness to engage in formal experiment; and fourthly, the use of overly literary language which does not reflect the linguistic realities of modern India.[6] A

[3] K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar. *Drama in Modern India and the Writer's Responsibility in a Rapidly Changing World* (Bombay: P.E.N All-India Centre, 1961), p. 33.

[4] K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 35.

[5] The main positions in this debate from the writer's point of view can be found in R.K. Narayan, 'English in India: The Process of Transmutation' and Mulk Raj Anand, 'Pigeon-Indian: Some Notes on Indian English Writing.' Both articles are in *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*, (ed.) M.K. Naik (Delhi: Macmillan, 1979.)

[6] S. Krishna Bhatta, *Indian English Drama: A Critical Study* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1987), pp. 196–200.

similar assessment can be found in the collection of essays edited by M.K. Naik published ten years earlier.[7] It is, above all, Krishna Bhatta's first point—the supposed unwillingness of dramatists to creatively utilize indigenous performance traditions—that situates the discussion in the context of syncretic theatre, either real or desired. Although Krishna Bhatta stresses the importance of this performance tradition, there is very little evidence of an adequate consideration of performance-related factors in his actual study. It is, like practically all criticism of Anglophone Indian drama, predominantly thematic in orientation, and pays little or no attention to the plays as performance texts.

It can be argued that the supposed 'meager achievement' is a far too generalized condemnation and that the negative assessment is in part a reflection of the Eurocentric critical apparatus employed by these and many other critics. In short, plays are assessed under quite narrow literary criteria, and in most cases there is little or no attempt to take account of the semiotic complexity and performance-related elements of those Anglophone Indian plays which do in fact correspond to Krishna Bhatta's above-mentioned desiderata. Whereas this critical strategy may be appropriate to the dramaturgy of Anglophone works realized in the Western mode of theatrical realism, it has serious shortcomings when applied to syncretic transcreated drama.

According to semiotic theory, a 'successful' play or performance is usually achieved when there is maximum congruence between the production codes of the author/director/performers and the receptive codes of the spectators. Regular theatre-goers tend to have at their disposal a substantial repertoire of receptive codes or 'decoding programs' which they can apply to the various genres of theatre they may encounter. When there is a serious disjunction in this relationship, for whatever reason, and there are many, then the performance can be said to have 'failed.' Syncretic theatre, which employs theatrical codes from quite disparate performance

[7] See, especially, M.K. Naik, 'The Achievement of Indian Drama in English,' in *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*, (eds.), M.K. Naik and S. Mokashi-Punekar (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 180–94. The one dissenting voice in this chorus of criticism is Murli Das Melwani in 'Indo-Anglian Plays: A Survey,' *Enact*, Vol. 123, No. 24 (1977), n.p.

and cultural traditions, creates an entirely new hierarchy of dominants,[8] which may in fact lead to a failure of semiosis. In this problematic area we may find one of the keys to the 'supposed' meager achievement of Anglophone Indian drama: a failure on the part of critics, representative here for spectators, to adjust their receptive codes to cope with new structures of code of dominance which are particularly evident in self-translated plays.

Translation has always been an important activity in Indian culture, a result no doubt of the linguistic diversity of a continent which has nevertheless very strong common religious and cultural roots. For this reason, translation was traditionally considered to be an independent creative act and not just an intermediary, interpretive activity. In the words of Bengali scholar Sujit Mukherjee, 'Until the advent of Western culture in India we had always regarded translation as new writing.'[9] During the colonial period there was widespread 'literary bilingualism'[10] which has continued into the postcolonial period and is reflected in the everyday bilingualism of the educated classes in India. For the dramatist this state of bilingualism resulted either in two separate literary and theatrical activities or, as was more often the case, in a state of continual and mutual exchange between work in the mother tongue and that in English, or between work in two Indian languages.

In the special case of dramatic translation, which is by tradition closely tied to the rendering of classic Sanskrit texts, the term 'transcreation' has been introduced. It was coined in 1964 by Purushottam Lal, a publisher and translator from Calcutta, in

[8] The semiotic system we know as Western theatre consists of dominants organized principally according to genre and performance codes—for example, a dialogic dominant for naturalistic drama, or a musical dominant for opera. One way to analyze syncretic drama and theatre is to examine if and when and for what purpose shifts in dominants take place, and how indigenous cultural texts influence the conventional hierarchy of dominants.

[9] Sujit Mukherjee, *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1981), p. 77.

[10] The term comes from Vilas Sarang, 'Self-Translators,' *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol, 16, No. 2 (1981), pp. 33–38. Sarang argues that Indian writers 'are usually bilingual to a greater or lesser extent in their daily life' (p. 33).

connection with his English versions of Sanskrit plays.[11] The most comprehensive theoretical justification of the concept can be found in Lal's essay, 'On Translating *Shakuntala*,'[12] where he claims to want to produce an 'actable,' that is, a stageable version of the classic text. He maintains that the crucial problem is not one of translating the language itself, but rather of rendering value systems, cultural conventions and forms comprehensible to a Western audience. This means that it is not possible to make a simple separation of form and content: problems of comprehension linked to the Hindu thinking also manifest themselves in the structure of the play. The circularity of theme and form found in *Shakuntala* is a reflection of Hindu metaphysics, which must create problems of reception in another culture: 'to a mind grooved in a different cultural pattern it [the theme] must surely appear far-fetched and abstruse.'[13] In order to counter intercultural misunderstandings, the translator must be entitled to take considerable liberties with the source text. Apart from the lack of cultural knowledge on the part of a Western audience, there are other difficulties arising from the dramaturgical and stage conventions inscribed in the text, which Lal terms 'the technical level':

> [T]he play is full of irritating dei ex machina: stage divisions are not into acts and scenes but parts and interludes, fluid, interwoven—seven altogether; asides, whispers, soliloquies, and chantable *slokas* abound.... Then there are naïve bits of melodrama ... Faced by such a variety of material, the translator must edit, reconcile and transmute; his job becomes largely a matter of transcreation.[14]

Solving these supposedly 'technical' problems places the intercultural stage translator in a typical dilemma according to Lal: to 'smooth over' stylistic and cultural elements so as to render a foreign text into a form corresponding to Western theatrical and

[11] See P. Lal, *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation* (Calcutta: New Directions, 1964). The title page reads: 'Great Sanskrit Plays in New English Transcreations by P. Lal.' On this coinage see Mukherjee, p. 85.

[12] P. Lal, *Transcreation: Two Essays* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1972), pp. 19–29.

[13] Ibid., p. 24.

[14] Ibid., p. 23.

dramatic conventions, or to consciously retain such 'technical' difficulties—and thus the theatrico-cultural characteristics of the text—and risk alienating a target audience. However, this dilemma is based on an over-simplified dichotomy because it assumes much more restrictive Western reception codes than are in fact the case. Lal posits for Western theatre a degree of homogeneity that in the second half of the twentieth century no longer exists. In the following analysis of the translation practices of Rabindranath Tagore and Girish Karnad it is important to keep in mind the tension between the assumed homogeneity of Western theatre on the one hand and its actual heterogeneity on the other.

Throughout his life, Rabindranath Tagore remained primarily a Bengali writer. Apart from a number of essays and lectures, he conceived and wrote his poetry and prose in his mother tongue, which was then rendered into other languages by translators. As far as his plays are concerned the situation is a little more complicated. Some of the works best known in Europe such as *The Post Office* and *The King of the Dark Chamber* (both 1914) were popularized in translations not done by Tagore himself, while other equally important works were rendered into English by the author. Therefore, as Naik suggests, it is necessary to differentiate between those plays translated by others and those 'transcreated' by Tagore himself to 'form a significant and autonomous body of writing which must be judged in and for itself.'[15] Naik argues that Tagore considered the 'transcreations' as contributions to Western dramatic literature and that they entailed substantial adaptation, condensation and refashioning of Bengali originals for Western theatrical conventions.

It should be kept in mind that Tagore's position within his own theatrical culture was by no means unproblematic since his work conformed to neither the popular nor the socially committed streams of local theatre. As one Bengali scholar succinctly put it: 'he remained aloof from the Bengali stage'.[16] His plays have also

[15] *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1984), p. 167. Naik lists 13 plays translated by Tagore himself out of a total oeuvre of 53 plays and dance-dramas.

[16] H. Sanyal, 'The Plays of Rabindranath Tagore,' in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume* (1861–1961), (ed.), H. Sanyal (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961), p. 239.

been criticized for their excess of symbolism on the one hand and lack of brisk dialogue on the other,[17] and although his plays were by no means conceived as closet dramas, the first productions were largely private affairs.[18]

All this notwithstanding, Tagore was keenly interested in theatre and problems of staging. This is immediately reflected in his translation practices. The preface to his 'dramatic poem,' *Chitra*,[19] indicates that he is very conscious of the fact that translation for the stage implies reworking not just the language but stage conventions as well:

> NOTE: The dramatic poem 'Chitra' has been performed in India without scenery—the actors being surrounded by the audience. Proposals for its production here having been made to the author, he went through this translation and provided stage directions, but wished these omitted if it were printed as a book.[20]

The 'here' referred to England and the published version contains no stage directions. Tagore was, however, prepared to provide them for rehearsal purposes so as to allow the text to be adapted to the scenographic and spatial conventions of the picture-frame stage. Indirectly Tagore also indicates to what extent his text is indebted to traditional Indian theatre. The comment suggests that

[17] The following comment by C. Paul Varghese is fairly representative of widespread opinion among Indian scholars, who disliked Tagore's excessive symbolism: 'The main characters of his symbolical plays are not so much persons of flesh and blood as personifications of the poet's subjective experience.' *Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English* (Bombay: Somaiya Publications, 1971), p. 155.

[18] They were performed either on the family estate in Calcutta or later at the school Santiniketan; however, because of Tagore's regional and international reputation these performances attracted a large number of spectators and press.

[19] The Bengali original, titled *Chitrāgundā*, was written in 1891, whereas Tagore's English version did not appear until 1914. The plot is based on a story from the Mahabharata about the love between Arjuna and the girl Chitra, who has been raised by her father as a son.

[20] Rabindranath Tagore, *Collected Poems and Plays* (New York: Macmillan 1941), p. 152.

the Bengali original contains, perhaps not unlike Shakespearean plays, chiefly *implied* stagecraft and scenographic conventions which would have determined the performance text in India. The reader of the English version has the impression that the actors, who speak a lyrically heightened but dialogically structured text, are the dominant sign system. The few didascalia provide no indications of stage action nor are there many implied stage directions in the spoken text. For the opening scene between the eponymous girl Chitra and the gods Madana and Vasanta, there is no spatial specification whatsoever; the scene takes place in a 'neutral, unlocalized space' typical of traditional Indian dance-theatre.[21] The only deictic signs provided pertain to the role of Chitra. The story itself points of course to its origin in the Mahabharata and hence more indirectly to a link between Tagore's play and classical Sanskrit theatre, which used the same sources. This affinity is however not immediately evident in the English version because Tagore pared back what he considered to be the excessive ornamentation of Bengali language for Western tastes and removed whole sections of the action and characters, which supposedly distracted from dramatic unity.[22]

A number of the significant changes made by Tagore to the English version of *Chitra* in the process of 'transcreation' were documented in 1926 by Edward Thompson, who bemoans the excision of long lyrical descriptive passages, which were apparently sacrificed in favour of an emphasis on the action. Another element which Tagore pared back was the strong erotic and sensual character of the language, 'in obedience to the laws which forbid in one language what they permit in another.'[23] Thompson sees

[21] See Suresh Awasthi, 'The Scenography of the Traditional Theatre of India,' *The Drama Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1974), pp. 36–46.

[22] Sujit Mukherjee argues that Tagore's plays often 'emerge from his translations shorn of sub-plots and superfluous characters making a distinct *advance in dramatic structure* even if they fail to gain in any other aspect' (emphasis added). *Passage to America: The Reception of Rabindranath Tagore in the United States 1912–1941* (Calcutta: Bookland, 1964), p. 142. This assessment betrays a somewhat Eurocentric notion of 'dramatic structure,' seen in terms of a hierarchy of advancement rather than as a culturally specific construct.

[23] Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 126.

'improvements' in the English version compared to the Bengali original, particularly in the simplification of the dramatic dialogue, a result, he argues, of the 'maturity' of a writer twenty years older. It is instructive to contrast two examples of the play's dialogue rendered into English. In the left are passages taken from Thompson's translation of the Bengali original, in the right column Tagore's adaptation of these passages:

Tell me, slender lady, the tale of yesterday. I have a desire to know what my heart loosèd, flowery dart wrought.	I desire to know what happened last night.
As in a song, in the tune of a moment, an endless utterance cries out weeping	Like an endless meaning in the narrow span of a song.[24]

While the examples selected may seem somewhat crass, they are nevertheless representative of the transcreative process of adapting between two stage languages. Whatever the conventions of Bengali stage language at the turn of the century may have been—and it could be argued that Tagore was working within a self-created genre *sui generis*—it is still evident that the transformation into a text intended for Western performance entailed in the mind of the author substantial linguistic, and, as we have seen, dramaturgical adjustments. The norm that Tagore is moving towards but by no means trying to imitate in his English version is the laconism of realistic drama with its concentrated narrative and its exclusion of all linguistic embellishments not immediately necessary for characterization or advancement of dramatic action.[25]

Much of the cultural misunderstanding and criticism that has been directed at Tagore's drama is rooted in this particularly narrow view of what constitutes 'drama.' In his analysis of the play *Phâlguni* (*The Cycle of Spring*, first performed 1916), Thompson praises the use of music, but criticizes the text itself: '[the play] falls short of

[24] Thompson, p. 130.

[25] In a moment of ethnocentric condescension, Thompson sees such concessions as enriching for Tagore: 'Rabindranath's exceptionally receptive genius has not come into contact with our Northern thought and life without great enrichment' (p. 130).

literature . . . the residue is not drama.'[26] While Thompson was intimately acquainted with Tagore's dramatic oeuvre, he appears unable to find the critical language to place the works in the context of Indian theatre aesthetics, or perhaps more accurately, within the framework of Tagore's adaptation of these aesthetic principles.[27] This standpoint is by no means unique but rather symptomatic of a negative attitude to Tagore's theatrical texts, which is based on a normative, neo-Aristotelian understanding of theatre and drama. Such attitudes, interestingly enough, were echoed by a number of Indian critics. It is this tradition of Tagore scholarship that Naik attacks in a more recent reassessment of Tagore's English theatrical texts:

> Those who condemn the dialogue as clumsy and awkward, flowery and rhetorical, forget not only that it is highly stylized but that this stylization was inevitable in a kind of drama which had so plainly discarded the realist convention and opted for the larger freedom of the imaginative theatre. In a theatre like this, rhetoric and declamation, soliloquy and song, poetic and mystic paradox are the natural idiom and need not be out of place at all.[28]

Here, Naik argues convincingly for a reassessment of the critical parameters within which to view Tagore's translated dramas. Although Tagore at no time voiced any interest in working purely within the realist tradition, the very act of rendering his plays into English had the effect of placing them entirely within a theatrical code.

The reception of Tagore's drama in Europe takes place significantly after 1913, the year he was awarded the Nobel prize, and is an important step in the process of intercultural reception among the anti-naturalistic theatre reformers. Practically every major theatre reformer of this time looked to the Asian theatre for inspiration and for a theatrical language to combat the strictures of naturalism, realism and the well-made play. Tagore's theatre (the

[26] Thompson, pp. 250ff.

[27] Tagore's reaction to Thompson's study was extremely unfavourable, to say the least. See Harish Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* (Manchster: Manchester University Press, 1995).

[28] Naik, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*, pp. 178ff. Naik draws pertinent comparisons with the anti-naturalistic symbolist drama of Yeats and Maeterlinck.

transcreated English dramas and later dance-plays) is not, however, in the first instance a counter-model to a prevailing tradition. Rather, it attempts to combine Tagore's primarily Indian aesthetic sensibility with his interest in, and encyclopedic knowledge of, western forms.[29] Through the process of 'transcreation' Tagore arrives at an early form of syncretic theatre, rewriting his plays partly in the linguistic and performance codes of Western theatrical sensibility, yet retaining the unmistakable signature of Indian performance aesthetics.

The period following Tagore saw two tendencies in Anglophone theatre, neither of which attempted to follow syncretic dramaturgy. One was a spate of verse dramas: the important figures here are Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), better known as a poet and philospher, and T.P. Kailasam (1885–1948), both of whom 'invariably cast their full-length plays in the age-old Shakespearean mould.'[30] Girish Karnad has underlined the important, yet problematic place of the realistic mode for modern Indian theatre and its development during the 1930s as a reaction against the shallow conventions of Parsi theatre:

> [Realistic theatre's] great improvement over the Parsi theatre was that it took itself seriously both as art and as an instrument of social change. Yet it remained saddled with the European model. Bernard Shaw became its presiding deity.[31]

A further obstacle to the creation of syncretic theatre was posed by the excessive Western orientation of many intellectuals and writers. In 1934, theatre historian R.K. Yajnik could come to the conclusion that in the nineteenth century, through missionary activity and Macaulay's 'momentous minute,' 'British civilization had given a tremendous impetus to the native genius of India.'[32] Twenty three years later K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar echoed similar

[29] For commentary on Tagore's debt to Western theatre, see Thompson, p. 287 and passim, and also Sanyal, p. 239.

[30] See Naik, *Dimensions of India, English Literature*, p. 156.

[31] Karnad, 'In Search of a New Theatre,' in *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, ed. Carla M. Borden (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1989), p. 100.

[32] Yajnik, *The Indian Theatre: Its Origins and its Later Developments under European Influence with Special Reference to Western India* (New York: Hashel House Reprint, 1970), p. 87.

sentiments, cementing this hierarchy of theatrical culture in which the West clearly occupies the privileged place:

> [W]hat the Western impact actually did was to awaken the dormant critical impulse in the country, to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and literature, and to open the way for a fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expression ....It is necessary from time to time, when a native inspiration is weakening, to graft on it a vigorous foreign inspiration.[33]

While Srinivasa Iyengar is clearly an exponent of 'the creative mingling of the two streams,'[34] the botanical metaphor creates unfortunate antinomies of weak (native) versus strong (Western)—main versus subsidiary—with the Indian branch presumably grafted onto the Western trunk. Syncretism is ideally a process based on mutual respect and a balanced exchange of cultural values and forms. Syncretic theatre requires therefore a dramaturgical method which can bridge cultural dichotomies and can look on either tradition, free of aesthetic hierarchies and normative constrictions, as the raw material from which to fashion works utilizing forms, codes and conventions from both traditions.

For an eminently successful and subtle realization of syncretic dramaturgy, it is necessary to turn once again to an example of transcreated drama. *Hayavadana* by playwright, actor and film-maker Girish Karnad (1938–) was originally written and successfully performed in the South Indian language Kannada in 1971,[35] and then subsequently rendered into English by the author and performed in that language a year later. It has also been translated into other languages; however, the critical and scholarly attention the play has attracted is focussed, significantly perhaps, on the English version. The play is based on the story of the transposed heads from the collection of Sanskrit tales known as the *Kathasaritasagara*, and on Thomas Mann's adaptation of

[33] Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 4ff.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Karnad's other plays in Kannada include *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Anjumallige* (1978), *Hittina Hunja* (1980), and *Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra* (1988). Karnad translated *Tughlaq* into English in 1971 and *Nāga-Mandala* in 1988. Both are published with *Hayavadana* in *Three Plays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990). His most recent play is *The Fire and the Rain* (1994).

the tale in his novella 'The Transposed Heads' ('Die vertauschten Köpfe').

The story, in Karnad's treatment, revolves around two friends, Devadatta and Kapila, who become estranged over their rivalry for Devadatta's young wife Padmini. Devadatta is a Brahman and devoted to intellectual and literary pursuits; Kapila, a blacksmith, is endowed with enviable physical attributes, which exercise a considerable attraction for Padmini. In a fit of jealous despair Devadatta beheads himself worshipping the goddess Kali. Kapila follows suit. Padmini reattaches the heads to the wrong bodies, and thus reconstituted, the men begin to quarrel over their respective rights to Padmini. She decides for the best of both worlds and selects the combination of Devadatta's head and Kapila's body. Kapila (the head) flees in despair into the forest. The ideal combination, however, begins after a while to decay—the intellectual mind neglects the athletic body—as does the marriage, until Padmini leaves her husband and seeks out Kapila, who has undergone precisely the opposite process. The two rivals kill each other in a duel and Padmini willingly performs *sati*, the Hindu custom of widow's self-immolation. This central story, which in its ironic tone, owes a great deal to Mann's novella, is framed within the story of Hayavadana half-horse, half-man, who in analogy to the main action, is also in search of completeness. He seeks Kali as well, commits an error, and finds himself transformed totally into a horse.

The performance style is heavily influenced by the conventions and theatrical devices of *Yakṣagāna*, a traditional form of theatre, widespread in Karnad's home state. Most important in *Hayavadana* is the use of the *Bhagavata*, a narrator figure, who functions as an intermediary between the fictional characters and the audience.[36] Apart from the explicit debt to Yakṣagāna dance-drama, there is an unmistakable Brechtian influence apparent. Karnad has stressed

[36] According to Kenneth Rea, 'The key performer in any Yakshagana [sic] play is the *bhagavatha*, for it is up to him to keep the performance under control and to express in his singing the changing moods and emotions the story takes.' He also helps establish each character. See 'Theatre in India: The Old and the New,' Part II,' *Theatre Quarterly*, 8.31 (1978), p. 46.

in a recent essay the importance of Brecht, not just to himself, but to modern Indian theatre in general, particularly in redirecting the attention of Indian playwrights and directors to the possibilities of the conventions of anti-illusionistic folk theatre:

> To use a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, these conventions then allow for 'complex seeing.' And it must be admitted that Brecht's influence, received mainly through his writings and without the benefit of his theatrical productions, went some way in making us realize what could be done with the design of traditional theater. The theatrical conventions Brecht was reacting against ... were never part of the traditional Indian theater. There was therefore no question of arriving at an 'alienation' effect by using Brechtian artifice. What he did was to sensitize us to the potentialities of non-naturalistic techniques available in our own theater.[37]

In this same essay, Karnad points out that it was not in fact a story or tale that inspired him to write the play, or even a political conviction, or thematic complex. It was rather a discussion about the meaning and function of masks and music in Indian theatre. These two elements identify two dominants in the play's thematic and performative structure, which even a cursory reading will confirm. When we turn to the critical literature on *Hayavadana*, however, entirely different concerns become apparent. In an early essay on Karnad's work, S. Gopale asks, 'what philosophy is he committed to . . . what models does he imitate?', before going on to analyze structure, character and Karnad's debt to existentialism. He concludes with the curious assertion: 'Karnad the poet is more compelling than Karnad the playwright. One doubts whether one is reading a play by Lorca as one reads *Hayavadana*.[38] The play's debt to *Yakṣagāna* is not even mentioned. In an article published in 1976, U.R. Anantha Murthy focuses his highly critical analysis of the play on its 'defective and muddled conception of two of the important characters,'[39] and on what he terms a 'stylized' technique. He in fact attacks Karnad for his reliance on anti-illusionistic theatrical

[37] Karnad, 'In Search of a New Theater,' p. 104.

[38] S. Gopale, 'Playwright in Perspective,' [Girish Karnad] *Enact*, Vol. 54 (1971), n.p.

[39] Anantha Murthy, 'A Note on Karnad's *Hayavadana*,' *The Literary Criterion*, Vol. 12, No. 2–3 (1976), p. 37.

conventions as the dominant code: 'We ask for psychological realism because it is there in some important parts of the play.'[40] In other words, we find here the remarkable strategy by which the critic tries to privilege the code of 'psychological realism,' although it cannot be considered by any account to be the dominant of the play.[41] Karnad's intention was precisely opposed to notions of psychological realism; the play was in fact conceived as a counter-model to the use of masks in Western theatre where they are very often linked to psychological questions. Karnad specifies that the three central characters—Devadatta, Kapila and Hayavadana—wear masks:

> Western theatre has developed a contrast between the face and the mask—the real inner person and the exterior one presents, or wishes to present, to the world outside. But in Indian traditional theatre, the mask is only the face 'writ large'; since a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype, the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature.[42]

'Psychological realism' is certainly 'there' in the play, but together with, and not more important than, lyrical passages reminiscent of Tagore's work or even Sanskrit drama, monologues, music, dance and self-reflexive asides to the audience. The dramaturgy of the play appears in fact to be consciously constructed around ironic shifts between these elements so as to prevent the privileging of any one performance code.

It is particularly revealing of the Eurocentric focus of much of the literature devoted to this play that there is no attempt to apply critical parameters deriving from traditional Indian theatre, particularly from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the compendium of Sanskrit dramatic and theatrical theory and practice. The text gives ample evidence that Karnad knows his classical Sanskrit dramaturgy; but here again, there appears to be an unwillingness on the part of critics to engage on an analytic level in the same kind of

[40] Anantha Murthy, p. 42.

[41] The play has by no means attracted only adverse criticism. See Naik, 'From the Horse's Mouth: A Study of *Hayavadana*,' in *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*; and Veena Noble Dass, *Modern Indian Drama in English Translation* (Hyderabad: Noble Dass, 1988).

[42] Karnad, 'In Search of a New Theatre,' p. 103.

syncretic processes that the dramatist has quite evidently utilized. First of all Yakṣagāna itself is influenced by Sanskrit drama and theory, a debt which is normally articulated *expressis verbis* in the dialogue between the *Bhagavata* and one of the buffoon figures. 'By quoting from ancient scriptures from the *Natyashastra* the *bhagavatha* links his Yakshagana [sic] folk art with the traditions of classical Sanskrit theatre, as if establishing its pedigree.'[43] Karnad's dramaturgy does not, however, reduplicate these conventions but rather utilizes self-reflexive allusions to an ironic commentary on them, a strategy which requires a sophisticated consciousness of both Western and traditional Indian theatrical conditions on the part of the audience. This ability to view the play with a double theatrico-cultural consciousness manifests itself in quite complex ways, as for example in the use of the Indian half-curtain, or in the incorporation of a simple joke. The Bhagavata introduces 'our actor' by the name of Nata, which is in fact the Sanskrit word *nata*, meaning an actor or dancer. The Bhagavata's introduction of the various characters, his constant dialogue with the audience, and comic exchanges with Nata at the beginning of the play correspond quite closely to the structure of a Yakṣagāna performance. The opening of the play also follows more or less exactly the rituals of Yakṣagāna theatre:

> *At the beginning of the performance, a mask of Ganesha is brought on stage and kept on the chair. Pooja is done. The Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha, accompanied by his musicians.*[44]

'Pooja' (Sanskrit *pūjā*) is the ritual performed at the commencement of all traditional Indian theatre in which offerings are made and prayers said asking for a successful performance. The presence of Ganesha, a mask of a one-tusked elephant and the protective deity of actors, serves not only to establish links with traditional theatre but also to anticipate the use of masks in the play and to underline the key thematic complex—the search for completeness. In his song to Ganesha, the Bhagavata alludes to these various functions: 'O

[43] Rea, 'Theatre in India: The Old and the New Theatre, Part II,' p. 50.

[44] Girish Karnad, *Hayavadana*, translated by the author (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 1. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness/ we pay homage to you and start our play' (p. 1). He continues in this metatheatrical vein with his introduction of the first major character, Hayavadana, who enters behind a half-curtain, a standard device for introducing new characters in both Yakṣagāna and Kathakali:

> What's coming? . . . If even a hardened actor like him gets frightened, it's more than likely that our gentle audience may get frightened too. It's not proper to let such a sight walk on stage unchallenged. *[To the wings]* Hold up the entry-curtain. (p. 5)

In Kathakali and Yakṣagāna, the entry of the figure is accompanied by dancing and the gradual lowering of the curtain which culminates in a *coup de théâtre* as the gods or demons are revealed in all their costumed and masked splendour. While Karnad follows the mechanics of the device, the theatrical effect is precisely the opposite. Hayavadana keeps ducking out of sight until finally 'the curtain is lowered right down to the floor. Hayavadana, who has a man's body but a horse's head, is sitting on the floor hiding his head between his knees' (p. 5). The device is repeated in the same ironic, anti-climactic way for the appearance of Kali before the beheading scene.

Kinesic and gestural codes suggest a conscious attempt to utilize both Western and Indian theatrical traditions. Stage directions such as 'Kapila goes round the stage once' (p. 53) allude to *parikramana*, a pattern of conventional movement described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which literally means 'walking around,' and is used to suggest a journey from one locale to another.[45] Karnad also calls for devices such as miming 'a cart-ride,' 'knocking,' and 'picking up an axe,' which clearly belong to the code repertoire of mime, a Western convention which is not known to traditional Indian folk theatre.[46] The climactic duel between Devadatta and Kapila, 'stylized like a dance' (p. 61), makes use of a kinesic code not derived directly from

[45] Farley Richmond, Darius Swann, and Phillip Zarrilli, *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 42.

[46] At least, this is claimed by the acclaimed writer and director Habib Tanvir, when asked to justify the use of mime in his productions. See Rea, 'Theatre in India: The Old and the New, Part III,' *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 32 (1979), pp. 47–66.

Yakṣagāna, although the dramaturgical situation, a battle scene, certainly is. In Yakṣagāna, the combatants are clearly delineated as hero and enemy and the duel involves frenzied drumming, leaping and swirling. In *Hayavadana*, the struggle between Devadatta and Kapila expresses no clear antinomy of good and evil, of hero and enemy; nor is the fight a frenzied, acrobatic combat. Instead the dance is performed with cool deliberation, without emotional excitement, which reflects the relationship between the characters, who are, in effect, mechanically executing the conventions required of them and the action. Here again, the allusion to a traditional performance code contains at the same time an ironic commentary on it.

Karnad's achievement resides in his ability to refashion a mythical tale using traditional performance techniques in such a way that the tale can stand up to severest critical scrutiny and sustain the Brechtian postulate of 'complex seeing.' Karnad's debt to Brecht, although explicitly acknowledged, is practically indistinguishable from his debt to Yakṣagāna, which illustrates very clearly that syncretic dramaturgy must not in any way be epigonic in its reliance either on indigenous or on Western models. In a study of Indian drama in translation Veena Noble Dass considers *Hayavadana* to be a model for future Indian drama:

> [B]oth in its thematic and technical strategy, *Hayavadana* is an innovative experiment that offers a new direction to modern Indian theatre. This experiment proves that the traditional forms need not be treated as precious artifacts, but can be adopted to treat modern themes suitable for the urban Indian audience.[47]

> In all the works examined, it is evident that even indigenous critics are often reluctant to make crucial shifts in their receptive codes to make allowance for the intercultural semiosis necessary to understand transcreated syncretic works such as Tagore's translated plays and Karnad's *Hayavadana*. Even in a monocultural context, theatrical performance or even an unperformed theatrical text is, as we know, a highly complex semiotic system. But an Anglophone Indian play, especially when transcreated from another Indian

[47] Noble Dass, p. 168.

> language, has by definition diverse and perhaps even contradictory cultural codes inscribed in it. To read the signs and to appraise the theatrical codes of syncretic theatre, it is necessary to engage in a kind of bicultural receptive strategy in order to assess these works according to their culturally determined dominant structures. Only by a recognition of these dominant structures, which must predetermine and direct the next stage of hermeneutic activity, will outmoded Eurocentric critical methods be replaced by culturally and aesthetically appropriate strategies.

Neo-Sanskritic and Naturalistic Hindi Drama

Diana Dimitrova

GENERAL OVERVIEW AND PERIODIZATION

Indian literary criticism refers to the initial three periods of modern Hindi drama up to Independence in 1947 as 'Bhāratendu-Kāl' ('Bhāratendu's epoch'), 'Prasād-Kāl' ('Prasād's epoch') and 'Prasādottar-kāl' ('post/after Prasād period'), respectively. In doing so, it alludes to the two major Hindi playwrights of the time whose work is most representative of the development of modern Hindi drama. This periodization follows the tradition of the widely accepted classification of modern Hindi literature that conforms to the lifetime and work of the most prolific and influential authors of Hindi. Thus, we talk about 'Bhāratendu yug', 'Dwivedi yug'[1] and so on.

The 'Prasādottar-Kāl', which starts in the 1930s, is followed by the 'Svātantryottar-Kāl' ('post/after-Independence period') that begins in 1947. This period, in turn, is followed by the 'Sāthottar-

[1] R.L. Handa even talks of the 'dramas of the Dwivedi era' when referring to L. Miśra's plays, which chronologically belong to the time span immediately after Prasād's period. See R.L. Handa, *History of Hindi Language and Literature* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1976), p. 377.

Kāl' ('after-the-1960s period').[2] Unlike the first three periods in the chronology of modern Hindi drama, which are defined and named after great personalities, the last two time spans in this classification are based on historical events and changes in the political and ideological climate.

Whereas Bhāratendu (1850–1885) heralded the beginning of modern Hindi drama by emancipating it from the conventions of both classical Indian and the commercial Parsi theatre, Prasād (1889–1937) broadened its expressive potential. The power of his language and the depth of psychological characterization of his dramatic figures marked a new phase in the development of modern Hindi drama. While Bhāratendu wrote satirical, lyrical and historical plays, Prasād established the historical play as the main Hindi dramatic genre.

In the 1930s, generation of playwrights appeared who rebelled against Prasād's authority and the domination of the historical play. They followed in the tradition of Western dramatists Ibsen and Strindberg and wrote not only historical, but also social plays that handled the immediate problems of contemporary Indian society. Their main representative in the 1930s was Lakṣmīnārāyaṇ Miśra (b. 1903).

After Independence, the subject matter of Hindi drama changed. The British were gone; social injustice, however, remained. This prompted many playwrights to stop writing historical plays that glorified the past and saw the British as the only cause for the 'fall' of the great Aryan civilization. The influence of Western drama grew and the social problem play in Hindi thrived. This predominantly social message of modern Hindi drama was in perfect conformity with the ideology of Progressivism, the ideas of Gandhī and Indian National Congress, and the political orientation of the J. Nehrū government toward the Soviet Union and Marxism. The work of Upendranāth Aśk (1910–1996), Jagdīścandra Māthur (1917–1981), Bhuvaneśvar (1912–1957) and Mohan Rākeś (1925–1972) is most representative of this time.

[2] Vacandev Kumar (ed.), *Hindi natak: 1960 ke bād* (Patna: Vibhu Prakāśan, 1982), p. 12.

The preoccupation with social issues led in turn to a new 'rebellion' in the 1960s and a new shift in subject matter. The playwrights of the new generation approached the problems of the relationship between man and woman in the family from a more personal perspective. Social issues became less and less topical. In this sense, the plays of Mohan Rākeś, Lakṣmīnārayāṇ Lāl, Hamidullā and many others should be taken into consideration. Dramaturgically, new techniques were employed. Many Hindi playwrights sought an alternative to the all-pervasive influence of Western drama and took up the folk tradition of the *nautankī* as a model of their plays. In this respect, Habīb Tanvīr's and Śāntā Gāndhī's plays should be mentioned.

One could question the universality of this periodization by pointing to the fact that historical plays have been written throughout the entire development of modern Hindi drama and that Western dramatic tradition is as influential nowadays as it used to be in the decades before and after the Independence of 1947. Similarly, Bhuvaneśvar and Upendranāth Aśk placed the emphasis on family issues and the relationship between man and woman from a very personal perspective long before the general shift in this direction in the 1960s.

Though this periodization is not perfect, it reflects the main tendencies and changes in the development of modern Hindi drama objectively. It is current in Indian literary criticism and I will therefore adopt it and will refer to it, wherever necessary, for the purpose of uniformity and clarity.

THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN HINDI DRAMA

In the following I will discuss briefly the dramatic work of six representative Hindi playwrights. In this way, we will become acquainted with major Hindi dramatists from the beginnings of modern Hindi theatre until the 1960s. The historical context not only of Aśk's formation as a dramatist, but also of all authors discussed after Prasād draws on Western dramatic tradition. An examination of the works of Aśk's predecessors and contemporaries will provide the historical, cultural and intellectual context for the study of the author's dramatic oeuvre.

BHĀRATENDU HARIŚCANDRA (1850–1885)

The beginning of modern Hindi drama can be traced back to Bhāratendu Hariścandra.[3] To him, drama was the most suitable literary genre for the promotion of his reformatory ideas because of its entertaining potential and power to attract large masses of people, influencing them in an immediate way. That is why he invested all the eighteen plays he wrote with his nationalistic and reformatory views. In order to be more convincing, he rendered them realistic in form, thus deviating from the tradition of the Parsi theatre.

His satirical play *Andher Nagarī* (*The Lawless State*),[4] 1881, exposes the stupidity and absurdity of a society where everything can be bought for one *takā* ('a copper coin, worth half an *anna*'). How does a society that has no values function? The second scene of the play depicts life in a lawless city: a Brahman sells his caste for a *takā*, a Hindu becomes a Muslim for the same amount of money; both cabbage and sweets can be bought for one *takā*.

The ascetic Gobardhan Dās is happy to have found a place where he can get everything so cheap. In scene three, he does not listen to the wise words of his *mahant* ('head priest of a temple') that this is a dangerous city, which he should leave immediately. The following fourth scene is a parody of the 'justice' practised by the imbecile king Caupaṭṭ. A subject's goat has died because a door has fallen and has pressed the animal down, causing its death. Trying to find the guilty one, the king questions the carpenter who has provided the wood, the worker who has built the door and so on. Finally the

[3] For Bhāratendu's formation as a playwright, see V. Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bhāratendu Hariścandra and Nineteenth century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 300–14. Dalmia analyses two of Hariścandra's earlier plays, namely *Prem Jogini*, (*The Yogini of Love*), pp. 1874–5, and *Visasya Visamausadham*, (*Poison is the Antidote of Poison*), 1876.

[4] Bhāratendu Hariścanda, *Andher Nagarī* (Nai Dilli: Śārdā Prakāśan, 1978). In her chapter on Bhāratendu's one act plays, Višnevskaja translates the title of the play as 'Slepoj gorodiško' ('The Blind City'), which is inaccurate. A Hindi equivalent of her Russian translation would have been 'andherī nagarī'. However, this is not the case. 'Andher nagarī' is a fixed expression for 'lawless state.' Cf. N. Višnervskaja, *Indijskaja odnoaktnaja drama* (Moskva: Nauka, 1964), p. 31.

police officer in charge is found guilty for a very absurd reason and has to be hanged as a compensation for the death of the plaintiff's goat. However, the final fifth scene shows the infantry men coming over to the ascetic Gobardhan Dās in order to arrest him and hang him in the place of the police officer.

It turns out that the man who was found guilty happened to be so thin that he did not fit into the loop of the rope, so they had to find somebody who was fat enough for it. The only person who could fit in was the ascetic, so he had to be hanged. The mahant manages to save his disciple at the last moment by professing a desire to be hanged in his place. When asked the reason, he explains that the one who is hanged will immediately go to heaven. Thereupon everybody wants to be hanged in the place of the ascetic. The king, who has the supreme authority, reserves this privilege for himself alone and gets hanged.

The dramatist implies that a society that tolerates a lawless state and has no ideals or values is inevitably doomed to fail. Thus, *Andher Nagarī* was a powerful and transparent satire of Bhāratendu's time.

In order to communicate his ideas, Bhāratendu had to break with the form of the Sanskrit play. He changed it entirely and created new genres for modern Hindi drama, e.g. the historical, satirical, and lyrical play. His dramaturgical technique and the realistic characterization of the dramatic figures were innovative for modern Hindi drama. They were possible under the influence of the Bengali and English plays, with which Bhāratendu was well acquainted and which he translated into Hindi.

JAYŚANKAR PRASĀD (1889–1937)

The most prominent representative of the school of the historical drama is Jayśaṅkar Prasād. In his plays, he used historical material in order to draw attention to the present and its problems. At times, his criticism of society is indirect and obscure. It is often intertwined with the author's glorification of the great Hindu past.

I will elaborate on the historical play *Candragupta* (*Candragupta*), 1931,[5] as representative of the twelve plays Prasād wrote on the

[5] Jayśankar Prasād *Candragupta* (Ilāhābād: Bhārtī Bhandār, 2017, vi).

subject of ancient Indian dynasties. The play, which consists of four acts, is about Candragupta's victory over the Greeks and over the Nanda dynasty in the 4th century BC. The first acts ends with a meeting between Alexander the Great and Candragupta, and the sage Dāṇḍyāyan's prophecy that Candragupta will be the future ruler of India. The second act culminates in Candragupta's victory over the Greeks, led by the army of Seleucus. In the third act the united forces of the states of the Mālvas and the Kṣudrakas manage to overthrow Nanda's rule. Candragupta becomes the new king of Magadha.

The wise Brahman Cānakya, who is shown to be the thinker of all complicated political manoeuvres, succeeds not only in bringing together the Mālvas and Kṣudrakas, but also wins the Punjab ruler Parvateśvar for Chandragupta's cause. The victory over Nanda and the proclamation of Candragupta as the new ruler of the kingdom of Magadha is shown to be the result of the fight of the united army of the whole of Northern India, and Cāṇakya's skilful management of the political and military situation.

In the last act, the decisive battle with the Greeks, who are led by Alexander's successor, Silyūkas (Seleucus), takes place. Cāṇakya has managed to ensure the support of the Taksaśilā kingdom as well. The Greeks are defeated and Candragupta consolidates his empire to the West of the river Sindhu. The peace treaty is sealed with a marriage between Candragupta and Karneliyā (Cornelia), Silyūkas's daughter, who is in love with the young emperor and admires the grandeur of India and its culture.

The motif of the superiority of India over Greece is one of the main ideas Prasād communicates to his contemporaries through his play. It is suggested that the nobility, high morality and honesty of its warriors, as illustrated in the characters of Candragupta and the young warrior Simharan, is felt and appreciated by the Greeks as well. Talking about her love for India, Karneliyā says that 'the other countries are men's birthplaces; India is mankind's birthplace' (*Candragupta*, 127). Even Alexander expresses his admiration for the 'soul' of India: 'I came to India drawing a sword, having seen a heart, I am going' (Ibid., 130). The marriage between Karneliyā and Candragupta is also to be interpreted symbolically. Prasād envisaged the interaction between India and Europe or Western civilization as a whole by way of the union of the 'body'

of Europe and the 'soul' of India, as represented by Karneliyā's and Candragupta's characters respectively.[6]

Another motif that underlies the development of the action in the play is the superiority of Hinduism and the Hindu way over Buddhism and Buddhist doctrine. It is no coincidence that Cānakya is a Hindu whereas the corrupt Nanda ruler a Buddhist. The injustice and baseness of Nanda's rule and personal moral behavior are opposed to the Brahman's wisdom and nobility. They point to Cānakya's superiority. Most of the dramatic figures look up to the Brahman with trust and reverence whenever a difficult and decisive moment comes because of his Brahmanical status. Prasād implies that the glory of India and its heroic past were the result of the people's belief and confidence in Hinduism and Hindu priests. This admiration for traditional Indian learning and wisdom, as reflected in Cānakya's figure, is communicated through the opinion of other dramatis personae as well. Thus, Karneliyā talks about her admiration for the *Rāmāyana* and the Brahmans' learning. Even Magadha's Buddhist minister, Rāksas, who has a rather complicated relation with Candragupta and Cānakya throughout the play, acknowledges the Brahman's wisdom and superiority and asks him for forgiveness.

On the other hand, Prasād avoids unrealistic and psychologically untrue pathos in Cānakya's portrayal by showing the doubts of some dramatic figures who are closest to him, such as Candragupta. The young prince does not always agree with Cānakya's strategy. He does not understand the necessity of cruelty for the sake of a political cause. Thus, Nanda's daughter, Kalyānā, who is in love with Candragupta, is exiled together with her father. She kills the Punjab ruler Parvateśvar, who has attempted to abuse her, after he suggests forming a plot against Candragupta. Deserted by everybody and in despair, the young woman commits suicide. Her tragedy is caused by Cānakya's deeds. Similarly, Cānakya does not hesitate to save Candragupta's life by making Mālvikā sleep in his place in his bed, as he expects plotters to attempt an assault on the price's life. Mālvikā is murdered at night. Cānakya also drives

[6] This view reflects the influence of Aurobindo's ideas on the author.

away Candragupta's parents, as he is afraid that their presence will stand in the way of victory.

All his actions aim at consolidating the whole of India under one ruler, Candragupta. Prasād implies that in the name of the freedom of India, the separate kingdoms should forget their differences and petty quarrels, and unite to fight and win over the alien conqueror, in this case the Greeks. As he puts it in his conversation with the young Āmbhīk, who rules over the Western province of Taksaśilā and has not joined the union of the other kingdoms yet, Candragupta's kingdom is not the empire of the Magadhas but of the *āryyas* (i.e. 'the Indians'). The central message Prasād conveys in *Candragupta* is that his contemporaries should forget their internal conflicts and unite against the British. For the present moment, there could be no higher goal than the independence of India.

In order to communicate his ideas, Prasād refers to Indian history. Though their motifs and characters are moulded in conformity with the author's views, most of the male protagonists like Cānakya, Candragupta and Alexander are historical figures. The female characters are, however, entirely fictitious. This gave the playwright the freedom to construct them according to his ideal notion of the feminine.

How are women portrayed in the drama and what are the roles they play?

The main female characters are all positive, capable of self-sacrifice and heroism, and play a crucial role in the events that lead to the victory of India. Prasād suggests that without their active support and collaboration, many of the decisive events would not have been possible. It is interesting to note that Cānakya suspects many of the male protagonists of being disloyal or treacherous, but has complete trust in the female characters. The success of many of his actions depends on women's help and reliability, which he never doubts or distrusts.

Thus, Mālvikā sacrifices her life for prince Candragupta. Out of love and care for the young price, Kalyānā kills Parvateśvar, who plots against his life. Similarly, Suvāsini risks her life and penetrates the camp of the Greeks in order to fulfil Cānakya's order and help Rāksas to find his way back to his own people. Karneliyā does her

st to prevent war with the Indians and attempts to instill in her
ther admiration for Indian culture and convince him that he
ould not fight the man who has saved her from infamy.[7]

Most interesting is Alkā's character. She plays not only an active
ocial, but also political role in the play. Disgusted by her brother
Āmbhīk's greed for power, she leaves her home and goes into exile
in the woods, where she meets Candragupta and Cānakya and
witnesses the sage's prophecy about the young prince's destiny.
She is ready to sacrifice her future and marry Parvateśvar, as this is
the only way to save the imprisoned Simharan whom she loves. It
is she, carrying a banner, who leads the people and appeals to them
to fight against the Greeks. When Cānakya proclaims her and
Simharan the new rulers of Taksaśilā, in the place of her brother
Āmbhīk, she says that her native kingdom belongs neither to her
nor to her brother but to India. It is no coincidence that she saves
Cānakya's life when Candragupta's insulated father attempts to
murder him.

After Cānakya and Candragupta, Alkā plays the most signi-
ficant role in the play. In modern Hindi drama, this is one of the
first instances in which so much importance and active political
responsibility is attributed to a female character. This is no
coincidence, as female characters are central to Prasād's plays. The
author portrays women's high morality and readiness for self-
sacrifice in the name of their love for their beloved or for their
country.

Dramaturgically, Prasād's plays follow in the aesthetic of classical
Sanskrit drama. In his article '*Rangmañc*' ('The Stage'), the author
points to the fact that modern Hindi drama should not imitate
Western theatre. He argues that the West has not achieved the
'new' (i.e. Ibsen's plays) by giving up the 'old' (i.e. Shakespeare's
tradition). Prasād considers Bhāratendu's dramatic work, in which
he combines the achievements of both classical Indian and Western
theatre, exemplary.[8]

[7] In the first act of the play, Candragupta saves Karneliyā from the Greek Philip, who was going to abuse her.

[8] J. Prasād, 'Rangmañc', *Kavya aur Kalā anya nibandh*, by J. Prasād (Ilāhābād: [illegible] 2015, vi.), pp. 104–6.

Similarly, in his plays he keeps the tradition of the *dāsīs* ('female slaves') or the main protagonists' companions preceding them on stage and thus introducing their appearance or describing the setting. This explains the large number of dramatis personae in Prasād's dramas. In the play *Candragupta*, their number is thirty. The male figures Devbāl, Nāgdatt and the *gann-mukhya* ('the chief of the community'), and the female servants Nīlā, Līlā and Elis appear on stage only to announce the coming of another personage or to receive an order to deliver a message, etc.

The author preserves another feature of classical Sanskrit drama, namely the beginning or ending of a scene with a song. Only the female figures sing songs, in which they express their feelings. Prasād also comments on the importance of the female actors and the fact that their beautiful singing has contributed to the success and popularity of classical Sanskrit theatre.[9] The lyricism of the songs has prompted Gaeffke to talk about 'lyrical drama' in Prasād's case.[10] Innovative for modern Hindi drama is the fact that Prasād writes his songs in Hindi, thus differing from Bhāratendu, who composed the lyrical parts of his plays in Braj.

LAKSMĪNĀRĀYAN MIŚRA (B. 1903)

In the following, I will discuss Miśra's first social play, *Sanyāsī* (*The Ascetic*), 1929.[11] It consists of four acts and handles the problems of romantic love and traditional marriage that became topical in Indian society during the 1920s under the influence of Western education and way of life. The drama deals with the problems of marriage and love. The two figure constellations, as represented by Kiranmayī, Dīnānāth and Murlīdhar on the one side, and by Māltī, Viśvanāth and Ramāśankar on the other, serve to illustrate the two opposite views about which Miśra's contemporaries were debating.

With the spread of the British educational system, mixed school classes in which girls and boys studied together, came into being.

[9] Ibid. 99–104.

[10] See P. Gaeffke, *Hindi Literature in the 20th Century: A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. VII, No. 5 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), p. 99.

[11] Laksmīnārāyan Miśra, *Sanyāsī* (Naī Dillī: Vānī Dillī: Vānī Prakāśan, 1993).

This brought about changes in the social structure of Indian society of the 1920s and 1930s. The traditional institution of the arranged marriage was 'threatened,' as the new social freedom in colleges made friendship between boys and girls of marriageable age possible. The phenomenon of 'romantic love' became a menace to the marriage regulations of conservative Hindu society.

Thus, young Māltī and Viśvanāth are fellow students in love with each other. When the jealous Ramāśankar makes Viśvanāth's love letter to the young girl public, he disgraces her. In the second act, Māltī's father asks the student to marry his daughter. However, Viśvanāth refuses, as he has already vowed his life to the national independence of India. He is not ready to assume responsibility for his love for Māltī. He writes to her that she should accept marriage with another man. Cynically enough, he understands his decision not to marry her as a form of self-sacrifice and an expression of his socialist ideas:

> She is a Hindu girl...She cannot act against the will of her society and her parents. We care about society but not about the individual...We are real socialists. (*Sanyāsī*, 85)

Māltī comes to the conclusion that she does not want a romantic relationship with Viśvanāth, but marriage that will sustain the test of time. As she tells Viśvanāth in the last act, he has fallen in love with her because she was young, beautiful and from a good family. She asks whether this is love and why he did not marry her when her father asked him.

When she accepts Ramāśankar's proposal, Kiranmayī, who has loved her whole life the inaccessible Murlīdhar, tries to make her reconsider her decision. Māltī, however, understands her acceptance of Ramāśankar not as a defeat, but as a victory of the female sex over the male one. She says that she will marry him because of her own needs, and not to submit herself to him.

> You think that I have fallen...but I think that I am rising—I need a man to live with...to satisfy my own needs...Today the female sex won a victory over men's vainglory. (*Sanyāsī*, 101)

Māltī's and Kiranmayī's situations are similar. They will both cherish forever the memory of the man they have loved first and

who has not married them. They have both married an older man, whom they do not love, but who has assumed the responsibility of taking care of them, providing them with a home, social life and security. Kiranmayī will never get over her dream of her romantic love for Murlīdhar and will always be unhappy with her husband, hating both him and herself for making a compromise. Māltī, on the contrary, realizes the necessity of making a compromise and of forgetting her love for the young and unreliable Viśvanāth, wishing for a stable marriage with Ramāśankar.

The author implies that Māltī's way, which is the way of tradition and common sense, is the only possible way for an Indian woman to be happy. He supports his views by showing the nobility and understanding of Kiranmayī's husband, Dīnānāth, who feels her pain and is full of compassion for her. Moreover, the author makes Kiranmayī ask her husband for forgiveness, thus acknowledging that she has been mistaken in her rejection of him. With his play, Miśra supports the ideals of orthodox Hinduism and traditional Indian marriage, suggesting that the new social network, which has come into existence under British influence, will destroy the harmony and order of Indian society.

In this sense, the motif of the national movement for Independence from the British appears to be of secondary importance in the play and serves to illustrate the necessity of preserving the primordial Indian way from the dangerous influence of Western culture. In the author's eyes, the Indian way is better and has more to offer. Europe has wounded mankind and it is the task of Asia, as the mother of religion and civilization, to heal these wounds (*Sanyāsī*, 79).

BHUVANEŚVAR PRASĀD ŚRĪVĀSTAV (1912/14–1957)[12]

Bhuvaneśvar wrote one act plays in which he explored the difficult relationship between man and woman. In *Pratibhā kā vivāh*

[12] It is not certain whether Bhuvaneśvar was born in 1912 or in 1914. For more information, see Rājkumār Śarmā, 'Bhuvaneśvar kā jivan vrtt,' *Bhuvaneśvar sāhitya*, Rājeśvar Sahāy Bedār and Rājkumār Śarmā (eds) (Śāhjahāmpur: Bhuvaneśvar Prasād Śodh Samsthān, 1992), pp. 285–6.

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> She is a Hindu girl...She cannot act against the will of her society and her parents. We care about society but not about the individual...We are real socialists. (*Sanyāsī*, 85)

Māltī comes to the conclusion that she does not want a romantic relationship with Viśvanāth, but marriage that will sustain the test of time. As she tells Viśvanāth in the last act, he has fallen in love with her because she was young, beautiful and from a good family. She asks whether this is love and why he did not marry her when her father asked him.

When she accepts Ramāśaṅkar's proposal, Kiranmayī, who has loved her whole life the inaccessible Murlīdhar, tries to make her reconsider her decision. Māltī, however, understands her acceptance of Ramāśaṅkar not as a defeat, but as a victory of the female sex over the male one. She says that she will marry him because of her own needs, and not to submit herself to him.

> You think that I have fallen...but I think that I am rising—I need a man to live with...to satisfy my own needs...Today the female sex won a victory over men's vainglory. (*Sanyasī*, 101)

Māltī's and Kiranmayī's situations are similar. They will both cherish forever the memory of the man they have loved first and who has not married them. They have both married an older man, whom they do not love, but who has assumed the responsibility of taking care of them, providing them with a home, social life and security. Kiranmayī will never get over her dream of her romantic love for Murlīdhar and will always be unhappy with her husband, hating both him and herself for making a compromise. Māltī, on the contrary, realizes the necessity of making a compromise and of forgetting her love for the young and unreliable Viśvanāth, wishing for a stable marriage with Ramāśaṅkar.

The author implies that Māltī's way, which is the way of tradition and common sense, is the only possible way for an Indian woman to be happy. He supports his views by showing the nobility and understanding of Kiranmayī's husband, Dīnānāth, who feels her pain and is full of compassion for her. Moreover, the author makes Kiranmayī ask her husband for forgiveness, thus acknowledging that she has been mistaken in her rejection of him. With his play, Miśra supports the ideals of orthodox Hinduism and traditional Indian marriage, suggesting that the new social network, which has come into existence under British influence, will destroy the harmony and order of Indian society.

In this sense, the motif of the national movement for Independence from the British appears to be of secondary importance in the play and serves to illustrate the necessity of preserving the primordial Indian way from the dangerous influence of Western culture. In the author's eyes, the Indian way is better and has more to offer. Europe has wounded mankind and it is the task of Asia, as the mother of religion and civilization, to heal these wounds (*Sanyāsī*, 79).

BHUVANEŚVAR PRASĀD ŚRĪVĀSTAV (1912/14–1957)[12]

Bhuvaneśvar wrote one act plays in which he explored the difficult relationship between man and woman. In *Pratibhā kā vivāh*

[12] It is not certain whether Bhuvaneśvar was born in 1912 or in 1914. For more information, see Rājkumār Śarmā, 'Bhuvaneśvar kā jīvan vrtt,' *Bhuvaneśvar sahitya*, Rājeśvar Sahāy Bedār and Rājkumār Śarmā (eds) (Śāhjahāmpur: Bhuvaneśvar Prasād Śodh Samsthān, 1992), pp. 285–6.

(*Pratibhā's Marriage*), 1933,[13] eighteen-year-old Pratibhā decides to marry an old, widowed friend of her father's, Prakāś Varmā, although her father is against it, and the young Mahendra loves her and wants to marry her. She loves the young man, too, but tells him that she cannot marry him, as their feelings for one another are bound to disappear shortly after their marriage. In making her decision, she considers the old man's arguments that:

> My land and property, money, everything will be Pratibhā's. She will have a special place in society; she will be no non-existing housewife and mother but a respectable widow. She will have good contact with society and life, as she will have a past in society, people will know her because they have known her husband...(*Pratibhā kā vivāh*, 58).

Varmā is of the opinion that motherhood is a tedious profession. He says that he would not like Pratibhā to be forced to sell her body and youth and become a mother in order to earn her living. That is why he would like to marry her and offer her a better life. Mrs. Jośī, who has an intimate relationship with Pratibhā's father, tells him that Varmā had also asked her to marry him. She has not accepted because he had asked her on the deathbed of her husband. She considers not motherhood, but widowhood an insult to woman. It is implied that, as Varmā is much older, it is likely Pratibhā will become a widow soon. The young Pratibhā, however, does not share this view, and makes up her mind to marry the old man and transform her love for Mahendra into a brotherly-sisterly relationship.

In the context of Indian literature, this is a rather unusual interpretation of motherhood as a burden to woman. Being a mother is considered important to womanhood. Most Hindi playwrights, for example Māthur in *Konārk* (*The Temple of Konark*), 1951, and Rākeś in *Āsārh kā ek din* (*One Day in the Month Āsārh*), 1958, see motherhood as the only way out for a woman in a difficult and unhappy love relationship. It is regarded as the only possibility for her self-realization in society.

Bhuvaneśvar's interpretation, however, should not be understood as a defence of widowhood. It is rather that he is interested in his female characters not as mothers, but as women, who are in an antagonistic relationship with men. Thus, Pratibhā will not marry her beloved, as she is afraid of losing his love with the progress of time. No matter how absurd this argument might sound, Pratibhā's decision not to marry Mahendra is an attempt to keep their love intact. She does not fear marrying Varmā, however, as she does not love him, and is willing to engage in an antagonistic and destructive love-hatred relationship with him.

As Amarnāth, from the one act play *Romāns: romāñc* (*Romance: Horripilation*), 1935, puts it:

> If a man and a woman have lived together for two years and never fight, then both of them are cowards or they are both deceiving each other... Happiness in married life is just a name for the vanity which expresses itself in the woman's victory over the man or of the man's victory over the woman. (*Romāns: romāñc*, 91–2)

Māyā in *Lātrī* (*Lottery*), 1935 is also intent on winning a victory over the men in her life. She is flattered to think of herself as a medieval princess, for whom two men are fighting. In her opinion, a pistol or a sword will decide the dispute between her husband Kiśor and her lover Pradyum. However, Pradyum does not want to take part in this 'lottery' and leaves. But Māyā does not need the second man any more. She has already won her victory as a woman: 'The real life of a woman starts only then when a man has ruined himself for her. This man could be either her husband or her lover.' (*Lātrī*, 103)

Bhuvaneśvar's understanding of man and woman as engaged in a constant battle with each other is very similar to Strindberg's views on this matter, as reflected in the dramas *The Father*, 1887, *Play with Fire*, 1892, or *Dance of Death*, 1900, and anticipates Aśk's interpretation of this issue in the plays *Taulie* (*Towels*), 1943, and *Añjo Dīdī* (*The Elder Sister Añjo*), 1955. In Aśk's dramas, though, there is no eternal triangle. The 'battle of the sexes' concerns only husband and wife. In Strindberg's *Play with Fire* and in *Dance of Death*, and in Bhuvaneśvar's plays, we find the same constellation of one woman and two men. Both authors have their heroines discuss their relationships with other men freely with their husbands, which is another instance of the influence of Strindberg and Western dramatic tradition on modern Hindi drama. In this

[13] *Bhuvaneśvar sāhitya*, Rājeśvar Sahāy Bedār and Rājkumār Śarmā (eds) (Śāhjahāmpur: Bhuvaneśvar Prasād Śodh Samsthān, 1992).

respect, Bhuvaneśvar's portrayal of the female characters and their freedom to choose or change a partner is unprecedented in modern Hindi drama, where it is normally men who are depicted as enjoying moral sexual freedom. By contrast, women are presented as waiting for them at home, in chastity and with devotion.[14] Bhuvaneśvar's portrayal of women does not reflect the objective reality of Indian society of the 1930s and 1940s, but is rather an expression of the author's artistic quest.

The dramatist does not depict woman only as a vile creature and a menace to men, as Strindberg did. Bhuvaneśvar also shows much sympathy and understanding for his female characters. In *Romāns: romāñc*, Amarnāth considers woman a problem for man and says that the only way to avoid this problem is to make her pregnant. The playwright, however, implies that he does not agree with this view by letting the main protagonist, Mr Siṃh, say that 'I consider woman a power, she is the one who makes life complete. Without her life would be like leaning on a blind man for support.' (*Romāns: Romañc*, 92)

The author sees the problems as resulting from the antagonism between the sexes. He considers the primordial sexual instinct an all-pervading and often destructive force, especially in the age of sexual freedom. The play *Ūsar* (*Fallow Land*), 1938, deals with the power of this sexual drive. It can make one ill or unhappy, although one does not know the real reason for it. Sometimes hidden wishes or true facts, known only to our subconscious mind, can be revealed involuntarily.

The opening scene begins with a conversation between a householder, *gṛhasvāmī*, and a tutor. The man had been married for twenty-two years. It is vaguely suggested that his wife does not feel very well. The host ridicules the young man because he considers himself superior to the other inhabitants of the house and charges that he is conducting an intellectual experiment with them. The householder's wife (*gṛhasvāminī*), a fat young woman (*moṭī ramṇī*) and three young girls come home from a walk in the park. They all decide to play a game in order to pass the time. One of them mentions words and the others have to write immediately the things they associate with the words 'room,' 'electricity,' 'perambulator' and 'sex.' The husband's answers are 'responsibility,' 'brain,' 'marriage' and 'science' respectively. His wife associates the word 'room' with 'bathroom,' 'electricity' with 'darkness,' 'perambulator' with 'baby' and 'sex' with 'Shah Nazaf Road.' They are all perplexed and the husband is very disquieted.

All of a sudden, the tutor appears and asks the boy whether he has seen his dictionary. The boy is surprised to find out that the tutor has been on the veranda all the time. He asks him whether he has talked to his father. The tutor answers that his father had said that the coming generation would be a better one than theirs, no matter whether they were cats or snakes. Surprised, the boy goes away to join the others. The final scene shows only the tutor on stage, lighting a cigarette.

The woman's answers reveal that there is something about her sexual dreams or married life that she has kept a secret from her husband. She has tried to suppress her thoughts in her subconscious mind, but the spontaneity of the play discloses them. There is something in her married life that makes her unhappy. The author does not make it clear whether it is a lost baby or an intimate relationship with another man or sexual dissatisfaction with her husband. The dramatist's psychoanalytic approach in the presentation of the woman's inner world implies that the real reason for her feeling of discontent is the incompleteness of her sexual and married life, about which she cannot talk, but can only keep to herself. The insertion of the associative game in the play enables the author to employ the technique of the 'Freudian slip,' the unconscious use of words motivated by and revealing of the subconscious mind, in order to disclose the woman's inner thoughts.

A question arises about the meaning of the title: why is the play called *ūsar* or 'fallow, barren land'? Does it refer to the woman's loss of a baby or is it a reference to the barrenness of her dreams and sexual wishes that were never gratified at home? Bhuvaneśvar's psychoanalytic, Freudian approach in shaping a figure's character

[14] The only two exceptions I could think of as regards the period discussed, are Aśk's one act play *Khirkī* (*Window*) and Rākeś's *Ādhe Adhūre* (*Incomplete Halves*). In both plays, it is suggested that the female character had a relationship with another man.

is innovative and unprecedented in the history of modern Hindi drama during this period.

The play *Ūsar* is also interesting on another level of interpretation. What is the function of the tutor, who appears at the beginning of the play to talk with the man and once again, at the end of the play, to tell his son the gist of their conversation? How can we explain his presence during the game, which remains unknown to the others? Was the game part of his intellectual experiment with the inhabitants of the house? And how is the father's statement that the next generation will be better than theirs to be interpreted? What is its connection with the game or with the other events described? Why does it have to appear at the end of the play, as if it conveyed some deep truth or climax?

The author employs dramaturgical techniques influenced by Western dramatical school that differ from Prasād's approach in a radical way. There is no action but only a situation in Bhuvaneśvar's plays, which is to be explained partly by the fact that he writes one act plays.[15] Similar to Miśra's dramas, the open ending of his plays does not provide us with any ready solutions to the questions raised. What is new and unusual in his dramatic technique is the unexpected, abrupt, explosive and paradoxical conclusion. Thus, Pratibhā's decision to marry old Varmā in *Pratibhā kā vivāh*, the departure of the lover Pradyum, who does not want to take part in the deadly 'lottery' in *Lātrī*, or the woman's unexpected strike in *Strāik* (*Strike*), 1938, and the puzzling ending in *Ūsar* illustrate this point clearly. Only a close reading of the plays enables us to find a clue to their interpretation and to see the hidden, second layer of the situation presented. Similarly, the casual mentioning of the tutor's intellectual experiment in the opening scene of *Ūsar* contains the clue to the hidden, second level of interpretation of the drama.

Bhuvaneśvar's use of everyday Hindustani language develops further Miśra's endeavors to emancipate modern Hindi drama from the all-pervading influence of Prasād's Sanskritized and learned vocabulary, and thereby create an understandable, natural and accessible dramatic language in Hindi. In this respect, Bhuvaneśvar's linguistic achievement prepares the ground for Aśk's approach to language. The two interpretative levels, the psychoanalytic approach, distinctive subject matter and the anomalous situations, unexpected abrupt open endings, absurdist elements in Bhuvaneśvar's plays, and the employed dramatic language are innovative for modern Hindi drama and anticipate many aspects in Aśk's dramatic work.

Bhuvaneśvar can be seen as the first *mature* recipient of the influence of Western dramatic tradition and intellectual thought on modern Hindi drama, including Strindberg's work and Freud's ideas. Therefore, his work is one of the indigenous dramatic sources that have inspired and contributed to the formation of Aśk as a playwright. In this respect, it should be pointed out that Aśk valued Bhuvaneśvar's work and included the one-act play *Strāik* in an anthology of one-act plays he edited. In the preface to *Paccīs śresth ekānkī*, the author mentions Bhuvaneśvar at least three times, stating explicitly that he liked the plays *Ūsar* and *Strāik* very much.[16]

JAGDĪŚCANDRA MĀTHUR (1917–1981)

Jagdīścandra Māthur concentrates on fundamental questions of human existence, such as the purpose of art and the union of the individual with the Supreme. He sets the action of his plays against the background of the ancient and medieval history of India, and uses motifs from the Purānas and other mythological sources. In his one act plays, he addresses topical issues, for example the question of women's education and views on marriage perspectives among educated girls.

[15] Modern drama criticism postulates the opposition of action and situation as one of the differences between the full-length and the one act play. Cf. Gerhard Neumann, "Einakter," *Moderne Literatur in Grundbegriffen*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer and Viktor Zmegac (Tuebingen: Max Nienmeyer Verlag, 1994) 102–9. Nevertheless, there are many one act plays, which differ from their full-length counterparts only in the different number of scenes and acts. For instance, many of J. Māthur's, R. Varmā's and Aśk's one act plays disclose actions, and not situations. Therefore, Bhuvaneśvar's approach is innovative.

[16] U. Aśk, ed. *Pratinidi ekānkī* (Ilāhābād: Nīlābh, 1969), pp. 77–95. See U. Aśk, preface, ... *śresth ekānkī* (Ilāhābād: Nīlābh, 1969), pp. 13, 18, 21.

The action of the one act play *Bhor kā tārā* (*The Morning Star*), 1937,[17] is set in the Gupta capital Ujjayinī in the 5th century AD. In the first scene, the poet Śekhar learns from his friend Mādhav that emperor Skandagupta values his poetry very much and has called him to his court to appoint him royal poet. Mādhav himself must go with Chāyā's brother Devdatt to fight against the Huns in Taksaśilā. Mādhav thinks that now that Śekhar's art has received due recognition, there will be no obstacles to his marrying his beloved Chāyā. In the second scene, Śekhar and Chāyā are happily married. The young poet tells his wife that she is his poetry. He shows her the epic he has just completed, entitled *The Morning Star*. He started working on it on the day of their marriage and it is about their love for one another. At this point, Mādhav arrives and tells them that the Huns have attacked Taksaśilā and that Devdatt has died the death of a hero. He says that the country needs every citizen as a soldier to fight for freedom, and asks Śekhar to go throughout the country and speak to the people. With the power of his poetry, he could motivate the men and women of the Gupta kingdom and mobilize them for the coming war.

Śekhar burns his work *The Morning Star* and leaves Chāyā and his home in order to speak to his countrymen. Chāyā blames Mādhav for taking her morning away. He reassures her that he has not done so.

> Chāyā, I have not taken away your morning. It will be morning now. Up to now Śekhar has been just a morning star. Now he will be the morning sun. (*Bhor kā tārā*, 147)

The author implies that are should be purposeful and should serve a national cause in order to have aesthetic value. No matter how strong Śekhars's love for Chāyā is and how beautiful his romantic epic is, the artist must leave his home and write poetry for the ordinary people. Through his work, he should respond to the problems of life in order to become a true poet and leave a contribution behind. Māthur also codes this message in the pun used in the title of the play. The Hindi expression *bhor kā tārā* means not only 'morning star' but also 'transient, something that has momentary existence.' Thus, by making Mādhav refer to the romantic poet of the past as a 'morning star' and to the socially committed artist of the future as a 'morning sun,' the author implies that only purposeful art can last.

[17] J. Māthur, "Bhor kā Tārā," *Bhor Ka tara* (Ilāhābād: Nīlābh, 1957), pp. 125–47.

Māthur explores the idea of the relationship between art and its creator further in his play *Konārk* (*The Temple of Konark*), 1951.[18] It consists of three acts, set against the background of 13th century AD Orissa. The first act serves as an exposition to the story. The sculptor Viśu cannot complete the temple of the Sun Deity in Konark. The spire cannot be adjusted on the lotus figure on top of the main body of the edifice. Because King Narasimhdev is engaged in a war with the Greeks, his minister rules Orissa. There is no end to the minister's despotism and the suffering of the people. Viśu thinks that this should not be their concern as they are artists and their task is to complete the temple. Thereupon, the sculptor reminisces about the past and tells Dharmpad the sad story of his youth. Twenty years ago, he had abandoned his beloved when she told him that she was expecting a child.

Eighteen-year-old Dharmpad, who is very talented in his work, criticizes Viśu's artistic concept. The experienced sculptor says proudly that this is not just a temple, but metaphor for the course of life. It epitomizes mankind's activities, longings and pleasures. According to Dharmpad, there is one more step between the beginning of life and its exaltation, namely life's struggles. The sculptures of the temple tell nothing about the workers' pain and the sweat of their labor. Viśu believes that, as artists, they should not interfere with worldly affairs. Dharmpad is of the opposite opinion:

> ...it is also not appropriate that the sculptor should continue creating images of youth and amorous playfulness in a cool and protected corner when all around him the flames of atrocity and famine keep on growing. (*Konārk*, 26)

At this point, the minister himself appears on stage, threatening to cut off the sculptors' hands if the temple is not completed within a week. Only Dharmpad knows how to complete the spire.

[18] J. Māthur, *Konārk* (Ilāhābād: Bhārtī Bhandār, 2018, vi.).

In the second act, King Narasimh arrives to admire the gorgeous temple. He has won a victory over the Greeks, but has come without his army, as he could not wait to see the marvel of the Konārk temple. It turns out that Narasimh knows nothing of his minister's misdeeds. He annuls all the orders given in his absence. At this point, they find out that armed men are coming from all sides to attack the temple. Narasimh realizes that his minister has formed a plot against him. Dharmpad organizes the defence of the temple, just as Viśu discovers that Dharmpad is his son.

In the last act, Dharmpad is killed and the workers lose the battle. Thereupon, Viśu addresses the Sun Deity:

> You are the protector of my entire world; But how can I forget that I am your creator?... Koṇārk cannot be the symbol of the defeat of the sculptors. You and I together will not let this happen... No. (*Koṇārk*, 64)

The minister penetrates the temple with his men. Viśu roars with laughter and destroys the spire. The gigantic image of the deity falls down while the temple of Konārk collapses, thus causing the death of both its creator and invaders.

Similar to *Bhor kā tārā*, Māthur asserts in his play *Konārk* that art should be about life and the pain and sufferings of the ordinary people. The author implies that it is grotesque to build a temple that glorifies love and amorous activities when one is surrounded only by injustice and despotism. It is no coincidence that Dharmpad, who believes in creating purposeful and socially committed art, is the one who manages to complete the temple. He is not only the opponent to Viśu's ideas about the mere aesthetic value of art, but is Viśu himself, or more precisely, what the sculptor used to be when young. The enthusiasm and idealism of his youth live on in Dharmpad. The bond of blood only seals this close relation between them.

Since the temple in Konārk has become a symbol of real life, of the workers' sufferings, hopes and their struggle for freedom and against oppression, it can not become a symbol of their defeat. Viśu destroys his own creation, thus taking revenge for the others' death and winning a final victory over the oppressor. The artist's life work his completed. The sculptor achieves final liberation in union with his creation. The building of the temple was his own life; its destruction his own death.

Māthur wrote the play in conformity with the requirements of naturalistic dramaturgy, thus, it can be presented very easily on stage. The action is concentrated, the plot is linear and the locale does not change. The drama starts with an *upakram* ('prelude') and ends with an *upsamhār* ('epilogue'). This stylistic device is borrowed from classical Sanskrit drama. The lyrical beginning of the play is an introduction to the story. The three voices that come from the background sing about the creation of the temple of Konārk. Similarly, the elegiac epilogue harmonizes with the mood of gloom and mourning at the end of the drama. In his notes to the stage director, Māthur points to the importance of having at least one female performer in the lyrical prelude and epilogue in order to compensate for the absence of female characters in the play.[19]

In the play *Pahlā rājā* (*The First King*), 1969, the dramatist even introduced the figure of the *sūtradhār* ('stage manager of a dramatic performance') who appeared in classical Sanskrit plays to introduce the different episodes and to explain new developments in the action. Māthur's use of different stylistic devices from classical Sanskrit theatre is not antithetical to the naturalistic character of his dramaturgy. These elements enrich his plays and contribute to their Indian coloring without impairing the author's basic dramaturgical concept, which is oriented toward the successful presentation of his plays in a proscenium theatre. Māthur's use of various stylistic devices derived from classical Sanskrit drama differs from Prasād artistic concept. The author's work has clearly been influenced by Western dramatic tradition.

MOHAN RĀKEŚ (1925–1972)

In his play *Ādhe adhūre* (*Incomplete Halves*), 1969,[20] Mohan Rākeś explores the man-woman relationship and gender roles in a 1960s middle-class Indian family. The setting of the drama is a contemporary household. The events happen in the house of an unspecified *Strī* ('woman') and *Purus ek* ('man number one'). There are no clearly defined acts, but two long episodes with an interval

[19] See J. Māthur, "Nirdešak aur abhinetāon ke lie sanket," *Konārk*, by J. Māthur (Ilāhābād: Bhārti Bhandār, 2018, vi.), p. 71.

[20] Mohan Rākeś, *Adhe adhūre* (Nai Dillī: Rādhākrsna Prakāšan, 1969).

between them. The locale remains unchanged throughout the play.

The play begins with the words of the man-in-a-black-suit, who functions as a narrator. He points out the typically and universality of the characters and events portrayed. The role of the narrator is restricted to this one single appearance throughout the entire drama.

The opening scene shows the tired *strī*, or Sāvitrī, coming home from work and finding the whole house in a chaotic condition: the tea set is still on the table and her husband's clothes are scattered all over the house. When her husband appears on stage, their interaction resembles a quarrel more than a real conversation. Their married elder daughter, *barī larkī* ('big girl'), arrives and tells them about her problems at home. She feels estranged from her husband Manoj and has come home to find out what makes her feel so worthless. The parents have great difficulties in starting a conversation with their daughter. Their attempts are cut short by the appearance of the younger daughter, *chotī larkī* ('small girl'), who comes with her own problems and complaints. The mother gives vent to her anger about being the one who has to do all the work in the family. Thereupon, the father leaves his home in protest. Sāvitrī tells the children not to worry, as he will be back by tonight. After that, the mother tries to reason with her son, *larkā* ('boy'), and make him understand that he needs a new job. She has invited her boss over to ask him to help them to find employment for the boy. *Strī* complains that she is like a machine that works for them all.

The boss, *puruṣ do* (man number two), arrives. He talks absent-mindedly about many topics and keeps on mixing up people and facts about them. He cannot remember her request concerning the boy, but promises to help. His only concern seems to be the strike in his company. The characters talk past each other, and not to each other. The boy has drawn a caricature of the guest and blames his mother for inviting her boss's salary, social status and good name, and not the man himself. Sāvitrī feels entirely misunderstood and complains that neither her husband nor her children appreciate her efforts. She decides to start a new life, taking care only of herself from now on.

The second part of the drama begins with a conversation between *barī larkī* and *larkā*. They comment on the fact that their mother put on her best sārī. To them, she looked as if she had made a serious decision. *Strī* has a date with her old friend Jagmohan, who is *puruṣ tīn* ('man number three'). She is thinking of leaving home and starting a new life.

When *puruṣ cār* ('man number four'), who is the husband's friend Junejā, arrives to meet the woman, he must wait for her. Upon the woman's return, they start a serious conversation about her married life. Sāvitrī tells him about all the things she hates in her husband, for example that he is not a strong personality but a failure in life. She complains of his being constantly under the influence of his friends and being rather dominant at home. Junejā, on the other hand, holds that *puruṣ ek* could have achieved more if she had not proven to him constantly how small and unimportant he was. He tells her that she respects other men simply because they are not her husband. But if she had married any of them, she would have started regretting choosing them anyway after some time:

> The truth is that if any of those other men in your life were in Mahendra's place, then you would begin to feel in one or two years that you married the wrong man. (*Ādhe adhūre*, 106)

Then he proceeds to tell her how her date with Jagmohan was. How he has probably said that he cherished the memories of the past, but could not commit himself to her now, as he had a new job, and she had children and a family, etc. Junejā makes clear to her that she has no choice.

Although Junejā has come to bring the couple together, he decides to persuade Mahendra not to return home. In the woman's eyes, there could be no reconciliation. The author reveals that she sees clearly that all men are the same, although they may look differently: 'You are all the same. You wear different masks, but the face? The face of all of you is one.'

In the final scene, the boy enters with his father, who has decided to return home after all. As he has just suffered a blood pressure attack, he is very weak and can hardly walk. His children rush toward him to help him into the house.

Mathendranāth and Sāvitrī's family is a new type of family. It is a nuclear family that has broken with the tradition of the classical Indian joint family. It is also a family where the traditional gender roles are changed. Thus, the mother of the house works, whereas the father mostly stays at home, as his attempt to start a business of his own has failed. They quarrel with each other constantly and are unhappy.

Rākeś shows that this a family where nothing functions. The husband does not help with the work in the household and his wife is always overloaded with work, tired and unhappy. Nobody seems to take care of the little girl. She is portrayed as capricious and speaks to her elders disrespectfully. Moreover, she is accused by others' parents of spoiling their children with talk about sex. These accusations allude to the chaotic and unhealthy climate in the little girl's home. The boy is also unhappy. He would rather leave his home, but is unable to stand on his own feet and find a job that would enable him to be independent. The elder sister has married in order to flee from her home. She cannot be happy with her husband, as she feels that there is something about her childhood and youth in her parents' house that is always in the way.

It seems that, as a consequence of the break with the traditional institution of the joint family, life in Mahendranāth and Sāvitrī's house is chaotic and unhappy. The husband tries to compensate for the lack of the bigger family by sticking to his friends, for instance to Junejā. This is exactly the point that his wife cannot accept and criticizes. Though she works, she is not a career woman. She has an unimportant position in a company and is entirely dependent on her boss. Although she had to accept the bitter truth that her husband turned out to be a failure in business, she has ambitions as regards her son. She does her best to find a job for him and invites her boss to her house for this purpose. When her son, however, tells her bluntly that he does not think much of her efforts and of her respect for her boss's salary and status, she decides to change her life. She meets her former friend and tries to start a relationship with him anew. It turns out that he is not ready for commitment any more and she must come back to her home and her previous life. As Junejā puts it, she has no choice.

Though she is ambitious and hard-working, she cannot think of changing or bettering her life on her own. In her eyes, all the high and attractive posts she seeks for her husband or for her son are meant for men, not for women. She seeks for realization through the men in her life, be it her husband, her son, her boss, her friend Jagmohan or her daughter's husband Manoj.[21] The changed gender roles do not imply a real change in society or better opportunities for women. That is why Sāvitrī has to continue to depend on the men around her and be unhappy instead of organizing her life according to her own wishes.

Rākeś does not seem to question this point. Though the woman is at the centre of the play and we sympathize with her throughout, there is a shift toward the man's point of view at the end of the drama. The playwright makes us believe that it is the woman's aspiration for the new, the different and the inaccessible that accounts for the problems. A parallel can be made to Aśk's play *Bhamvar (Whirlpool)*, 1961. Sāvitrī is at the centre of the play, surrounded by four men. Similarly, Pratibhā is the central figure, surrounded by three admirers. Rākeś's heroine is already married whereas Pratibhā cannot find a husband to her liking. Nevertheless, their situations are very much alike. It is suggested that they are both unhappy, because they cannot accept reality. Instead, they desire men that remain inaccessible to them. However, whereas Pratibhā's conflict is within herself and due to her own intellectualism, Sāvitrī's conflict is with her husband. This is similar to Añjo's problem in Aśk's play *Añjo Dīdī (The Elder Sister Añjo)*, 1955, and Laura's and Alice's conflict in Strindberg's plays *The Father* (1887) and *Dance of Death* (1900) respectively.

There is an important difference between Rākeś's interpretation of gender relationships and that of Strindberg, Bhuvaneśvar and Aśk. Whereas the last three authors see the battle of the sexes as innate, as pertaining to the nature of man and woman, Rākeś considers it to be the result of changes in gender roles in contemporary Indian society. This conveys a rather negative view of the question of women's emancipation. Rākeś's stance is quite

[21] It is suggested that Sāvitrī had an affair with her daughter's husband before their marriage (Ibid., pp. 107–8).

opposite to the treatment of the subject by Aśk. In the play *Svarg kā jhalak* (*Glimpse of Paradise*), 1939, Aśk criticizes the fear men have about marrying an emancipated woman and starting a family in which gender roles might be changed.

An additional difference in Rākeś's presentation of the nature of the relationship between man and woman is the fact that he sees no possibility of communication between the sexes. Though Strindberg, Aśk and Buvaneśvar have seen the conflict between man and woman as a never-ending and deadly battle of the sexes, their protagonists can communicate with each other. They quarrel, fight, and destroy each other, but talk *to* each other. Language is their strongest weapon! In Rākeś play, real conversation is not possible any more.

The characters talk *past* each other and not to each other. Vasudha Dalmia is right in observing that the play reflects a total breakdown of communication.[22] Husband and wife cannot talk to each other any more. They cannot carry out their conflict in a verbal debate. The only real verbal controversy that takes place in the drama is not between the two spouses but between the woman and Junejā, the husband's proxy.[23] This points to the impossibility of dialogue.

Children and parents fail to communicate as well. Neither the mother nor the father can start a conversation with their elder daughter when she asks them to. The girl feels estranged from her husband. She attempts to talk to her parents about it, as she cannot communicate her feelings to her husband (*Ādhe adhūre*, 24–7). The visit of the woman's boss is another example of failed communication. Though many topics are mentioned, nothing is really said. The boss utters words to fill in the time. He is not interested in the woman's family at all. He cannot remember their previous conversation and mixes up people and events. Even the first minutes of Sāvitrī's meeting with Jagmohan are marked by their inability to start a conversation. The external reason might be

[22] See Vasudha Dalmia, 'Neither Half nor Whole: Dialogue and Disjunction in the Plays of Mohan Rakesh,' *Tender Ironies: A Tribute to Lothar Lutze*, (ed.) Dilip Chitre et al. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), p. 184.

[23] Ibid., p. 196.

the constant coming and going of the children. The real reason is that they have grown apart from each other throughout the years.

The breakdown of communication finds expression in ways other than the fragmented dialogue. There is no real action in the drama, only events that are revealed through the figure's utterings. The characters are not round any more and they convey the idea of being fragmented selves, torn from others and from their environment. Dalmia compares the play to Handke's *Kaspar*. I also consider *Ādhe adhūre* structurally close to Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (1953), or its English version, *Waiting for Godot* (1955). In Beckett's play, we find the same breakdown of communication, which expresses itself in the fragmentation of dialogue and the lack of action. Estragon and Vladimir talk past each other rather than to each other. They are estranged from their fellow human beings, from themselves and from their environment.

When talking about the structural similarities between the two plays, we should keep in mind their differences in theme. Beckett's play is not simply about our inability to communicate with each other and about being lost in a world that is not ours any more. It is also about the meaning of life, our hopes and fears. Estragon's and Vladimir's eternal waiting stands for the hope (or hopelessness?) of the human condition. It is about a time when mankind has lost its beliefs, ideals, and its faith in God and the purposefulness of the universe and of our lives. By contrast, Rākeś's play centres on the more immediate gender problems of contemporary Indian society.

Rākeś's dramatic work can be seen as another example of the creative impact Western dramatic tradition had on modern Hindi drama. His play *Ādhe adhūre* is innovative, as it treats new subject matter and uses dialogue in a way no Hindi playwright had ever used before. Thus, it represents a rethinking of the convention of a round character and questions the very notion of action in a play.

Panjabi Drama and Theater

Atamjit Singh

Panjabi drama, from the very beginning an admixture of the charactertistics of English and Sanskrit drama, bears a great impact of English drama—particularly of Shakespeare—than of traditional Sanskrit drama. In fact, Sanskrit drama and poetics, through they flourished in this land in ancient times, ironically, did not have much influence in shaping the drama that developed in the twentieth century.

Though Bhai Vir Singh, a Panjabi (*Raja Lakhdata Singh*, 1910), Kirpa Sagar (*Maharaja Ranjit Singh* and *Dido Jamval*), Bawa Budh Singh (1878–1931) (*Chander Hari* and *Mundri Chhall* [The Magical Ring], Charan Singh (1853–1908) (*Rani Sarab Kaur*), Gurbax Singh Barrister (*Mohan Bhaia*, 1912), Brij Lal Shastri *(Puraan Natak*, 1919, *Partigya*, *Vasva Datta*, 1925) started writing Panjabi plays in the early part of this century, Ishwar Cander Nanda (1892–1966) wrote the first successful plays in Panjabi in a realistic style on the model of Western drama. His predecessors did follow models of Sanskrit plays, but Nanda started writing under the direct influence of Western drama. He came in contact with Norah Richards and Philips E. Richards of Dayal Singh College, Lahore, during his student days and started writing short plays in Panjabi. *Dulhan* (Bride) and *Bebe Ram Bhajni* were Nanda's two one-act plays, which pioneered modern Panjabi drama.

Nanda's first one-act play was staged in 1914, and his full-length play *Subhadra* was published in 1920. He has written two other full-length plays, *Var Ghar Jan Lily da Viah* (1938) and *Social Circle* (1953),

and a Panjabi adaptation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* entitled *Shamu Shah* (1928). Besides these, he wrote over a dozen one-act plays, published in two collections, *Jhalkare* (Reflections, 1949) and *Lishkare* (Flashes, 1956).

In all his works, Nanda wrote about social problems of his day. In *Subhadra*, he deals with the problem of widow remarriage; in *Var Ghar Jan Lily da Viyah*, he contrasts love marriage and arranged marriage; and in *Social Circle*, he portrays the urban, middle-class elite who arrange their 'social meets' merely to promote their narrow commercial interests.

The most important contribution of Nanda's plays is that, with them, Panjabi drama is freed from religious and mythological themes. He propagated new values through young men and women educated in schools and colleges. That is why he highlights mutual conflict between the two generations of the Panjabi middle class. To Nanda's credit, while adopting Western techniques of drama, he made full use of the folk theatre tradition of Panjab, blending the two in a vivid pattern. His presentation of marriage scenes, religious ceremonies, superstitions, the ignorance of the village folks, folk songs and folk dances, and so on invests his plays with a Panjabi character. Nanda greatly influenced the later playwrights who were responsible for shaping the future Panjabi drama into a theater molded and motivated by Western drama on realistic lines. Those who followed him included Joshua Fazal-ud-din (1903–73), Harcharn Singh (1914), Sant Singh Sekhon (1908), Balwant Gargi (1916), and a few others. The writers who were almost contemporaries of Nanda were Gurbakhsh Singh Preet Lari (1895–1978), Mohan Singh Dewana (1899–1984), Harcharn Singh, Gurdial Singh Khosla (1912), Roshan Lal Ahuja (1904–87), and Gurdial Singh Phul (1911–88). Some of the writers of this generation were writing in other genres, and so drama and theatre were not their mainstay. They were primarily writing drama only for enriching this form also; otherwise, they distinguished themselves in other forms of literature. For example, Dewana gained fame in poetry and literary scholarship, Gurbakhsh Singh in prose, and Sant Singh Sekhon in fiction and literary criticism, but a few of them devoted themselves wholeheartedly to drama. Except for Sant Singh Sekhon, most of these playwrights contributed to the growth of popular drama nurtured by Harcharn Singh. It was taken

forward by Gurdial Singh Khosla, Roshan Lal Ahuja, and Gurdial Singh Phul, all playwrights of the first generation. These playwrights wrote on topical social, historical, and mythological themes. The dramatization of Sikh cultural ethos was also a favourite subject of these playwrights. The audiences who were not conscious of any quality theater were swayed by their religious sentimentality. However the plays of this generation gained popularity, their art remained untouched by modernism. The defining feature of these playwrights was their farcical or melodramatic impact, which did not rise above the level of Ram Lila performances.

PROGRESSIVE TRENDS—PANJABI DRAMA BETWEEN 1931 AND 1947

There is no doubt that Harcharan Singh and the playwrights who followed his lead added quantitatively to the body of dramatic literature in Panjabi, but they have offered little by way of quality, which appeared only when stalwarts like Sant Singh Sekhon, Balwant Gargi, and Amrik Singh (1921) made their contribution. These writers have brought vigor and freshness to Panjabi drama. With them began the trend of progressive writing. Sekhon has given a new dimension to Panjabi drama by committing the genre to a dialectical interpretation of contemporary reality. He is responsible for evolving a form of Panjabi drama that is called intellectual drama. Instead of presenting matter-of-fact details, Sekhon, in this type of play, subjects themes to intellectual insight and philosophical scrutiny. Sekhon, in his more than a dozen plays, raised exciting debate on various themes of contemporary social and cultural relevance, which has made some of his plays very controversial. Some of his very well known plays include *Kalakar* (The Artist 1946), *Moyian Sar na Kai* (Gone and Forgotten), *Bera Bandh Na Sakyo* (You did Not Bind the Logs of the Float), *Narki* (Denizens of Hell, 1952), *Damyanti* (1962), and *Mitter Pyara* (The Dear Friend). It is generally believed that Sekhon has failed to write plays meant to be staged, and his works do not go beyond intellectual discussions, which, of course, are stimulating. His characters are automatons and devoid of any physical action, but still his writing offers an exciting fare for mature and lively debate.

During this period, there seemed to have developed a cleavage between literary drama and drama meant for the stage. The plays of Sant Singh Sekhon, though impressive, were scarcely staged. Defending his plays, he argued that they could not be staged for they represented times ahead of him. The existing theater was not adequate to produce his plays because of its limitations. On the other hand, some Panjabi critics characterized these plays as literary plays at best, having no potential to turn into a stage reality. Roshan Lal Ahuja accepted that there could be both kinds of plays—literary meant for reading only and others worthy of stage production. Thus, for some time, there existed a state of isolation between the literary, on one hand, and stage drama, on the other, in Panjabi. Balwant Gargi, one of the most distinguished names in Panjabi drama and theater arts, brought an end to this controversy by laying the foundations of a mature, professional theater in Panjabi. His plays are a happy synthesis between the requirements of stage and the demands of literature. The dialogue of his plays has a literary grace and poetic charm. Panjabi folklore in its diverse manifestations lends meaning to his play and makes them memorable.

His earliest work, *Loha Kut* (The Blacksmith, 1944), created a stir in Panjabi literary circles for its unusual theme and distinct form. It is a very sensitive play with an equally unusual theme: the problem of suppressed passions. In it, the inner dreams and aspirations of both mother and daughter are ruthlessly crushed in the suffocating atmosphere of the blacksmith Kaku's home. The daughter revolts against the orthodoxy and oppression and elopes with her sweetheart. The mother follows the example of her daughter and leaves Kaku, even though they have been married 18 years. At a symbolic level, the play deals with the elemental and primordial in human nature.

Gargi, under the impact of *pragativad* (progressive movement), wrote a number of plays with a Marxist slant. Notable among these are *Ghuggi* (The Dove), *Biswedar* (The Feudal Lord), *Sail Pathar* (Still Stone), *Kesro* (Name of Woman), and *Girjhan* (Vultures, 1951). These plays are on themes such as the world peace and movement, the agrarian struggle, national reconstruction, and polemics of committed art. In his *Dhuni di Agg* (The Dark Ritual), he breaks with

the realistic tradition and represents love and hatred as primeval forces through the symbolism of red flames of fire contrasted with the darkness of night. Among his plays based on Marxist ideology, *Kanak di Bali* (Stem of Wheat) departs from realistic tradition and introduces an element of lyricality from the indigenous folklore. He attains a rare height in *Sultan Razia*, a historical play that deals with an action-packed period of Indian history, from the dying Iltumish to the death of Sultan Razia. It is a period of uncertainty and conspiracies resulting in ruthless killings for the throne. This play in its Hindi version was staged by the National School of Drama under the directorship of E. Alkazi and thus brought Gargi to national fame. In another play, *Saunkan* (The other wife, 1979), he deals with the triple relationship among mother, son, and daughter. He presents sexual rivalry between the daughter and the mother at the psychological level. This is a rather disappointing work, for it does not give rise to any powerful dramatic conflict. Gargi is also an author of a scholarly treatise on Indian stagecraft entitled *Bharti Drama*, which won him a Sahitya Akademi Award.

Among the older generation, Kartar Singh Duggal, a leading fiction writer, wrote plays that have been produced mainly by All India Radio. He is credited with developing a form of the radio play in Panjabi. To meet the needs of the radio play, he uses his characters as symbols. His play *Puranian Botlan* (The Old Bottles) is a meaningful critique of the unscrupulous behavior of the urban middle class. His other notable plays include *Auh Gaye Sajjan Ah Gaye* (There Goes Our Good Friend, 1942), *Ik Siffer Siffer* (One Zero Makes Zero, 1941), and *Mitha Pani* (The Sweet Water), all of which have been produced successfully several times over the radio. Duggal in these plays seems to have been impressed by the technique of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry in the matter of the use of rhythmic prose in his plays.

POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD (1947-70)

Most of the playwrights of the pre-independence period continued writing after independence and some, like Gurdial Singh Khosla, Harcharn Singh, Kartar Singh Duggal, and Sant Singh Sekhon, wrote plays on the problems of rehabilitation of refugees following in the wake of partition of the country, yet a group of young writers,

namely, Amrik Singh, Harsaran Singh (1929-94), Gurcharan Singh Jasuja (1925), Surjit Singh Sethi (1928), Kapur Singh Ghumman (1927-84), and Paritosh Gargi (1923), introduced a few new themes and techniques in their plays.

IPTA AND PANJABI DRAMA

During the freedom movement before independence, theater activity had assumed far greater relevance than before, and links between the Indian arts, especially theater arts and the resurgence of Indian people, had become stronger. The Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA) movement in the realm of drama and theater was responsible for greater participation of the masses in different art activities, particularly in theatre, as a result of which drama went closer to the day-to-day routine of the life of people. The theater arts were no longer conceived as mere means of entertainment, but they were reoriented toward playing a greater role as instruments of social awakening. IPTA also worked for obliterating the link between theater and audience and bringing it close to their hearts. It also brought about a significant change in the Panjabi theater in the sense that it extended its area of operation by making possible its convergence with theater activity in the rest of the country. This resulted in the liberation of Panjabi theater from inhibitions of academicism and middle-class prudery, and the IPTA movement in Panjab made it possible for appearance on the theater scene of artists like Shiela Bhatia, the well-known film star Balraj Sahni, Balwant Gargi, Tera Singh Chan, Joginder Bahrla, Pandit Khalili, and others, who made serious efforts to take Panjabi theater to the masses and evolve a powerful idiom of dramatic conflict.

EXPLORATION OF INNER RECESSES OF THE MIND

In contrast, some of the new playwrights started introducing experiments in their plays under the influence of some Western dramatists and theater artists. Their focus of interest shifted from the portrayal of economic and social problems to the exploration of inner recesses of the human mind. Amrik Singh, in his *Parchhavian Di Pakkar* (The Grip of Shadows), makes use of episodic technique in building to a sharp climax the crippling grip of past events on the life of an innocent victim of circumstances.

In *Atit de Parchhaven* (Shadows of the Past), the design of the play is clearly influenced by August Strindberg, the Swedish playwright. In *Bujharat* (The Riddle), he again plunges into experimentation of form while dramatizing the life of Strindberg. Here, he makes use of the dream technique and symbolism of the sea to unfold the inner workings of his protagonist's mind.

Harsaran Singh, another experimentalist, in his plays *Jigra* (Courage) and *Udas Lok* (The Dispirited People), has shown unusual vitality by bringing to bear critical realism on contemporary social problems. He brings out forcefully in *Udas Lok* the tensions in a joint family and its gradual disintegration. In his historical play *Nizam Sakka*, he presents in dramatic form the brief rule of Nizam, a water carrier, on whom the Mughal emperor Humayun had bestowed kingship for one day in reward for saving him from drowning. The writer has tried to make this incident relevant to the contemporary situation by projecting Nizam Sakka's rule as concretizing the dreams and aspirations of a socialist democratic welfare state.

Surjit Singh Sodhi, another playwright, started writing social plays with a realistic slant and soon turned into an experimentalist. His *King Mirza te Spera* (King Mirza and the Snake Charmer) is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It is an attempt to find meaning in the futility of existence. In another play, *Nangi Sarak Rat da Ujala* (The Naked Road and the Light of Night), Sethi attempts to focus on the experience of alienation and loneliness being suffered by modern individuals. In yet another play, *Eh Zindgi Hai Dosto* (This Life, O Friends), he wrote a powerful satire on corruption in contemporary social life. He profitably makes use of Artaud's theater of cruelty in its production. Sethi is a bold experimentalist and has been able to translate Western ideas into playwriting and stage production in Panjabi.

The experimental drama received a further fillip from Paritosh Gargi. His *Luk Chhip Jana* (Ay! Hide You Yourself) and *Chhleda* (Illusion) are authentic pieces of experimental structuring. The former recalls Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* and the latter focuses on social problem using experimental techniques.

Gurcharan Singh Jasuja, who stands out prominently among the new dramatists, writes his plays with down-to-earth common

sense. By remaining away from all kinds of theories and fashions, he is able to dramatize small-time conflicts of the lackluster middle class. Still, he has made some significant innovations and a meaningful analysis of the inner self in his plays. In *Kandhan Ret Dian* (The Walls of Sand) and *Andhkar* (The Mist), he moves from visual symbols to verbal symbols, which not only help to unfold meaning but also intensify the action in the plays. One of his recent plays, *Rachna Ram Banai* (God Made the Creation), a play based on the verse of Guru Tegh Bahadur, implies that the Lord is the creator of this world and that every object in it takes its shape according to his will. The play, a fine example of the dramatization of an idealistic theory creation, is a distinguished work possessing literary grace and artistic excellence.

The quincentenary of the first Sikh guru, Baba Nanak was celebrated in the year 1969. In 1966, the 300th birth anniversary of the 10th master, Guru Gobind Singh, was celebrated with great fanfare. In 1977, the 300th anniversary of the founding of the city of Amritsar by Sri Guru Ram Das was celebrated. During these anniversaries, the art of drama and theater was used to pay tributes to these Panjabi heroes and many aspects of their life and teachings were projected in various theatrical performances. A lot of dramatic literature was produced during this period. Some critics gave a name to this period as *shatabdi kal* (centenary period) of Panjabi drama and theater, when a large number of playwrights and theatre artists devoted themselves to the task of writing religious plays around the legends and history of the Sikh gurus. It was a challenge for a playwright to write a play about the Sikh gurus without their presence on the stage. The Sikh religious sentiments cannot tolerate any flesh-and-blood character portraying the great guru. Some plays revolve around an idea or a character that appears but briefly on the stage, but any play based on Sikh history depicting the gurus and their times has to present the main character only as a reported speech. In these plays, Panjabi playwrights drew the character of the off-stage hero in a superb manner. Balwant Gargi, in his *Gagan Mien Thal* (the Sky, the Worship Plate), presents, in absentia, Guru Nanak as its hero. A bulk of dramatic literature, produced in this category lacked quality and overwhelmed large audiences due to religious fervor.

Some of the titles that became popular during this period are *Sabh Kichh Hote Upaye* (Everything could be Possible) and *Jin Sach Pale Hoye* (Those who Possess the Truth, 1969) by Gurdial Singh Phul, *Itihas Juab Manda Hai* (History Demands Answer, 1967), *Zafarnama* (1969), and *Chamkaur di Garhi* (The Fortress of Chamkaur, 1969) by Harcharan Singh, and *Amritsar Sifti da Ghar* (Amritsar—the House of Praise) by S.S. Amole.

Some very eminent poets have written memorable verse plays in Panjabi. Haribhajan Singh wrote *Tar Tupka* (A Drop Hanging by a String, 1957); Ravinder Ravi of Canada, *Bimar Sadi* (The Ailing Century); Shiv Kumar, *Luna* (Name of a woman); and Ajaib Kamal of Kenya, *Langra Asman* (The Lame Sky).

On the other side of the border, some writers have made to promote the genre of drama by some Pakistani writers. Some of them wrote for radio and television. Ashfaq Ahmad, Sajjad Haider, Nawaz Sheik Iqbal, Baqi Siddiqui, Saleem Rafiqui, Akram Butt, Agha Ashraf, and, above all, Rafi Peer made important contributions in this regard. Those who wrote for television and made a mark in this sphere are Safdar Mir, Munnoo Bhai, Younis Javed, Ashfaq Ahmed, and Bano Qudsia. Munnoo Bhai's serial 'Jazeera,' (Island) was very popular with viewers on both sides of the border. Later, it was published in book form.

There has been some stage activity in the cities of Pakistan, particularly at Lahore, which had grown into an excellent center of Panjabi theatre arts before partition. There has been a spurt in the commercial theater, but very little can stand out as a genuine art. *Pug* (The Turban) and *Aj Akhan Waris Shah Nun* (I Address Waris Shah Again) are rare exceptions.

There have been some very good plays in Panjabi written over the years on this side of Panjab. The late Ishaq Mohammad's *Mussali* (Water Carrier) and *Quqnus* (name of a mythological bird), Najm Hussain Sayad's *Takhat Lahore* (The Throne of Lahore) and *Ik Raat Ravi Di* (A Night on the Banks of the River Ravi), and Sarmad Sehbai's *Punjwan Chiragh* (The Fifth Earthen Lamp) and *Shak Shubhey da Vela* (The Time for Doubt and Suspicion) all deal with the history of Panjab and attempt to identify and rediscover Panjabi 'roots.' Najm Hussain Sayad's plays are already translated into Gurmukhi in the Indian part of Panjab and are quite popular

with Panjabi readers. Ishaq Mohammad's *Mussali* is also available to Panjabi readership in the Indian side in Gurmukhi script. The play has been staged successfully a number of times in Chandigarh, Ludhiana, and Amritsar by Kala Mandir Mohali and has received great applause from large audiences. It has been produced and directed by the noted author and theater artist Atamjit. The play charms audiences for its dialect of the Bar area in West Panjab. Its story goes back to the times when the Aryans invaded the subcontinent and destroyed Harappa. It is the sad story of Mussallis who were subjugated by the Aryans, being labeled as *daso achhoots* (untouchables) and made to do low, menial work in the farms without home and hearth.

Experimental drama made its presence felt in the hands of a couple of young playwrights and directors, like Atamjit (1950) and Ajmer Aulakh (1949). Atamjit's *Rishtian da Ki Rakhiye Nan*, *Ajit Ram*, *Seenan*, and *Farash Vich Ugiyya Hoya Rukh* are very popular with Panjabi audiences. His short plays *Murghi Khana* and *Pallu di Udik Vich* are equally well known to the Panjabi world. Aulakh has become a household name in the world of Panjabi theater with *Begane Bohar di Chhan*, *Ik Ramaya Hor*, and *Bhajian Bahin*.

PANJABI THEATRE AND ITS PRESENT POSITION

The early Panjabi theater catered primarily to the urban middle class, and its intent was to bring about social reform. Whatever the conflicts presented, these plays focused on the domestic and the romantic. The characters were generally stock types, and the denouement proceeded on familiar lines. According to Sant Singh Sekhon, Panjabi theatre in its early days was rhetorical, with emotions and sentiments having great importance.

During the 1940s, there emerged a significant Panjabi theater in Lahore. But the partition of the country was responsible for checking its growth. Uprooted from its nuclear cultural center of Lahore, theater activity received a serious setback when it dispersed to Shimla, Jullundher, Patiala, Amritsar, Delhi, and later, Chandigarh. Nowhere could it make its presence felt. In all these places, Panjabi theater remained a localized affair with no distinctive character of its own.

National School of Drama (NSD) and the Panjabi Theatre

Only in the 1960s did the theater movement in the regional languages attain maturity and professional skill. The National School of Drama, established in Delhi in the early 1960s, became a strong center for bringing about a purposeful dialogue among theater folks of the different regions of India. With coming into contact with the theatre being done elsewhere in India, Panjabi theatre found a new orientation in the Panjab and Delhi and Bombay. It had an opportunity to avail itself of the services of well trained professional theater artists like Harpal Tiwana and his talented wife, Neena, Bansi Kaul, Suresh Pandit, Gurcharan Singh Channi, Devinder Daman, Sonal Mann Singh, Balraj Pandit, Kewal Dhaliwal, Kamal Tiwari Mahender, Navnindra Behal, and Rani Balbir Kaur, who have brought into it a new vitality and vigor. The establishment of the departments of Indian drama and Asian theater at Panjab University, Chandigarh, and speech and drama at Panjab University, Patiala, under the guidance of two theater stalwarts, Balwant Gargi and Surjit Singh Sethi, respectively, has led to some bold experiments in theater. Some playwrights, such as Gursharan Singh and Atamjit, though they did not have formal training in theater arts, are so slick in their profession that they are bringing a professional touch to Panjabi theater.

In the 1970s, Prem Julundry, with his Sapru House shows, regaled middle-class Panjabi audiences in Delhi. These shows, a craze of those times, offered what may be termed 'hilarious adult comedy,' which were also called 'laugh-a-minute sex comedies.' These Panjabi farces with salacious titles have been attacked, defended, even threatened, yet they were big box office hits.

In this very period, Panjabi theater started having its impact, for some of the theater groups made a serious effort to free themselves from the bonds of tradition. The Delhi Art Theater of Shiela Bhatia, Gursharan Singh's Amritsar School of Drama, which later took the name of Chandigarh School of Drama after his moving to Chandigarh, Balraj Pandit's Natakwala, and Atamjit's Kala Mandir, first at Amritsar and now at Mohali, have combined dramatic dexterity with ingenious devices while exploring new modes of expression on stage. Ajmer Aulakh has evolved a new, robust theatrical idiom from the folklore of Panjab. Devinder Daman and Jaswant Damathe, a director-actress, husband-wife team, have, through their Norah Richards' *Rang Manch*, introduced new modes of action in religious-historical plays.

Panjabi Drama and Theater from 1980 Onward

From 1980, Panjabi drama and theater passed through most difficult times. In this period, the people of Panjab suffered the most painful conditions of reckless killings and tensions between the two major religious groups of Panjab—Hindus and Sikhs. There was an atmosphere of total darkness and dissolution, with ever-increasing terrorist activity of looting and killings and fake police encounters, with women widowed and children orphaned. The killings were not confined to only one community, as the men, women, and children of both communities were being shot dead in cold blood. The people, terrified by the harrowing atmosphere, dared not stir from their homes at night. Mothers prayed for the safe return of their children; the shrieks of widows and orphans continued to rend the sky. Ironically, theater activity was triggered by militancy. Most of the theater groups concentrated on the Panjab problem and churned out scripts and staged plays on this problem. Gursharan Singh, the most notable of the artists, took his crisp, message-oriented plays from village to village and, in a loud voice, warned the masses of the dangers of religious fundamentalism. His plays written and enacted during this period were repeatedly applauded, enjoyed, and reenjoyed by the common people. *Ik Kursi, Ik Morcha te Hawa vich Latke Lok* (A Chair, an Agitation and People Hanging in Midair), *Curfew, Hitlist, Baba Bolda Hai* (The Old Man Speaks), *Bhai Manna Singh, Chandigarh Puare di Jarh* (Chandigarh, The Root Cause of Discord), and others were being staged at every corner of the state, and people in large numbers would witness these plays. There was no artistic quality in them, nothing that would make them a good example of professional theater, yet they had a sway on the people. Gursharan Singh himself does not boast of their finesse, but he measures his success in terms of their delivery of a message. He represents the *Janvadi* (the people's) movement in Panjabi theater. Other theater artists, such as Atamjit, took a different position. They do recognize

the importance of a message, but for them theater is a unique art: it must be conceived in terms of dramatic metaphor, it must be transformed into a metaphorical mode of existence, and these metaphors should unfold meaning in a future-oriented movement of time. Therefore, there must be a significant experiment in form. His *Seenan* (Stitches) and *Ajit Ram* are not just tear-jerkers; they are mature pieces of new experimentation in form. Even his *Rishtiyan da Ki Rakhiye Nan* (How to Name the Kinship Relationships), staged by a number of theater groups, is found to be relevant to the communally charged atmosphere of the 1980s and early 1990s. An adaptation of Saādat Hassan Manto's short story, 'Toba Tek Singh,' it presents in spectacle the story of the country's partition in an ironic mode. Happily, it is still a powerful story with which the people can identify even after 40 years. It will be interesting to note that, in spite of disturbed conditions, some good theater has also been possible. Sonal Mann Singh, Atamjit, Charan Das Sidhu (Delhi) Kewal Dhaliwal, Navnindra Behal, and a host of other directors and producers are engaged in widening the vision. But still, drama and theater remain the weakest link in twentieth century Panjabi literature. Panjabi theater is still not flourishing due to paucity of scripts, and very few playwrights write good scripts. In their absence, the theater has to depend on adaptations and translations from other languages. There is no doubt that the new interest in theater in Panjab is here to stay, yet there is much to be done to improve the future of Panjabi theater.

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Encounter of the Performing Arts and Modern Mass Media

J.C. Mathur

The performing arts have matured over a period of centuries. Modern mass media are an altogether new phenomenon and continue to grow from decade to decade and sometimes from year to year. Over the ages the performing arts have been using the chamber, the arena and the auditorium as the principal means of their communication with their audience and as the forum for their expression. Now suddenly during the last fifty years this new genie has appeared as an additional and alternative vehicle of communication. Unlike the chamber, the arena and the auditorium, the mass media have separated the locale of performance from the receiving end. This is a revolutionary change. Though the locale of artistic expression and the locale of receiving the fruits of that expression have been separated, the interesting thing is that the technology of modern media manages to produce an illusion of non-separation. This is because of the speed and simultaneous reception of the 'message' (the programme-content) that the electronics media carry. Even the non-electronic medium of the film usually succeeds in creating the illusion of non-separation because though its reception is not simultaneous, its display-technique creates an environment of immediacy.

Another revolutionary aspect of the modern mass media is that generally they transcend the normal process of the mental

interpretation of the message. Normally a performing artist leads the audience or the *rasika* through a number of intermediary stages towards the fulfilment of aesthetic enjoyment. The artistic devices employed by the performer, the director, the composer and the writer stimulates the necessary receptivity in the mind of the spectator. Gradually he is able to interpret the message and adjust it to his own personal sensitivity.

But the modern mass media exercise a direct emotive influence because they assail and awaken the sensations through almost a plastic impact. In fact the TV affects the whole nervous system. There is not much chance for gradual mental interpretation. You are subjected to the message; your own receptive faculties are not stimulated; they are overwhelmed and held captive. Even more significant is the fact that the artistic devices of the performer, the poet, the director, etc. became subsidiary. Much of the stimulating function is taken over by the techniques of the mass media. Close-ups, reaction shots, zooms, pans, freeze shots, solarization, dissolves—these are examples of the tools of the film and TV producers by which they can communicate with the audience and overpower them in no time. The artistry of the programme-content and performance is only a subsidiary factor.

These two revolutionary changes—the separation of the place of performance from the place of reception and the direct impact on the spectators' emotive and nervous systems by the technology of mass media have produced some benign results as well as some alarming situations. Let us consider first the benign results and positive gains so far as they relate to music and dance. Drama will be discussed separately from music and dancing because drama's place in mass media has been dubious and unhappy in countries like India.

BENIFICIENT EFFECTS

An obvious effect of the rapid, simultaneous and widespread transfer of the image and sound by mass media is that musical and dance forms of countries and regions far and near are influencing each other not imperceptibly as in the past but pointedly and sometimes with a bang. Popular film music of the commercial film of Bombay borrows sometimes rather crudely, the refrains from

the hits in Hollywood. But one notices a subtler and more welcome effect too. In the classical music of societies with a traditional culture like India, innovation of a creative kind is appearing, and because it is often initiated by some reputed musicians, it is not dismissed unceremoniously by even conservatives. New compositions, in which not only foreign instruments but also notes belonging to diverse musical systems coordinate, are being attempted and the kind of blending that in the past took centuries to come about has emerged on the horizon within years. The experiments of Kumar Gandharva and Ravi Shankar for example, are significant and the controversy over them is itself symptomatic of the new musical ethos. The walls between Hindustani and Karnataka system and between *margi* and *desi* styles are no longer impregnable.

Between radio and music there has been a constructive relationship. Indian classical music artistes willingly accepted the radio discipline of performance duration. This discipline has improved the communicability of the classical style despite a little curb on creative inspiration. Instrumental ensembles and orchestral compositions based on classical *ragas* and *raginis* as also choral renderings have come into the repertoire of Indian music largely under the influence of the radio and often at its initiative. The film and the radio have been responsible for extending and deepening the popularity of the *ghazal* within the last two decades. To radio (and now TV) can be attributed much of the recent widespread stimulus to folk music of different regions. A new sense of identity and even pride has come to rural and tribal singers who are now beginning to refine their modes of presentation.

In classical dances, the impact of mass media has been not so much towards blending as towards distinctiveness of styles. Each major style—*Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Orissi, Manipuri* and *Kathak*—is keen to emphasise its distinctive features. Documentary films and the TV, in their endeavour to recognize and give pride of place to the contributions of different regions to the composite tradition of Indian culture, have promoted the regional excellences of classical forms, overlooking the common source and shared features. But the effect has on the whole been wholesome in as much as precision in exposition and attention to details in presentation have been encouraged.

TV is indeed an excellent medium for bringing out the finer beauties of classical dances, the nuances of the *abhinaya*, the supreme skill of the *parans* and the sophistication of the traditional make-up and costumes. An innovation disliked by traditionalists but likely to be an asset eventually is songs which classical dance artists interpret which are beginning to be rendered in regional languages and in Hindi. The demand of communication may thus lead to wider appreciation of classical forms.

Indeed the most important positive contribution of the radio and TV seems to be that they provided to the classical arts a larger appreciative patronage just when the patronage of landlords and feudal princes began to decline.

The *sahrdayas*, men of good taste, need no longer be confined to the chamber of the aristocrat. The image of the old *darbari* musician or the *mehfil* dancer has faded out over the years. The profession is becoming modern and has acquired a high social status. The distinction between 'profession' and 'amateur' performers has practically disappeared and an environment of equality is growing.

These positive gains notwithstanding, modern mass media have an infinite capacity for creating illusions not only for the audience but also for performing artists and others who are responsible for the contents of the programmes. The illusion is created by the image of the artists—actors, singers, instrumentalists, dancers—created by the mass media. It is a highly flattering image.

To be heard, seen and admired by thousands who are invisible gives a sense of having a vast domain over the hearts of people. Is this a true domain? One view held among several sociologists in the West is that 'most films, TV and radio stars are merely figureheads of a giant entertainment apparatus, spokesman of a culture-industry that will abandon them as soon as viewer response declines.'

In India the above description certainly applies to film stars. The fortunes of stars rise and decline according to popular response. But who determines 'popular response'?

In pre-media times a minority of aesthetically sensitive people used also to be the major 'financiers'. In their presence the performances were given either in the chambers, or temples or on

occasions of domestic and community festivity. Their appreciation, judgement and guidance provided the norms to artists and the general audience alike, because they were the patrons as well as the financiers.

The separation of the place of performance from the place of reception by modern mass media has created a new situation for the performing arts. The patrons and the financiers are now different people. Listeners and viewers in thousands of homes, and the vast film audience are the patrons. Distributors, cinema-owners, bankers, political decision-makers and bureaucrats are the 'financiers'. The patrons pay for their admission tickets to see films and their licence fees for radio and TV sets. People with refined taste, aesthetic responses and well-developed understanding lie scattered among them. Not being major patrons nor being physically present at the places of performance, they no longer carry weight as assessors of quality. They are a minority whose voice does not really count.

QUALITY-CONTROL

It is the financier and the bureaucrat on whom falls the burden of deciding what fare the performing arts should provide on mass media. As a class neither of them is qualified to assess quality and to guide taste. And so they generally ignore the issue of the aesthetic quality. The box-office, the number of licences and in the case of advertisers, the amount of community turn-over, influence their choice. They interpret and also subconsciously guide what is known as popular appeal; subconsciously, because though they disclaim all responsibility for aesthetic judgment, their own untrained taste and limited understanding subconsciously influences their selection of media content.

Moreover, 'programme-production' in mass-media has tended to become more technical. The quality of the programme-content is only one of the factors in building up an attractive image of the programme. Sometimes it is not even the predominant factor. 'Effects' have become a major enrichment-device. Over the years effects that began as a subsidiary, have tended to occupy the centre of the stage. Media techniques have led to new exciting programmes like electronic music, and dances in which the shadow and the figure intermingle.

These developments have not caused serious setbacks to classical music and dance in India, because, ultimately the skill, artistry and depth of musical and dance expression is the major determinant of the quality of a musical programme. Besides the radio (and even TV) has a thing called 'minority' programme. In old times the BBC had the Third Programme for quality pieces. India has had the National Programme which began as a prestigious national event but is now reduced to the status of a minority-interest programme.

Of all the performing arts it is drama that has benefitted the least from modern mass media. In fact one gets the impression that drama as it has grown over centuries—its blend of literature, poetry, action and expression—may perhaps in the future have no place in the media world. We have already radio-drama, TV drama and film scenario—each a genre in its own right.

Each of these is an interesting form. But with a few exceptions, the scripts written for these categories and the productions do not qualify for recognition as dramatic literature and theatre. It is not that they are inferior. It is that they are an ancillary to a joint enterprise in which the technology of the medium is the central operational force. That technology seeks to make a quick and direct emotive impact upon the human systems. Its tools are the manipulation of voice, sounds and image. Words may or may not be important. The microphone and the camera aided by various complex and sophisticated contraptions and artificial lights take over some of the communicative and expressive functions of dialogue, poetry, gestures, facial expression and human movements.

In radio-drama the word is not denigrated; it is magnified and acquires new dimensions—under the control of manipulated sound. The radio certainly promoted poetic drama. But in the absence of the visual, and uncorrected by the reactions of an audience in its physical proximity, it tended to become monotonous.

The film has had little use for drama. It looks for a dramatic story, a plot, a theme. Thereafter it parts company with drama. The preparation of a film does not follow the sequence of the story. Shots which are the core of the film production technique, are taken at different places, and the order in which they are taken depends upon considerations of technique and convenience. There

is no such thing as a continuous performance as in the theatre. Continuity is provided by the technical skill of the editing staff and the syncretic vision of the director. The film is a manufactured cultural presentation. Drama is a creative stage-presentation.

Unfortunately for drama, the first result of the introduction of the cinema in India was that as popular entertainment, it lost its hold on audiences, particularly in the vast Hindi-speaking region—in towns and later even in several rural areas. Several factors accounted for this situation. These are the exotic appeal of the film, the low tariff and its unlimited capacity to show any place or situations, realistic to the most convincing detail and as fantastic as the wildest imagination. That is why the first to go down was the spectacular drama of the Parsi theatre, because its revolving stage and its trick scenes were no match for the marvels of trick-photography.

That in itself was not much of a loss. But with it also seemed to go the core of the theatre—the power of speech, the beauty of the turn of phrase, the dialogue that illumines a situation in a flash, and brings out the clangors of the human soul in conflict. Gone was the gradual build-up of climax and the cathartic effect of passion in the throes of struggle. For some time it seemed that the theatre would not survive in the Indian situation where, unlike in the West, there had been a long break in the availability of state-patronage to the theatre during British rule.

CRISIS OF IDENTITY

However, soon after independence, the theatre has had a revival. But it bears the impact of the modern mass media—not altogether in tune with its character. Several effects of the modern mass media, particularly the film, can be seen. First, we see a far more pervasive and sophisticated use of the techniques of stage-production based on electrical and mechanical devices. Sometimes the manipulation of these devices is not an aid but the principal motivating force. Second, and in a different direction, is the preference for abstract in the form, speech and production of drama, the search for non-dependence on words in drama, and the discarding of coherence, symmetry, episodic build-up and other common practices of the dramatic art. Third, we see the fancy for the superficial film-type of drama, unabashedly copying the style and tricks that appeal to entertainment-seekers whose preferences have been shaped by the cinema. Finally, the structure of plays is being influenced by the film-scenario. For example a recent vogue is to have numerous short scenes each with a rather narrow focus and without a marked integral relationship with others.

It may seem that a crisis of identity has seized the theatre superficially, similar to the crisis that came to painting when photography was discovered and from which it has not yet recovered completely. The similarity is superficial because the photographic technique replaced and improved upon the functions of realistic art. It was a better mirror to external form and therefore the painters sought different ways of interpreting form. Dramatic technique of interpreting life has not been replaced by the film or TV. It cannot, because the skills of the playwright and the actor require the span of the performance-duration and the communicative environment of the theatre-hall or arena, for its adequate expression. One should therefore be cautious about the common contemporary assumption that the emergence of film-drama justifies deliberate indifference to the basic character of drama as a direct and interpersonal sharing of the literary experience between the playwright, the actor and the audience.

Without the sharing of literary experience, without the artistry, poetry, vision and intensity that are the warp and woof of literature, drama will lose its identity. Cinema provides a more impressive mirror to life; it certainly gives infinitely varied and complete entertainment; it produces overpowering audio-visual miracles and reproduces reality and fantasy with unsurpassable thoroughness and accuracy. TV reinforces the needs and coverage of the film not only by its capacity for instantaneous and simultaneous communications, but even more by providing a near-substitution for three-dimensional reality by enveloping the sensations and the nervous system of viewers. But the theatre alone enables the individual to have access to the heights and variety of literature through the communicative process of *rasa* or aesthetic enjoyment.

Another role of the theatre is that of involving the community in its ethos. In folk and traditional theatre, a performance is more than a show. It is a community festival. Performers are able to

elicit a ready response; the idiom and the wavelength are the same. This does not mean that conscious and prepared artistry and the professional skills of stage (or arena) are lacking. Performances are not merely improvised and ad hoc presentations. They have a high degree of professional excellence and, unlike in the west, folk drama in India carries some conventions, imaginary and stylistic variations inherited from ancient classical drama. What enables folk and traditional theatre to involve the community is that it is local-specific or can be with a little adjustment. This is something difficult and generally impracticable for film scenario and radio-drama to achieve. By their very nature mass media try to appeal to large masses. But the more critical factor is the separation between the place of performance and the spectators.

The 'crisis of identity' is, therefore, spurious. Its unreality becomes apparent once it is realized that neither the imitation of the film style nor the fabrication of new structures based on a creative use of electronic devices and audio-visual effects can be a substitute for drama proper. These developments have their own importance but they do not replace the role of drama because the strength of drama is in its being literature, written or oral, and in its capacity to involve the community actively.

ROLE OF TV

Of all the mass media, only TV can and should be used for the re-assertion of drama as a literary genre and its role in giving the experience of community-involvement. The other two, film with its scenario, and radio with its recitative and non-visual drama cannot use drama in its true character and convey its full experience. Unfortunately hitherto, in India TV has been rather pathetically imitating the film with the result that its potential as a medium for drama has not received attention. Chains of shots rather than scenic sequences, effects rather than dialogue, clever angles and even long distance views rather than close-ups of speaking and expressive faces—these are only some of the things that hinder rather than help in providing an intimate face-to-face and concrete experience of dramatic literature and community involvement. There seems to be an exaggerated emphasis upon the technical production aspect. One gets the impression as if all those connected with the production of TV drama item were keen to establish their bonafides as future technicians, directors, actors, producers of films. It would not be surprising if, career-wise that is the path they wish to take. But, in the bargain, the true character of drama is not brought out.

Actually TV's power to make the spoken word acceptable even to an indifferent audiences is tremendous. A person speaking on TV becomes part of the intimate circle insides one's drawing room and whatever he says is heard. That is why dialogue in drama can follow its natural course and not be subjected to the scissor-and-glue process of the kind unavoidable in making a film. Between stage-drama and TV drama, therefore, there need not exist the kind of dichotomy that is inevitable between the film and theatre. If a 2½ hour film can be shown on TV, I do not see why complete plays cannot be telecast. Brutus's speech in Shakespeare's Julius Ceaser, the long but challenging dialogues of Shaw's satirical plays, the complex beauty of Jaya Shankar Prasad's dramatic prose, can have abundant scope and need not normally be trimmed and edited. TV is an ideal medium to bring out the magic of dramatic language; the enlarged, intimate, expressive face can whisper to you elevating thoughts, intricate imagery, stirring exhortation, internal and external conflict. Clear enunciation on TV means much more than on the radio. It is a tool of aesthetic comprehension, and not just a mark of excellence. Regional TV can stimulate the warmth of intimacy in the presentation of folk plays and thus capture, to some extent its local-specific character and sense of participation. This may not be possible as a national network, but only in local programmes. TV should, therefore, be an ally of drama proper rather than the seeker of a different form that may in effect be only a pale imitation of film-drama. Let it help in the re-assertion of the literary personality of drama.

To sum up, I see the performing arts being able to retain their identity in the midst of the vast and powerful tide of modern mass media in the following manner:

- Classical and folk music have in the radio an effective vehicle because it can create an auditory concentration of the wide and varied spectrum of rhythm, melody and harmony.

- Classical and folk dances have a useful forum both in the film and TV The film catches the tripping rhythm, the lyrical flow and the subtle and detailed beauty of *abhinaya*, and TV makes these an intimate experience. Both will facilitate wider comprehension of dance forms without distorting them.
- Drama is in serious danger of being distorted unless it adheres to its literary and poetic base and admits folk and traditional forms in its mainstream. In today's theatre resurgence, several experiments are going on. Those that endeavour to blend the urban peoples' drama and the folk and traditional forms (for example *Hayavadana* of Girish Karnad and some recent productions of Habib Tanveer and B.V. Karanth), have the potential to create an environment of community-involvement. Significant experiments should likewise be attempted to strengthen and highlight the literary core of drama. In all such experiments that re-assert the identity of theatre proper, TV can be an ally because its technology does not compel the dilution or distortion of drama as does that of the film or radio.

Drama on Television

Kirti Jain

Television as a medium, has now come to stay in India. It attracts the maximum attention as any emerging new media would. Having started as a medium purely for instruction and education, it has gradually had to make concessions to the growing demand for more entertainment. As its viewing has increased both in number and variety, the demands and expectations have become multidirectional. Television in India therefore is now faced with the challenge of sorting out these growing contradictions, asserting its significance and establishing a definite identity of its own.

The task, however, involves many complex problems. Firstly, the medium has to cater simultaneously to the tastes of people from varying cultural backgrounds, literacy levels and classes. Therefore in the planning of the programmes, TV while keeping the interests of its wide clientele in mind, has to be careful not to lose sight of its own objectives that may often be at cross-purposes with popular demand.

In setting up of the objectives, it might perhaps be useful to examine the dilemma that a medium of this nature is faced with. Television is a tremendously expensive medium and a country like India cannot afford to sustain it without the justification of it serving a definite social purpose i.e., removing illiteracy, increasing social awareness, inculcating familiarity with the varied regions and their cultures, etc. But what do the masses demand?

The urban middle class invest in purchasing a TV set, and having acquired an article that is a status symbol they then start imposing their demands on the medium; after a day's tiring work they very justifiably demand entertainment. They are not prepared to have any sort of education or information thrust on them. The demand is for a kind of entertainment that would allow them to escape into a world of superficial reality—a world that is sentimental, romantic or full of violence. This explains the popularity of the commercial Hindi films. Television has to provide entertainment and yet fight against the demand for escapist entertainment. Television drama can therefore function at two levels—one, of putting across social messages through carefully planned story lines and the other, the more significant one, to make people aware of subtle human relationships, problems and situations. It should be more directly related to real life, more sensitive and more human. It can take up any number of significant social and human issues and project them not necessarily in order to convey a moral or a message but just to increase some perception of human nature and problems. In other words, the drama has to lead to a more sensitive perception and acceptance of life, to the understanding of the environment in greater depth and to inculcation of finer values of life. This of course can only be a very slow process but one has to make a beginning and then it is a question of gradually attuning your audience to this process and to make them function on the same wave length.

What is TV drama? For ages 'Drama' has been almost synonymous with 'theatre' but with the emergence of media like the films and television the connotation of 'drama' has changed and widened and now we have different manifestations of drama in all the three media. Each of these manifestations is conditioned by the essential and basic characteristics of the respective media. Therefore, it might be useful to study the general differences between them.

DEMANDS OF DRAMA

Theatre caters to a large audience at a time and therefore communication at a personal level is difficult. But the very presence of live actors, moving and speaking in front of the audience evolving

out of a specific experience—living it out as it were, all this makes theatre more direct an experience. Theatre is a representation of reality and this representation can be either realistic or stylized as the play or its interpretation would allow. The audience may find a formal stylization difficult to comprehend, but as they have chosen to come and see the play they make the effort to make the best of the occasion. In other words, the audience in a play performance is a captive audience and hence forced to be more attentive and more patient.

Film, too, has captive audiences. This, like theatre, caters to large audiences at a time but it cannot build any immediate contact with its viewers. What it has to its advantage is an immense freedom in its form. It does not have the physical limitation of the unity of 'Time' and 'Place' which a stage production has to adhere to. The action in a realistic play has to be limited to one locale or at the most two, due to practical difficulties arising from the fact that it has to be shown in continuation and cannot afford to have too many gaps. The film, on the other hand can be shot in bits, at the actual locales and with the maximum realistic details as there can be any time lag between the shooting of one sequence and the next. This very convenience makes a demand on the medium—that of extreme realism, which often also becomes a binding factor since it is possible to show all realistic and external details on film, the viewer expects and demands that it be shown that way. It is not prepared to make concessions that it would for a stage play, where a major part of the action is normally confined to the interior and happenings outside are either reports or conveyed by other means. This freedom in the film—while it adds to the variety and impact—becomes an inhibiting factor in terms of the budget and the time taken in its preparation. Everything in the film has to be on a wider scale to allow for enough physical action and sustain the interest.

Television is different from both film and theatre in that it does not have a captive audience. Television is viewed casually and informally in the home and the viewer is free to walk in and out of the programme at his will; he can even eat, drink or talk as he is watching a TV programme. This allows the viewer to be more informal and at ease when we he is seeing the programme but it raises a major challenge for the medium as such. Television programmes

have to struggle to find ways and means of capturing the interest and attention of viewers which theatre and film get automatically having the audience that has come of its own choice. Again, TV is owned by a large cross-section of people of varying backgrounds and interests who when they are seeing a particular programme can be in different moods and situations which would condition the impact of any programme on them. Capturing attention therefore being the basic aim of a TV programme, thrillers and mystery stories have successfully established themselves in television. But these are obviously not ideal solutions to programming.

What then should be done? What is the solution? To answer these questions one has to study the assets of TV drama over the film or the stage play.

ASSETS OF TV

TV having got its place in the homes of the people does undeniably have the advantage of closer contact and of being more personal. The TV play can create a more direct communication with the viewer so that the viewer feels that you are talking to him, dealing with his problems or confiding in him about yours. The interest has to be sustained by a strong story line establishing a more direct and intimate contact with the viewer and with greater intensity in situations and acting.

TV drama like films has to have a more realistic, naturalistic portayal of life and has the facility of shooting at different sets, locates and timings and is therefore not bound by unity of time and place. While in theatre the interpretation of a story is often communicated through positions, compositions and movement of characters, in films and TV the interpretations differ through highlighting of certain visual imagery and symbols, juxtaposition of these images and shots, which can communicate the desired meaning without many words. These, like the theatre, cannot use the straight narrative device of the story or the novel—but can convey the inner thoughts and emotions, the background and the development through a carefully worked out sequence of visual images. In fact, the visual imagery is conveyed in totality through the designing, the casting, the costumes, the shot compositions

and the sequence of shots. The choice of shots, the order in which they are used, the emphasis on small objects or facial expressions are often able to convey much more—and more effectively than what narration can do. Here, unlike theatre, the interpretation is totally in the hands of the director and he can make the audience see what he wants it to see in a particular story. For instance, at a particular point in a story five people are being questioned about a crime—and they react in different ways. In a play, all the characters are present on the stage and can be seen by the audience and therefore it is possible that the mind of different members of the audience be attracted by different characters, depending on who they think could be guilty. But in a film of a TV play the audience is allowed to think only what the director wants them to. Even if they are misled, they are misled because the director so wishes it by highlighting the face he wants to highlight. TV and films are more the director's media than the actors.

The major limitation of TV as against cinema is the small screen on which it is viewed—and that too in an intimate, homely environment. While the film seen amidst a crowd allows for a more impersonal treatment and also a more grandiose one, the size of the TV screen and its domestic viewing demands more indoor, personal, domestic treatment. The action in TV plays should be devised on a much smaller scale keeping in mind the size of a TV screen, the limited budget and greater frequency compared to films. It therefore should not get into competition with films in portraying elaborate crowds or battle scenes—or series of outdoor sequences. The idea of the 'epic' or too grandiose a scheme is not meant for television, for its forte is a closer deeper analysis of human behaviour, characters and relationships—and this is what it should exploit to the greater extent. For instance, if we take up plays like *Adhe Adhure* or Prem Chand's *Hori* (*Godan*) we can discuss the difference in treatment in the various media more specifically. A film would be expected to establish the house of the Mahendra Nath couple in *Adhe Adhure* within a wider environment; show Savitri and Mahendra Nath outside their own home—with their friends, in their working situation, so that the accusations made by each against the other at home could have been assessed in

relation to their actual behaviour outside. Therefore, while for making a film the entire structure of the play would have to be changed, on TV, keeping in view its limitations, the structure that the play written for the stage has, can be retained—except for minor changes where some glimpses of their past life and relationships could be incorporated. Similarly *Godan* with its wide spectrum of characters, locales and situations can be more effectively portrayed through the film, as a TV play too—it can make an impact more in terms of individual conflict than in terms of a social situation. It is difficult to capture the atmosphere of the novel, but if played on a smaller scale it can communicate the basic conflict of values projected in the novel. This, when adapted as a stage play leaves much to be desired—for it tends to become patchy and too episodic thereby losing the flow of action. The canvas is too wide to be able to maintain any unit of time, place or action, and hence the novel is rendered unsuitable for stage adaptation.

Coming back to TV plays, the fewer the sets, locales and characters it deals with, the deeper the analysis possible and the better the medium works. What TV can exploit most is the close up. Close ups work better in television for they appear nearer the life size and hence more natural then they would on the large film screen. So, while, a very long shot would appear flat and ineffective on the small TV screen, the close ups would took unnatural and distorted on the large screen. Hence intense personal drama can be most forcefully projected on TV with at the most two, three or four characters at a time to retain a neatness and slickness in the production. Excessive and fast movement of characters on a TV screen tend to make the image look clumsy and unmanageable. The movement therefore should be brought about by shot compositions, cutting and camera movement and not so much by actual movement of the characters. There is the possibility of conveying very subtle human emotions merely by capturing the right expression a sudden gleam in the eyes on a light close up to express joy, or the tension through a close up of clenched hands, or nervousness through drops of sweat on the face in a tight close up etc. These aspects in theatre and films cannot be highlighted individually—or so closely, for there the statement is made through movement and compositions on a wider canvas.

STYLE OF ACTING

The acting too, therefore has to be more subtle, more lifelike, more realistic than that in either theatre or films where a certain degree of historionics and melodrama are permissible and tolerable since one is not seeing it so closely and in so intimate an environment. A very good stage actor can find it very difficult to adapt himself to a medium like TV or/and would be less effective because he may be used to projecting his actions, emotions on a scale larger than life, to be able to reach the last member of his audience. He might tend to forget that in TV his viewer is always very close to him; he has to portray the character on a normal life scale for it to reach his viewers. Another point about TV acting is that the action has to be broken up into scenes and episodes and the stage actor used to a continuous performance may find it difficult to maintain consistency. Yet TV acting is not as fragmentary as in films where each shot is planned, designed and enacted separately. On TV generally one scene on one location can at least be shot at a stretch thereby allowing the actor a comparatively greater continuity and concentration.

The availability and nature of TV playscripts forms the most crucial point for discussion. It is important to realize that unlike any other mode of creative writing, a TV playscript cannot be a one-man band; here the script writer, director, actors, producer, cameraman are all equally important and it is only when they all work in co-ordination that the script acquires any meaning. In fact, results achieved in a TV production are often more spectacular than what the script indicates, because it is meant essentially for visual representation. A stage play can still be a great piece of literature without its being actually performed, and there have been plays that are more effective when read than when staged. But a TV playscript cannot have any such independent standing; its meaning, like the films, lies in its visualization.

But where are TV plays? Have we yet developed even a reasonable repertoire of television plays? Have our playwrights or writers yet considered this medium significant enough for self-expression or communication of their ideas? Have they made an effort to understand the technique of this medium and tried their hand at

it even as a challenge if not for experimentation and exploration of new techniques?

I think, with 18 years of television in India we have almost no television script writers to boast of, and no specialized or systematic research has gone into the requirements of a good television play. This indeed is the reason for not being able to maintain or acquire any standard for the writing and production of plays despite the persistent popular demand for plays. Now, it is about time that more attention be given to the development of television drama as a specialized field and encouraged on a large scale through workshops that would facilitate interaction between the writers, television producers, technicians and stage directors. Unless definite steps are taken in this direction the dangers of the commercial cinemas completely overpowering. TV are imminent. A high potential medium like television has not only to run in competition with the films but has to struggle hard to establish a distinct identity of its own.

Statements

A Bill to Empower the Government to Prohibit Certain Dramatic Performances

Whereas it is expedient to empower the several Local Governments to prohibit dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest. It is hereby enacted as follows:

1. This Act may be called 'The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876': It extends to the whole of British India: And it shall come into force at once.
2. In this Act 'Magistrate' includes a Presidency Magistrate.
3. Whenever the Local Government is of opinion that any play, pantomime, or other drama performed, or about to be performed, is—

   (a) of a scandalous or defamatory nature, or
   (b) likely to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law in British India, or
   (c) likely to deprave and corrupt persons present at such performance, or
   (d) otherwise prejudicial to the interests of the public, the Local Government, or such officer as it may generally or especially empower in this behalf, may by order prohibit such performance.

4. A copy of any such order may be served on any person about to take part in the performance so prohibited, or on the owner or occupier of any house, room or place in which such performance is intended to take place; and any person on whom such copy is served, and who does, or willingly permits, any act in disobedience to such order, shall be punishable, on conviction before a Magistrate, with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine, or with both.
5. Any such order may be notified by proclamation, and a written or printed notice thereof may be stuck up at any place or places adapted for giving information of the order to the persons intending to take part in the performance so prohibited.
6. Whoever after the notification of any such order—
   (a) takes part in the performance prohibited thereby, or in any performance substantially the same as the performance so prohibited, or
   (b) in any manner assists in conducting any such performance, or
   (c) is present as a spectator during the whole or any part of any such performance, or
   (d) being the owner or occupier, or having the use of any house, room or place, opens, keeps or uses the same for any such performance, or permits the same to be opened, kept or used for any such performance,

   shall be punishable, on conviction before a Magistrate, with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine, or with both.
7. If any Magistrate has reason to believe that any house, room or place is used, or is about to be used, for any performance prohibited under this Act, he may, by his warrant, authorize any officer of police to enter with such assistance as may be requisite, by night or by day, and by force, if necessary, any such house, room or place, and to take into custody all persons whom he finds therein, and to seize all scenery, dresses and other articles found therein, for the purpose of such performance.
8. No conviction under this Act shall bar a persecution under Section 124A, or Section 294, of the Indian Penal Code.

9. Whenever it appears to the Local Government that the provisions of this section are required in any local area, it may, with the sanction of the Governor General in Council, declare, by notification in the local official gazette, that such provisions are applied to such area from a day to be fixed in the notification.

On and after that day the Local Government may order that no dramatic performance shall take place in any place of public entertainment within such area except under a license to be granted by such Local Government, or such officer as it may empower in this behalf.

The Local Government may also order that no dramatic performance shall take place in any place of public entertainment within such area unless a copy of the piece, if and so far as it is written, or some sufficient account of its purport, if and so far as it is pantomime, has been furnished, not less than three days before the performance, to the Local Government, or to such officer as it may appoint in this behalf.

A copy of any order under this section may be served on any keeper of a place of public entertainment, and if thereafter he does or willingly permits any act in disobedience to such order, he shall be punishable, on conviction before a Magistrate, with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine, or with both.

STATEMENTS OF OBJECTS AND REASONS

The primary object of this Bill is to empower the Government to prohibit Native plays which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious or obscene. The necessity for some such measure has been established by the recent performance in Calcutta of a scurrilous Bengali drama, to prevent which the existing law was found to be insufficient.

The Bill, first, empowers the Government, or such officer as it empowers in this behalf, to issue on order prohibiting any dramatic performance which, in the opinion of the Government, comes within any of the classes above-mentioned. The order may be served on intending performers, or on the owner of the place in which the

play takes place. The order may also be notified by proclamation, and penalties are provided for disobedience thereto.

Power is then given to the Magistrates to grant warrants to the police to enter, arrest and seize scenery, dresses, &c.

Lastly, the Local Government is empowered to order in specified localities that no play shall be performed in any place of public entertainment, except under a license from Government, and that a copy of the piece, if written, or a sufficient account of its purport, if it be in pantomime, shall be previously furnished to the proper authorities.

Calcutta
9th March 1876.

A. Hobhouse

The Stage

Rabindranath Tagore

In the *Natyashastra*[1] of Bharata is a description of the stage, but no mention of scenes. It does not seem to me that this absence of concrete scenery can have been much of a loss.

In spite of Wagner and his idea of the combined arts, it may be argued that any one of the arts is only to be seen in her full glory when she is sole mistress; it hurts her dignity and lessens her if she is asked to share her household with a rival, the more especially so if the rival happens to be the favoured one. If we have to sing an Epic, the tune needs to become a chant and to give up all hopes of rising to melodic heights. The true poem indeed furnishes its own music from within itself, and rejects with disdain all outside help. On the other hand the true song tells its story in its own way, and waits for no Kalidas or Milton, often doing quite as well with a Tan dar a dei and a tra-la-la. A sort of artistic pageant may no doubt be got up with a mixture or word and tune and picture but that would be common or market Art, not of the Royal variety.

It may seem that dramatic art must needs be less independent than other forms; that the drama is created with the very object of attaining its fulfilment with outside help, and therefore awaits the acting, scenery, music and other accessories. But I cannot agree with this view.

[1] A work on the Drama.

Like the true wife who wants none other than her husband, the true poem, dramatic or otherwise, wants none other than the understanding mind. We all act to ourselves as we read a play, and the play which cannot be sufficiently interpreted by such invisible acting has never yet gained the laurel for its author.

So far as the acting goes it would be more correct to say that it has forlornly to await the drama since only in its company can it display its charms. But the drama which cramps and curtails itself to fit in with the actor's skill, becomes, like the henpecked husband, an object of scorn. The attitude of the drama should be: 'If I can be acted, well and good; if not, so much the worse for Histrionic art.'

But because the art of Acting is necessarily dependent on the Drama, it does not follow that therefore it must be the slave of every other Art as well. If it would keep up its dignity, let it not accept any bonds other than what are absolutely needful for its self-expression.

It is superfluous to state, for instance, that the histrionic artist is dependent on the words of the play; that he must smile or weep, and with him make his audience smile or weep, with the words of joy or sorrow which the author puts into his author. But why pictures—pictures that hang round about the actor and which he cannot help in creating?

To my mind it shows only faint-heartedness on the actor's part to seek their help. The relief from responsibility which he gains by the illusion created by pictorial scenes is one which is begged of the painter. Besides it pays to the spectators the very poor compliment of ascribing to them an utter poverty of imagination.

Why should the actor imagine that he is in the witness box in a court of law where his every word must be supported by an oath! Why all this paraphernalia of illusion to delude the poor trusting creatures who have come with the deliberate intention of believing and being happy? They have not surely left their imaginations at home under lock and key. They have come to co-operate, not quarrel, with the interpretation of the drama.

King Dushyanta hidden behind the trunk of the tree is listening to the conversation of Sakuntala and her companions. We for our part feel our creative faculty quite equal to imagining the tree trunk, even though its image be not bodily there. The complex of the emotions appropriate to the characters of Dushyanta and Sakuntala, Anusuya and Priyamvada are doubtless more difficult to conjure up and retain in their exactitude, so we are grateful for the assistance you give to the corresponding play of our sympathetic emotions; but what is the difficulty about imagining a few trees, a cottage, or a bit of a river? To attempt to assist us even in regard to these with painted canvas hangings is only to betray a woeful mistrust in our capacity.

That is why I like the Jatra plays of our country. There is not so much of a gulf separating the stage from the audience. The business of interpretation and enjoyment is carried out by both in hearty co-operation, and the spirit of the play, which is the real thing, is showered from player to spectator and from spectator to player in a very carnival of delight. When the flower girl is gathering her flowers on the empty stage, how would the importation of artificial shrubs help the situation? Must not the flowers blossom at her every motion? If not, why need an artist play the flower-girl at all, why not have stocks and stones for spectators?

If the poet who created Sakuntala had to think of bringing concrete scenes on his stage, then at the very outset he would have had to stop the chariot from pursuing the flying deer. I do not mean to suggest that the pen of that Master Poet would have had to stop with the chariot; but what I want to ask is; Why should the great be required to curb itself, for the sake of the petty? The stage that is in the Poet's mind has no lack of space or appurtenances. There scenes follow one another at the touch of his magic wand. The play is written for such as stage and such scenes; the artificial platform with its hanging canvas is not worthy of a poet.

So while Dushyanta and his charioteer standing in their respective places are representing the very spirit of a moving chariot in their words and action, is it too much to expect the audience to realise the simple truth that though the stage has its limits, the Poem has not? No, for so easily do they forgive the poor material stage its shortcomings and lend it to the glory of the stage of their hearts; but how hard would it have been to forgive the wretched wooden platform if it had compelled the Poem to limit and reduce itself!

It is, I repeat, because the drama of Sakuntala had not to depend on artificial scenes, that the Poet found it possible to create his own scenes. The hermitage of Kanwa, the cloud-path on the way to heaven the woodland retreat of Marich—in these scenes of nature as in the portrayal of the various characters the Poet was free upon his own creative treasure-house.

I have elsewhere said that the European wants his truth concrete. He would have imaginative treats, but he must be deluded by having these imaginings to be exact imitations of actual things. He is too much afraid of being cheated, and before accepting any representation of imaginative truth with some amount of enjoyment he must have a sworn testimony of its reality accompanying it. He will not trust the flower until he sees the earth of the mountain top in which it has its roots. But this is the *Kali Yuga*, and mere faith will not move mountains; that requires engineering skill; it is also costly. The cost which is incurred for mere accessories on the stage in Europe would swamp the whole of Histrionic Art in famine-stricken India.

In the Orient, pomp and ceremony, play and rejoicing, are all easy and simple. It is because we serve our feasts on plantain leaves that it becomes possible to attain the real object of a feast—to invite the whole world into our little home; this true end could never have been gained had the means been too complex and extravagant.

The theatres that we have set up in imitation of the West are too elaborate to be brought to the door of all and sundry. In them the creative richness of poet and player are overshadowed by the wealth of the capitalist. If the Hindu spectator has not been too far infected with the greed for realism and the Hindu artist still has any respect for his craft and skill, the best thing they can do for themselves is to regain their freedom by making a clean sweep of the costly rubbish that has accumulated roundabout and is clogging the stage.

Translated by Surendranath Tagore

Proscenium-arch Stage

Satya Prasad Barua

The British Raj had brought Assam under its suzerainty in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandabu and thus Assam came into closer contact with Bengal where the proscenium-arch stage of the English type had already come into vogue. This new way of presenting plays in a box type of acting space open only in the front caught the imagination of the young theatre enthusiasts of Assam and those who were indented from Bengal for administrative reasons by the Company had good reasons to help in the process of its development.

In the year 1875, a theatre expert named Gopal came to Kamakhya. He was also a singer and a dancer and was therefore called Gopal *ostad*. He initiated the process of staging plays on a proscenium stage. Later, one Barada Prasanna Majumdar was brought from Calcutta and he took better steps to build a proscenium stage at Kamakhya in the pattern of the proscenium stages of Calcutta with side wings and several rolled scenes in which significant locales necessary for plays generally were painted. Being fixed to rollers these scenes could be rolled up and down as the sequences demanded. This was in about 1903. Another staunch enthusiast of Kamaskhya Jibeswar Sarma even went to Calcutta and worked on the staff of the famous Star Theatre, which has recently been razed to the ground by a devastating fire, to gather experience and expertise. He was followed the Lakshmi Kanta Sarma Talukdar and Mahipati Sarma, both of Kamaskhya.

Theatrical activities of the modern type started at Dibrugarh during late Seventies and a particular locality where mainly theatre enthusiasts lived came to be known as *Theatre Para*. Both the Bengalis and the Assamese connoisseurs of theatre took the initiative to stage a Bengali play called *Prahlad Charit*. In Guwahati the first step to build a proscenium-arch was taken by both Bengalis and the Assamese enthusiasts and the Aryya Natya Hall came up on the banks of the Brahmaputra in Sukreswar ghat area in the year 1895. The Assamese enthusiasts after changing their venue several times finally settled down at Uzanbazar in the present site in the 1915 when the *Kamrup Natya Samiti* was setup. Its stage was christened as *Kumar Bhashkar Natya Mandir* by Rup Konwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla. The name of a Bengali gentleman, late Gopal Krishna Dey, will always be remembered as one who took keen interest in the theatre movement of Guwahati in the initial period along with other Assamese compatriots. The *Baan Theatre* of Tezpur was established in the year 1907–8 with Sahitya Guru late Padmanath Gohain Barua as its first Secretary. It should be mentioned that the first play staged there was *Baan Rajaa* written by Gohain Barua on public request. The foundation of the theatre hall and the stage was laid at Nowgong in the year 1902. At Jorhat the initial step to have a modern theatre was taken by late Sahitya Ratna Chandradhar Barua in the year 1885 and the Jorhat Theatre was established in the year 1914–15. The Sibsagar Natya Samaj was established in 1899 but its stability was ensured sometime during the year 1922 with late Phanidhar Chaliha as its President. It has to be mentioned in this connection that the first revolving stage in Assam—the *Bhagawati Prasad Barowa Revolving Stage*—was established at Sibsagar in the year 1958.

By 1920 almost all the District and Sub-Divisional towns, including some of the progressive villages of Assam, could boast of having a semi modern type of proscenium-arch stage and theatre hall. In this connection it needs to be mentioned that though the first initiatives came from the connoisseurs of theatre, other eminent persons as well, not necessarily actors or playwrights, helped the process forward with a view to promoting socio-cultural activities of the people and strengthening the base of emotional integration. The inquisitive readers might refer to the Magnum Opuses on Assamese Theatre by Sahityacharya Atul Chandra Hazarika'a *Manchalekha* and Dr Hari Chandra Bhattacharyya's *Asamiya Natya Sahityar Jilingani* for further details.

The Theatrical activities in Assam even on a proscenium stage started purely on amateur lines and ... these proscenium stages were much smaller with limited requisites and paraphernalia, compared to the commercial stages of Calcutta. Though smaller, our stages in most cases had an imposing facia built with tin sheets, wood and plaster of paris. There were normally five wings on both sides to match with the scenes. Along with the scenes and wings there were broad sheets of cloth hung from above the scenes and the wings to cover up the top. These were called *Skies* [that were] mostly coloured blue to signify the expansive sky above. The stages were covered with a well designed thick screen significantly painted with indigenous designs called the drop scene. This drop scene was kept hung down till the play started, when it was rolled up. The drop scene was also lowered at the end of an act and when the play ended. Our drop scenes did not have any advertising materials as those of the commercial stages of Calcutta. There was no white cyclorama. The back wall was covered by a black screen with a passage behind it.

It may be mentioned here that later Sardar Gopal Chandra Rava, father of Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha, had quite a number of scenes painted at Dacca for the *Baan Theatre* of Tezpur. Piyari Mohan Das, a local painter who was closely associated with the activities of the *Bann Theatre*, also painted some scenes for that Theatre. Late Shyam Lal Das was brought from Calcutta to paint scenes for the *Kumar Bhashkar Natya Mandir* of Guwahati. At Dibrugarh late Mukta Nath Bordoloi, a known artist of the town, painted some scenes. Thus the usual paraphernalia that went into the making of the stage were done by the combined efforts of the Assamese and the Bengali artists.

The common painted scenes were those of the street, Raj Darbar, hills and dales with rivulets flowing down from them, jungles, village corner with thatched cottage, flower garden and a few others that suited mythological and historical plays. The wings very often had two covers. The one painted with jungle was lowered from above when the main backdrop happened to be that of a jungle.

Scene changes naturally did not take much time. However there were occasions when some decorating requisites had to be placed in a particular locale such as a Durbar sequence. In these cases the street scene was lowered to cover the actual locale and a singer mendicant or a few dancing *chokras* like the *yatras* were ushered in, to fill up the gap. Sometimes humorous skits, not connected with the main theme, were interpolated for similar purposes.

For making up the artists, a paste was made with zincoxide powder, glycerine, yellow puri powder and vermillion. Later zincoxide was replaced by a smoother powder. Crepe (artificial) hairs were normally used with spiritgum for moustaches and short beards. Readymade wigs and beards of various patterns, black, brown and white were used to suit the roles of the plays. In the cases of mendicants and sages, flowing readymade wigs and beards of artificial hairs were used. These were normally of not very good quality but some of the ambitious actors got better types of wigs from Calcutta as those in the wig box of the stage did not satisfy them. Blue or indigo powder was mixed with the paste for characters like Rama and Krishna and the demons were painted black. But Ravana, Bibhisana and Meghnad looked fair and dignified with suitable moustaches. The male actors donned silk dhoties (Pat) but for mythological plays ornate coloured saris were borrowed from the wives or other female relatives. For Assamese historical plays decorated mekhela, riha and chaddars also had to be borrowed in the same manner. Sometimes pure gold or silver ornaments were also borrowed from the ladies of the families but artificial improvised one were normally preferred. For Assamese historical plays, suitable costumes had to be specially sewn either by the stage management or by the actors themselves. While playing the role of *Sundar Konwar* in 1938, I donned a long decorated coat made of kingkhap which my grandfather got as a present from the family of King Kandarpeswar Singha. I also had from my grandmother a white flowery chaddar which she got from the Ahom royal family.

Cut scenes along with the rolled ones were introduced at Dibrugarh but unfortunately I do not remember the exact year. I do remember that around 1933, while staging *Charapati Shivaji* with late Jagat Chandra Bezbarua in the lead role, the Nagaon Dramatic Club of Amolapatty not only used cut scenes but also introduced three dimensional solid sets for fortresses, etc. At Guwahati solid three dimensional sets made of bamboo and cloth were used in plays like *Beula* to create realistic effects of waves by late Lakshmi Nath Das and Dulal Barua. Solid pillars of bamboo and cloth were also made when necessary.

Stage lighting was rather poor. Originally hanging kerosene lamps of higher candle power were used but later when gas light and petromax lights were made available these were used to light up the stage and the auditorium. The stage petromax or bigger menthol lights called daylights used for lighting the stage were kept in a box hanging from the ceiling so that these could be covered up to produce darkness when necessary. A series of gas lights or petromax lights were used as footlights. These were cleverly covered to save the audience from the glare. Late Lakshmi Nath Das and late Prakash Gohain had ingeniously fitted coloured glasses which could be drawn in front of the foot lights to create technicolour effects. This was done first in the *Kumar Bhashkar Natya Mandir* and was later introduced in the Amolapatty stage of Nagaon by late Prakash Gohain. Big five battery torch lights were used as focusing lights and with these limited resources the late Lakshmi Nath Das successfully created the drama sequences of Usha or other trick sequences of Mahabharata episodes.

Female roles were played by good looking effeminate young boys and I nostaligically remember some of them who actually looked like females and acted very well. They were late Prafulla Chandra Barua (Ex-MP), late Ganga Prasad Barua, late Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, late Darpa Nath Sarma, late Prabodh Chandra Das (of the Assam Civil Service), late Bhawani Prasad Barua, late Nirada Kanta Bhuyan, late Nityananda Bordoloi, late Sahajananda Bharali, late Sarangadhar Rajkhowa, late Rajendra Nath Sarma, late Chandra Choudhury and Sri Surendera Nath Das. They were in great demand and were invited to act in plays mounted in different places of Assam. Of those who took male lead roles people still remember late Dr. Prabhat Das, late Saifuddin Ahmed, late Radha Gobinda Baruah, late Sahityacharyya Mitradeb Mahanta who was awarded the prestigious *Sangeet Natak Academi Award* for acting in 1961. Others include Natyacharyya late Indreswar Borthakur,

late Manik Choudhury, late Jagat Chandra Bezbaruah, late Lalit Mohon Chaudhuri, late Barada Kanta Sarma, late Kamakhya Nath Thakur and definitely a few others whose names I do not readily remember. Every place had its stalwarts who not only acted but took the responsibilities of staging a play. Both Abhinayacharyya Braja Nath Sarma and Natasuryya Phani Sarma though products of the *Yatra* of Assam rose to the pinnacle of glory even in the proscenium-arch stage and Nata Suryya also had a place of honour among the film actors of Assam.

Co-acting was first introduced in the commercial theatre by Abhinyacharyya Brajanath Sarma in the year 1933 at Doomdooma in upper Assam with the collaboration of Bepin Chandra Barua. Brajanath Sarma's *Kohinoor Opera Party* introduced three ladies namely Benoda Gogoi, Saralabala Devi and Labanya Das to act along with boys taking female roles. Three other girls, Golapi Nath, Sarveswari and Phuleswari, were introduced as dancers. These actresses and dancers, under the training of Braja Thakur, as he was popularly known, acquitted themselves quite creditably in their play *Kalapahar* enacted in the *Kumar Bhashkar Natya Mandir* in 1934. But due to public criticism this endeavour had to be given up.

In 1935 the *Sundar Sevi Sangha*, an amateur cultural organization, so christened by Rupkonwer Jyoti Prasad Agarwala was set up by Satya Prasad Barua at Guwahati. This Sangha had earnestly started co-acting since 1936 and in 1938 educated girls like Smt. Leela Devi participated in their play *Karengar Ligiri*, which created a furore at Guwahati and later Usha Bhattacharyya participated in their social play *Sakoi Chakowa*. Both Leela Devi and Usha Bhattacharyya had obtained their postgraduate degrees by then. *The Sundar Sevi Sangha* had to mount their plays in the private compound of late Lakshmi Prasad Barua during the Durga Puja festival not only because all the collaborators collected during that time for the family puja but also because the public stages at Guwahati did not permit co-acting during those days. It should be mentioned in this connection that though the theatrical performances were held in a private compound, sometimes for three days during the Saptami, Astami, and the Navami nights, on an improved proscenium-arch stage, there was no restriction for anyone to see the performances

and theatre lovers from all parts of the city gathered to see co-acted plays by the *Sundar Sevi Sangha*. Had these plays been staged in a proscenium-arch public stage audience restriction would have had to be enforced and such a large number of people could not come out to witness the performances that they eagerly waited for one long year. This gave to the *Sangha*'s performances a public character. Mention might be made that almost all the leading actors of the city participated in the performances, and educated ladies even from Muslim families came up to join the performances. Some conservative elements did create some trouble but Desabhakta T.R. Phukan took the unofficial lead along with Rup Konwar Jyoti Agarwala and principal J. Barooah to fight such criticisms and extended all kinds of patronisation to the Sangha. ... [T]his did help them to go ahead and gradually co-acting started to have its supporters. This troupe had no difficulty in mounting my one act *Kalpanar Mrityu* in the Sudmersen Hall of the Cotton College with Minati Barua (Rajkhowa) and Kalyani Barua (Phukan), two grown up girls in the two important female roles in 1940, under the auspices of the *Guwahati Sandhya Sanmiliai* on the occasion of the Bhogali Bihu festival.

Stage music was rather poor. The orchestra consisted mainly of harmonium, flute, violin, clarionet, tabla, esraj and sitar. Tunes of the songs included in the plays were mostly of the tappa variety of Bengal and the dances also did not have any local flavour and were mostly of the yatra type. Bhajans were sometimes sung but there was no place for Borgeets or songs tuned in the indigenous pattern.

When mounting his play *Sonit Kunwari*, which Jyoti Prasad wrote a couple of years before 1925, a new thing happened in regard to stage music and dance. Although *Sonit Konwari* was a mythological play woven around the episode of Usha, the lovely daughter of Baanaasur and Anirudha (the grandson of Sri Krishna), some of the important aspects of Assamese social life were reflected in the play and Jyoti Prasad wrote the songs keeping in view that these would be tuned in the indigenous pattern prevalent during those days. Jyoti Prasad had to fight hard with theatre artists and directors and the connoisseurs of the theatre ... till late Prafulla Chandra Barooah (Ex-MP) came forward to enact the role of Chitralekha,

the artist cum dancer and singer friend of Usha. He was enamoured of the new indigenous tunes of the songs and started singing them in such an impressive way that those who stood away came nearer and a new era of Assamese stage music or ... modern, Assamese music itself, was ushered in. Under Jyoti Prasad's direction, stage dancing also took a new form based on Satriya and Assamese folk forms. Jyoti Prasad also introduced an orchestra for the stage consisting of almost all the indigenous instruments causing a metamorphosis, as it were, of the whole gamut of stage music in Assam.

My readers might have been led to believe that the Assamese proscenium-arch stage and the actors were swayed away by the influence that crept into our theatrical life from Bengal. Though it was true to some extent and plays translated from Bengali became popular due to their high flown rhetoric and melodramatic approach, yet our playwrights and those connected with proscenium-arch stage even during the early period tried to create theatre that was to a great extent distinct from those prevalent in Bengal.

Late Gunabhiram Borooah's *Ram Navami* written in 1857 was a social play on the theme of widow remarriage. Though it had scene and act divisions in the Western pattern, the author did not altogether free himself from the influences of Sanskrit plays and the Sutradhar.

It is not known precisely how these and other plays like *Bengal Bangalani* by Rudram Bordoloi (1871) on a social theme or late Padmanath Gobain Barua's *Gaon Burha* (1899), a satire on the lives of a village headman were actually staged. The yatra form of play acting was not introduced then and the proscenium-arch stage was also a far cry. Later the plays by Sahitya Guru Padmanath Gohain Barua and Sahitya Rathi Lakshiminath Bezbarua, including *Gaon Burha*, were staged on proscenium-arch stages.

These plays adopted the Assamese manner of speaking in such a way that outlandish and exotic melodrama had to be banished from the stage. These plays helped our connoisseurs to free our stage from the so-called Bengali influence.

Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbarua's historical play *Chakradhwaj Singha* (1915), though influenced by Shakespeare in some of the character portrayals, was written in such an idiomatic Assamese style that many actors did not dare touch it, but the Sibsagar stage had taken it as a challenge. The Assamese way of presenting the play was highly praised by connoisseurs like Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi and Deva Kanta Borooah who opined that this was how an Assamese play should be enacted.

The adaptation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* as *Bhramarnga* (1887) by four writers namely late Ratnadhar Barua, late Ghanshyam Barua, late Romakanta Borkakati and late Gujanan Barua also adopted the dramatic pattern of Assamese dialogues. This play was first staged on an improvised proscenium-arch stage at Calcutta. The play was set up in a purely Assamese atmosphere and was made to reflect Assamese social life, which did not give scope for borrowing from ... Shakespearean acting.

This and other plays written in the Shakespearean mode had a number of acts, at least five, each divided into a number of scenes. It was however left for Jyoti Prasad Agarwala to bring about a change in the plot structure of the plays to suit the limited resources of our proscenium-arch stages. His *Rupaleem*, written sometime in 1936, had only seven acts each with one scene only. It was staged at the *Baan theatre* of Tezpur in 1937.

National Theatre

Bellary Raghava

[The] question of the establishment of a National stage or a national theatre for the combined play of the dramatist and the actor should be carefully and immediately considered. The necessity of such an institution is obvious. Apart from considerations of health, sanitation, light and acoustics, the theatres we can boast of now are not fit places for the development of the art. Art's fragrance is nowhere near such houses. The stage as well as the auditorium are absolutely devoid of any association with works of art. The auditorium reminds you of a warehouse where music, painting, and such other innocent babies are murdered and given no quarter. The stage walls present a number of holes, cracks and *chunam* [plaster] daubs and nothing more. The green-room is a misnomer. It makes you cry. The smell of rank perspiration is all the inspiration of art you get there. The dressing arrangements are simple and primitive. Huge piles of dress without any idea of assortment are thrown out and the first comer gets the first chance of grabbing at anything he fancies. There is nothing whatever in the green-room to suggest to you the colour of the skin or the mode of dress which is befitting your part. A gentleman past middle age, who once upon a time took a woman's part is installed there and he is an authority and an encyclopedia in the green-room. The wigs and crepe-hair are a bewildering mass. Water and soap are luxuries only for the very high in the cast. Come to the stage—be it a forest, palace or street or even the celestial regions, the painter's name in good modern

English stares you in the face. The arrangements for lighting are still more fanciful. Either the actor is placed completely in the dark or a stream of blinding light is thrown on him, bathing him once in pink, once in red, once in green and so on. The amateur is too poor to build a good theatre and the professional is too shrewd to spend too much of money on such things. It is necessary that there should be a national effort to construct a National theatre. Works of art should fill such a place. There should be a small museum attached to it, to give an idea of ancient dress, ancient costumes, ancient weapons and ancient conveyances. There should be a research room attached to it to make experiments in the art of colouring and lighting. There should be a library of the latest dramatic works of the world. There should be paintings of all our great artists; musicians, painters, sculptors and actors, whose expression could inspire the actor with the right frame of mind to react to the surrounding environment. I know all this requires money—it does. Once again let me repeat my statement: let us be honest and true to ourselves. If we honestly believe that the stage is a potent factor in the scheme of our national education, let us fearlessly ask our rulers and leaders to budget as much money for the stage as for the other educational places. I hope the members of the Mysore Senate will take up this question for consideration. If on the other hand, (I beg pardon for the repetition) we hold that the stage is only a place for amusement and not instruction, let us put a stop to the enormous expenditure on such things whether by legislation or otherwise.

Lastly, the most important work is to carry the correct notions of the stage, drama, and histrionic art to our great masses. It is only the upper and lower middle class men that can afford to attend our so-called theatres now. The poor villager can hardly afford to pay for such entertainment. To him the *veedhi natakam* or the *bayalata* is still the only form of stage and it is no source of education whatever for him. Here is a field for good work by the Municipalities and Local Boards and also amateurs. Associations of trained actors should be maintained or helped by the various Municipalities and Local Boards, and they should be asked to carry a correct type of drama to the village. Interesting dramas on health, sanitation, temperance, cooperation, team work inculcating

our national life, dramas on the evils of untouchability, dramas illustrating the principles and advantages of Hindu-Muslim unity should be staged by trained artists in all villages. Consider how this would be a most successful way of enlivening and enriching our rural life. We can logically claim progress only when the great masses behind wake up and show signs of life.

In his letter of greetings for the New Year the great Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson writes to me that drama is the great peace-maker of the world. It is true that the drama is a great peace-maker of the world. It is the best medium to give life to our society and to our people. It is a religious belief with me that it is our stage that will rouse our masses and lead them on to take their place in the comity of nations. It is my firm belief that the stage and the art of acting not only educate society, but also help the artist in his struggles of spiritual evolution and finally make him realize his divinity.

A National Theatre Wanted

A Non-Commercial Theatre

Baldoon Dhingra

This is a plea for a Theatre owned by the Community. The National Theatre implies the idea of social service without acquisitive gain.[1] It must be endowed to a great extent so that it may function in freedom from the rigours which always attend a commercial enterprise. A play is evanescent, gone with the wind even as the actors speak the lines. To subsidise the theatre is to receive no concrete return; and it is obvious that the amount required will have to be large enough to cope with and withstand the losses that shall have to be suffered during its initial, experimental period.

The enterprise will have to be on a large scale, for this, short of extravagance or ostentation, has a far greater chance of succeeding in a permanent and honourable position, than any enterprise on a small scale, however ably conducted. It must impose on public notice by the very fact of its simple, dignified and liberal existence. It must bulk large in the social and intellectual life of the country. It must not be mistaken for those pioneer theatres known as Group Theatres. The group, the ridiculous clique, of which we have in Bombay, Calcutta, Lahore, and all big cities a fair sprinkling, is bad; it is intelligent and serious, but uncritical, often super-reverential.

[1] Cf. Granville Barker, 'A National Theatre.'

A National Theatre will restore to the plays the sense of high vocation of which they do not even know the existence. No one will deny that the first efforts of a National Theatre will be of necessity experimental, even crude. We will stamp our National Theatre with the form of a human and spiritual idea. For the drama is at its best, and at its worst too, indeed the expression of spirit. But the stage will also display whatever health there will be, whatever valour of soul, whatever things of loveliness and good report, that remain to give free scope to the spirit in its secret but permeating life. This is not too idealistic, for let us remember from what our theatre is derived. Its ethics were lofty. Every play is in a sense a sacrament, and, short of the rites of religious worship one can imagine no artistic activity more worthy of a proper home for its practice and consumption. That is why no expense should be spared, no method left untried, to make our National Theatre as beautiful and as technically perfect as conditions require and as it lies within our power. The Russians lavish their best efforts, and how rightly, upon those things which benefit not a small select number but people in general. Witness, the Moscow underground.

The Theatre I visualize should, apart from its exterior loveliness be in harmony with the atmosphere of the Province and the people, have all the normal requirements of any theatre in London or Moscow.

The auditorium should have a capacity of 1,000 or 1,200 seats. And the community element should be stressed by the horse-shoe formation which more than any other knits the members of the audience one with another and with the actors on the stage. And the stage must be equipped with every useful device which modern ingenuity can supply. The building will have to include an excellent library and reading rooms, two rehearsal rooms, a wardrobe room, a dramatic school room, a make-up room, a carpenter's room, an artists' room, a Manager's room, a producer's room, a Committee room, a lounge, a foyer, and close on a dozen other rooms.

Who will finance this great scheme? Government? No, we must look for private liberality. This is not only preferable but desirable also. There is no profit involved. The donor will make a gift to the people, in point of service value of no less magnitude than any hospital or school or college. There are so many self-effacing philanthropists in India who can give donations for a theatre if they are made to realize its National value. No fabulous wealth is required for this essential service. It would be ideal if this theatre could be born out of the munificence of one man, but if two or three or more joined to cause this to be realized our indebtedness to them would not diminish one jot.

In which part of India will this National Theatre be built? And will there only be one theatre? And even of there could be one in every province would that be too Utopian, too unrealisable a dream? There are seven hundred and ninety theatres in USSR. It would be very incredible if there were seven in India. We have first of all to make a start and in which capital city the first will be built will depend on the donor, this would no doubt be his special prerogative.

It will have to be admitted that the spot chosen for the erection of this building will be central, near a park and with some, if not extensive, grounds. For the purpose it has to serve is no mean one and it is necessary that the producer and the actors live under the best conditions possible so that for the most strenuous task ahead of them they may derive the maximum benefit.

...

LANGUAGE AND THE WORD 'NATIONAL'

It is not to be understood that a simple language shall be the one that can dominate the stage. The language problem is something people have made much of. The wealth of literature and the peculiarities and niceties of language it is possible to enjoy in a language that is one's own. 'The Soviet Theatre,' says Professor I. Moskwin, 'is not associated strictly with the Russian language or even the eleven languages of the eleven union republics. More than forty languages are spoken on the Soviet stage. The fact that it is multi-national is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Soviet Theatre.[2]

And so to suggest a single language for the National Theatre is to limit the scope, to deny to it the essential universality which is implicit in the word 'national.' All tongues and epochs are to

[2] USSR Speaks for itself.

be deliberately intermingled, gathered together round one rallying point, the National Theatre. There is something all-embracing in its meaning. For the theatre can be national only when the spirit of each language is brought out to the full, when each is raised to its full stature and there is one purpose behind all endeavour: 'it is immortality to die aspiring.' It is only natural that plays will be produced in the vernacular, for else the purpose is ill served. There will, however, be no bar to plays being produced in English or even written in English, for there is, and always will be a bi-lingual, even tri-lingual audience, and it is not the purpose of the National Theatre to ignore the minority. Moreover, in all capital cities original plays in English will be produced from time to time, though it cannot become a regular feature in the scheme of the repertoire.

Towards a National Theatre

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

It is a strange as well as a tragic fact that the general national awakening in India resulting, amongst other things, in a tremendous revival in fine arts and various aesthetical pursuits, should have so completely bypassed the drama and the stage. This may in fact be counted as a rare and rather isolated fact, because normally a revolutionary age must lead to the growth and the development of the theatre, for the theatre is essentially a symbol of movement. The art of the theatre is action, and the action bears the same relationship to the theatre, as melody to music, or drawing to painting. Its absence in India is all the more surprising when we recall the stupendous heights to which the theatre had risen in the days of India's pristine glory. In fact, one of the biggest Moscow producers, and the founders of the famous Kamarg Theatre, was so impressed by the Indian system with its highly evolved brain and body discipline that he applied it in his own production work.

'The father of the dramatist was the dance,' says a great English authority on the theatre. Dancing was so indispensable an element of drama, that the Sanscrit *Natya* or *Nataka* signifying drama comes from *Nritya*—Dance. Dance was undoubtedly the origin of drama. The oldest and most perfected dramatic art of India was dance-drama, remnants of which still continue to survive in our countryside. Most of our festivals were and are even now celebrated through the dance-drama. For it has been found to be the most

poignant and impressive medium for conveying religious as well as philosophic ideas through an extraordinary technique evolved out of the collaboration of dance, song and an elaborately perfected gesture. The significance of this form is best expressed in the words of Edward Gordon Craig, one of the greatest dramatic producers of the world: 'First dramatists were children of the theatre, the modern dramatists are not. The first dramatist understood what the modern does not yet understand. He knew that when he and his fellows appeared in front of them, the audience would be more eager to see what he would do than to hear what he might say. He knew that the eye is more swiftly and powerfully appealed to than any other sense. It is without question that the keenest sense of the body of man is the eye. The first thing he encountered on appearing before them was many pairs of eyes, eager and hungry. Even the men and women sitting so far from him that they would not always be able to hear what he might say, seemed quite close to him by the piercing keenness of their questioning eyes. To these and all he spoke poetry or prose, but always in action, in poetic action which is dance, or in prose action which is gesture.'

But however marvellous and perfect this traditional theatre might be, it can no more serve as a spontaneous and natural medium through which the mind of the people is to manifest itself. Not that this traditional theatre is to be allowed to go into decay through neglect as is happening at the moment. Rather it should be definitely revived and preserved as the rich heritage on which to build the new theatre of today and the structure of tomorrow. It should be the background to give tone and colour to the modern experiments and keep forever awake in us, a keen sense of discernment to avoid the cheap and aspire for a noble standard and strive for something even greater.

The theatre is not only a natural phenomenon in times of great upheavals and changes, when vast energy released from aged bondages, seeks manifestation through the most dramatic medium. It is also a forceful lever for helping these forward forces into constructive channels. For the theatre is the most dynamic and mature expression of the creative spirit. It is a synthesis of all arts: architecture, sculpture, painting, drama, dance, music, poetry, a dexterous blending of these making an irresistible

appeal to the human mind and sense, particularly when, under the impact of a great national stress, the springs of inspiration as well as the force of action lap beyond their normal tempo. Hence every revolution which is the result of a true national urge and is characterized by the broadening of a social base and imbued with idealism, necessarily gives birth to newer and purer expressions of art, notably in the field of drama and the stage. In the West, the French Revolution for instance, turned the theatre into a new political forum. The American Revolution made the theatre the expression for its social discontent and aspiration. The Irish Revolution found the theatre one of the most powerful levers to political action. The Russian Revolution gave birth to the public theatre, the symbol of an overwhelming national striving to find a way out of the old morass to a fuller and freer life. The German Revolution of 1918 set the foundations of a new art in theatre, not only in Germany but in entire Europe, by hastening the transition from court to people's play houses, releasing a wealth of originality in thought and technique. In the East, the Revolution in Japan which marked a break-out of the shell of worn out feudalism into the light of modern day, brought about such a transformation in the Japanese theatre as to make it a veritable place of pilgrimage to which theatre devotees from the world over flocked with bated breath. In more recent times the national awakening in China has been marked by the carving out of a great national theatre. Against these superb achievements, the paucity, nay, the bankruptcy of the Indian theatre bears down on one with greater poignancy. For, a low standard in the theatre has resulted in a low standard for the films, whose content undoubtedly is very poor, however creditable the technical development may be. The tragedy is all the greater when we see that the films are practically the only form of entertainment offered to the people in this country both in the rural and the urban areas. Our physical degradation is thus matched only by our cultural degradation. Never before has the need for a national theatre been so great as today, on the positive as well as the negative side.

The theatre movements go in a circle of three compositions: First, the revolutionary urge, which sets the circle into motion. Second, the directive, which sets the idea into a positive structure

for continuous functioning. Third, the response whereby the theatre becomes a vital medium of universal experiences. Therefore, the content of the production is as important as its technique. The modern plays should hence be distinctly different from the traditional as in Europe and Japan. The drama has been described as the projection of the human soul into space. Particularly, when society is in a flux and the old static strata turns fluid under the volcanic upsurge from below and the impact of strange forces from outside, the new stream has to flow into new moulds which will set up new standards. At such a time, the call of the muse becomes insistent, the creative urge quickens and the response is inevitable. The content must embody that striving and that yearning for the shape of things to come. It must pulse with that sensitive touch of those electrified fingers that shape them. Any resentment towards the past should be avoided, for such aversions merely set up unhealthy complexes. For however undesirable or unworthy may seem that gone-by period to our reoriented vision, to foster a hatred towards it or try to wring a surgical breach with it is not the function of art, nor is it scientifically true. Human tissues may be cut but not mental or emotional make-up. Like clay, it takes whatever shape the forces of the prevailing environment set it into. Surely, a new sapling sprouting afresh should bear no grudge towards the old decaying trunk. Rather the past should be presented as a historical procession, events which have followed a particular pattern due to the socio-economic condition of the time, an understanding of whose fundamentals is very necessary as a future directive.

The present tendency of a writer is to deal mostly with the intellectuals, usually ignoring the vast masses, both in the themes as well as in the appeal, as though the latter simply did not exist, or if they did, only as appendages to the upper classes. Life is depicted essentially as lived by the classes, and the entire ideology coloured by their acquisitive outlook and thought, and bounded by the narrow capacity-space of this exclusive set. The only nourishment offered to the masses are the traditional 'Puranic,' themes, but unfortunately, shorn of their original grandeur by the introduction of hybrid forms and unaesthetic techniques.

The Indian society is still semi-feudalistic. Our social codes are yet dominated by feudal patterns although the feudal context has itself been considerably broken up by modern industrial forces. Most of these old forms are too outmoded to receive the new life stream. Neither can fluid life forces be mechanically offered ready moulds as melting metals can. The new moulds and forms must arise with the new forces out of the fresh experiences, deep and vital to a people in the remaking.

This is a period of great flux, of clash and din, when the old is losing its identity in the melting pot, and the new has not gained the vitality and courage to assert its ascendancy. Our primary need is of writers who will take the challenges of today and give adequate expression to the vivified impulses and emotions, the surging thoughts and actions of a vast human mass slowly stirring like a huge elephant rising to its feet. Then alone will the theatre cease to be a reserved enclosure and become an open creative playground for all, an organic part of national life, expressing the individuality of the people as a whole.

But for complete fulfilment, the people themselves have to become the central force in place of the present isolated groups of intellectuals. The creative spirit belongs to no one class nor is its expression the monopoly of a single section. The theatre should never be separated from the springs of human action. It should be the treasure of all, an arena where they are free to exercise their own dynamic powers and creative urge: where the old walls that spanned their vast lives into little, dank unlit chambers will have crumbled away; they will no more be puny automaton at the mercy of uncontrollable forces from above, but become personalities of meaning and importance in the picture of contemporary history, and wielders of human destiny.

Such a national theatre does not, in fact should not, conform to any single type or form, but take a variety of shapes as experience has shown in other countries, even Russia, in spite of its uniformity of ideology and way of living. For, life has a variety of expressions, and the national theatre should give it the widest scope and greatest play. One can visualize some of these likely possibilities for India. But before we do that, one must take stock of the existing cultural level of the people, both classes and masses, then explore

the intellectual and technological equipment necessary and that available, so as to make its genius and achievement a common sum-total and a valuable contribution to world culture.

Organisational Principles

Indian People's Theatre Association

(*Draft for discussion in the Organisational Commission of the 7th IPTA Conference.*)

To realize the objective of developing IPTA as a national thriving organisation in the service of the people, reaching the largest numbers in the cities and villages, the following organisational principles are suggested:

1. (a) The basis of developing IPTA will be on linguistic states, according to their cultural traditions, forms and objective conditions prevailing. We shall accept the present existing State boundaries for all practical purposes till the just demands of the people for the creation of linguistic states are met with.
   (b) Branches in the disputed areas have to settle their position through mutual discussion among the members concerned, keeping in view the objective of unification and healthy development of their Branches, taking care not to apply it mechanically.
   (c) The Squad or Unit among the minority section in a State will function under that particular state branch with a full right and guarantee of its working in its own language

and cultural language branch for dramas, etc. through the Centre or direct.

2. All-India Executive:
   (a) The functions of the All-India Executive Committee will be:
      (i) to co-ordinate different branches
      (ii) to exchange discussions, problems, achievements, reports and creative materials
      (iii) to organise inter-State exchange of cultural troupes or individual artists
      (iv) to initiate movements on all-India or world significant issues arising at different times
      (v) to guide on common problems arising out of the movement in different states
      (vi) to take the lead in building and developing branches of IPTA where they do not exist or where they are weak with the help of the neighbouring branch
      (vii) to keep contact with the progressive cultural movements in the other parts of the world
      (viii) to run *UNITY* the official organ and to bring out publications if necessary (mainly history of IPTA)
      (ix) to call All-India Executive meetings at least thrice in two years and an All-India Conference once in two years
      (x) to place audited All-India accounts at the Conference.

   The development of the IPTA movement from now on will depend on the State branches on which depends the strength of the Central Executive, primarily functioning as a co-ordinating and exchange body.

   (b) The Central Executive will consist of the following office-bearers:
      (i) One President, five or less Vice-Presidents, one General Secretary, four Joint Secretaries to function as the All-India Organisers for four zones and one Treasurer.

      All the above office-bearers to be elected by the delegates present at the Conference

The All-India Executive will further consist of a maximum of two members from each State Branch elected by the delegates from that particular State, present at the Conference.

      (ii) The All-India Secretariat consisting of President, Vice-President (if possible), General Secretary, Joint Secretaries and Treasurer should meet twice a year to check up and implement the All-India Executive's decisions.
      (iii) The Office Secretariat, consisting of General Secretary, Office Secretary (elected by the Executive Committee) and all members on the All-India body from the place where the office will be situated, should carry forward day-to-day work.

3. Broad tasks and principles for State Branches:
   (a) (i) Units are to be built up primarily on the basis of localities urban and rural, drawing members, organizations and affiliating cultural organisations *primarily* from that particular locality. These local Branches will have within their fold a number of squads either on different art forms or among different sections. The minimum number for the membership of the Squads, and minimum number of squads for a Branch in a locality are to be fixed up by the State Branches according to the objective conditions there.
      (ii) These primary Units will form higher Branches from City, District, Sub-division up to the State Branch, having the respective committees elected at General Body meetings and Conferences as the case may be to carry forward the principles of the IPTA movement.
      (iii) A central troupe on State or even on district plane (if possible) should be formed to expand, popularise and raise the artistic level.
   (b) (i) To stress on the federal character of the organization, guaranteeing sufficient rights to the affiliated organization, so that confidence is created in the affiliated bodies.

(ii) Any cultural organization willing to affiliate should do so with the nearest IPTA Branch. But any organization in a State, where no IPTA Branch unit exists should directly affiliate with the all-India body.

(iii) To organize simultaneously joint shows, discussions, etc. with those organizations which are not yet ready to affiliate with IPTA to create a favourable atmosphere dispelling any misunderstanding or distrust in the process.

This part of the constitution of the State Branches must be formulated after thorough discussion so that the federal character part of the organization can play its role.

(c) (i) To call Conventions in those areas immediately where a Central Organisation does not exist, co-ordinating and consolidating the disintegrated groups.

(ii) Before holding the State Conferences, Music conferences, Drama festivals, Dance festivals of cultural organizations and individual artistes (IPTA and others) from rural and urban areas must be held in every State under the initiative of IPTA. These festivals must reflect the classical, modern and folk forms.

(iii) To avoid shoddy productions and to stage well-rehearsed and polished productions.

(iv) To revive and revitalize the traditions of the Indian stage, (specially rural) developing those in the modern light.

(d) (i) To conduct classes, training camps, etc. to educate members on IPTA ideology, organization and artistic creation and to develop and encourage healthy and constructive criticism.

(ii) To take the initiative to launch united movements on different demands of the cultural workers.

(iii) To ensure complete democratic functioning in taking day-to-day decisions, in running the committees and in selecting dramas and songs, etc.

(iv) To produce audited accounts by the State Branches annually.

4. The Constitution:

(a) (i) The present All-India Constitution should be revised and redrafted on the basis of the above principles by the new All-India Executive and circulated to the State Branches within two months. The next All-India Executive meeting should finalise the Constitution on the basis of recommendations from State Branches.

(ii) This adopted Constitution will be binding till the next All-India Conference, where it should be finally adopted enriching it with the experiences gained during the interim period.

(iii) The basic principles and rules finally adopted in this Conference will be binding till the All-India constitution is finalized in the All-India Committee meeting mentioned in (i).

(b) (i) The States have to work out their own Constitutions according to their conditions, on the basis of the main principles and rules adopted in this Conference. This must be ready for the first All-India Committee meeting.

(ii) State Constitutions must be adopted in the State Conferences after having been circulated and discussed by the entire membership, and sanctioned by the All-India Committee.

In Search of Form

Utpal Dutt

It has always been my belief that theatre must speak its own language and the idioms of its language are its lights, its sets, its music. When we are not playing at streetcorners, the proscenium stage must be eloquent in its dressing, and the audience's ears must also be assailed, and not only its eyes. Theatre is both visual and aural. Those who make of bareness of the stage a theory are due to poverty or sheer incompetence, merely trying to cover their inadequacy. And in the play 'Coal' we tried to blend all the elements of theatre-craft into what can be for want of a better phrase called 'A song of Coalminers', with Ravi Shanker composing music for it and the visual music of elaborate sets and lights. The screams about content that rose from the reactionaries were surpassed by those about form from so-called progressives, who beat their breasts and gnashed their teeth over the death of theatre. They said, theatre-craft had swamped the sacred Talmudic text of drama, that theatre which uses lights, sets and music was no theatre but a factory of machines, that a bare stage with a backcloth of jute sacking was the only way that theatre could be itself.

But it confirmed my belief that we were on the correct path, because when conservatives begin to wail, one can be sure something worthwhile is being done by way of new theatre. And we persisted with machinery, even heavier and even more elaborate spectacles, because the most important element in theatre, the audience, reacted electrically to it. We had the advantage of

professional theatre, having to worry about the box-office, which keeps dramatist and producer strictly attuned to the masses.

It was our intention first to create a harsh, ugly world on the stage, where the revolutionary new speech of the proletariat will sound relevant. His world must be created around him, before his tale can be told, because he is no abstraction called King, Queen, Prince, Villain, but a new, intensely-alive, human being. In the older Bengali theatre, where picture-scenes were used extensively, the audience made up by its imagination the deficiencies of atmosphere, because the denizens of that world were familiar figures, traditionally well-known. The King, the Temptation Scene, the Repentance, the crowd acting more as chorus than as living beings, the Wronged Princess, they had all walked the rickety boards of the stage for a long time. And with the call of the Herald: Attention, the King approaches, the audience automatically saw a palace in its mind's eye. But the proletariat as the center of action was not so common in Bengali dramaturgy and even Mr Shambhu Mitra's production of *Red Oleander*, by relying on what can only be called lyrical décor, failed to create the horror and ugliness of miner's lives. *Red Oleander* is not a beautiful play, but a gruesomely constructed study in a capitalist jungle. I for one found the new proletarian heroes of Mr Mitra's production roaming in a never-never-land, expecting fairies to pop out of corners and Snow White out of a trapdoor. *Nabanna*, the creator of modern theatre in this part of the country, did away with sets altogether and left its peasant-heroes in a vacuum. So we tried in our own way to rectify these persistent trends.

But where I was failing was in my texts. I was becoming far too involved in the fate of my proletarian fighters to attain a dialectical view of their struggle. I wanted to create a Myth in all its simple brevity, with undertones of vast interconnections and interactions. But it was precisely those interactions that kept escaping me, and right upto Kallol and the Vietnam play I kept presenting a bland, oversimplified, one-sided spectacle of Good versus Evil. That I was vaguely conscious of it is proved now to me by the way my play flew tangentially into Cruelty. I have never believed in the principles of the so-called Theatre of Cruelty. But I suppose the same despair with the threadbareness and inadequacy of material

drove me also to distended torture scenes, almost against my will. It had to happen, because, the characters standing bare and without inner conflicts, the outward conflict alone remained, and the torture scenes were the natural culmination of this outward conflict between revolutionary and police, between Vietnamese and American. The torture-scene was the inevitable conclusion of merely physical conflict. If one is able to penetrate deeper into the historical significance of the conflict, as well as into the working of individual minds, one can reject the outward manifestations of class-conflict altogether and can present the great Truth hidden behind individual heroics.

I have tried mass crowd-scenes in the idiotic belief that they may somehow lead me to a transcendence of the individual, to a dialectical connection between masses and man. I realized very late that a lone Faust is more representative of the German masses of his time and revolutionary thought of our time than a thousand weavers in Hauptmann's play. My crowd scenes achieved only theatrical surprise and thrill, but in no way extended the scope of my characterization or portrayal of class-struggle.

I was helped to recognize the worthlessness of most of my texts principally by my involvement with the *Yatra*. I had been deeply interested in it since 1951, and even written occasionally about it, and had been bowled over by the directness, even brutality, of its impact on the audience. The Yatra refused to die with the incursion of capitalism into the countryside, as many other folk-forms have been wiped out. The survival-technique of Yatra infuriates many of our scholars, because, they are denied the pleasure of re-discovering an extinct form.... They abuse the Yatra for its rapid change with the times, for cutting down its plays to a three-hour duration, for abandoning songs and dances, for banishing the *Vivek* and the *Juri*, for becoming slick and professional. They fail to see that the essence remains the same: immediately reflecting the social conflict of its time in vigorous, violent terms. The petty-bourgeois scholar has always been the dilettante who is preoccupied with form and never with content.

Anyway, what marks the Yatra off from theatre is not that it is played in the round, or that a few years back, there used to be ten songs to today's one, or that the musicians sit in the sight of

all. Its distinctive feature is its mimetic element, its robust and unashamed use of every emotion, every passion, every violence to subdue the audience to its own will. This is theatre as Magic. It is tempestuous incantation. It creates its own world, and even if it is an absurd one which resembles nothing on earth, it seeks to dominate the audience's mind by sheer violence and brazen dramatics. It is theatre at its primitive best. It relies on nothing but declamation in heavy poetic prose and must capture the attention of a more-or-less unruly proletarian audience by intensity of action, by royal assassination and retribution, by Machiavellian villainy, and the clash of arms. It almost faces the same problems as Shakespeare did, because its most important element is its audience, coal-miners, tea-garden workers, peasants and, being thoroughbred professionals, the Yatra-players respect and taste the judgment of these rough and exhausted men, these alienated, dull-brained workers thinking of their early morning shifts next day, sleepy-eyed with toil, still filling into the enclosure in noisy groups, expecting to be overawed by the majesty of violence—much like the apprentices in London, 1600.

These are the elements from which Myths arise, and not from the indigestion of plagiarizing European plays, or so-called learned experiments of alienated intellectuals. The Yatra relies for its dramaturgy on figures of history and mythology who are well-known to its audience—Moghul Emperors, British proconsuls, revolutionary martyrs, even Lenin and Mao and Che, the new mythical heroes. The stories move in convulsions of violence, deaths and murders in every act, transcending thus the pettiness of life as it is, and reaching out to a new mythology often erratically and without perspective, but still, I believe, creating the grounds from which myths eventually arise. A Goethe does not rise suddenly; the German theatre had been preparing for a hundred years for the coming of the Master. But the elements must be there, robust proletarian audiences dictating their shape, size and nature, truly folk-elements and a folk-lore about folk-heroes, a mythical world where even Mao Tsetung must conform to the requirements of the traditional Yatra-hero. He must be the Good King who lives like an ascetic in the caves and rules justly and the evil King Chiang Kai-shek must fall in violent epilepsy, the rage and rant against

the mountain-rat, much as Aurangzeb has traditionally ranted in the Yatra against Shivaji. The Yatra can take any subject from any country and must necessarily mould it into its own folk-lore. Compare this to the petty-bourgeois experimenters of the city who can take the most local subject but must necessarily 'Europeanize' it, and make it a hybrid, a bastard, revolting in its rootlessness.

My long association as writer and director with the Yatra players has exploited many of the beliefs I had once held passionately with regard to form. Voltaire once said, 'Tous les genres sont bons, excepté le genre ennuyeux', all forms are good, except the boring ones. I was awakened to the truth of Voltaire's statement by watching Yatra. All that violence and rage and unashamed dramatic devices were aimed at keeping the vast audience's attention riveted to the play, to the content. Form here is reduced to an elemental power, a savage tribal power, a magical danse macabre where the audience and players become one in a condition hardly to met in city-theatres. Since content is the most important element in our plays, the Yatra-form can be our most important form, precisely because of its apparent formlessness, because it has been tested and enriched by the dialectics of audience-reaction, has destroyed the boredom of vast mass-audiences, unreachable today except by use of the public-address system. ...

The nearest I managed to arrive at a myth of patriotic struggle was with my Yatra-play *Sanyasir Tarabari* (*The Crusade*). I do not claim to have reached within miles of a myth, but it was worth trying. Its figures are all part of the Bengali folklore, though they lived in history: Devi Chowdhurani, Bhawani Pathak, Majnu Shah, Warren Hastings. It was the story of the revolt of Sanyasis and Fakirs against British plunder; the yellow and blue robes of the religious mendicants of course were outward trappings; the men had mostly been soldiers of the Moghul army, disbanded by the victorious British aggressors. I tried to tell the story of an essentially patriotic story in terms of the dialectical workings of the collapse of an ancient, feudal society, and the coming of the socially advanced Englishmen, represented by Captain Rennel. The conflicts within the revolutionaries, the delight in butchery that Ramananda Giri displays, the famine which dehumanizes the peasant, the people turning away from their own champions, the lonely revolutionaries being borne out of their forest-hidings, the change in Rennel from an opium-smoking, tired, cultured Englishman to a savage successor of Hastings, and the revolutionary's final death in chains, totally alienated from his people, secretly poisoned and thus deprived of even the halo of martyrdom—all these were elements that built a dialectical view of the patriotic war. I had at last thrown off the tendency to categorize the characters as simple statements of unilateral tendencies, and was able, partially I admit, to create them as complexes of warring contradictions, diverse and opposing desires, and was even able to present the contradictions between what they wanted to do and what they were actually doing. Apart from that, the play has many weaknesses; its complexity defeating the suggestive simplicity, the seeming naiveté that must clothe the most complex relations in a myth.

But the play, after exposure to electrifying mass audiences for three years, has taught me many things, even if its final structure was not quite what I wanted. Since then my writing for the theatre has changed radically. I could not have written the *Tin Sword* and *Titu Meer* without first experiencing the Yatra form's impact on the masses. Titu Meer, especially, a peasant-warrior against British occupation in 1831, and his death in battle, provided me with important myth-material. The warriors of both *The Crusade* and *Titu Meer* are monks, fakirs, preaching a religion of violent war against evil especially the greatest evil of all, imperialism. In our country, most myths are intimately connected with religious warriors, who have died fighting imperialism, right upto the heroes of the 1857 revolt. My heroes' garb—saffron for the Hindu, blue for the Muslim—helped immediately to build the myth with strong religious overtones, an inevitable condition, I suppose, if one wants to create a specifically Indian myth.

I keep writing and producing for the Yatra and the theatre, and hope some day in my play to strike the dialectical balance between the individual and society, between the decay of the old in society and the rise of the new, between complex and simple, between poetry and dramatic prose, between the finiteness of each of my characters and the infinity of a re-created Myth.

The political theatre must not only deal with day-to-day political issues, but must also transcend it to create proletarian myths of revolution. Only then would it fulfil its task as Revolutionary Theatre.

Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance[1]

Mahesh Dattani

I would like to make it clear that I am not speaking here today as a representative of the English language theatre in our country. I am here to move beyond this very limited definition of the theatre that I see myself involved with.

I see myself as a part of contemporary society and therefore I see myself as a contemporary theatre artist. In this way I feel less excluded from some of the Indian theatre artists whom I admire and identify with.

There are questions that recur in my mind such as, 'Why do I do theatre? What is in it for me?' But these are personal questions and unimportant to anyone except myself. The more important question is 'What is it that comes out of my involvement in theatre?' And I shall not even dare to answer that question. Neither do I want to impose my theatre view on other practitioners, or worse, on innocent unsuspecting audiences. It hardly matters what I think theatre ought to be. It is what it is and more academically inclined people can spend more time in defining it.

[1] Talk on 11 February 2001 at Ravindra Kalakshetra as part of the Krishti Festival of Plays to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Bengali Theatre in Bangalore.

But having said that, as a practitioner of the art and craft of theatre, I allow myself the liberty of asking one general question. 'What are we reflecting through our theatre today in India?' Of course that question can be asked of all art, all over the world. Theatre has always been a mirror for man. A reflection of his world, of the eternal conflicts that plague him, through which he has experienced a range of emotions. Man has created a very complex language called theatre. A language that has the ability to redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement. A language that goes beyond the verbal, a movement that goes beyond the physical. Through this language of theatre he has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be.

So what is it that we see through our theatre in this country? Do we really see ourselves? Do we see what we have made of ourselves? Do we see our hopes, values, aspirations and struggles? The answer to that question can only be a yes, no, maybe. Probably, it's all three. Now you see it and now you don't. What happens when you don't see yourself or any part of your awareness reflected in the theatre that you choose to patronize? More often than not, you stop believing in the theatre. Whether you are an artist or part of an audience, there is the constant danger of disillusionment, because we do not see ourselves or our aspirations in the theatre.

So, it becomes important to do the kind of theatre that means something to you personally and also to go to the kind of theatre which engages you enough for you to relate to in the way I have spoken about. Only then is there the true synergy between the artist and the audience. This synergy is better described in our traditional theatre as *Rasa*. For this rasa to be savoured, some common grounds or spaces have to be defined for this synergy to happen.

That is why there is the need to look at identities both for the performer and the audience. It is not enough to say we are Indians and we shall see Indian theatre.

We need to go beyond this very simplistic political identity for ourselves and our theatre to arrive at the true Indianness of our theatre and ultimately of ourselves.

In a plural society as ours, which is culturally as diverse as the European continent, and a civilization that is as ancient as the world, it is very difficult to define what is quintessentially Indian. Obviously, a more pluralistic approach is required. The conventional way of defining by linguistic and regional divides does not work for creating artistic identities any more, or it probably never has.

The spaces I feel that go beyond region and language are the most useful. These are more of ideological spaces and the whole purpose of making them is to come closer to our identities rather than create further hostile divisions. We have enough of those in our country!

I would roughly describe the three spaces as 1. The traditional; 2. The continual; and 3. The radical. None of these spaces are mutually exclusive.

The traditional: I don't have to go into the traditional aspect of our theatre. There are enough people who are traditionalists who can vouch for the permanence and completeness of our classical theatre and dance forms. In fact the word 'Natya' is used for both Dance and Drama. We can pride ourselves on our integrated performing art forms, which are complete in every sense of the word. A *varnam* in a Bharata Natyam concept contains everything that theatre and dance all over the world strive for. It has technique, it has grace, it has power, it has emotions, dramatic tension, beauty, and most definitely it has style. A *rasika* who has the capacity to enjoy this experience is truly a traditionalist in the best sense of the word.

The continual: A lot of us seek our identities in our roots or traditions whether they are rural or urban, regional or Sanskrit, or international, or a mixture of all. It may be important to draw from these roots and to create works that are largely inspired from where we come from. To a lot of people their roots have a greater form of identity even if they have moved away from the traditions that they seek inspiration from and yet they need to be true to their times. This state of transition has created many great works in our country. Watching a play by Girish Karnad or Kambar gives us the satisfaction of viewing our past and our roots through a viewfinder

that definitely belongs to the present. It is an important bridge that reminds us of where we come from and where we are today. It is interesting that both Mr Karnad and Mr Kambar have used the same Kannada folk tale to give us two gems: *Nagamandala* and *Siri Sampige*. Both are so different from one another and yet they share common roots. This is something unique to Kannada theatre.

The radical: While it is absolutely vital to have tradition and continuity, all is not well with that. You do need change. You do need people who are willing to explore and develop new forms and languages. The radical theatre of today is in all likelihood to become the traditional theatre of tomorrow. Some of the most powerful works in the theatre today are from radicals like Rabindranath Tagore, Badal Sircar, and Vijay Tendulkar. Tagore was among the first of the 20th Century dramatists to put the focus on the caste system and inequality through his plays. If traditional and continual theatre is linked to our roots, radical theatre is linked to our spirit. It soars like a bird exploring new horizons and offers us vantage points that we didn't know existed. Both form and content have been enriched by radical thinkers in our theatre.

So, as we can see to form our cultural identities we need all three, tradition, continuity and change. It is when we accept the need for all three in our theatre that we can truly have a theatre movement that is inextricably linked to the development of cultural, social and individual identities.

One can have roots, and roots can grow into flowering trees. And on those trees are birds ready to spread their wings and fly. That is the completeness of life and its representative called theatre.

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KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAY (1903–1988) was a social reformer and freedom fighter who contributed immensely to Indian handicrafts, handlooms, the women's movement, and theatre. Founder of the All India Women's Conference that became a nationally reputed organization, she helped set up the National School of Drama in Delhi, started the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography (NIKC) in 1964, and became the head of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Recipient of the prestigious Padma Bhushan (1955) and the Padma Vibhushan (1987), which rank among the highest civilian awards in India, she received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 1966. She published her acclaimed autobiography, *Inner Recesses and Outer Spaces: Memoir*, in 1986.

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INDIAN PEOPLE'S THEATRE ASSOCIATION (IPTA) was formed in 1942 against the backdrop of World War II, the Quit India movement, and the Bengal famine of 1943. It identified its aim in its 'Draft Resolution' as mobilizing 'a people's theatre movement throughout the whole of India' and using that to organize 'people's struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice'. Its membership included leading writers and artists such as Bijon Bhattacharya, Balraj Sahni, Utpal Dutt, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Anna Bhau Sathe, Sheila Bhatia, and Anil de Silva, among others. Beginning in Bombay and Calcutta, by 1945 it expanded into a nationwide movement organized around three divisions: the song and dance division, the drama division, and the film division. Its most memorable productions include the play *Nabanna* and the film *Dharti ke Lal*. The IPTA continues to inspire and influence activist theatre groups and film-makers.

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LOTHAR LUTZE's lasting affair with modern Indian literature and culture made him a unique figure among contemporary Indologists in the West. Lutze became one of the pillars of 'Heidelberg Indology', offering a modern alternative to traditionally oriented classical German Indology. Lutze has a number of publications to his credit, including studies on Hindi literature and translations of Hindi fiction.

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ATAMJIT SINGH joined the Department of Foreign Languages, San Jose State University as Lecturer in Punjabi in 1998, where he has been teaching Punjabi to Indian diaspora students. He was earlier Professor and Chair of the School of Punjabi Studies at Guru Nanak Dev University. His area of specialization includes Punjabi drama and theatre.

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