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**A Study of the Impact of Grants that IFA made to Theatre in a decade
2005–2006 to 2014–2015**

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This report sets out to study 62 grants made by the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) over ten years (2004-05 to 2014-15), in the field of theatre, the visible impact of those grants and what this corpus identifies and reveals about the larger milieu of theatre in India. It also seeks to witness and reflect on the influence of the various grant programmes at IFA on individuals, companies and researchers, on practice and scholarship. What is the best way to approach this exercise? One could look at each grant, each project as its own story. What did it set out to achieve and why, and how successful or impactful were the results? Or one could locate this particular project or grant in the larger story of artistic practices, contexts and histories. This second approach inevitably includes the questions of the first but suggests that the impact is best reviewed not in specific actions, occurrences and results but in how each unique project informs and responds to the larger movements, exigencies and realities of theatre-making and scholarship. In some cases I feel well poised to take this approach because of my understanding of the projects and their context. In other cases where I am less familiar, the task is daunting and particularly exposed to problems of speculation, assumption and summary. For that reason this essay might seem to pose as many questions as it does arrive at conclusions; questions, I hope, allow us to imagine the present and future of the story rather than to suggest the story incomplete. The questions often arrive from my perspective as a theatre practitioner and in their articulation reveal my own curiosities and doubts. At times there are patterns and connections in my reading that map a wider impact on the field and at others, there is a review of more singular experiences that throw up specific questions for consideration.

The 62 selected projects cover multiple forms of practice, research, groundwork and experimentation. Grants have been made to artists, writers, filmmakers, researchers, academics, teachers, theatre companies, NGOs and other cultural organisations across the country. Many of the grants have stemmed either from long-term ambitions or artistic urgencies of the grantees, while some have been born out of initiatives and imperatives from within the IFA's programme team. My access to this work has primarily been through the documentation and reports on the individual grants by the grantees themselves, external evaluators and the

programme team. In some cases I have been fortunate enough to see the work or to meet people involved with the projects who have shared something of the process.

In the construction of this narrative I have chosen not to move chronologically or regionally, two approaches that presented themselves early on in the process. Instead I have looked at a broader schema that divides itself into “movements”. The first movement studies *narrative and thematic preoccupations*, including the specific politics of the work. I then briefly consider *form and aesthetics*, building from here to look at a wider picture of *theatre practice* and how it informs the larger *ecosystem*. I close by looking at the grant projects that contribute to *theatre scholarship and history* in India. Needless to say, none of these movements exists without the others and there is a considerable amount of intersection and overlapping. Across these movements one is allowed a view into the meditations and investigations of the artistic, imaginative process in the theatre (the *interior*) and presented vantage points from where we can witness broader trends, shifts and currents in the unfolding history of the field (the *landscape*). I confess to having borrowed this spatial metaphor - and the title of this essay - from IFA grantee Vaibhav Abnave’s articulation of the reflexive form he sought to explore and document the work of the Marathi playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar. I use present tense throughout because I believe that much of this work sets a process or practice into motion that continues in the present and must be treated as ongoing and not terminated by the end of the specific project or grant period.



Under the Sal Tree Festival, Badungduppa Kalakendra, 2012

Before I delve into this schema it is worth briefly considering how these 62 grants divide themselves across the map of the country. This is not to present a statistical review of how fairly or consistently the grants have been distributed to different regions or states but to acknowledge existing nerve centres, locations of sustained or concentrated activity in the field, and ecosystems where the projects and processes tend to generate further and deeper movement. As many as 1/5th of the theatre grants have been projects based in Maharashtra - predominantly in Mumbai and Pune. Given the long tradition of experimental theatre and scholarship in Marathi theatre as well as concerted efforts of practitioners such as Sunil Shanbag and Jyoti Dogra to push the language and politics of theatre in Mumbai, this is not entirely surprising. A significant number of the grants have been distributed to practitioners, organisations and teachers in Karnataka which reflects IFA's endeavour to feed into the culture, artistic life and education in their home state, and for this endeavour to reach a demographic beyond the metropolis of Bangalore. There are multiple grantees from Bengal and Kerala - again, active ecosystems - with projects from the latter looking more deeply into performance

and practice and those from the former distributed across practice, education and archiving. There are projects based in Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. In some cases, grantees have travelled to different locales and ecosystems to initiate and develop projects, such as M.K. Raina's work in Kashmir. While there are four projects from Assam - including two associated grants to Badungduppa Kalakendra - it is notable that there is only one other from the north-east states - M. Mangangsana's *Phou-Oibi* from Manipur. One has also to be careful about how we read this: there is a tendency for organisations to rest complacently in a sense of achievement at having distributed space and opportunity with a region-wise equitability. National theatre festivals, for example, continue to tom-tom their curating for representing the full breadth of Indian theatre, a claim based on how many states are represented as opposed to a breadth of form, practice and context, which I believe to be the broader goal of the IFA grant programmes.



Draupadi Amman Mahabharata Koothu festival, A. Sashikanth, 2008

I.

Some months ago a friend in the theatre wrote to me about how he had begun to work his way through the 12-volume unabridged 6000-page *Mahabharata*. He remarked on how playful and avant-garde it was as a text, “unrelentingly and almost pathologically risk-taking”. His letter evoked in me a question: how far do the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* function as key texts in Indian theatre practice as Shakespeare and Greek drama do in Anglo-European theatre cultures? Practitioners and scholars alike return to them constantly as a canon of myths and stories that address the human condition. Predictably, this is our entry point into the first movement of this schema - on narrative and thematic preoccupations in the theatre projects supported by IFA.

Abhishek Majumdar’s proposal for a project on physical and non-verbal explorations into theatre language (2014) states quite plainly that it is “more convenient to work with epics where the story is already known and there is no need to explain the plot to the audience.” Is it this familiarity with the epics that enables their capacity for newness and experiment? Is their avant-garde-ness to be found as much in what they make possible as in what they already hold as texts? Consider the expansive nature of Adishakti and Rustom Bharucha’s grant project that investigates the reinventions of the *Ramayana* across seven performance traditions (2014). The texts, in their mutability and multiple retellings, allow theatre makers to reach beneath plot to find both performative and contextual immediacy. Suresh Acharya’s grant project explores Karna’s “otherness” in the *Mahabharata* (2010), bringing a contemporary lens to view this character as a figure “suppressed and side-lined by the mainstream”. Acharya is able to relate this to his own caste identity as a Mahabrahman (brahmans who supervise funeral rituals) and alienation from the mainstream. In *Akshayambara* (2015) Sharanya Ramprakash reveals complex parallels between text (the *Draupadi vastrapaharana*) and performance tradition (Yakshagana); the former provides the perfect foil for her to create and explore reversals of power, gender politics and hierarchies in the latter. An interrogation of identity is similarly explored in A. Sashikanth’s film on the Draupadi Amman Mahabharata Koothu Festival (2008),

which poses a compelling question for today: “does one want a world of ethical values, fluid identities and peace or a world of rigid identities and war?”¹Sashikanth himself reflects on the ability of the epic to function “not only as a discourse on ethics but also as a repository of the collective memories of people and war.” Within this grand scope there is the possibility for investigations driven by personal context (as in the first two examples here) but also interventions in long-standing performance traditions such as NIRMAN’s revitalisation of the *Ramlila*(2006) - “a vitally important source of holistic civilizational learning for children” - as part of their larger social and educational project. Discoveries and challenges aside, each of these projects serve the larger discourse around these texts, as Rustom Bharucha notes, by playing it out not just in academia but “through the complex and contradictory dynamics of the epic in performance.”



Phou-Oibi, M Mangangsana, 2008

¹Muthukumaraswamy, Director of the National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC), quoted in A. Sashikanth’s grant description.

The contemporaneity of the mythical, the folk and the classical emerges as a wider question among theatre makers and scholars today: where does one find the present in the eternity of these texts? A notable example of this struggle is in M. Mangangsana's interpretation of the Phou-Oibi myth in Manipur (2008), which reveals a nostalgic tendency towards revival, a preservation of clichés and an indulgence in what Swar Thounaojam describes as "a false glorification divorced from the vulnerable reality of the Meitei woman today". Swar's report on this project throws up critical questions for theatre practitioners in this time: can artists employ a true urgency of myth while ignoring deeper politics of identity and alterity, nationhood and rebellion? Can the aesthetic experience alone justify the use of an "inherited ethnos" in contemporary theatre?



Cotton 56, Polyester 84, Sunil Shanbag, 2006

The story of the city manifests itself differently across several projects, in negotiating the social politics of urban spaces and in plumbing the intimacies of personal experience. One can view *Cotton 56, Polyester 84* (2006), Sunil Shanbag and Ramu Ramanathan's play on mill workers, as a landmark production in bringing a history of the Mumbai working class to an urban audience

that has insulated itself from such narratives. The journey and success of the play cannot be taken for granted; it seems to occupy a lacuna in urban theatre between the epic/mythic and the domestic. This might seem like a simplification of viewing culture and taste but there is certainly some truth to Shanbag's assertion that "working class audiences, like their middle—class counterparts have been won over by television ... and are reluctant to shake off their stupor." *Cotton 56* represents a theatre in which the makers explore marginal identities and storylines outside of their own, and extend that experience to city audiences who find it hard to "recognise the political even when it is thrust in their faces." I use present tense even though it has been close to 15 years since the play opened because my belief is that this challenge has remained for theatre practitioners. How does one draw an audience weaned on easy, byte-sized entertainment into deeper, urgent socio-political narratives that seem to be removed from their personal lives but are, in fact, embedded in the living reality of the cities they occupy?

There are a few striking examples of artists working to place themselves and the audience in a physical, lived reality of the city. Staged on a moving bus, Sadhana Centre for Creative Practice's immersive project (2012) merges its theme and the site of performance to achieve a close observation of everyday reality. It uses personal perspective, memory and anecdote to contextualise a larger socio-economic history of the evolution of the bus service in Kerala. In the IFA's programme Project 560 (2013), there has emerged a similar imperative to make vivid and immediate the transforming landscape of Bangalore through site-specific performance and interventions that reimagine the citizen's relationship with the city through the arts. How can artists and organisations use public, found spaces and immersive work to address broader conversations on our urban culture and histories, thereby moving beyond the novelty of the "event" and the realm of the niche where the work can sometimes remain literally and figuratively rooted to the spot?



The Bus Project, Sadhana Centre for Creative Practice, 2012

Makarand Sathe's engagement with Aasakta Kalamanch over their grant production *Tirchee 17 Prakarne* (2010) epitomises a particular tension that has emerged in the expectation and expression of the political between modern and contemporary urban theatre in India. There is a bristling quality to his response to Aasakta's assertion that their work seeks to move past the repetition and unoriginality in the middle class themes of Marathi theatre. While he does not take a self-conscious or defensive position Sathe does provoke through counter-assertion: a project helmed by a collective of "young, middle-class, urban, males, with western influences" can only claim to transcend the culture of theatre it criticises by confronting their own "desensitised" and often apolitical approach to narrative. While this argument is quite specific to its particular context in Pune, I believe that it can be read to be symbolic of fractures in how contemporary urban theatre makers engage with the political and social intricacies of their contexts. There can be a tendency to overvalue the conceptual, to cast the net too wide across the "unease and crisis of identity in contemporary society" (to use Aasakta's words), thereby risking naïveté, abstraction and an obfuscation of the specific. Interestingly, Aasakta's next grant production – Ashutosh Potdar's *F1/105* (2014) - finds a sharpness in drawing the conceptual (our notions of colour) into the specific (class hierarchies and social attitudes).



Tirchee 17 Prakarne, Aasakta Kalamanch, 2010

Kirtana Kumar's *The Wedding Party* (2007), Navtej Johar's *The Maids* (2011) and *Akshayambara* offer instances where systems of power in class, gender and sexuality are contested in and through performance. Each addresses a different context, demographic and history through strikingly different idioms but each offers a narrative framework that brings marginalisation, disempowerment and the critical dialogue around it into some relief. There are few performance projects that investigate Dalit and caste politics, especially in urban theatre, though the grant scheme has supported research and discussion on Dalit and Adivasi theatre that we will look at later in this essay. In some cases, even when the work is driven by the impetus to engage with traditional forms or to invigorate a local ecosystem, the projects lean towards narratives that comment on histories of oppression and decaying social systems. M.K. Raina's work with the Bhand Pather artists in Kashmir (2007-08) is a notable example in this regard.



The Doorway, Jyoti Dogra, 2008

Jyoti Dogra's two projects developed with the support of the IFA (*The Doorway*, 2008, and *Notes on Chai*, 2013) achieve a theatre of the *interior*, working from the deeply personal towards the pervasive and finding the mythic in the mundane. Her approach to narrative is often labelled non-linear but perhaps we can ascribe to it a different, centrifugal movement: one that begins from the self (as "subject and conductor") and the quotidian, and then projects outwards to reveal our "desires, biases and fears"? It is hard to compare these works with others in the IFA programme but I do know that they have had a substantial impact on a new generation of theatre makers who find an impulse for narrative within their intimacies, their own "nakedness", and move from the private to the political.

The environment and its relationship to changing social politics is a theme common to a few projects from Bengal and Assam, and compelling enough to have been one of the subjects at the imaginative core of the Under the Sal Tree festival (2013). Here one senses a strong desire to reflect on the local ecology in its relation to changing value systems, mindless

industrialisation and the lines of contention within ethnic groups. Shilpika Bordoloi's *Majuli* (2013), an artistic response to "the Brahmaputra and the understandings of culture, identity and development of communities", dives deep into the ecology of the river but misses a larger and more complex history of Assam. I can remark here on how such narratives struggle to move beyond their own sense of nostalgia but they are at least present; the environment is conspicuously overlooked as a critical contemporary subject by most urban practitioners.

II.

There is a significant amount of exploration in form and aesthetics across these grant projects. At times the experiments are short-lived and particular to the imagination of the single project - such as the interest in magic and visual trickery in both Jaimini Pathak's production for young audiences *Day I Met the Prince* (2008) and Shena Gamat's *The Pink Balloon* (2007). In other cases practitioners commit to a longer engagement with formal questions and structures that continue beyond the scope of these individual projects. The investigation of corporeality and the presence of the body is one such journey, as is the use and influence of multimedia on live theatre.



***The Maids*, Navtej Johar, 2011**

A number of grant projects express the desire to study and work with the body as a means of training, a mode of consciousness and a performance language. Practitioners like Jyoti Dogra and Shilpika Bordoloi both question the easy appropriation of Western aesthetics of physical theatre and dance, and propose a use of the body that stems from the “artist’s own life and circumstances”. The effort to arrive at a personal vocabulary of movement is a persistent formal query expressed in several projects including Sankar Venkateswaran’s *Quick Death* (2007), Prabhat Bhaskaran’s *Act Without Words* (2008) and Navtej Johar’s *The Maids* (2011). The influences on these investigations are diverse: from Grotowski and Noh theatre to Kuttiyattam and Bharatnatyam’s *padams*. With *Notes on Chai*, Dogra extends the physical to the resonant body of the voice, studying and exploring vocal techniques such as Tibetan throat singing, overtone singing and Dhrupad. Significantly, all of these practitioners have extended their formal experimentation into the realms of teaching. Their work with students and young practitioners in theatre and dance allows the query to enter into wider pedagogy, training systems and a consistent practice.

The centrality and critical presence of the body in theatre practice is not new. In fact, it is at the core of the idiom and aesthetic of numerous folk and traditional forms in India. But perhaps there is a continuing tendency for urban practitioners, flush with an exposure to the rigours and possibilities of physical theatre, to fetishise their newfound rituals and yet, struggle to translate their investigations into performance. I find Abhishek Majumdar and Indian Ensemble’s grant project (2014) a useful case study for the field here: it offers us an honest realisation from within the artistic process of how the conceptual imagining of a physical performance language can sometimes confound its practical application and create false dichotomies of text-based and non-text-based theatre. Perhaps there is a journey to be made for the viewing culture as well? Is it still reasonable to seek aesthetic and formal distinctions between dance and theatre, between the traditional and contemporary? How can new performance languages enable the audience to look beyond the actor’s body and a desire for and expectation of beauty and meaning?

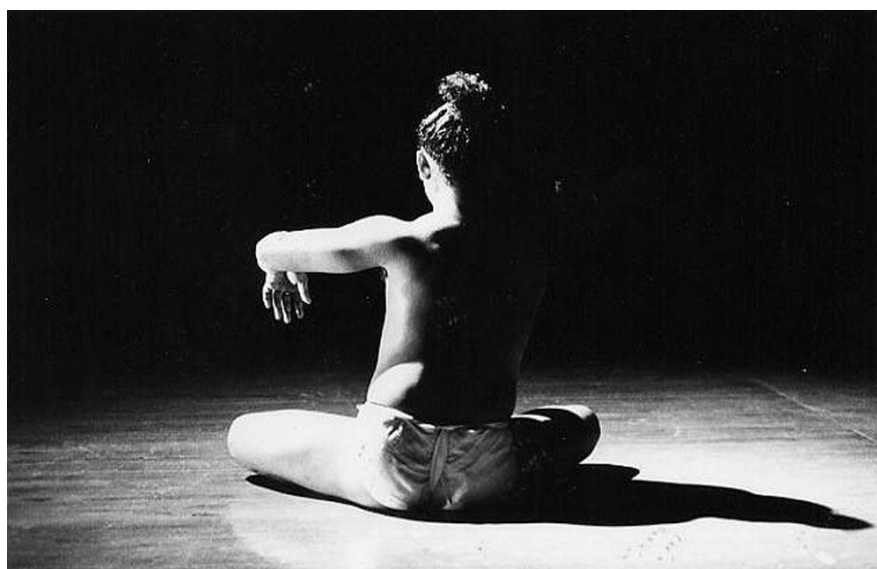


Cycle of performances on Naxalite Movement, Santanu Bose, 2006

The use of multimedia continues to bring an aesthetic dynamism to live performance and to offer practitioners a mobile scenography and a more complex relationship with space. In M.G. Jyotish's *Macbeth* (2008), it aids and enables a visual and performance language that embraces abstraction and challenges existing aesthetics in Malayalam theatre. In his cycle of performances on the history of the Naxalite movement (2006) Santanu Bose uses video as an audience interface – to challenge and fragment the live aesthetic experience, and express his frustration with “good-looking theatre”. This project and Sunil Shanbag's *S*x, M*rality and Cens*rship* (2009) are two examples where multimedia allows for a merging of fiction and documentary, of real and imagined space. The growing presence of multimedia as an element in performance is another chapter in what Veenapani Chawla refers to as theatre's “aesthetic pluralism” and its very nature as a “summative art”. Indeed, in Adishakti's grant proposal for *The Hare and the Tortoise* (2005) Veenapani suggests that shadow puppetry might be considered a precursor of multimedia.

III.

This particular project by Adishakti offers an opportune segue into looking at how the IFA theatre grants have supported and enabled the revisiting, revival and reimagination of traditional and folk forms in contemporary practice, a subject worthy of its own essay². The Adishakti Laboratory, well known for its constant dialogue with various traditional arts, provides us with the keywords: continuity, cross-feeding, extending. Varying imperatives drive the processes by which practitioners engage with the traditional. Adishakti, for example, views each historical mode of expressions as a “text” and states that live performance must reflect the “simultaneity of multiple-sightedness” in its structure and form to remain valid as an art. I must confess to initially feeling nonplussed by what I read as ‘proposal-speak’, but it did subsequently throw up the question: how should contemporary theatre makers seek to “extend traditional forms beyond their existing practice”? Perhaps *The Hare and the Tortoise* itself is not the best example here, as a production challenged by too many simultaneous ‘texts’ and overwhelmed by a “tortuous ... and complicated trajectory of making”, to quote Ashish Rajadhyaksha.



The Hare and the Tortoise, Adishakti, 2005

²As many as 23 projects of the 62 invest involve some form of interaction (artistic, scholarly or documentary) with traditional or folk theatre practice and history.

There is a great vulnerability in the interaction between the traditional and the contemporary especially when it is compressed into a single project timeline. Rajkumar Rajak draws on dance and martial arts forms such as Ghoomar, Thang Ta, Meenawati and Kalarippuyattu to stage the experimental Hindi novella *Suraj ka Satvaan Ghoda* (2009) and Suresh Acharya turns to the folk form of Rammat to transform the poem *Rashmirathi* into a performance script (2010). Both projects commit actively to the cross-feeding of practices (“the meeting of two streams in a river”) but find their contemporary artists and singers challenged by the nuances of the form without adequate training. Swar Thounaojam also speaks of the traps in the modernising of traditional Manipuri forms to suit contemporary performance and how those practices play out in non-ritualistic public spaces, in reference to M. Mangangsana’s production of *Phou-Oibi*. Sharanya Ramprakash’s *Akshayambara* offers the field a compelling example of dialogue between contemporary urban practice and a well-known traditional form. Her impulse to seek out a new expression draws her towards Yakshagana and enabled by a progressive guru, she immerses herself in a lengthy process of research and interaction with practitioners. This, in turn, creates the opportunity for her to perform as the only woman in an all-male professional troupe while grappling with her own internal conflicts. The process and the play that emerges from it challenge the traditional Yakshagana discourse and setup, and also create space for new experiments in Kannada theatre.



***Akshayambara*, Sharanya Ramprakash, 2015**

M.K. Raina's work in Kashmir in revitalising the Bhand Pather form (2007-8) and Jhalapala's commitment to reviving the performance aspect of Patachitra in Bengal (2008/13) exemplify the investment of artists and organisations in the preservation and continuity of endangered traditional forms. Both projects display resolve and resourcefulness in bringing a new generation of young artists - children in the case of the Jhalapala - into an apprenticeship with senior "ustads" and practitioners. Raina notes that this creates an opportunity for "new training in an old form" and for the traditional methodologies to benefit from new voices and techniques. Jhalapala works to connect the young patuas with their own folklore and heritage by encouraging an imaginative, responsive practice. The shrinking space for culture in these social environments creates an urgency not merely to preserve an artistic legacy but also to imagine new directions and a contemporary idiom for it. Raina believes that getting these artists "out of their negativity and depression is as important a task as training the next generation of performers". Both cases also offer directions in addressing a critical question: how can new generations of folk and traditional artists be empowered to find the contemporary relevance and potential of their art form "in a scenario where the natural context of this art form no longer exists"?³ The stories of these two projects cannot be removed from the sobering reality of their backdrops. There is a grave threat to the patua communities from fundamentalist Islamic forces in the region, and the work of the Bhands is constantly at risk in the political turmoil of Kashmir, forcing them on occasion to work "deep inside the forest where no one can hear their noise."

³Anjum Katyal, in her evaluation of the Jhalapala grant project.



Bhand Pather project, M.K. Raina, 2007



Patachitra workshops, Jhalapala, 2008/13

How do the negotiation of space and the concomitant consideration of the audience give rise to new modes of practice? There are scattered examples of the innovative use of diverse locations, mobile performances and a breakaway from the monotonous formality of proscenium theatre. The grant projects of Santanu Bose and Jyoti Dogra are particularly revealing in how they evolve through a multiplicity of spaces and stages, and a self-reflexive relationship with the audience. Bose works across different sites and cycles of performance in his staging of the history of the Naxalite movement. His intention is for the form to “reflect the nature of media” but also to permit bold and alternative forms of dissemination. Central to this project is the involvement of the audience in determining the development of the performance - as witnesses, participants, actors, interlocutors and respondents. It is at times a fractious and confrontational relationship but one that exerts an indelible influence on the ritual of performing. Dogra similarly commits to an ongoing conversation with diverse audiences as she moves through both established and unconventional venues, in the metropolis and in B cities that have experienced rapid urbanisation. These new audiences are critical to her understanding of what the “contemporary” is, and her post-show discussions are able to localise the unique experience of each show but also welcome the audience to affect the narrative development of the play. As IFA notes, it is “an important example of how to develop and encourage audience members to engage with an artist’s practice in critical ways”.

There is a noticeable contesting and reimagining of creative roles and established performance practices across grant projects. Some practitioners like Sankar Venkateswaran challenge the “director’s hold on meaning-making”, drawing once again on the traditional arts to evolve methods of training that enable actors to become autonomous and claim a kind of authorship. In both their grant projects Aasakta Kalamanch challenge the playwright-centric nature of Marathi theatre and commit to a more collaborative process of development between the writer, director and actors. This shift towards a more devised practice allows them to rely less on the weight of the spoken word and experiment with “free-form intimate staging” in alternate spaces and a diversity in their casting. A number of practitioners also engage the multilingual nature of their audiences by playing across languages and working in the politics of formal, colloquial and performative modes of speech.

IV.

A handful of New Performance projects call into question the dominant norms and paradigm of theatre by and for children. The loudest overture here is to move beyond the “preachy, prescriptive and patronising tone of theatre for young audiences (TYA)”. Jaimini Pathak and Jhalapala aim to achieve this by creating thought-provoking narratives that encourage self-reflection. In Pathak’s *Day I Met the Prince* the use of Forum Theatre creates space for this engagement with the play’s young audience whereas with Jhalapala, as I have already noted, the children are imaginatively occupied in the making of the work - conceptualising, scripting and designing. I was struck by the recounting of a moment in their Patachitra project: responding to the proliferation of violent imagery in their daily lives, the young artists challenge and modify the ending of an ancient patua story *Manohar Fansira*. They choose to pardon the antagonist instead of killing him. This example might seem slight but even in its limited context it proposes a spontaneous and reflexive culture of theatre-making by and for young audiences, one that includes their own shifting contexts and experiences and does not resort to the patronising traditions of the past. IFA supported two gatherings of performance artists, writers, educationists and teachers to debate and discuss current performance and pedagogical

practices in TYA. Ranga Shankara Theatre and Sanket Trust hosted a symposium and teacher training Initiative in 2009, and in 2011, the University of Delhi and the Indian branch of ASSITEJ hosted a three-day national conference. Across both platforms there seems to have been widespread agreement on the need for a more artistic, porous and interdisciplinary practice, and for “collective action and policy”⁴. Many conversations revolved around the complex dichotomy of ‘the arts in education’ and ‘an education in the arts’. The impact of such symposia is to create hubs for a cross-pollination of ideas and building of networks. But in a field this wide, where there are disagreements on the very definition of “young”, should progress be measured more regularly, in smaller movements of trial and experimentation? Should critiques on practice be more specifically addressed? And do we perhaps need a more grassroots approach to the building of resources and nurturing of ecosystems?

IFA’s sustained support to enabling teachers within and outside of the Kali-Kalisku project in various districts of Karnataka has resulted in important learnings in the symbiosis of artistic, cultural and educational ecosystems. Within the individual projects there are examples of self-initiative, empowerment and critical interactions with the local: for example, Ashok Totnalli’s programme to introduce children to Doddata, a folk art form in North Karnataka (2014) is not so much an exercise in revivalism as it is an opportunity to engage with a marginalised community whose contact with the mainstream culture is limited. Shanthamani H.B. devises a series of workshops with her fellow teachers to sensitise them to the use of theatre in working with slow learners (2013), creating inclusive environments and exploring a meaningful dialogue with folk forms. Her process reveals an immediate impact in the integration of theatre arts into language, mathematics and science classes. There now exists a working model that can be shared with other teachers and schools, influencing the relationship between arts education and academic achievement. The work here reaches out to include multiple stakeholders: teachers, students, School Development and Monitoring Committees, local artists and communities. The projects also create an ongoing engagement for students with their local ecology and social realities. One of the most significant successes of a Kali-Kalisku arts education

⁴Wolfgang Schneider, President of ASSITEJ

project is M. Mallesha's use of theatre clubs, public artistic demonstrations (*jaata*) and cluster-level teacher training to sensitise his local community to the problem of gender inequity in his school in Dharwad District (2012). Mallesha's project results in a measurable increase in school enrolment and the girl students voicing their rights to continue their studies without succumbing to the pressures of early marriage.

In both Karnataka and Assam we find projects that involve a "decentralisation" of space, artistic control and identity in the local ecosystems. In updating and digitising their database of performance spaces across Karnataka, Ninasam creates an invaluable resource not only for their own repertory company but also for professional and amateur groups across the state (2005). Akshara K.V. places this initiative within a wider context of the theatre culture moving away from Bangalore and the other big centres to various small towns and rural areas. Prakash Garud, who received an IFA grant to study the history and development of the Dodatta performance tradition, uses his tenure as director of Rangayana to host Dodatta artists as well as performers from other forms and contexts in Karnataka, including Company Theatre, Sri Krishna Parijata and Sannata. Through their participation in festivals, workshops and seminars, there is a re-contextualisation of their work within the broader ecosystem of performance in North Karnataka. A question posed in the evaluation of Ninasam's project remains: can these forms of resource mobilisation and exchange which allow practitioners and art forms to move beyond the local and invest in their own expansion and sustainability be replicated in other ecosystems?



Research on Doodata folk performance tradition, Prakash Garud, 2013-14

In successive editions of the Under the Sal Tree festival (2012, 2013), Rampur’s Badungdappa Kalakendra creates opportunities for young Assamese directors to make performance work that critically examines the self amidst a wider crisis of identity and “politics of survival”. Central to their director Shukhracharjya’s project is a desire to create an alternative ecosystem for new performance and practice that challenges the reductive framing of only traditional forms as the ‘Art of Assam’. Each director receives infrastructural support, mentorship and their work is exposed to a circle of peers and conversations around their work that includes the participation of venerated theatre makers from the region such as Sabitri Devi and Heisnam Kanhailal. The festival also engineers an in-built dissemination plan where each director presents their work for each other’s audience, thereby involving their respective local communities in creating a supportive environment. Eventually, the originators of the project find themselves challenged by the very movement they sought to catalyse. The young directors, feeling burdened with

Badungduppa's constant influence, assert their independence and move on to start their own groups. This is a somewhat unintended decentralisation. Yet, in the sense of a splitting chrysalis, is there not sometimes the necessity for a loss of grip, a discarding of prevailing structures for a truly independent ecosystem to emerge?

The Dalit Adivasi Theatre Akhra, a two-day conference hosted by the Pyara Kerketta Foundation (PKF) in Ranchi (2011), reflects the complexities of expressing the terms 'practice', 'ecosystem' and 'history' with singular meaning. PKF projects a broad understanding of 'Dalit' as a caste-based category of subordination that covers "any individual or community exploited socially, politically or in the name of religion"⁵. This inclusivity enables the Foundation to address concerns of the creation and appreciation of contemporary practices in other marginalised communities. But in fact, the conference commences by identifying critical differences between Dalit and Adivasi identities and politics, especially in relation to theatre where they need to be addressed in their immediate context and not clubbed together. There are calls for Dalit theatres to be defined by their unique relationship to space, form and language and not by the subject matter. There is also a challenge to positioning these practices in opposition to the mainstream. Of all the questions that emerge during the Akhra, one stands out in capturing the enigma of dialogue between artistic practice and social identity: is Dalit theatre a philosophy, a form, a modality or merely caste-based?

⁵Ashwini Kumar Pankaj, the coordinator of the conference.

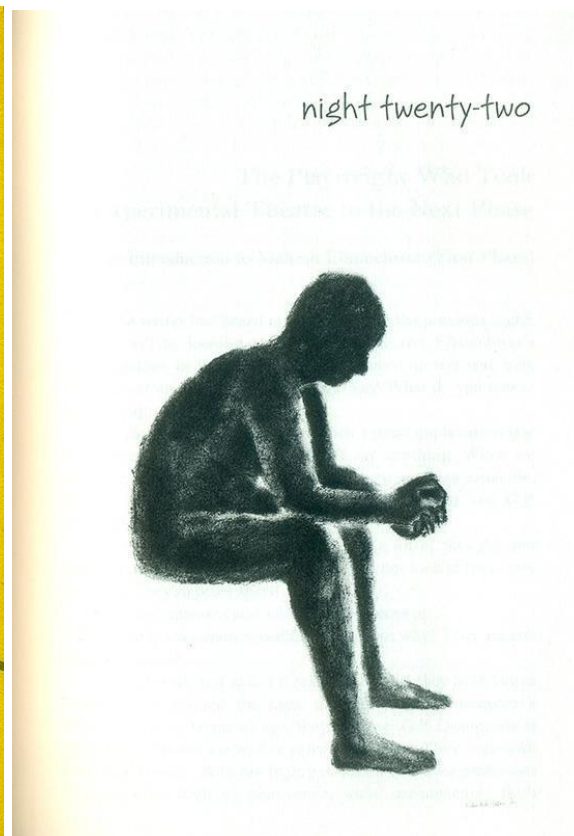
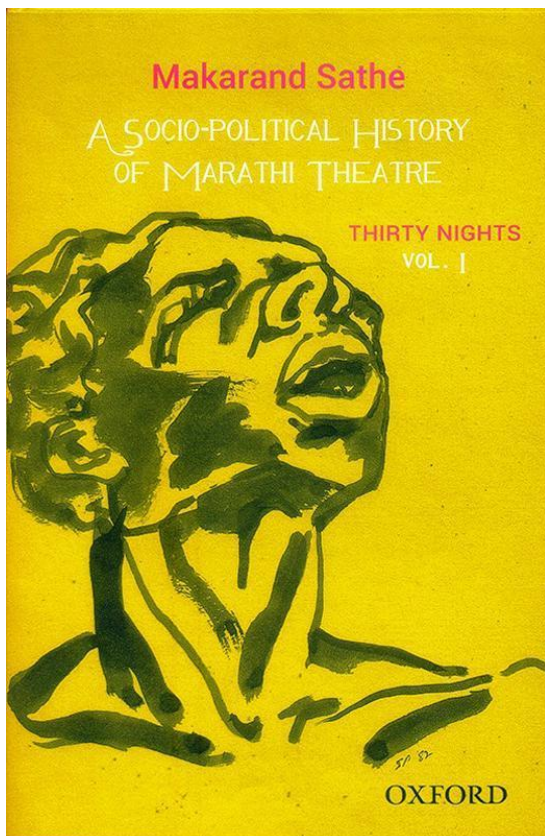


Documentary on Koothu-p-pattarai , R.V. Ramani, 2006

V.

In this final movement it remains for me to consider a diverse range of projects that contribute research, commentary and documentation to a living archive of Indian theatre. Outside of the cumulative value of monographs, manuscripts, photographs, films and other material, it is IFA's positioning of this work within the realm of practice (and not ancillary to it) that seems most vital to me. Just as there is a continuing, reflexive relationship between practitioners and narrative, form and context, the writer, scholar and documentarian often cast themselves into their subject of study. As an illustration, we can observe how five filmmakers turn their lenses to chronicle the shifting histories of theatre artists, companies and genres, innovating with the documentary form itself in the process. R.V. Ramani and K.M. Madhusudhanan immerse themselves in the ongoing legacy and stories of Koothu-p-pattarai (2006) and Surabhi Theatre (2005) respectively. They commit to recording the living reality of these companies while also

witnessing generational shifts and processes of change. A. Sashikanth and Merajur Rahman Baruah capture the Draupadi Amman Mahabharata Koothu festival in Tamil Nadu (2008) and the phenomenon of Bhramyaman – Assam’s mobile theatre (2008) respectively. Both filmmakers employ the strategy of following multiple custodians (artists, storytellers, villagers, promoters and technicians) to create myriad perspectives on these cultural experiences. In *Dhoosar* (2008), Vaibhav Abnave seeks to locate the playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar within the tradition of modern Marathi (and Indian) theatre. In blurring the line between the real and theatrical, fiction and documentary, he eschews the standard retrospective film in favour of a more poetic and personal portrait. Despite struggling with the volume of footage, the scale of ambition and a sometimes elusive coherence to the story, each of these filmmakers pushes to realise what Ramani describes as the “prismatic possibilities of the chronicle”.



Thirty Nights of Marathi Theatre, Makarand Sathe, 2008

Two projects tackle the gargantuan task of historical overview with strikingly different approaches. Kamal Saha undertakes the compilation and publication of a ten-volume encyclopedia on Bengali theatre with the meticulous dedication of an enthusiast and collector (2006). Consequently, his manuscript is packed with historical detail, lists of dates, people, companies, productions, visual records and anecdotal information. By contrast, Makarand Sathe maps the socio-political history of modern Marathi theatre by casting himself in the dual role of playwright and investigator (2008). He seems more content to study political trends and social context as against a chronological history. His *Thirty Nights of Marathi Theatre or Who Am I* is as much a story about a search for his own roots and identity as a playwright as it is a chronicle. Deepti Priya Mehrotra and Sampurna Trust set out to research and revisit the lived history of feminist street theatre in 1980s (2014). While this is a significantly shorter historical timeline than the above-mentioned projects, the study is no less critical in the specificity of its context, in the continuum of street performance traditions in India and in its integral part in the Indian women's movement of post-Emergency India. Deepti Priya Mehrotra's process forges "a synergy between what is documented, what is remembered and how it is remembered"⁶, arriving at a form that is part memoir and part history.

There is not the place here for a detailed review of the numerous other research and archival projects that apply themselves to documenting genre, local forms, regional theatre practices and the changing contexts for traditional and folk performers across the country. The subjects range from Tamaasha to Farce; from Reshma-Chuharmal Nautanki, a popular Dalit folk theatre performance of Bihar, to Sang Ragini, a signature tradition of Haryana. Adishakti and Rustom Bharucha's in-depth study of seven performance traditions of the Ramayana alone moves across an expanse from Kerala's Nangiar Koothu to the shadow puppetry of Orissa's Ravan Chaya. I find, however, that these individual studies are sometimes coterminous and propose common questions and directions that are worth articulating here - not as a scattered hypothesis but as a series of postulations for the field:

⁶Tanveer Ajsi, in his evaluation of the project

What are the diverse ways in which performance traditions can contribute to our negotiation of evolving social systems of religion, class, caste and power?

What are the histories that continue to be absent from the present discourse in scholarship?

How can we cease to demarcate the traditional from the modern and the contemporary, and instead witness them in dialogue with one another, influencing each other and creating new practice?

How are we responding to the shift in the roles and meaning of art and entertainment?



Introducing the Doddata form to children, Ashok Totnalli, 2014

In reviewing the course and impact of the IFA grants in theatre I find myself wondering how much the prerequisite of submitting to a rigorous proposal-writing process can act as a sort of kindling for artists to consider not merely the “what” of their projects but the “how” and “why”? These grant programmes encourage practitioners and researchers to enter into deep

dialogue (and sometimes conflict) with their socio-political context, the wider artistic practice and their cultural ecosystem. There is a greater emphasis on this movement than on the “product”, its marketability or positioning in the panoply of ideas and aesthetics around us. In its most enabling capacity this thought process allows for the work to be instigated and influenced by people outside of the work - those that support and welcome it. This is not always a comfortable proposition for artists and scholars who often like to keep the thinking cards close to their chests, who find it difficult to articulate the depth of their project without first immersing themselves in it, and who believe that they must be trusted wholly on their instinct or their pedigree. On the flip side there is also now a whole generation of makers and thinkers who can construct and articulate thorough and elaborate discursive frameworks in their proposal writing and yet find themselves challenged in committing to specific actions and decisions on the floor. These projects can tend to be overwhelmed by or overcommitted to the full expanse of an idea and often unable to resolve themselves. It is also puzzling to me that there is often a premium placed on finality and exactitude in the theatre when in its essence, it is a form that can positively embrace doubt and incompleteness. These IFA grants offer us plenty of examples of the tussle between what is conceived or imagined and what is discovered and realised. In my view this should be seen as a strength in the programmes even when it is a difficult challenge for the grantees.

In seeking to look critically at these grant programmes to identify gaps, lapses or challenges I must rely on the evidence provided by the field itself. There is clearly more time, resources and energy to be invested in theatre for children and young audiences. While the IFA has supported a gathering of ideas, dialogue and a handful of performance projects, perhaps there is the possibility to address this need more consistently and with focussed attention - through a sub-programme within the wider Arts Practice mandate? Similarly, the Dalit Adivasi Theatre Akhra gives us evidence of the urgency in committing to a deeper cultural engagement with marginalised cultures and communities on their own terms. This further opens up a challenge for IFA - as an urban-based institution - to seek out engagements and conversations with the folk, the traditional and the marginalised that are not always mediated by (or seen in relation

to) the urban, the contemporary and the mainstream? Can one enable processes of participation, of listening and supporting without defining the frame of expectation? By this I mean to enquire whether there is the scope for the IFA to create space within its programme every year, to invite voices from the field to participate not just as potential grantees but as curators and programme managers who can define new directions and dialogues.



S*x, M*rality and Cens*rship, Sunil Shanbag, 2009

What is the theatre in India today? Where is it, who is it by and who is it for? And when we find it how should we continue to return to it? Perhaps these questions must be answered both individually and in concert. Working on this report in this present time and context, I found resonance in my recollections of watching *S*x, M*rality and Cens*rship*. That play is more than the history of *Sakharam Binder* and the stifling of the artistic freedom of its original makers. Sunil Shanbag, Shanta Gokhale and Irawati Karnik offer us a staging of a conversation, an

excavation of the past in anticipation of the challenges of the future. The theatre does not need to be prescient but it can be present and prepared.

The IFA grants in arts practice, research and education present a vision and opportunity for artists, scholars and organisations to work with their own interiority, their questions and quandaries, and to use this work and practice to navigate the larger theatre landscape in this country. The various programmes constitute a narrative journey through this landscape, in which one can (and sometimes must) get lost; where the easy routes can reveal themselves to be perilous and the harsher terrain can be more rewarding; where we may fail to reach predetermined destinations but instead find new ground; and where all arrivals are only temporary, at stations from where we must inevitably move forward.
