

ART CONNECT

An IFA publication

Volume 1

Issue 1

January-June 2008

Rs. 100



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An IFA publication

Volume 1, Issue 1

January-June 2008

Editor

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Design

Vaishnavi Murthy

Published by



India Foundation for the Arts

'Apurva' Ground Floor

No 259, 4th Cross

Raj Mahal Vilas IInd Stage, IInd Block

Bangalore – 560 094

Phone/Fax – 91 80 2341 4681/ 82

Email: contactus@indiaifa.org

www.indiaifa.org

Bangalore 2007

Printed at

Pragati Offset Pvt. Ltd.

17, Red Hills, Hyderabad 500 004, India

Photo and Text Credits

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Contents

EDITORIAL

3

THEATRE IN AN ERA OF ENTERTAINMENT AS GLOBAL INDUSTRY

Akshara KV

Translated by S Raghunandana

4

CAUSALITY DENTURES

Text and Images by Abhishek Hazra

21

THE TWO LIVES OF MAHINDER MISIR

Ratnakar Tripathy

32

POETRY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Gieve Patel

with poems by

Atishe Chordia, Siddharth Bhatia,
Yoganand Chillarige, Muthu A, Ambika Kamath,
Mimansa and Mallika Gopal

44

ON THE ROAD WITH SURABHI

Text and images by KM Madhusudhanan

58

THE WORD ON STAGE: TRANSLATING FOR THEATRE

Arshia Sattar

with

an excerpt from Na Muthuswamy's
Padukalam translated by Lakshmi Holmström

70

Contributors

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Abhishek Hazra's work explores the intersections between technology and culture through the narrative device of a 'visual fable'. *Shongkot-Kon*, his current IFA-funded project, looks at the early history of science research in India. *Causality Dentures*, the work published here, was done on a residency in PROGR_Zentrum für Kulturproduktion, Bern, funded by Pro Helvetia. He can be contacted at abhishek.hazra@gmail.com.

Ratnakar Tripathy is Senior Research Fellow at the Asian Development Research Institute, Patna. He has been working on Bhojpuri cinema for the last one year. In 2002, Tripathy received an IFA grant to research the history of theatre and music in the Bhojpuri region of Bihar with special reference to the artist Mahinder Misir and his peers.

Gieve Patel has published three volumes of poetry—*Poems* (pub. Nissim Ezekiel, 1966), *How Do You Withstand, Body* (Clearing House, 1976) and *Mirrored, Mirroring* (OUP, 1991), and is the author of three plays—*Princes, Savaksa* and *Mister Behram* all of which have been performed. A volume of his collected plays will shortly be published by Seagull Books, Calcutta. Gieve Patel is also a well-known painter. His paintings are in public and private collections in India and other countries. He has worked as a medical practitioner in rural and urban India.

KM Madhusudhanan is a painter, graphic artist and short filmmaker whose latest film—*History is a Silent Film*—was selected for screening at the Outstanding Short Films from International Festivals, Museum of Modern Art, New York in June 2007. With IFA support he recently completed a documentary film called *Mayabazaar* on the Surabhi theatre group from Andhra Pradesh.

Arshia Sattar's translations from Sanskrit of *Tales from the Kathasaritsagara* and the *Valmiki Ramayana* have been published by Penguin Books. Her commentary on the *Valmiki Ramayana* will be published by Penguin in 2008. She teaches Indian literatures and narrative traditions in various academic programmes in India and abroad. She was Festival Director for the Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival 2005.

Lakshmi Holmström has translated the short stories and novels of major contemporary writers in Tamil such as Mauni, Pudumaippittan, Ashokamitran, Sundara Ramaswamy, Ambai, Baama and Imayam. In 2000 she received the Crossword Book Award for her translation of *Karukku* by Bama. She has also edited *Inner Courtyard: Short Stories by Indian Women* (Virago, 1990) and co-edited *Writing from India* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). She is one of the founding trustees of the South Asian Diaspora Literatures and Arts Archive.

Editorial

Akshara KV, writing in this issue about the impact of the growing media and entertainment sector on the arts, talks about the fundamentally “un-businesslike quality” of theatre. Because theatre is so dependent on the immediate physical context in which it is performed, and because it so completely derives from the live co-operation of people, it is difficult to market theatre as mass entertainment. The expression Akshara uses to describe this lived quality of theatre is its “purely human capability”.

We have come to take it for granted that we are living through an era of increasing encroachment on the freedom of expression (even if “freedom of expression” remains at the best of times a nebulous concept). According to Akshara, however, cultural expression has fewer restrictions placed on it today than at any earlier point in history. What is actually under threat is something more fundamental—the idea of art as distinctive human expression and not a mass marketable form driven by advanced technology and controlled by big capital.

Many of the essays in this issue draw attention back to the “purely human capability” of the arts and their impact on us at the experiential and everyday level. Poet and painter, Gieve Patel, has been sharing poetry from across the world with school students and encouraging them to experiment with writing it. He seeks to recover the sense of pleasure and fulfillment in the reading and writing of poetry, unmoor it from its excessively ‘heroic’ pretensions, and get young people to see that a poem could be uniquely suited to convey the “specificities of their own lives”.

Filmmaker KM Madhusudhanan presents Surabhi—a 100-year old travelling theatre group from Andhra Pradesh, whose members almost literally ‘live’ theatre. Kamalabai, one of Surabhi’s best known actors was, quite poignantly, born on the stage and, writes Madhusudhanan, “the spectators believed this to be a part of the play. Eventually, when they heard the story of the real birth behind the curtain, they were stunned and ecstatic.”

Ratnakar Tripathy describes his project to map the life and times of the elusive Mahinder Misir, a figure uniquely connected with the cultural landscape of early twentieth century Bihar. Misir’s performative style embodied, says Tripathy, a free movement between and easy borrowing from the classical and folk musical forms of the region. Says Tripathy, “In our modern eagerness to record and compile we tend to forget that developers of new styles were too much in the thick of things to bother about permanence. Often their main concern was to simply respond to the landscape in their immediate vicinity, and hopefully transform it.”

We would like *ArtConnect* to capture this irreplaceable, lived quality of creating and experiencing the arts. The response to our first issue was heart-warmingly positive. Please do continue writing to us with your feedback and views.

Anjum Hasan
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4

What happens to intellectual freedom in an era when the media and entertainment industry has overrun the space traditionally occupied by the arts? And can theatre, in some ways the most subversive of art forms, escape the profit-driven juggernaut of Information and Communication Technology and Entertainment?

*Theatre in an Era of
Entertainment as Global Industry*



Akshara KV

Translated from the Kannada by
S Raghunandana

There are certain developments taking place in the Kannada cultural milieu today regarding notions of intellectual freedom and the danger that that freedom is facing currently. There are two domains that are part of this process, whose interrelationship is very deep and is of very urgent consequence to all who practice theatre. I feel, too, that the issue needs to be examined very searchingly. This essay is born of that feeling, and seeks to take a look at the state of Kannada theatre today in the broad context of these developments.

I shall start with an examination of the notion of intellectual freedom. I shall then turn my attention to an examination of the entertainment industry, and shall end with some observations on the state of the theatre today.

From Censorship to Sponsorship

At the very outset, we need to clarify what we mean when we talk of intellectual freedom today. For, if we mean just 'freedom of expression' when we are talking of intellectual freedom, we will have to admit that, internationally, that kind of freedom is perhaps safer and stronger today than it ever was before. We only have to remember the various kinds of control and censorship that were imposed on the arts throughout

history to see that most of that control and censorship has vanished today. In fact, such control and censorship are now deemed to be a sign of the darkness of mediaeval times. Most nations swear by what goes by the name of democracy, at least at the level of lip service. It is today also accepted, again at least at the conceptual-notional level, that cultural plurality and variety are not only inevitable but also essential for the survival and continuance of democracy.

If we look at the history of the last three or four centuries, when democracy gradually came to be accepted as the best model of governance and politics, we see that a lot of thought and a great deal of discussion has taken place concerning freedom of expression, and much progress made towards realising it. Very many nations have even inscribed it as a fundamental right in their constitutions. If we take the recent history of India as an example, the state now exercises considerably less control on the arts and culture than was done during the time of the British Raj. Except for the brief and dark chapter of the Emergency in the middle of the 1970s, the record of human rights and freedom of expression in our country has been relatively clean, at least at the constitutional level. If we look at popular

perception, we see that the media today depicts Islamic countries, which still exercise several kinds of such control, as being mediaeval in their outlook. While it is true that censorship has not completely vanished everywhere and in every respect, it is certainly no longer seen as a great problem or threat facing the world of the arts and culture, and the media.

Can we, therefore, say that the state of *intellectual freedom* has improved as a whole? Does a culture of intellectual freedom really prevail the world over today? Has there been real progress made in the direction of achieving such a freedom in India? Any attempt to answer these questions runs into contradictions and difficulties. We are left tongue-tied.

surveys and urgent discussions on contemporary issues, with all the differing viewpoints given their due; and we are today easily able to see on TV, and elsewhere, documentaries and other programmes that even a few years ago we could not imagine having access to. On the other hand, it is also evident that today there is an alarming and increasing dearth of voices that dissent from those of the extraordinarily and globally powerful cultures of financial, technological, political and cultural hegemony. And such dissident voices that have been there or are newly being born are lonely and lost in the colourful and raucous *maya* of the mass media. So much so that, seen from this point of view, the decades of the 1970s and '80s when there was tighter censor-

7

Does a culture of intellectual freedom really prevail the world over today? Has there been real progress made in the direction of achieving such a freedom in India?

For, while the impediments to freedom of expression have lessened, real intellectual freedom is still only a dream. For instance, on the one hand, kissing sequences in our cinema escape uncut and unscathed; our TV channels show election

ship and when the media explosion was still a long way off, seem to have been more progressive, in many respects, than this turn-of-the-century decade and a half. For instance, we could look at the movements and struggles concerning ecology, and the

empowerment of Dalits and women, and the anti-English and consumer rights activist movements that arose during the 1970s and '80s of the last century, and the various expressions of culture, such as street theatre, little magazines, rallies and processions, and the literary movements that they in turn gave rise to. Today, even the vestiges of such movements seem to have lost their teeth. And their modes of cultural expression

Why have things come to such a pass? What are the reasons for this dumbing down? Or, what is the nature of the change in societal living that has caused such a transformation? As a way of addressing these questions, I shall cite from the story of a celebrated play written by Bertolt Brecht. This play dramatises very theatrically and tellingly the transformations that took place in European society towards the end of

8 If Brecht's Macheath had a grandson, and that grandson were to be alive today, my guess is, he would not be a *goonda* who thieves and kills transparently. Instead, he would be a smart operator working in the business of Information and Communication Technology and Entertainment.

today seem to exist, at most, as fossils of their former selves, emblems of a society that purports to guarantee freedom of expression ought to have for name's sake at least. Or, as has happened in the case of street theatre, these modes of expression that were at one time means of dynamic protest, communication and organisation are today instruments that espouse a tame and docile agenda of 'social welfare'.

the nineteenth century, when the culture of industrial, capitalist finance had just begun to make headway there. One can see some dramatic parallels between what that play says and the story of what is happening to us here in our country today, as we climb one more step up the insane and precarious ladder that is lampooned by Brecht.

Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*, written in 1928, is a play that nar-

rates very entertainingly the story of such a mad transformation at work. The play has two main protagonists. One, a don of organised begging, named Peachum. The other, an underworld don of organised crime, named Macheath. The rivalry and enmity that ensues between them leads them into a series of strange confrontations and, finally, to the defeat of Macheath. At the end of the play, Macheath is imprisoned, convicted and sentenced to death. At that point, when on his way to the gallows, Brecht's Macheath explains the reasons for his defeat, and says:

... Ladies and gentlemen, you see here the vanishing representative of a vanishing class. We bourgeois artisans, who work with honest jimmies on the cash boxes of small shopkeepers, are being swallowed up by large concerns backed by banks. What is a picklock to a bank share? What is the burgling of a bank to the founding of a bank? What is the murder of a man to the employment of a man? ¹

If Brecht's Macheath had a grandson, and that grandson were to be alive today, my guess is, he would not be a *goonda* who thieves and kills as transparently as his grandfather was wont to. Instead, he would be a

smart operator, working with great finesse and skill in the business of Information and Communication Technology and Entertainment (ICTE). And, in my opinion, he would 'improve' upon the latter part of the passage from the play, quoted above, thus:

...Ladies and Gentlemen...today, we can control things through sponsorship. To censor is to be crude, uncouth. What is censorship to sponsorship? Today, our new technologies, our new media can swamp the world with our voice. Gagging others is tough, risky. What is gagging others to ROCKING LOUDER than them? Today, we can pressclicktap and doctorsexupcastrate info worldwide. As we like it, do what we will. In our own image. As God made

Man, see? What is murdering info to sexingup-castrating it? What is killing to doctoring? What is arm-twisting to manufacturing consent? What is reporting info to manufacturing it?

Entertainment as Industry

Thus, Brecht helps us identify the transformation that has taken place in the relationship between culture and society as being one of a movement from 'censorship' to



¹ Brecht, Bertolt, *Plays Vol. 1* (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 174.

'sponsorship'. However, there is an additional reason for my holding up those lines from Brecht's play as a mirror for our times. While recording the change that came about in his times as a result of the movement of capital, Brecht also holds up a fine mirror to the powerful domain of the entertainment industry and the new media that we see around us in our world today.

As I have said earlier, the play has Macheath on the one hand, and Jonathan Peachum, who runs an organised begging business, on the other, as protagonists. To run this

business of his, Peachum actively researches and comes up from time to time with newer and newer 'metaphysical and spiritual tools'. To compare the two, Macheath is an old world artisan who cannot adjust to the New World Order and is therefore being ruined, whereas Peachum is a mandarin of the New Times. He has made a successful business of social welfare. He has made an industry of communication. In short, he could represent a strange mixture of the NGOs and media barons of our times. Here is how Brecht has him describe himself:

10



Something new—that is what we must have. My business is too difficult. You see, my business is trying to arouse human pity. There are few things that'll move people to pity, a few, but the trouble is, when they've been used several times, they no longer work. Human beings have a horrid capacity of being able to make themselves heartless at will. So it happens, for instance, that a man who sees another man on the street corner with only a stump for an arm will be so shocked the first time that he'll give him sixpence. But the second time it'll be only a three-penny bit. And if he sees him a third time, he'll hand him over cold-bloodedly to the police. It's the same with these spiritual weapons.²

Peachum's 'spiritual weapons' have today solidified into the entertainment media that is all around us. And the sponsors and promoters of these new age 'spiritual weapons' are carrying forward very successfully the work that was done in the past by censorship. With only one difference—the entertainment industry today has grown and achieved a reach that was unthinkable in Peachum's end-of-nineteenth century or Brecht's first-half-of-twentieth century times. If Peachum's spiritual weapons were crude, mechanical bombs, today's weapons of cultural communication are electronic and

nanotech homing devices and nuclear weapons, capable of hitting their targets with unsurpassed accuracy.

I shall illustrate my argument with the help of a well-known survey conducted at the global level by the international agency, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC).³ The survey concerned itself with assessing, at the threshold of this new century, the state of the entertainment industry, and the changes and 'growth' that it is liable to undergo between 2004 and 2008. The survey has taken into its ambit different segments of the global entertainment industry in its entirety, including that of India. Essentially, this survey has been done with the aim of providing, to those who might want to invest capital in this industry, information regarding investment opportunities, and the consequently needed tips and warnings. Here are some of the statistics it came up with:

- ♦ Global capital investment in the entertainment industry in 2004—1.2 trillion dollars. In 2008 this investment is projected to be to the tune of 1.8 trillion dollars. That is, the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of this industry during this period will be 6.3 percent globally.
- ♦ Countries of Asia and the Pacific are expected to be at the forefront of this growth rate. In India and China

² Brecht, Bertolt, *Plays Vol. 1* (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. 101-02.

³ The PricewaterhouseCoopers report cited here can be seen on the Internet at <http://www.pwc.com>.

this growth is expected to be to the tune of 9.8 percent during this time. In sum, the industry will see considerably more growth in the countries of this region than elsewhere.

These figures are an indication of the enormous growth that is taking place now, and will take place in the future, in the economy of the global entertainment industry. For the sake of comparison, the sum of 1.8 trillion dollars is hundreds of times more than the turnover of the central government of India. Similarly, a growth rate of 9.8 percent is much more than the growth rate of industry, of every description, of the whole of India.

12

Segments of the media that fall under the purview of the survey include filmed entertainment, television programming, audio and video recording, video games, Internet broadband services and the advertisements they can host, and book publishing.

The survey predicts that globally the CAGR of this segment will be 20.1 percent, and that video games and Internet advertisements will together account for a business of 23.8 billion dollars in the Asian countries alone. At the same time, traditional media such as print journalism and book publishing find a place only at the bottom of this list.

We must first note that the

media that call for the deployment of advanced technology on a large scale are always controlled by big capital. For that reason, they are susceptible to centralisation, and are at the centre of the entertainment industry today.

Secondly, the notion of entertainment itself is being defined anew in the business world of today. Only a few decades ago, if one were to ask what the media or vocations were that constituted the world of entertainment and communication, one would get the answer: literature, cinema, theatre, newspapers and magazines, and TV. Note the difference between this traditional list and the list provided by the PwC survey. It can be inferred from PwC's 'avant garde' list that all the traditional art practices can be weirdly mashed and thrown together in the pan of the new digital media and thereby reinvented. For example, we today have a new category of entertainment that is a coalescing of the cinema, the theatre and TV: filmed entertainment. This is true of what is happening in the arena of sports as well. Until some decades ago, cricket was a field game, and was therefore entertainment. Today, it has become 'filmed entertainment', commodified digitally.

In other words, the entertainment industry is bringing to the centre those media that can be controlled with the strings of sponsor-

ship, and is gradually pushing aside those 'traditional' arts and communication practices that refuse to be attached to such strings. Further, the world of business and industry is trying to redefine the very notion of entertainment so as to suit this imperative.

Such, then, is the devious and serious nature of the danger that intellectual freedom faces, at the global level as well as in India. Against this background, I shall now turn my attention to the state of the theatre in India, and shall attempt to examine and diagnose the dangers that the theatre and the other arts are facing in our country today.

Challenges Facing the Theatre

Why does the theatre not find a place at all in the list of entertainment media and practices furnished by the PwC survey? We can begin with this question. And the answer is simple: the theatre, in India and elsewhere, is just not an industry in the sense, and to the extent, that the other media and practices mentioned in the survey are. In other words, the practice of the theatre does not need the kind of capital, and so does not offer the kind of profits, that would entitle it to be considered part of a study of business and industry at the global level. It is true that there are,

in the West, theatre districts such as Broadway and the West End, which are very nearly industries in their own right and are supremely professional in the commercial sense of the word. It is also true that business practices in both these places are akin to that of the commercial cinema everywhere. But it is equally true that the financial turnover of even this kind of theatre practice is ultimately nothing compared to that of the electronic and related media today. Consequently, and paradoxically, given the present state of the entertainment industry and the question of intellectual freedom arising from it, this un-businesslike quality of the theatre also becomes its strength. On the other hand, this same un-businesslike quality also poses many challenges to the self-sustainability and reach of the theatre—a challenge that it would do well to meet, but on its own terms.

Fundamentally, the reason for the un-businesslike quality of the theatre lies, I would say, in the nature of the art itself, in the very way that it asks to be practised. Since the theatre (along with the rest of the arts of live performance) is bounded by time and space, and by the immediate physical context that is obtained thereby, it is impossible to turn it into an industry or market it as mass entertainment. Which is also why it

is very difficult to control or censor it absolutely. More than in any other art practice or medium, teamwork occupies an absolutely central place in the theatre. The task of making and performing a theatre production demands the communitarian effort of groups of people. Any theatre performance takes place only by their mutual and live co-operation—every time, at every place, and in every space. Moreover, here, the need for any kind of technology is minimum

14



and, ultimately, dispensable. So much so that the task of preparing a theatre production and performing it is basically a task of mobilising, optimising, and attempting to realise to the fullest, the phenomenon of *purely human capability*—in every sense of the phrase—every time. For this reason, the act of doing theatre has a political edge that is unique to it. For instance, whether you are performing a street play that takes on the real politics of

the day in a direct manner, or *Srikrishanparijatha*, a folk play and theatre tradition of Bijapur in North Karnataka (which might seem to have nothing to do with the politics of our times), the act of performing it, and seeing it, both become the source of a strange 'political energy'—a fact that is known to all who have even a slight connection with the theatre.

Thus, since the theatre plays a very important part (perhaps the most important part) in the politics of culture, beginning from the most ancient times the powers-that-be anywhere have always been distrustful and wary of the art and its practice. When the Puritans came to power in England in the late seventeenth century, after Shakespeare's time, the first thing they did was to have all theatres closed. Similarly, when the British began to rule India, the first art that they sought to censor and gag was that of the theatre. The Dramatic Performance Control Act, promulgated by the British in India in 1876, is perhaps the oldest of all such laws that have come into being in the history of the modern nation-state. Ironically, it is still in force today in independent India, although not often invoked. Most theatre people know that this Act was used to ban the explosively political and subversive nineteenth century Bengali play, *Neeldarpan*. But

it is often forgotten that it was also used to ban, around the same time, the ‘apolitical’ early modern Kannada play *Sangya Balya*.⁴ This play deals with the story of a woman’s conjugal infidelity, and the betrayal of trust between two friends (one of whom is her lover), and the lover’s consequent murder by the ‘cuckolded’ husband and his brothers. As can be seen from this very brief account of its theme and story, *Sangya Balya*, unlike *Neeldarpan*, was not even remotely connected with the ‘political’ issue of British rule in India and of subversive efforts against it. Yet the play was banned. We can, therefore, generalise and use this fact to draw the following conclusion. Any society—especially, any modern nation-state—is wary of what it perceives to be the inherently subversive nature of the theatre. The powers-that-be tend to be wary of all theatre, regardless of whether the play in question is politically subversive in an overt manner or not. The very existence of the theatre is deemed to be dangerous by them.

Now, as the independent Indian nation-state began to learn the ropes of ‘good governance’, it desisted from using, to an extent, the old, crude methods of censorship. Instead, it cultivated other, newer techniques of

doing the same thing to the theatre, and to other forms of cultural expression. This is true of the mindset of the national and nationalist upper class in the decades leading to the achievement of Independence as well. For instance, we have the example, from around the 1930s, of how many ‘folk’ and ‘classical’ traditions of performance such as Bharatanatyam (or what is known by that name today) were sanitised and reformed. And in the decades after Independence, we have the phenomenon of the nation-state, and its manifestations in the form of various Central and State governments, encouraging a certain notion of Indianness by fostering a ‘back to the roots’ movement in the matter of playwriting and production modes. All of this was, in my opinion, a series of strategies devised by the



⁴ I have called *Sangya Balya* an early modern play. Most people call it a ‘folk’ play. But there has been much discussion in recent times, in which I played a part, about how to categorise this work. I have strong reasons to categorise it the way that I have done. Constraints of space prevent me from writing in detail about this issue here.

Any modern nation-state is wary of what it perceives to be the inherently subversive nature of the theatre.

The powers-that-be tend to be wary of all theatre, regardless of whether the play in question is politically subversive in an overt manner or not. The very existence of the theatre is deemed to be dangerous...

16

nation-state to tame the theatre.⁵ And, coming to recent times, I would suggest that from around 1990 onwards the policy of the Indian nation-state towards the arts and culture (including theatre practice) in this country has undergone some great and momentous change, leading to a change in its strategies of control. These changes in policy and strategy have a remarkable feature. They are not very obvious; unlike the crude strategies of the past such as outright censorship, they are discernible only if seen closely and searchingly. For that reason, I feel that the impact that they are making on intellectual freedom in our times is also very deep, widespread and insidious.

We may call the first of these developments 'the withdrawal of state investment or funding from the domain of culture, and its participation in it'. Disinvestment by the State

is not something that is unknown to us, of this era. For we live in times where our central government has a separate ministry for disinvestment in the public sector. However, the fact that much the same thing has been happening in the realm of art and culture escapes the notice of many.

We must also not forget that the period from the year 1990 to the year 2005 has been a historic turning point for Indians. This has been the period when foreign entertainment media has entered the country in a big way, along with foreign business and capital. This has also been a period when scores of private TV channels took root and flourished. For this reason, the government should have extended special help to local art and culture, and to the *desi* media. But it has done exactly the opposite. Just as the government began to sell off or disinvest in public

⁵ It is interesting to note that the 'culture of festivals' in India seems to have begun with the organisation of the Republic Day parade. Cultural events have been made part of the Republic Day celebrations, to signify 'that this young Republic values cultural progress no less than military strength'. For details, see BP Singh, *India's Culture: The State, the Arts and Beyond* (Delhi: OUP, 1998), pp. 92-100.

units, thus making things convenient for foreign capital as it began to flow in, it did likewise in the case of culture. It withdrew funding from the entertainment industry—leaving the door wide open for foreign investors.

Secondly, in this same period of 1990-2005, similar and equally alarming changes have taken place in government spending on culture as well. Take, for instance, the incidence of mega festivals, and the roller coaster rides of white elephants in the field of culture—all government funded or sponsored. Just one example will suffice as proof: the National School of Drama alone gets nearly two percent of the money that the government spends, every year, on fostering literature, music, dance, and theatre *combined!* That's not all. In the period 1990-2005 the budget allocation for this institution has risen extraordinarily, from 2 crore and 22 lakh rupees in 1990 to nearly 16 crore rupees in 2005.⁶ But, at the same time, there has not been any appreciable increase in the allocation for the total grant money given by this very culture department to numerous cultural institutions spread all over the country, during this period.

Also, as anyone who has the eyes to can see, government money is being lavished on huge, gargantuan

'cultural festivals' inside the country, and outside it. The annual Bharat Rang Mahotsava, which has been taking place in Delhi over the past few years, for a period of one month every year, has a yearly budget of five crore rupees! This culture of festivals that began at the time of Rajiv Gandhi and has been plaguing our cultural and artistic life since then, is today no longer confined to our spend-thrifty central capital city or the various state capitals. Karnataka, for instance, has been inventing and organising newer and newer cultural festivals every other year over the past decade or so. Most districts of Karnataka today have one or two such white elephant-like festivals every year.

Thirdly, we must take note of another subtle development that has taken place, in tandem with all the other developments mentioned above, during this period. And that is the fact that processes facilitating community activities and social action, and processes facilitating methods of social and political struggle and agitation, have been gradually blunted and co-opted into becoming instruments of social welfare, and thus rendered toothless. The use of street theatre as a medium to propagate the message of universal literacy and, recently, the special enthusiasm

⁶ The details of the finances of the National School of Drama are taken from the 2004-05 Annual Report of that institution.

being shown by government departments in the matter of theatre-in-education are, in my opinion, concrete examples of this strategy.

Even as I say this, I know I shall be confronted with the question: is it wrong to put the theatre in the service of such socially meaningful programmes? Again, in my opinion, whether it is right or wrong to do so depends on how and why such 'theatre' activity is facilitated. Our governments and NGOs have developed an interest in street theatre and in theatre for or by children because international agencies like the World Bank give importance to this phenomenon and have been funding such activity liberally. We must, then, ask the question: why are the international funding agencies, including the World Bank, enthusiastic about spreading literacy in India and why are they so enthusiastic, in a manner that was not seen before, *post* the year 1990? The substantial reason for such enthusiasm has been enunciated quite clearly and directly by the agencies themselves and by business circles in their many reports and proposals: to give the Indian people enough literacy and 'education' so as to turn them into willing consumers of newer and newer consumer and entertainment goods. However, while these international agencies are today always willing to fund such programmes in basic literacy and

'education', they also insist that our governments cut subsidies on higher education and culture. It is clear why they do so: they will then have at their disposal, as a consumer base for the consumer and entertainment industries, vast multitudes of people with some simple level of literacy (enough to make them effective, profit-generating consumers) but, also, without the opportunity to have higher education and higher cultural aspirations (which would make them think and question the machinations of the profiteers!).

My argument can be summed up as follows: the global entertainment industry is making various kinds of efforts to enter and strike roots in India in a big way today; while some of these efforts can be directly seen in the private business sector, other developments on this score are sitting, subtly hidden, in the cultural policy of our nation-state, and in its economic documents such as the budget estimate papers. However, the conclusion that can be drawn, directly or indirectly, is the same: what lies behind all of these developments is the desire to make India a ladder to the heights that the global entertainment industry wants to occupy in the coming years.

Therefore, all of this is going to impact quite heavily on our theatre; and consequently, there is going to be a quite far-reaching and negative effect on the climate of our intellectual freedom.

Is there no solution to this problem, then?
I shall deal with this question briefly, before
ending.

I do not pretend that someone like myself, 'doing' theatre and involved in other cultural activities in this corner of Karnataka, has a solution to these vast, global developments and questions that are touching every aspect of our lives. It would be too presumptuous to do so. But, at the same time, I must also say that such developments need not necessarily lead to personal despair. For, as I have already said, the very fact that an art practice such as the theatre (or more broadly speaking, any art practice that does not, solely, seek to be a profit-making industry) exists in a society, and is dedicated to the process of live communication, *itself* constitutes an act of resistance to these developments. And, I would say that to participate passionately in such art practice is, by itself, to be a very important part of such resistance, at the personal level.

True, such resistance may not be able to prevent the growth of the global entertainment industry entirely. But if it is possible, through such resistance, to keep the effects of that narcotic-like entertainment at a sober distance, then it would also be possible for that same stance of resistance to engender in us a Brechtian 'critical attitude', an attitude that can bring about a change in our art practice itself. I shall end by quoting this poem by Bertolt Brecht:

ON THE CRITICAL ATTITUDE

The critical attitude
Strikes many people as unfruitful.
That is because they find the state
Impervious to their criticism.
But what in this case is an unfruitful attitude
Is merely a feeble attitude. Give criticism arms
And states can be demolished by it.

Canalising a river
Grafting a fruit tree
Educating a person
Transforming a state
These are instances of fruitful criticism
And at the same time
Instances of art.⁷

20

A Kannada version of this essay appeared in the journal
Desha Kaala, Vol. 1, No. 4, January-March, 2006.

⁷ Brecht, Bertolt, *Poems* (New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1981), p. 308.

Image on this page and on pp. 5 and 10 from Tirugata's production of *Three Penny Opera* directed by Akshara KV. Photo-credit: PS Manjappa



A fascination with physics, a tendency towards playfulness, and a keenness to tell stories come together in the work of digital artist, Abhishek Hazra. The following piece is part of a longer work of 'interconnected micro-fiction' that Hazra is currently developing, which explores the theme of causality through narrative.

Abhishek reluctantly revealed the following about his protagonist: "SprachPlug has always been fascinated with Calcium Carbonate, particularly chalk and teeth. As a child, he literally grew up with chalk—his father was a hobby mathematician and enjoyed solving second order differential equations on large blackboards. In fact, their house had a blackboard in every room, even one near the dining table. When he was seven years old, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm for Laplace transforms, he even pulverised his grandmother's dentures to prepare chalk dust for his father."

4.116

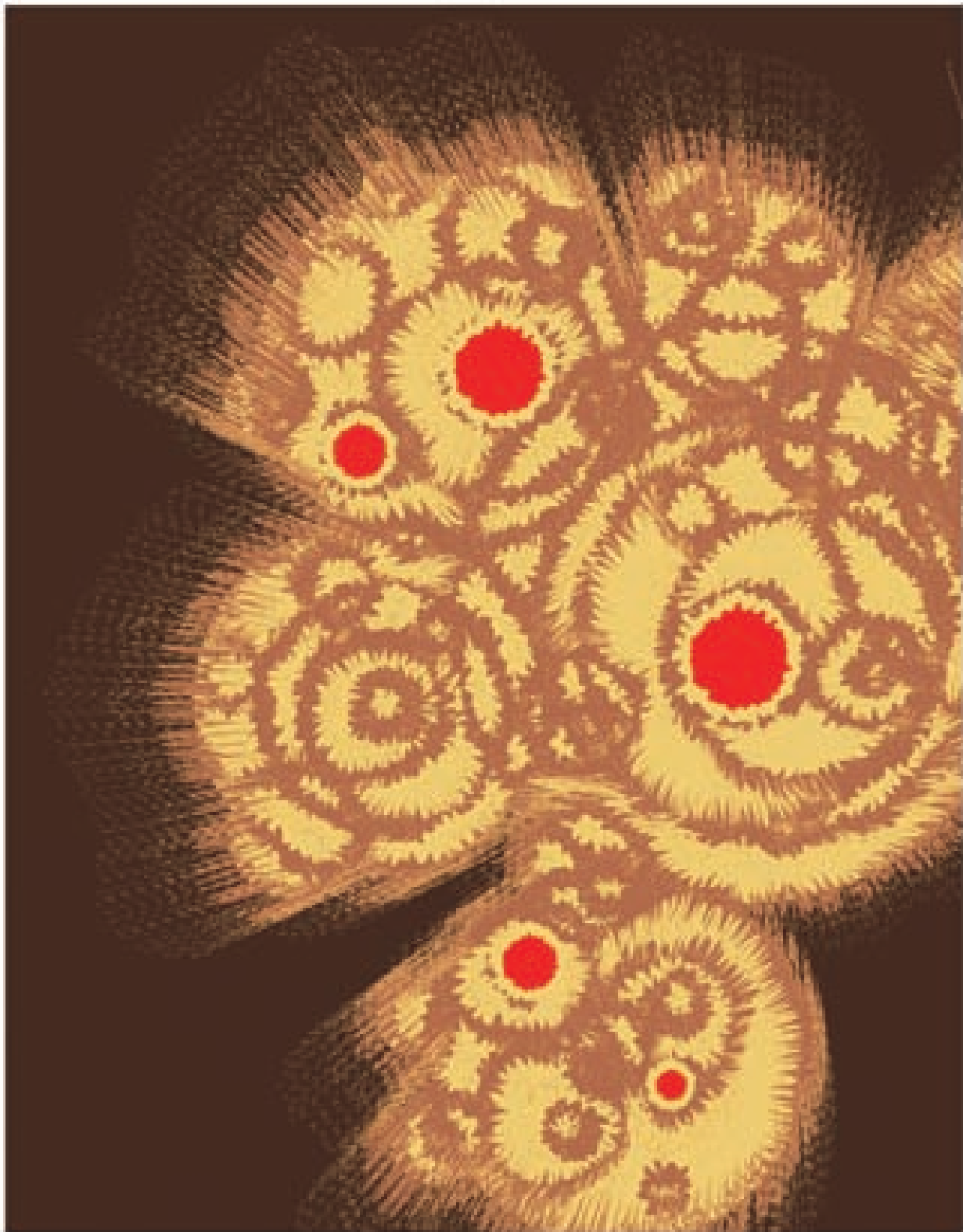
Causality Dentures

Image+Text: Abhishek Hazra

2007



Though he didn't believe in art, for various practical reasons, SprachPlug had to masquerade as a performance artist. Using deposits from the Caucasian chalk circles, SprachPlug had fabricated a set of dentures powerful enough to tear apart even the most rigid causal linkage.



He would sneak into the manicured lawns of laboratories housing influential particle detectors and burrow furiously into the ground with his Causality Dentures. He firmly believed that his intervention would unhinge reality from the tedious textile of causality that the physicists were so intent on unravelling.

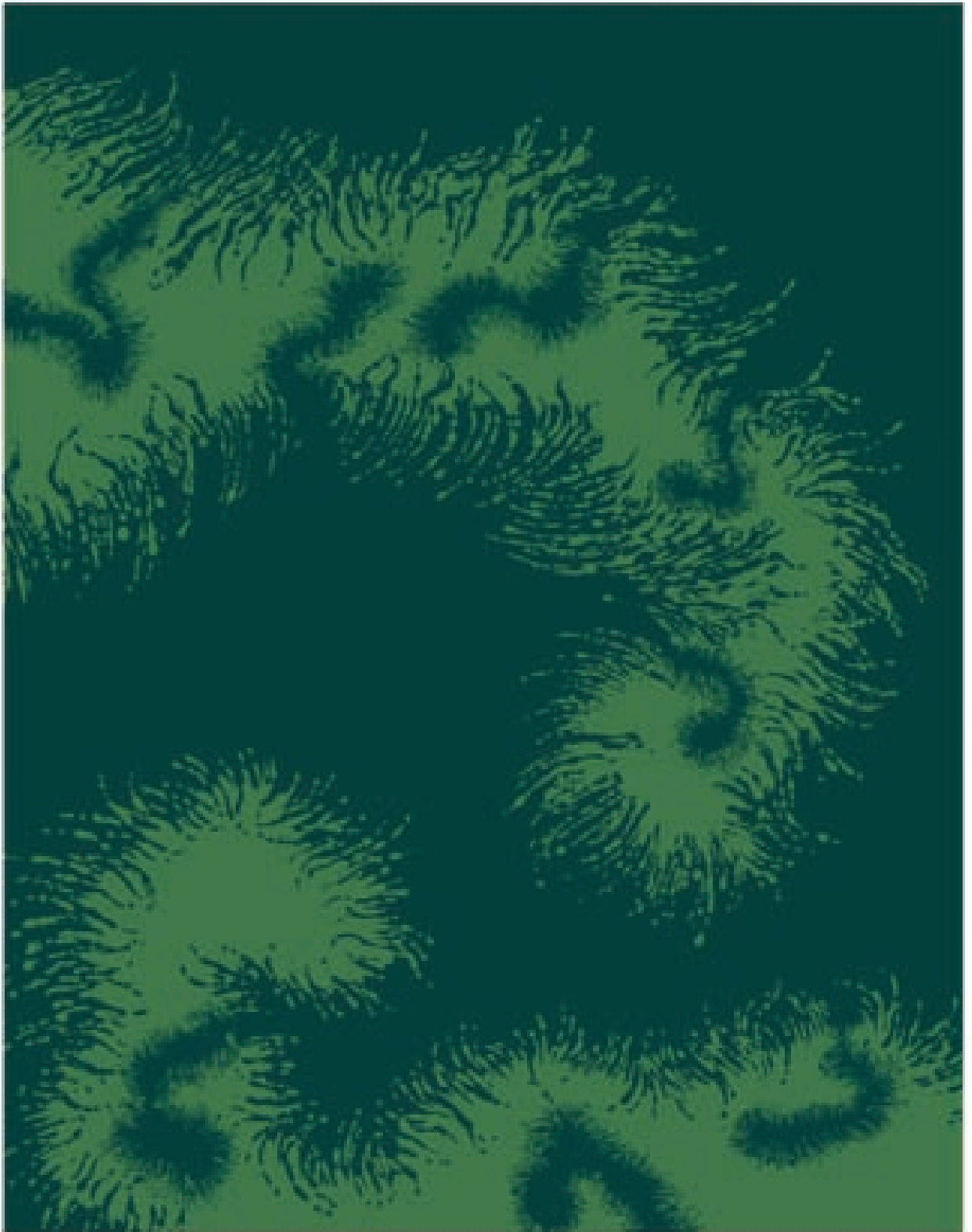


Though the physicists had initially discarded him as a nuisance, they soon detected the uncanny resemblance between SprachPlug's burrow tracks and the particle trajectories that were generated inside their formidable equipment.



Since what was important in their investigation of reality was the particular form of these trajectories and not its actual material basis, scientifically it wouldn't make a difference if they used SprachPlug's

burrow tracks instead of images generated by the particle detectors.



The physicists obviously wanted to keep this revelation to themselves but word got around and soon there were prime time talk shows on the feasibility of using SprachPlug as a research

material. However, before they could even begin looking for particles in SprachPlug's pancreas, they had to non-invasively understand his body's dynamics and its scientific hotspots.



Since it was primarily his mouth that created the burrows, the physicists wanted to analyse audio data generated by SprachPlug. And given that oscillation was one of the fundamental phenomena

in physics, audible sound, which was nothing but another form of oscillation, seemed to be a good choice.



But what would SprachPlug talk about? The physicists decided to supply him with a script, which was simply text based data from giant magnets that performed a realtime tracking of SprachPlug's internal environment.



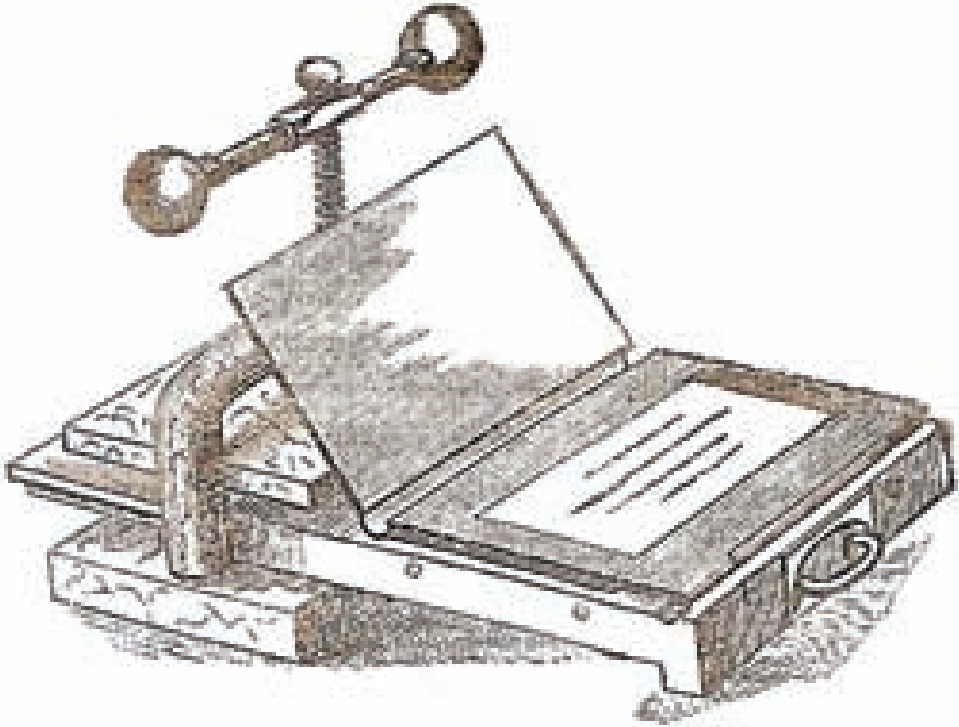
A typical sample of this script would read something like this: “7,249 Sodium ions just crossed over into cell number pR267B located on the terminal tip of my Medial Pterygoid muscle”.

Acknowledgements:

- Shai Heredia, Anjum Hasan, Madhuban Mitra and Sanjay Iyer at the India Foundation for the Arts
- Chandrika Grover Ralleigh, Pooja Varma and Sangeeta Rana at Pro Helvetia, New Delhi
- Katrien Reist and Diana Dodson at PROGR_Zentrum für Kulturproduktion, Bern
- Florian Dombois, Head of the Y Institute for Transdisciplinarity, Bern University of the Arts

From the cultural landscape of early twentieth century Bihar emerges the intriguing figure of Mahinder Misir. Ratnakar Tripathy delves into the life of this musician who was a well-known public figure, moving freely in performance between classical and popular forms, and yet something of a cipher, whose life contains a riddle that remains unsolved to this day.

The Two Lives of Mahinder Misir



33

Ratnakar Tripathy

For most of the twentieth century Mahinder Misir and Bhikhari Thakur were probably the two best known names in the world of music and theatre in the Bhojpuri speaking regions of Bihar. They were famous right from the 1930s till the 1980s when the audio cassette revolution introduced a number of star singers and performers into the region. When Mahinder Misir died in 1951 he was

vacated these spaces in more than a physical sense. The teacher's hushed talk of Mahinder Misir completely disarmed my fact-gathering, my almost forensic search for the 'truth'. He pointed to a little temple named after Dhelabai, Misir's lover and patron, and I realised that Dhelabai, a *tawaif*, had also been promoted in an accelerated mode to deityhood. Clearly, soon after she had built the

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temple to Shiva and died, she was herself elevated to the divine pedestal. Was I dealing with history from a few decades ago or

34

already a legend. Similarly, Bhikhari Thakur had become a haloed cultural figure long before his death in 1971. One would expect that being recent history, their lives would be relatively unlayered by the dust of time and easy to uncover.

But that is not how I felt when I stood in front of Haliwant Sahay's *baveli* in Chhapra in the year 2003, where Mahinder Misir spent many years of his youth. True, the finely worked masonry was intact, but Mahinder Misir had receded into a past so deep that the feeling of historical proximity was not of much help. As I spoke to the teacher of the middle school run in a part of the building, I realised that gripping the bricks of the mansion with intense emotion was little use—its denizens had long

from the hazy centuries of yore, is the despondent question I asked myself as I walked away. I may as well have been communing with the ruins of Nalanda or Rajgir.

In plain language what I am saying is that we Indians are bad at keeping records. On the other hand, we overcompensate for this lack of historical accounts by manufacturing legends. It occurred to me that, ironically, despite the lack of records, ours is probably the longest unbroken mythological tradition in history. Ironically too, as I complain about the lack of records I may well be transmitting, without being aware of it, some of these hoary myths to future generations.

What I also realised is that even as theoretical debates between the

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fact-seeking positivist tradition and the purely interpretive urge behind the hermeneutic (interpretive) tradition continue to echo in the corridors of university departments, a researcher doesn't really need to choose between the two. She can simply use the horns of the dilemma, to use a figure of speech, as a fork to heft her material and pack it into her notes. In brief, when you see a fact, record it; when you see a legend, interpret it. The only problem is facts don't come with certified seals and legends often impersonate facts. So instead of being torn by this irresolvable dilemma, I decided to look upon both legends and facts as two divergent intellectual temptations or 'passions' that cannot and need not be resolved. In fact I began to enjoy my own ambivalence.

There is another ambivalence I need to admit to before I recount the unusual story of my protagonist—Mahinder Misir. Misir belonged to a middling landowning family very much like the rural branches of my

own paternal and maternal clans. And yet, given my staid middle-class background, he seemed fascinating for his singular devotion to music, *ta-waifs* and, well, forging bank notes on a scale that alarmed the CID of the time. For a long time I had a near obsessive musical refrain running in my head: "Making songs, minting money or the other way round, making money, minting songs?" There was a dark mystery to the man that continues to fascinate me to this day—Misir was

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ruthless in clinging to his secrets and left no trails for 'facthound' researchers like me.

Mahinder Misir was born on 16 March 1886 in the village of Misrauli near Jalalpur, a small town near Chhapra in Bihar. During my repeated visits to this village in 2003-04, I could sense its continued accent on music. Misrauli, with around 1,500 souls, had three different musical groups

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and sites where people met every other day to sing *kirtans*. A small, dilapidated shed carried a comically formal signboard—‘College of Music’. Clearly, at least some of these musicians did not consider themselves amateurs even if they would be aghast if accused of being professionals. Apart from receiving a token Sanskrit education, Misir as a child seems to have divided his attention between musical training and the *akhara* (wrestling ring), which combined bodybuilding with an emphasis on celibacy and religious devotion. Interestingly, the nineteenth century society in these parts looked upon these activities with approval and even admiration, up to a point. But the moment they threatened to turn into a passion, the family had to rein in the child with due violence. Forced to give up singing by his grandfather, Misir sulked and then ran away from home. Talent and passion for the arts thus unavoidably went against the *jati dharma* in those times for both upper and lower castes.

There is also some indication that apart from the musical upbringing, Misir received some formal training from an *ustad*—Ramnarayan Misir. An isolated *ustad* may seem an unlikely idea today, but this is precisely what happened to trained musicians who did not care to seek patrons or relegated themselves to the countryside. Since the entire

Bhojpuri region regarded Benaras as its cultural capital, it is not surprising that Misir’s guru was affiliated to the Benaras *gharana*. This is an example of how the light classical-classical dynamics worked, with a steady give and take that remained unregulated by a central authority or a *gharana* head. The situation is comparable to that of professional singers from the Bombay cinema, many of whom to this day receive significant classical training before choosing the path of ‘vulgarity’.

Misir’s running away from home was an extreme measure and a disaster for the family, but it must also have been a potent ‘coming of age’ experience for a youth of fourteen. Hunger and deprivation came mixed with the sweet taste of unbounded freedom that only a renouncer can know. Young Misir seems to have wandered around for nearly a year before being rediscovered by the family. Imagining the mendicants, rogues, seers, singers and impostors he may have encountered along the way, it seems impossible not to romanticise this brief phase in his life. When he did come back, however, it was on his own terms. Faced with the extreme threat of a repeat, the family meekly gave in to the whims of the only child. Misir’s sabbatical from the family won him his deserved bit of freedom forever.

Music, muscles and godliness

took Misir increasingly away from regular education as the twentieth century dawned. Instead, Misir became part of the entourage of Haliwant Sahay, the colourful town-based landlord whose land the family oversaw. Sahay moved in circles with regal pretensions such as patronage of *tawaifs*, music and dance. Terrific squandering of wealth, cultural patronage, refined and sophisticated taste, and a perverse acceptance of financial doom often lent these circles an aura of sublime tragedy which Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* manages to capture so well. Of course, these circles included hangers-on and opportunistic parasites, and Misir was one such parasite to begin with. His talents included a powerfully rich voice, lyrical felicity and muscle power in full abundance when required. Besides, as a close confidante, Misir was also loyal to his patron.

So loyal indeed that when Haliwant Sahay fell for the charms of Dhelabai, the *tawaif* beauty from Muzaffarpur, Misir went ahead and kidnapped her. One needs to remember that in those chivalrous times, it was not unusual for a young lover to waylay his bride to be. Kidnapping someone for a friend's sake would seem to belong to the order of philanthropy! It had strong romantic and theatrical overtones, and violence was aimed at the girl's clan rather than the girl herself. As a 'career' woman Dhe-

labai's case is a complex one, however, and it is not easy to claim that she was waiting for her prince charming to come riding on horseback, her eyes half shut in anticipation. My guess is she resisted and then gave in, hitching her loyalties to a hopefully stable patron.

The story goes that Haliwant Sahay turned out to be a fickle lover. Very soon a love triangle seems to have formed with the pairing of Misir and Dhelabai. Misir adored Dhelabai. So much so, he fell out with his patron for not appreciating her worth enough—a twist of the sort I don't remember seeing in a Hindi film. In the process, however, Misir's distant admiration for Dhelabai seems to have turned into an intimate bond. During my interviews with his grandchildren and their peers, I was time and again given the jarring assurance that the bond was entirely platonic. It seems likely that Misir was by now (circa 1915) a respected name among the cultivated *tawaifs* and patrons as a lyricist, composer and singer, rather than just a debauch let loose. Misir was adept at entertaining both the exclusive *darbari* gatherings as well as the popular audience. He was as much at home with the erotic as the devout. And he seems to have had great charisma: he was a very good-looking man with a tremendous presence.

According to my reconstruction, this is when Misir's salad days

abruptly came to an end. He had to leave Dhelabai in Chhapra and proceed to Calcutta, not as a hang-loose runaway anymore but as a focused migrant in search of a livelihood. In

when the police discover strange but convenient connections between Misir's concerts and certain attacks on government treasuries by insurgents in different neighborhoods. The

police investigate and come up with absolutely no clues. But Misir becomes a marked man. This

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Calcutta his reputation preceded him. Having tasted the patronage of the wealthy and the powerful, Misir discovered the charms of street popularity among the hordes of Bihari mill hands in Calcutta. One wonders what it may have meant to be a 'sensation' in the age of word-of-mouth advertising! Misir, of course, had a huge following in the *kothas* of *tawaiifs* in Calcutta; he seems to have been a known name in *tawaiif* establishments in small and big towns between Lucknow, Benaras and Calcutta.

38

Some of these smaller towns, such as Bhabhua in

Rohtas district, were known for little else but a concentration

of *tawaiif* talent. I was reminded time and again by my interviewees that a visit from Misir to a *tawaiif's kotha* began to be taken as an effective stamp of quality. He had thus acquired the status of a guru or an *ustad*.

Abruptly, the Calcutta story gets clouded by a curious episode

is probably the only (but uncorroborated) evidence of Misir's involvement with revolutionaries in Bengal. The fitness culture of the Anushilan and the Jugantar movements, with their large number of groups and factions, must have seemed inviting to young Misir who also had a clear distaste for British rule. The earliest of the Jugantar groups showed a penchant for conspiracies, which culminated in the Chittagong rebellion in the mid-1920s. Given such a climate in Calcutta, Misir's entanglement with the revolutionaries is pos-

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sible, and even likely. But all this is very ambiguous and speculative. The interesting aspect of Misir's insurgent activity—printing of bank notes with the stated objective of wrecking the imperial financial system—seems like a very urbane idea. One would expect a college-going youth from Calcutta

to envisage something like this, rather than a folk singer from Chhapra, even though paper money is equally useful to everyone.

It is at this point in his life that Misir's story, as the title of this essay indicates, splits into two, and it seems unlikely that the two lives of Mahinder Misir will merge again. Interestingly, there is little divergence over the basic facts; the difference lies in the ascribed motives, and what a vast

Calcutta discover a trail of bank notes moving between Chhapra and Calcutta. On the other hand, life seems to be looking up for Misir and many others who come into contact with him. A large-hearted man by nature, Misir was hardly likely to be stingy with pieces of paper. The CID sends a man called Rupchand, avowedly a tabla player, a fixer of a great *paan*, and a devout lover of music, in the guise of an aspiring disciple (*shagird*). Rup-

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difference this makes to the story! When I started work on this project in 2002, funded by the India Foundation for the Arts, the idea was to document and assess Misir's contribution to the culture of the Bhojpuri-speaking region. But I also had great hopes of untying the Gordian knot of Misir's double life. It turns out I couldn't even cut it.

After a brief spell in Calcutta, this is what happens from 1920 onwards: Misir abruptly leaves Calcutta for his ancestral village with a small but sophisticated press for printing bank notes. He sets up the dismantled press in his remote village, camouflaging his activities with the help of minimal staff. The sweet din of music muffles the mechanical sounds of the press. The police in

chand tirelessly accompanies his guru on tabla and makes his *paans* for close to three years trying to win Misir's trust. After a tiring spell of hide and seek, Rupchand finally discovers the hideout, a cowshed, and the police arrest Misir in 1924. When Misir discovers this piece of treachery he sees the humour in the situation and composes a song addressed to Rupchand, a paean to the cunning of the detective. It became one of the most popular all-time hits in Bhojpuri with many variations:

'Hansi hansī panwa,
Kھیāule Rupchanwa'
[Oh Rupchand,
how you made my *paan*,
Ever so merrily]

Misir gets sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment. He regales the prisoners and policemen with his songs, and in one instance even tutors the jailor's young daughter. When I was roaming in Chhapra town in 2004, someone pointed out the squat and solid prison building and told me the jailor had a second storey especially built for Misir's sake. Misir could hear his pupil sing and she could, conveniently seated on her terrace, enjoy face-to-face interaction with her guru. But then a reliable source and a spoilsport told me it had all happened in Buxar! Dhelabai notably remained faithful to her man throughout, fighting his case for him and carrying food to the prison.

40

With his acquittal several years later, Misir's story peters out. It seems Misir passed the rest of his life uneventfully, singing and composing devotional songs aimed at Shiva and Rama. This is not unusual in a culture where you are taught to be your age and the most colourful and heroic of men accept old age with peace and settle into a humdrum routine, playing their own version of *vanaprastha*, and showing no desperate urge to relive their youth.

These are the bare facts largely supported by the police report made by the shadowy Rupchand. But consider the contrary interpretations. According to one school of thought, Misir printed bank notes with the

grand motive of wrecking the British financial system and to support the freedom fighters. Take two says that Misir had no clear relation with any revolutionary and he printed money just to get rich, despite which we love him as a singer and composer, no moral judgments made! These two versions are supported by two semi-fictional biographies—*Mahinder Misir* by Ramnath Pandey, which depicts Misir as a revolutionary, and *Phulsunghi*, a semi-fictional biography of Dhelabai by Pandey Kapil that sees little patriotic content in Misir's life. Pinning a patriotic motive to money-minting works like powerful dyestuff, however. It is a stain that forces itself all the way back to Misir's adolescence. Ramnath Pandey in his novel is compelled to 'stage' a meeting between a runaway Misir and a Bengali insurrectionary, and present a vivid account of the subsequent indoctrination of Misir. On the whole, it is made to seem that Misir was a revolutionary-in-waiting for most of his early life and all his music was just 'appearance' till he got hold of the printing press—his real-life assignment. It is in this sense that Misir's life shows a fault line right at the centre—Misir was not what he seemed to be. Misir's real life was a carefully maintained secret that we know little about. If one accepts that Misir was indeed a revolutionary, there is a heavy price to pay because then his music becomes a

ploy, a cover to hide his real intentions and mission. With that interpretation comes a great deal of responsibility. The sentence 'He minted money for the sake of the revolution' can change the entire meaning of Misir's life. Are we ready to swallow the idea of his music as alibi?

In the year 2003, when the Bhojpuri Sahitya Sammelan met for its annual session, supporters of the two versions came to blows over the issue: interpretive pedantry can often end up in fisticuffs. Patriotic Misir has however won the recent rounds of the debate with some help from the then Central Minister George Fernandes, who unveiled a statue of Mahinder Misir in Jalalpur in 2003, describing him as a great freedom fighter. While it is difficult to prove that Misir (or anyone else) was not a freedom fighter, that he was one remains unproven. Thus while the two semi-fictional traditions continue to flourish along separate and unrelated paths, no one with firsthand information has stepped forward to put the facts together. As for Mahinder Misir himself, he maintained a discreet silence throughout his life, neither confirming nor denying rumours of his patriotic intent. Standing before his misshapen marble image in Jalalpur and staring hard into his stony eyes through the camera lens was not much help either.

At some point in my project

work I found the laboriously erected puzzle so maddening I wanted to abandon my original intent and seriously look into the historical records on the revolutionary groups in Calcutta, such as Anushilan Samaj, and see if there was a mention of a certain missing printing press, for example. But I decided not to wreck the stated purpose of the project and disappoint the generous funder. It occurred to me that even if Misir had revolutionary connections, he may have had any number of reasons for keeping quiet. Minting bank notes is dangerous business mortally and morally. It can get you killed but it can also corrupt you. What stands in Misir's favour however is that there are no tales of accumulated wealth that I heard of. Standing before his humble estate in Misrauli and talking to his grandson I looked for evidence of the good life. There was none. But later I heard a whisper through my family connections that if a certain family in Champaran is known for its great wealth, it's thanks to Misir, who had parked a good chunk of the cash with them way back. By then I was feeling like the author of a very bad thriller sans denouement.

These days I get an occasional itch to go back to the puzzle, probably through a minor thread in Bengal, if there is such a thing, and follow it all the way to Chhapra. I let this juvenile impulse pass and focus on the more

obvious and undisputed contribution of Mahinder Misir and Bhikhari Thakur. They were both men who devoted their energies to the refinement of popular taste. Misir is known to have evolved his own style of Benarasi Purabi as a foot soldier in a cultural process that over time raised several raw folk forms such as *chaiti*, *kajri* and *hori* to classical or semi-classical heights. He was, so to say, a middle-brow artist, not in the sense of being stuck in the rut of the middle path, but in the dynamic sense of constantly transforming the crudely popular into higher taste. According to the local legends around Chhapra, Misir developed his own style of the Purabi tradition, which is not surprising. Removed from Benaras and left to his own means, Misir and other refiners of the cruder folk forms are likely to have developed their own sub-styles.

In our own time, we have become quite used to *gharanas* in their concretised form, but it's not difficult to imagine a fluid situation where a number of styles emerged and withered away without acquiring any permanence. In our modern eagerness to record and compile we tend to forget that developers of new styles were too much in the thick of things to bother about permanence. Often their main concern was to simply respond to the landscape in their immediate vicinity, and hopefully transform it.

We need to remember that such

dynamism in the folk forms can even cause serious ripples within the classical genres, influencing and reinvigorating the entire gamut of cultural forms. Misir and Thakur performed this task without an ideological prop, unlike our parallel cinema of the 1970s and '80s that was so full of ideological *sturm und drang*. While Misir's contributions veered around the folk musical forms, Thakur was busy distilling theatrical forms such as *labar* and *nautanki* into something higher. Apart from the refinement of the form, he lent serious content to his plays, many of which were frontal attacks on the distorted social practices of his time. This enabled Thakur to acquire a loyal audience over time, ensuring his continued relevance to this day.

Having been alive till 1971, Thakur is now much more widely known than Misir. Thakur's texts have been put together and make for livelier reading than the songs of Misir. Thakur's plays have a clearer stamp of authorship, while Misir has turned into an immanent presence in the world of Bhojpuri melodies and words. It needs to be clarified that even though in my project and in the story narrated here, Thakur, the better-known artist, may seem to fade before the Misir charisma, the fact is that Thakur's fame, for reasons mentioned above, has proved more enduring. It seems that Thakur spent

his long jobless monsoons at Misir's home in Misrauli, listening to him and just hanging around. Experts say that the musical component of Thakur's plays carries the clear stamp of Misir. If ever during my project work I faced the temptation to day-dream, it was about this—being a fly on the wall on a long rainy afternoon during a combined session between Misir and Thakur, performing for themselves with a supreme unawareness of their own stalwarthood.

I wish to share an interesting insight that emerged from the project. Towards the end it became clear to me that very much like high art, the folk tradition has place for further refinement, and in fact a clear sense of distinction between the crude and the refined. In this sense there is continuous give and take between popular and high art. It is indeed the modern 'mass art' of our times that has shown the tendency to exclude the possibility of refinement in an almost categorical fashion, sticking to its crassness with great determination. In fact, this insistent divorce, this distinction helped me define mass art more clearly than ever.

To conclude, what distinguishes Misir and Thakur is that they tried to lead popular taste ahead, unlike the educated practitioners of the Bombay cinema, who give the audience less and not more than it deserves. Contempt for the audience has thus

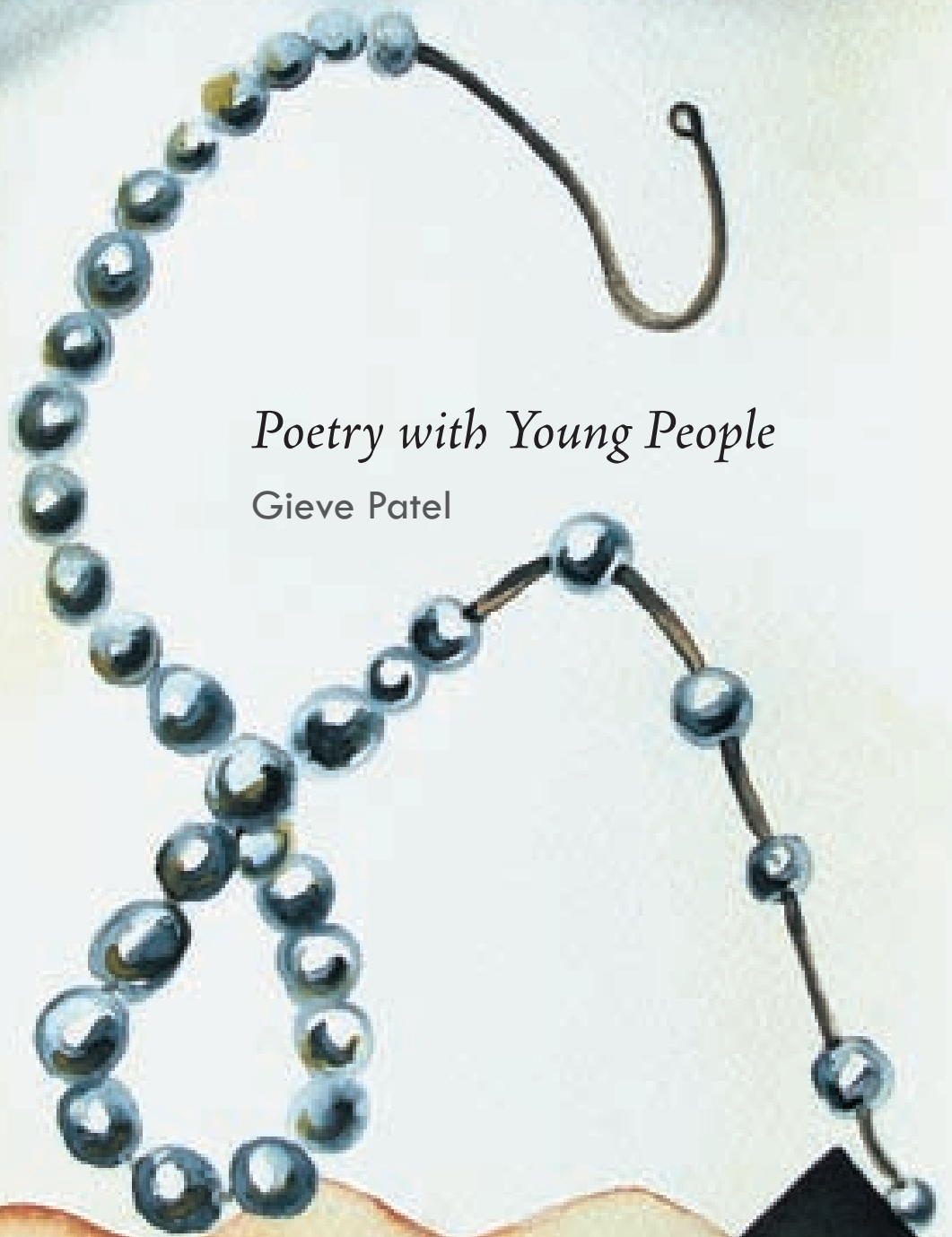
become part of everyday life in the creative circles of the Bombay entertainment circus. Being as meanly materialistic as any other artist, Misir and Thakur would have questioned how such contempt necessarily goes with commercial success or playing safe.

Another time, another walk in Misrauli towards the end of the project, and I could sense the earthiness and the spontaneity of 'taste', popular or otherwise, and the concern for refinement for its own sake. I felt less and less embittered by Misir's reluctance to issue clarifications for the benefit of future researchers of historical facts. I am still not sure, however, if he wanted the world to know him as a double. But it began to seem likely that he didn't want the puzzle solved and he succeeded—just as he succeeded in broadcasting his lovely compositions all over the Bhojpuri region for many decades to come, no copyright issues raised! If, in the process, George Fernandes was persuaded to unveil and garland his statue, well, why quarrel with a bonus?



44

Through his dedicated work with poetry and young people, Gieve Patel reveals how poetry can become a form of heightened awareness and how the works of the masters can speak to high-school students, inspiring them to read, write, recite and think about poetry with pleasure.



Poetry with Young People

Gieve Patel

The Poet-Cobbler during Bombardment

As a mender of soles
I don't gain much by this filthy war.
Yesterday's bombings
Remind me of pearls falling from a broken necklace.

Atishe Chordia

I remember the days when I used
To stand on this table,
Feel tall for a little while and then
jump down.

from *Ancient Table*
by Divyangana Rakesh

46 The lines quoted above are not heroic. They do not express noble or pious sentiments. They do not handle elevated thoughts. And they are not about burning social issues. They address in fact a mere mundane object—a discarded old table. Even so, they stand at the heart of poetry. They do so because within three lines the writer has imbued this object with feeling, memory, and a sense of passing of time. The lines also have an admirable rhythmic structure, the extended third line stretching upward toward tallness and then curtailing the ascent with the almost audible thump of “jump down”.

This poem is one of a large number written by students of Rishi Valley School (in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh) in the course of a workshop conducted by me at the school campus over a period of a decade or so. I am, I believe justifiably, pleased by the quality and range of these poems. Inevitably, there are limitations to my project. These too I will discuss in due course.

To go back to the start of this essay—am I suggesting that poetry should not express noble sentiments,

shouldn't be heroic, shouldn't handle social issues or elevated thought? Of course not. A writer is free to attempt any of these things. But a poem isn't necessarily a good one because it attempts to convey such thoughts.

That by itself cannot make it a good poem. It could even turn out to be a very bad one, in spite of the laudable sentiments expressed. Young people are particularly beset by instructors who want them to express such sentiments in poetry, irrespective of the many other qualities that good poetry calls for. Or they want to be given something cute, dainty, quaint, a false adult notion of what goes on in young minds. No wonder many student readers and writers tend to find poetry uncongenial, and think of it as something at one remove from the specificities of their own lives.

What then does constitute a good poem, if a writer is equally free to choose an elevated or mundane subject? It wouldn't be possible to answer this question in ten lines. It might be better therefore to address sources and to take a look at indisputably great poetry. When we can have an experience of the thing itself, we might allow the question of 'what it is' to take second place. For this reason, very early in the evolution of the workshop I came to the decision that we would keep away from the reams of poetry written specifically

'for young people.' The ages of my students range from twelve to eighteen. If I could choose discriminately for each age group, I felt confident that I could read to them from the masters. Here's just a small part of my list: Sangam poetry from the first and second centuries in southern India, Wang Wei, Francois Villon, Shakespeare, Robert Frost, AK Ramanujan, Anna Akhmatova, Dante, Arun Kolatkar, Ted Hughes. Specific poems from all these poets are accessible to school students. With such wealth at one's disposal, one doesn't need to look elsewhere.

I have yet to answer why I commend the poem *Ancient Table* for not tackling large issues. Just because it begins where poetry should begin—familiar territory. The writer should know what he is talking about, but really know. Don't we contemptuously say: "That man doesn't know what he is talking about"? It isn't any different with poetry. My students were discouraged from writing about witches and fairies, stock subjects in the horrid writings of junior school. Also daffodils, because you don't see them in our country. And a snowy day, if you haven't visited Simla in winter. In short, for a start, write about things you have seen, known, are familiar with, and about emotions you have personally felt or been touched by.

It is an easy corollary to this that you avoid writing at second hand. To reproduce images and feelings from literature you have read without a long and subtle process of assimilation, which incidentally is not an easy process to understand, is as pointless as talking about daffodils—you have not lived through some writer's experiences, just as you have not seen daffodils. So, to discover your own source material, leave most of the things you have read in books behind. Go to your own life; it is richer and fuller than you believe; it has all the

A Question

How did they live before
Chocolate was invented?

Siddharth Bhatia

potential material for good writing.

A third rule of thumb is to discard clichés. It is useless to tell the reader that the sky is blue, that grass is green. He has heard it too often before, it is tedious to hear it one more time, it has lost all meaning—it cannot awaken any new process of thinking or feeling in the reader, since it hasn't in the writer either.

Once these three basic falsehoods are identified and avoided, it is quite wonderful to see how the imagination is released. But why are

we talking about the imagination? Weren't we supposed to leave witches and fairies behind? My answer to this is that we need to distinguish between the imagination, and fancy or fantasy. Fantasy is trivial, small-time, a bit like rather pointless day-dreaming. Fantasy traps you in your own small world of wishful thinking. It is self-deluding, a baby's comfort nipple to suck at. Good poetry rarely comes from it. I use the word 'rarely' to cover myself from charges of inaccuracy. Ultimately, good poetry could come from—anywhere! Even so, one attempts to make distinctions.

48 Imagination is altogether something else. It is empathy; it lets you into worlds other than your own and ultimately leads you to understand that there is nothing out there that does not belong to you as well. When I read a poem like Villon's *Epitaph* with my students, I am inviting them to witness the public hanging of petty thieves in fifteenth-century France, and the crowd of good citizens who come to see the spectacle for their day's entertainment. For my students it is an effort of the imagination to grasp both the historical fact and the associated emotions that Villon's great poem arouses. But that is exactly what sets off in any reader a corresponding capacity to conceive of situations and emotions that are not necessarily a direct personal experi-

ence. I may quote from Sunanda N's moving poem *True Friendship*, about an orphan who has been given shelter and then deserted:

I'll be back in the orphanage if you leave
I won't have anyone to play with.
Hope we meet again in Paradise
Where true friendship never ends.

Or from Bilawal Singh Suri's
Unemployment:

I go walking looking for a job
But I've been walking so long,
Looks at last, dear reader,
That walking is now my job.

Or from Vigyan's
The Smiling Doll:

My boat skimmed over the stagnant
waters
Of the ill-fated village.
I came to a hut,
And drifted past the shattered door.
A doll came into view.

Has Sunanda N been working at an orphanage to be able to tell us how an orphan feels? Has Bilawal Singh Suri personally suffered unemployment? Has Vigyan visited the sites of repeated annual flooding that large parts of the country suffer? I presume not. Imagina-

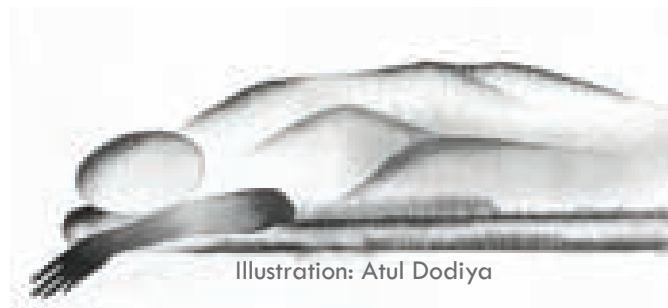


Illustration: Atul Dodiya

tion opens the door to all experience.

Each great poem opens such a door for the reader, giving him access not just to experiences outside his ken, but even to his own experiences, which otherwise would remain unavailable to himself, locked and sealed in the chambers of his own mind. So it is that studying AK Ramanujan's translations of Sangam war poetry gave us access to our feelings about what Afghanistan was going through. Wang Wei helped us to understand that suggestiveness can often be more effective than overt statement. Anna Akhmatova opened a door to the astonishing range of feelings explored in what's rather simply called 'love poetry'. An anonymous Spanish poem *The Gray She-Wolf* translated into English by WS Merwin demonstrated that cruelty used in a focused and conscious way can be a powerful tool in the hands of a writer, that poetry doesn't have to be pious; it can be sharp, violent, acerbic, and still be wonderful poetry. Some of the hard-hitting poems in this collection come from a conscious decision to release inner violence onto paper. The only restraining condition being that, as in the work of the masters, the violence should be controlled within the structure of the poem; that it should be 'held' by the poem and thereby lend power to the experience described.

Rishi Valley School is a four-hour drive from Bangalore City. It nestles in a shallow valley that suffers from being in the rain shadow of hills around it, with the result that in the earlier part of its existence the school was lodged in an impressive but arid setting. Planting of trees started in the 1930s, soon after the inauguration of the school itself. It was a good beginning. The next phase took off in the 1980s with the leasing of adjoining hillsides to the school by government, and in the last twenty years, an ecological program to reforest the valley was established in earnest. The school sought the help of ecologists, students and neighbouring villagers for this purpose. The result of this visionary activity is a transformed environment. The hills and the valley are full of trees, there are water bodies with birds and tiny animals whenever the rain gods are reasonably generous, species of birds that had never been seen in the valley before have started to make their home, and the valley has been declared a bird sanctuary.

The school also has an ongoing rural outreach programme, with satellite schools for the Telugu-speaking villagers around. There are attempts to make connections between English-language schools and rural schools. And there is a constant stream of visitors from various walks of life to inform the students, often on

repeated visits, about the latest news and developments in their particular specialisations: social activists, artists, scientists, lawyers, historians, environmentalists.

Many schools over the years have asked me to give a talk to their students, or do a day's poetry workshop. Well-intentioned, but water off a duck's back ultimately. What can you achieve in a day? In the present case I was re-invited after my first vis-

tion. It wouldn't have been one had I worked with a handful of students who may have volunteered to join the workshop. But the initial trial session with full classes and different age groups gave me the sense that there was an ocean of possibilities here, and I was unwilling to give that up. Who could guarantee that a few volunteers would necessarily be acutely receptive? Within the ocean, however, I had inklings of talents that were as yet hidden

Hourglass in the I.C.U

The heart is ticking,
The sand is slowly trickling.
When the last grain has fallen through
Who will remember to turn it around?

Yoganand Chillarige

it to continue with the work started, and this then became an annual visit. The people and the place were what ensured that I would return again and again. And the workshop evolved on its own steam as we learned from each year's mistakes to alter strategy and direction.

If the school thought the poetry workshop was worth supporting, my engagement with the students was by no means an easy one right from the beginning. Understandably they felt it to be a bit of an imposi-

from the possessors themselves. To bring those out seemed something of a grand design worth undertaking.

I admit to feelings of guilt when I started out. Such clear, beautiful young faces, why was I subjecting them to this extra study? Many of them looked bewildered at the prospect, quietly resentful. There were sneering and defiant looks too. How could I blame them for it? The subject was not part of their prescribed study; I was not even a bonafide teacher in their school. But there was a turning

point and it was with the sevenths, the watershed between junior and high school, minds not yet too burdened by the weight of being grown up. I was explaining a wonderfully suggestive Wang Wei poem. The poem at root was a simple one but was couched in cryptic lines. I had to uncover the lines like the unveiling of a crime in detective fiction. Four tiny lines, and a whole bittersweet situation between a young husband and wife opened up, and the mores of another time and place. And then I saw an assenting gleam in row after row of eyes.

The next hurdle came when I decided the whole school should be made aware that many fine poems had been written by the students in the course of two years with the workshop. I asked the teachers what

they thought of the writers reading their poems out loud at assembly. They were enthusiastic about the idea, but the students were not. Many of them were now writing with something close to pleasure, but to admit this before their peers! The unspoken feeling is that writing poetry is a slightly retarded business—it isn't normal activity. Very accomplished warriors, I said, wrote poetry in bygone times—it's a matter of developing skills. Lukewarm assent, then someone came out with it. "It will be a dummy show," he said. I thought it time for me to exercise a political argument. They appeared unwilling to admit what they had accomplished could actually be worthwhile, or would be seen as worthwhile by their fellow students. So I said: "I love coming to Rishi Valley year after year. You



About Myself

It's easy to hate you
or to love you
when you is me, me is you
and that's it.
There are many permutations
and I
can always try
to justify
any one of them.

Ambika Kamath

52



can see how much I enjoy it. If I give the school a dummy show I won't be invited to come again. Do you think I would risk that?" This argument was met by surreptitious little smiles all around. O yes, they found it convincing.

It was an uphill task nevertheless. The average well-educated Indian school student does not know how to speak at a public platform. The mercurial charming chatter with implosions of words and running together of text is pleasurable to hear at games field or picnics, but it doesn't work as public speaking. In addition, these students at this stage of the workshop saw the reading as something painful to be quickly got over with. The idea was to rush through the poem and then run away. Only repeated reassurance that their text was worth sharing with the rest of the school, that the school actually wanted to hear their poems, could help them overcome the rush syndrome. Not to run words into each other, to speak out loud and clear. Over these ten years, teacher after teacher worked to bring the point home. The work is far from accomplished, but each annual or biannual poetry assembly is at least an audible and coherent experience. It is also looked forward to by most students. Besides giving legitimacy to the idea of a poetry culture within the school, the assembly readings brought home

Illustration: Sudhir Patwardhan

another important point regarding poetry—that it is both a private and a public affair. It needs to be read to oneself in silence. But it also needs to be read aloud, to oneself and before others. The two actions, both of equal importance, together fulfill the destiny of a poem.

Some time around the third year of the workshop I felt the need for assessment of the work done. Was it worth continuing with the project? Was I wasting the students' and the school's time on a self-gratification trip? The teachers expressed generous approval for the work done. A house-parent said that he found the students under his charge fretting under the pressure of having to write a poem, but that this seemed more like obligatory rebellion. Once they got down to the work they seemed to enjoy it, and there was a good deal of excitement in discussing completed poems. I needed to be reassured just a bit more. I showed some of the poems to friends in Bombay—writers, painters, actors. The response was warmly encouraging.

It was time now to introduce the idea of editing. A number of poems that ran into ten lines and more had, I noticed, two or three lines of perception in them, embedded in material of lesser interest. For most professional writers this is a familiar occurrence. We learn to become

editors of our own work, preserving the useful lines, discarding the rest. I hoped to get my students into the habit of editing their own work. But this, I found, would indeed be asking too much of writers who had just written their first few poems. A substantial number of the poems needed no editing, or just the slightest alteration of punctuation or syntax. These are the poems that come to a writer intact, whole. It can happen even to beginners. But many works needed some cleaning up for the heart of the poem to come through blazing. More and more I have wanted to emphasise and demonstrate this process to my students. The poem in draft form may be all their own, but they do need to learn editing skills, something that can be acquired only over a period of time. Even so, I am pleased at the number of poems that do not need to be worked on at all, or to be worked on quite minimally.

Many two- or four-line poems were produced. A number of these come from the writers fully realised, as short, intense little experiences.

Brown

I dream of the stuff that comes
from the oven,
brown as my skin,
warm as my heart.

Nachiappan Ramanathan

But there are some that were extracted during the editing process from poems of greater length.

Boredom

I looked at the blackboard and saw
the fading lines
of yesterday's geography lesson . . .

Ajay Krishnan

This poem as presented was a work of fourteen lines. It is these two lines, however, that essentially carry the poetic load and I thought it worthwhile to isolate them. Seen now in this new form the lines are evocative indeed, of the veins of desiccated leaves, of meandering riverbeds gone dry. To point this out to the writer and to the school audience becomes a vital lesson in editing.

The unpredictability of effective production is one limitation of this project, however. Because a student has written well on one occasion there is no guarantee he will write well again. There could be numberless reasons for this, too many really for me to be able to make a useful surmise on the question. But if excellence of writing is unpredictable, the inculcation of a good reading habit is certainly a more modest end one could aim at. This then could be an aspiration—the hope to create intelligent readers of poetry. Here too, though, I am under no illusions. I am aware that of all the students

who have participated in this project a mere handful will continue to read poetry. Some may give it up now, but may take it up again at some future period in their lives. Whenever they do, this initial exposure to great poetry over six formative years in their lives may make some difference in the way they look at the texts they read.

The exposure to great poetry is absolutely the very basis of my project. A poet friend who was impressed by the students' work asked me how I managed to convey the importance of form in poetry to them. She said she found so many of the poems formally impeccable. My reply was that I did not need to address the question directly. The reading aloud, and to oneself, of master poems seems to have been the way to do it. The sense of form is then imbibed. Even as the close viewing of great paintings will give a painter perceptions about painterly form that no classroom lecture could replicate.

Poetry may be the most misunderstood of genres among the arts. While on the one hand there is an explosion of interest in it all over the world today, as witnessed by its wide prevalence on the net, there is no way to assess what exactly it could mean to its numerous readers and practitioners. And maybe it would be rather imperious for any one person or any one school of thought to presume

Sister

She has the elegance
Of tiny birds that hop around small pools of water.

Muthu A



The Bull

The bull didn't want to horn the red cloth.
He was peaceful on the hill behind the
cemetery and was forced to go to the arena.
He just stared at the cloth being
brandished in front of him and
wondered why men thought of
such things.

He wanted to go back to his
spot on the hill and watch
the undertaker putting another
headstone under the peaceful,
quiet sky.

Mimansa

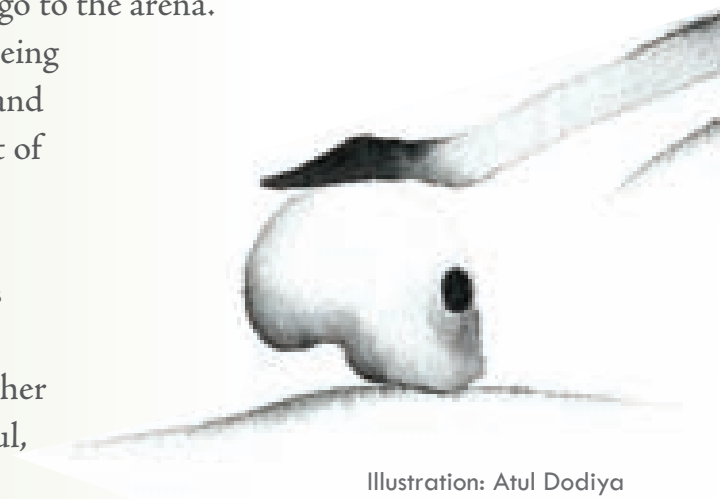


Illustration: Atul Dodiya

56

knowledge of its true estate. Maybe it will always mean different things to different people, and that may be the key to its democratic appeal. But that would be to talk of people to whom it does mean something, however various. What about those to whom it means nothing? This was indeed one end of the spectrum of my experience in the course of the workshop—the unavoidable encounter with the students who had reluctantly to suffer my presence and my instruction. It may have been a miniscule part of their year's many activities, and the number of these students may have been relatively small. But it could have been no less of a nuisance to them for these reasons.

Nevertheless, after acknowledging this, I may make the claim that a substantial number of the students were touched in a positive way by the experience. The evidence for this is in the poems they wrote during the period. Each year I was mailed a few hundred poems from the school. Scrutinising these, weeding out the ones that couldn't be read at school assemblies, I was moved by the earnestness evident in all of them. Each poem was a real effort to come to grips with the material at hand, and to give it a poetic form and dimension. The poems that ultimately worked were elating to read indeed. Those that did not were nonetheless authentic little documents of the concerns of

various individual lives.

My unending need for reassurance was put to rest finally by a statement made by one of the teachers in conversation with me. He spoke of the excessively technophilic bias that edu-

cation today was subject to. This bias, he said, was alienating students from the deepest sources of their being. The corrective could come only from exposing them, at least in equal measure, to the arts and humanities as well.*

A Glimpse of My Great Grandmother

Yellow skin wrinkled
like paint smeared
over a crumpled piece of paper;
Tiny diamonds
on one side of her nose
competing with two beady twinkling eyes;
Arms stretched out as though trying
to ensure that she is living;
Soft lips quivering, trying
to say something about
a bygone era;
and a long nose to get
a whiff of the past.

Mallika Gopal



Illustration: Nilima Sheikh

* A version of this essay first appeared as the introduction to the anthology *Poetry with Young People* (Sahitya Akademi, 2007). Grateful thanks are due to the Rishi Valley Education Centre, Krishnamurti Foundation of India, for permission to reprint this essay and the accompanying poems. Illustrations courtesy Anju Dodiya, Atul Dodiya, Nilima Sheikh and Sudhir Patwardhan.

On the Road with Surabhi



Text and photographs: KM Madhusudhanan

With their grand mythological themes, their lavishly painted backdrops, and their spectacular theatrics, the plays of Surabhi, a hundred-year-old theatre group from Andhra Pradesh, are a throwback to the travelling Parsi theatre companies of the nineteenth century. KM Madhusudhanan is both a filmmaker and a painter, and he captures Surabhi in a series of evocative word and photo images.

“**T**heatre is our life. We have never been able to think about anything other than theatre, nor done anything other than theatre,” Babji, as R Nageshwara Rao is fondly known, said, sitting on an old trunk.

The Surabhi theatre group was shifting base to a new location. Carrying sets and equipment, the members of the group were passing in and out of the company’s arched entrance. Various paraphernalia was stocked in the huge truck waiting outside—a horse head, two cut-outs of stone pillars, the face of a demon, shields, clubs...

The golden hue of dusk on Babji’s face made it look like a dark-red statue. Stroking his white hair, he said, “The times are changing. Today no one needs theatre. If there’s a cricket match on TV, there won’t be any audience for the play. We have

often run shows for no more than four spectators.”

Babji often wondered if his Venkateshwara Natya Mandali, the biggest group in the Surabhi theatre family, would have to close down. How would the 80-odd members of his theatre family survive? None of them know anything other than theatre. This is a family that has stuck together through two World Wars. They wake up with the sole intention of performing in the evening—building the stage, erecting curtains and backdrops, orchestrating light, letting the music rise....

Surabhi’s flag atop the tent was ruffled by a gentle breeze. From where we stood, we could see the 5.30 train, chugging in from afar and speeding into the distant horizon. Surabhi camps at Gudoor, a small village on the outskirts of Hyderabad. Tonight they leave for Bhimavaram

Surabhi actors require elaborate make-up. For the role of Rama, Babji usually takes hours to transform into his 'divine incarnation'. He achieves the extravagance of royalty with cheap makeup and costumes, and fake jewellery. Even though they are keenly aware of the side effects of chemicals on their skin, they have no complaints. The divine character should appear on stage exactly at the appointed moment. That's all.

60



district, a night's train journey from Gudoor. At dawn, upon reaching Bhimavaram, they will set up another smaller camp at the village Nandan-murigaruvu.

"We will enact four plays there," Babji said. Chinmayee and Sai Teja, the child artistes whom I had befriended, brought me tea. There are several smaller families

within this large family at the camp. When members get married and make a new family, they start a separate kitchen and have a separate bedroom. My tea came from one of these kitchens.

Inside the tent, land had been dug out to demarcate space for the audience. Before the audience, segregated with bamboo and boards, the

Surabhi's plays address villagers. They conquer the hearts of the audience with loud performances in spectacular settings. Any other theatre group would find it very difficult to emulate their tricks and effects, and their ease of performance, perfected over the years. They never err, nor forget.



orchestra sits on an even lower level. The orchestra is just an old harmonium, tabla and a keyboard. Right at the front of the stage are pictures of Surabhi's founders. Normally, the play starts at nine in the night. The *aalap* from Vanarasa Panduranga Rao's harmonium rises an hour before the performance. The tabla expresses a *taal*.

"It all started in 1885, in a remote village in Kadapa district called Surabhi, with the play *Kichaka Vadha*. On the occasion of a marriage, our elders were invited to perform at the residence of village elders Sri Ram Reddy and Chenna Reddy. Before that our elders used to perform puppet shows. In 1885, Sri Vanarsa Govinda Rao transformed

the story line of that puppet show into a play," Babji said during the train journey. The rest of the troupe started to prepare to sleep as soon as they boarded the train. Light from the outside world flashed on Babji's face off and on through the train window.

When I woke up, I found the Surabhi actors queued up with their

belongings, descending from the train. Babji led us to a huge lorry awaiting us outside the railway station. The temple site where the plays were to be performed for a temple festival was not far from the station. Andhra Pradesh unfolded green on both sides of the actors' heads as the lorry lunged ahead.

As he got off the lorry, Babji



Hidimbi in *Mayabazaar* has a specific gait. A specific beat. She dances to the tune of the harmonium-player, Vanarasa Panduranga Rao. As the lights dim, the curtain behind her changes to the house of Ghatotkacha.



Actor Padma is making up to be Sri Krishna. A woman dons a man's role. Ironically, it was men who played women in early Indian cinema and theatre, since it was virtually impossible to find woman actors. Every member of the Surabhi family participates in the plays. Here, women can also play the parts of men.

said, "No play today. Nor rehearsal. Rehearsals begin tomorrow morning, once everyone is settled and rested." The stage at the temple site has neither curtains nor sets. By tomorrow evening, palaces, fountains, forest scenes will start appearing. The backdrops and curtains of Surabhi plays

are reminiscent of Parsi theatre. And the first Indian silent films borrowed from Parsi theatre too. Many of Surabhi's sets took me back in time to Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* and *Shri Krishna Janma*. I showed Babji stills from *Raja Harishchandra* in a book I was carrying.

64



Our epics are replete with stories of gods defeating demons and phantoms... an inexhaustible source. Grabbing the villagers' attention for two whole hours, Surabhi's plays bring gods and demons onto the stage. The stories have no semblance to the lives of the spectators. Everything is happening in another world.

“Several of Surabhi’s actors performed in early cinema and earned a name for themselves,” Babji informed me, not particularly interested in the photographs. “The first such well-known actor was Kamalabai. Kamalabai in fact was born on the stage. Her mother Venkubai was a

Surabhi actor. While she was acting the role of a pregnant woman, her performance had to be interrupted as she came down with pains. The curtain had to be brought down immediately. The spectators believed this to be a part of the play. Eventually, when they heard the story of the real



The backdrops and curtains of Surabhi plays are reminiscent of Parsi theatre, which borrowed heavily from the Shakespearean plays that the British brought with them.

Vasantharao. Actor. Father of two children. His wife and children also act in Surabhi plays. Surabhi is one large family made up of many, many such small families. Theatre unites them all. Surabhi. A lamp that has not extinguished for more than a hundred years.



birth behind the curtain, they were stunned and ecstatic.” Waves of pride enveloped Babji’s face.

“When she was a baby, Kamala played Krishna, Prahalada and Luv on the stage. Impressed with her performance, HM Reddy cast her as Prahalada for the first sound film in

Telugu, *Bhakta Prahalada*. Later, she also played Shakuntala. These were major hits in Telugu cinema. Kamalabai was born in 1907 and died in 1977,” Babji recollected.

Later, Babji announced it was time for make-up and started applying blue colour on his face. The

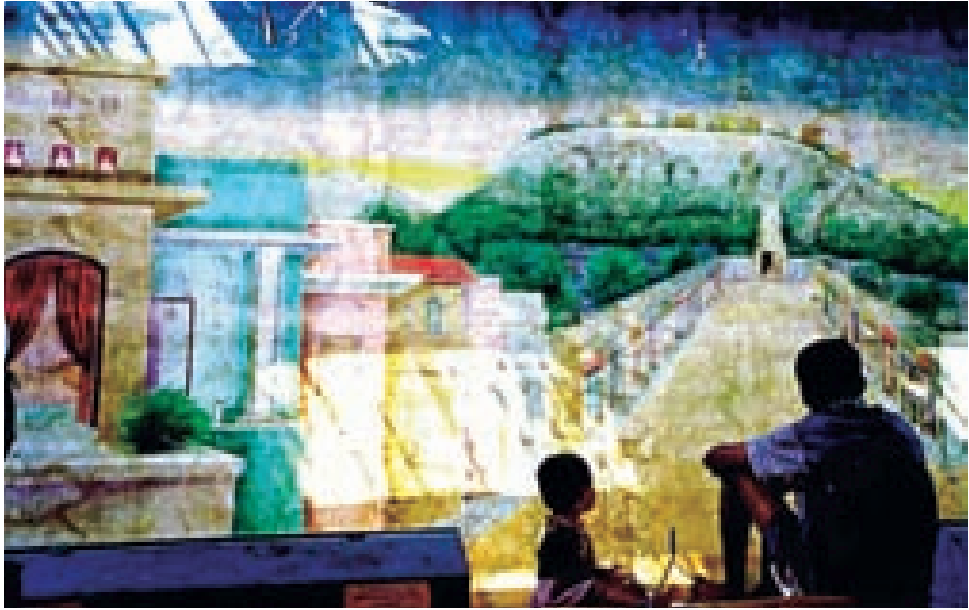
first play for the night was *Luv-Kush*. Men, women and children gathered around the dull bulb hung low and started becoming new avatars. A mother put her child to sleep as she applied make-up. As Mohana Krishna's mother put make-up on his face for his role as the child Luv, his hands drove a toy car. Originat-

ing over a century back, the make-up and costumes of this theatre family are not likely to have undergone any significant change.

Babji almost completely drowned in blue. He rubbed blue into his dark hands and legs. He started applying *kajal* in the eyes. Right next to him, Sita, Valmiki and



Ghatotkacha produces the food that he eats from thin air. In the illusory world of the stage, everything is possible. When the play ends, this family faces hundreds of their own problems. There have been occasions when they have had to perform for a mere three or four spectators. As also occasions when they've performed for thousands of spectators.



68

Where would our next journey take us? Surabhi has an audience in every corner of rural Andhra Pradesh. The moment they reach the next village, curtains need to be raised, the stage decorated...

other characters started emerging. Sounds from Vanarasa Panduranga Rao's harmonium...

"Aangikam Bhuvanam Yasya...."

That night, villagers drowned in the story from the Ramayana.

I said goodbye to the Surabhi family. Upon reaching Hyderabad, after the night's train journey, my head was full of sounds from the plays. On the streets along the

Secunderabad railway station, my attention was drawn to a trader selling pictures and calendars of gods—avatars of gods and goddesses embodying the shadows of Ravi Verma's paintings. They seemed to me to be alive, much like the Surabhi characters of the previous night. Even when I turned back to look from a distance, these forms of the gods continued to stare at me.



The actors that brought the childhood of Luv and Kush to the stage, later performed the more mature roles of Rama and Lakshmana. The very same actors became older still, and appeared on stage as Bhisma and Dronacharya, stroking their white beards. As Time, the biggest theatre person, drew the curtains, these actors became but mere memories. Those memories lasted a little while longer, adorning the crowns and thrones of new faces, and subsequently disappeared onto another stage.

What kinds of issues, concerning both performance and translation, might arise when literary translators translate for the stage in collaboration with practitioners of theatre? A recent workshop aimed at generating translations of contemporary Indian plays also illustrated how the other languages of theatre intersect with the text and create meaning on stage.

70

Accompanying the essay is an excerpt from Lakshmi Holmström's translation from the Tamil of Na Muthuswamy's play *Padukalam* (Battlefield). *Padukalam* is inspired by the Tamil Koothu tradition, and is at the same time a sophisticated and modern play with an individual take on the Mahabharata. Muthuswamy collapses the 8-10 day cycle of performances depicting the 18-day Kurukshetra war into a single performance. The real life situation of the actors (*pangalis* or kinsmen and co-heirs) and their dispute over the boundaries of their land reflects and comments upon the roles they play. Finally role and actor coincide, and the play ends with a real death.

*The Word on Stage:
Translating for the Theatre*

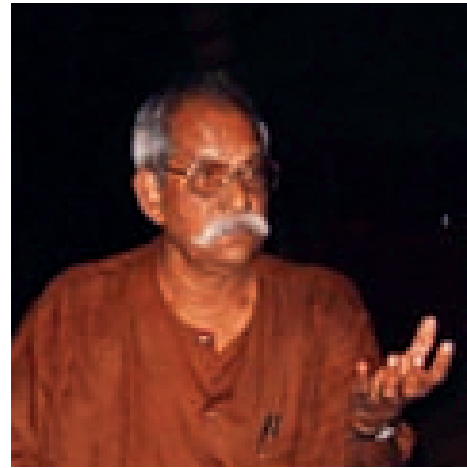


Arshia Sattar

with an excerpt from Na Muthuswamy's
Padukalam translated by Lakshmi Holmström

The Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival held in Bangalore in 2005 revolved around the idea that, after nearly fifty years of the National School of Drama and about the same period of self-consciously 'modern' Indian theatre, it was time that we looked back at ourselves—as playwrights, performers, technical designers and as audiences and critics. The

firmed that the 1960s and '70s were all about sharing each other's theatres, about the excitement of being the first to translate Badal Sircar's new play into Hindi, or Vijay Tendulkar's latest work into Kannada and performing it as soon as possible. Through the 1980s and '90s, with more and more challenges to the idea of 'national' coming in from all quarters, in thea-



Playwright Na Muthuswamy at the workshop.

theme of the festival was Indian playwrights and, apart from performances and workshops, there was also a series of seminars on seminal playwrights and other theatre practitioners who had influenced the look, the attitudes, and performance styles with which we had grown up.

What came up over and over again, in public and private conversations, was the fact that we seemed not to be doing each other's plays any more. Playwright Girish Karnad con-

tre, too, we turned inwards, focusing on and highlighting our own local traditions and our local playwrights. As a result, not only were we no longer doing each other's plays, we were isolating ourselves into smaller and smaller communities, despite the fact that many of us were living in increasingly multilingual cities where theatre was available in several languages, with productions serving both majority and minority linguistic groups.

The obvious reason for fewer

What came up over and over again was that we seemed not to be doing each other's plays any more. With challenges to the idea of 'national' coming in from all quarters, in theatre too we focused on our local traditions and playwrights.

translations from one Indian language into another is simply the fact that there are less and less of us who are multilingual across Indian languages—most of us have only English and one other Indian language firmly in our grasp. But whatever the reason—the dominance of English as a first language for many of us, regionalism over nationalism, the end of the romance with 'modernity' that spawned so many incredible pieces of writing—the fact was that Indian plays were not moving across languages and across performance spaces around the country with the enthusiastic speed they had before.

With that in mind, or rather, to attempt to address that problem (in a small way, let it be said), Ranga Shankara applied for a grant to bring together translators who worked in various Indian languages so that they could move a contemporary work from a regional language into English, with the further proviso that the second session of the workshop would

move in the opposite direction, i.e., move these same plays (and/or other Indian plays) from English into other Indian languages. Bringing translators together in a workshop space (both physical and emotional) had added advantages: one, that we could share our work, our stumbling blocks and our successes; and two, that since we were aiming at stageable translations, we could bring in directors, playwrights, performances of translated plays, other translators and technical theatre people to broaden our understanding of how verbal language works on stage.

The workshop was held at the Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Art Research campus outside Pondicherry, which allowed us the additional privileges of being in a place that had a dramaturge, talented performers as well as a performance space, all of which could only enrich the workshop by adding experiential dimensions to what might have become an entirely cerebral endeavour.

The chance to have our translations read back to us by performers, to hear where the pauses would naturally come, where the breath needs to assert itself, where a sentence should end on a high rather than a low note, was a tremendous gift and not one that is available when we work on our own.

Somewhere, buried in this emphasis on performability, was the understanding that Indian play scripts are now also texts for study—they have begun to appear regularly in university courses on Indian literature here and abroad. The occasional intrepid teacher of the social sciences might also now recommend that we read plays written after 1947 as a critique of society, or of the nation-state. So, the issue that was foregrounded in the workshop was the creation of *stageable* translations rather than literary texts. Little did we realise how far that would take us from the business of literary translation, a business to which most of us were far more accustomed, for the text that can be read with felicity and footnoted to carry all its nuances and meanings is a far cry from the text that is required by a performer and a director.

The first person to bring this to our attention as translators (rather than theatre practitioners) was Atul Kumar, Director of The Company Theatre, Mumbai. Atul had worked with Rajat Kapoor, when they were all part of the theatre group Chingari

in Delhi, to create Hindi translations of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Maids* (Jean Genet). He then went on to do other independent Hindi translations, including *Chairs* (Eugene Ionesco). Atul boldly declared that the idea of translating a play for the sake of translating it was of no interest to him. As a director and actor, he worked the other way: once he decided that this was a play he wanted to do in another language, he set about 'translating' it with the idea of the designed production in mind. If he had already envisioned a certain style for the play, for example, *Chairs* as buffo, he then adapted Ionesco's text towards that mode, rather than concerning himself with a faithful literary translation of the text. Atul also introduced the idea that 'less was more' for a play script that was going into performance: the more open a text was in terms of possible interpretations, the more likely it would be to excite the imagination of performers and directors. The empty spaces in the script would be the spaces that the director and performers would fill.

Prakash Belawadi, who was translating into English his own stage adaptation of UR Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel *Awasthe*, took the idea of 'less is more' further still by saying that when one writes and translates for the stage, an isolated sentence should not make any sense. For exam-

ple, he said, the sentence “Don’t touch me!” should ideally be presented for the stage simply as “Don’t!”—an imperative surrounded by empty space. The implications of the rest of the imperative would be demonstrated and emphasised by physical gesture and movement, not only by expression and intonation. Sadanand Menon, who worked for decades with choreographer and dancer Chandralekha as a stage and light designer, talked about the many languages that are present on a stage at the same time and that are available to performers, directors and audiences. Apart from verbal and physical languages, there are also the ‘languages’ of set, lighting and music, each with grammars, syntaxes and lexicons of their own, each capable of conveying meaning. Stage writing, therefore, should be metonymic in nature, a part that stands

for the greater whole, the whole being fully apparent in a complete production, but which is implied continually, by each of its parts.

Nonetheless, we all felt, since we were translating ‘texts,’ we did need to work towards representing the text as fully as possible, rather than letting the translated word rely on its stage siblings for a completion of its meaning. No contemporary writer or translator who produces words for the stage suffers from the delusion that the word and the text will remain wholly intact.¹ A play script goes to a director who then moulds the script to his/her vision of the play and edits and chops and changes and shifts emphases according to a personal and often highly subjective interpretation. Sometimes, words will be excised completely and replaced by one or more of the many other languages that theatre so effort-



From left to right: Translator, Lakshmi Holmström; writer and critic, Shanta Gokhale; and playwright and director, Prakash Belawadi.

¹ One has to mention here the exceptional case of the extreme control that Samuel Beckett himself and later his estate, impose upon performances and productions of Beckett’s plays.

lessly commands. Translators need to re-present the original text such that performers and directors can excise words but retain meaning.

The problems of addressing the fullness of the word *per se*, are apparent (though not exclusively so) when working out of Indian languages. The temptation to leave pan-Indian words and verbal gestures untranslated is enormous: the *arrey*! and *bhais* and *namaskars* and *pranams* of Hindi, which do not have easy English equivalents, could well be left alone for most Indian audiences, if not for most Indian languages. Like other verbal gestures, *arrey* means different things at different times and in different contexts. We could argue that it should be translated with a constellation of alternative words that respond to its galaxy of implications, the same word from that constellation being used each time *arrey* expresses the same emotion. But what then, if we are producing, say from Hindi, an English text that will be used as the basis of say, a Kannada translation? How does the middle (English) translator convey to his/her Kannada counterpart that the multivalent *arrey* (and a relatively proximate verbal gesture) is the word behind a constellation of equivalents that includes greetings, imprecations, expletives and questions like “What!” “That’s odd!” “Hey!” and simply “Oh?”

My own struggle at the work-

shop and after has been what to do with the deceptively simple Hindi sentence, “*Main theek hi hoon*” spoken by Raju, the utterly average and unremarkable-in-every-way protagonist of Manav Kaul’s *Shakkar ke Paanch Daane*. For Raju, this is an existential disclaimer as well as a statement of fact about his average life in an average town in an average time. Specifically, at the moment when it is spoken, it describes the level of his cricketing talent and extends to being a comment on general competence. “I am just/simply ok” is the English equivalent that I am working with, searching for an emphatic that replicates the Hindi *hi* as conviction as well as resignation, and also searching for a pithy formulation that will convey the depth of Raju’s ennui. My instinct is that I will have to settle for one of these emotions on this occasion and find ways to fill out the nuances at other moments in his monologue. As a literary translator, perhaps I am cutting corners, but as a translator for the stage, I am counting on the fact that a multitude of other signifiers will convey Raju’s wasteland and that the crushing weight of his alienation will be obvious to the audience.

Translators also work on the assumption that keeping the *arrey*s of a text colours them with locality, roots them in a specific culture and linguistic framework. We look to these expressions to capture the rhythms

of the original but more than that, even, we look to them to be the markers that simultaneously include the audience (for we guess their meaning from context) and remind us of our distance from the original language. Look for a moment at Lakshmi Holmström's translation of Na Muthuswamy's *Padukalam* from Tamil. Her retention of the Tamil vocatives *di* and *da* punctuate the speeches and provide some sense of the particular rhythms of spoken Tamil. So too, her choice of "Duryodhanare!" in favour

a universe of meaning across to the reader. The translator for the stage has to assume that the performer will internalise these universes of meaning and convey them to the audience through the skills and resources at his/her disposal. Where, then, would the translator for the stage place that additional material, such that it be available to the performer first and then, through him/her, to the audience? In the same critical armoury of glossaries and footnotes (as we already do with Shakespearean scripts),

My own struggle has been what to do with the deceptively simple Hindi sentence, "*Main theek hi hoon*" spoken by Raju, the utterly average and unremarkable-in-every-way protagonist of Manav Kaul's *Shakkar ke Paanch Daane*.

77

of the uninflected English declension, heightens that sense. For the reader of Holmström's text, these expressions might simply bounce off the eye, but for the performer of her text, they may well become indicators of inflexion, emphasis and pause, ways to replicate alien rhythms in a familiar language.

The literary translator can always resort to an additional armoury of footnotes, glossaries and other text-critical materials to carry

which frame the text itself? Or rather, in an extensive and loaded Introduction to the play, as Alok Bhalla does in his majestic new translation of Dharamvir Bharti's *Andha Yug*? All of Bhalla's extra-textual comments and contexts are stated in his Introduction which becomes the space where he, as a translator of a well-known and often-performed play, is able to provide interpretive materials for performers and directors. His reading of the play is set apart and as a result, the play

text itself remains clean and open, reading fluently both as a literary text as well as performance script.

Another point of interest that became apparent through our workshop discussions was that the issues we were confronting had very little to do with translating from Indian languages into English. Translating towards less rather than more, translating for the spoken rather than the read word, concentrating on patterns of speech, registers of voice and the syncopation of dialogue in the absence of descriptive text, surrendering to the other languages of the stage, acknowledging existing theatricality in a work as well as highlighting inherent moments of drama (as Holmström so confidently does in her translation of Scene 4 of *Padukalam*): these are the parameters that define all adaptations for the theatre, be they across language or across form. An adaptation from a novel or a story would equally have to concern itself with these matters.

As far as translating across language goes, any translator of any work has to make the decision of whether to 'naturalise' the work in the target language, i.e., make it sound as if it were originally written in it, or keep it 'exotic,' i.e., remind that audience that the original text comes from another place. While translating the Indian epics (or any other classical text), for example, both time and space

combine to create the distance that separate the reader from the ancient story as well as from its composition in another language.

My decision while translating the Sanskrit *Ramayana* into English was to constantly negotiate the distance of time, space and culture for the contemporary reader rather than to eliminate it altogether. While a simile like "Sita trembled like a slender banana plant in a high wind" brings Indian images into English in ways that might be considered enriching, the alliterative and melodic *gajagami* simply cannot be translated as "Sita walked with the gait of a female elephant". I would translate *gajagami* as "Sita, who walked with a swaying grace . . .", willingly sacrificing the specificity of the image because it might reduce to laughter the reader who has never seen the unexpected beauty of an elephant's walk. But even as the text is made more and more familiar through strategies like this, I believe that we do need to remind readers that the story of Rama comes from a different time and place. In order to do that, my decision has been to retain words like *dharma* and *asrama* and *raksasa*, using italics as a visual marker of that difference. While *dharma* and *asrama* can be counted now as part of wider English lexicon and, therefore, legitimate in an English translation, the italicised *raksasa* and *yaksini*, for example, cau-

tion the reader that we are coming upon the unfamiliar and the as yet unknown. The italics should break the visual ease of reading such that the reader becomes alert to difference and strangeness.

A literary translation, thus, has to rely on nothing other than words chosen carefully, reinforced, if necessary, by the persuasive strength of notes and glossaries and the occasional orthographic trick. It is, fundamentally, a universe controlled by the translator him/herself and complete, in and of itself. But a translation for the stage has to imagine its carefully chosen words (which may not be the same carefully chosen words as those of a literary translation), as part of something larger and more complex, and for the translator, perhaps not

fully knowable.

In Hindu mythology, Vinata bears the sage Kasyapa two sons who are born from eggs. In her eagerness to see her children, Vinata opens the first egg too early. Aruna emerges, radiant and shining, but without his lower limbs. Garuda, who emerges later, is born with all his limbs and in a great flash of lightning, disappears into the sky. It is Aruna who becomes the charioteer of the Sun, combining his natural radiance with Surya's and bringing light, day after day, to the world. Like Aruna, a translation for the stage merges its brightness with the other radiances of performance and production while the literary translation flies like his brother, Garuda, alone, into the sky.



Theatre director S Ramanujam



80

The following is an excerpt from Na Muthuswamy's play *Padukalam*, translated from the Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström.

Scene 4

(The Melam drum is struck. On stage, two men holding up the screen. Kattiyakkaran appears in front of the screen and begins to dance.)

KK: Wearing his matchless jewellery
 clad in superb striped clothes
 his fine pot-belly
 shining in front of him
 the Kattiyakkaran comes—
 he who guards the portals
 of gracious, much loved Duryodhana—
 the Kattiyakkaran comes
 to this great audience.

(sings)

- Look, the Kattiyakkaran
comes!
Look, look, who's this?
It's the Kattiyakkaran
with his banner of fire
and his beautiful headdress
- KK (calls out): Sindoor...
- Chorus: ... on his forehead.
- KK: Anklet bells...
- Chorus: ... sounding a rhythm.
- KK: His cap on his head...
- Chorus: ... at a slant.
- KK: Squatting and jumping...
- Chorus: ... walking his walk.
- KK: Look, look, here he is
here comes the Kattiyakka-
ran.
- KK: All you fine spectators,
Vanakkam. The theatrical
troupe from Chennai, known
as the Koothu-p-pattarai...
- Cho: Yes, yes.
- KK: ...is here to present to you
the Koothu of the eighteenth
day of battle from the
Mahabharata, the Koothu
known as Padukalam. If
we make any mistakes in
words, or music, or rhythm
or pitch, or any mistakes
whatsoever, we ask you to be
gracious enough to forgive us,
as you would forgive and ac-
cept your own children when
they have done wrong.
- KK: What is snatched from your
hands is *duttu*
- Cho: Ah ha
- KK: What stays in the shops is
laddu
- Cho: Ah ha
- KK: We block chariot wheels with
a *muttu*
- Cho: Ah ha
- KK: A growing girl must eat *puttu*
- Cho: Ah ha
- KK: If you go where you're not
wanted, you get a *kuttu*
But we are the Koothu-p-
pattarai set(tu)
Give us a hand now, once,
loudly!
Now see how Bhima and
Duryodhana enter the court.

(When he says this, the screen trembles. The Screen-holders watch this happening, then turn their gaze towards KK before speaking.)

Scr 1: What's this? You want us to watch Duryodhana's entry?

Scr 2: You are the Kattiyakkaran who guards the Gracious Duryodhana's portals, aren't you?

Scr 1: You come wearing matchless jewels and clad in superb *sal-ladam*, don't you?

Scr 2: (Pointing to the screen) Do you know what this is?

82



KK: (Frightened) What's it?

Scr 2: That's what I asked you. What do you think this is?

Scr 1: This is the sari which Duh-sasana pulled off. It's Drau-

padi's sari. It's what we use for our screen, in Punjai. You know that?

KK: I know, I know.

Scr 2: Then why are you praising Duryodhana to the skies?

KK: Sorry, sorry. It's just force of habit. I'm sorry.

Scr 1: This screen isn't one which stays impartial. It's not going to bring a hundred and one pigs on to the stage and prance about singing their praises either. You know that?

Scr 2: It can twist your neck off, you know that?

(The Screen catches hold of him and shoves him away. It goes toward Duryodhana and Bhima, both of whom are dancing—possessed—and is now held between them. Duryodhana and Bhima are each held by a *'thundu'*, shoulder-cloth, which is thrown around his waist by a spectator. They stand on either side of the screen. Other spectators appear on stage.)

Spec 1: I garland you on behalf of the Vannarapettai group.

(He garlands Duryodhana with a hand-woven towel. Another man removes it immediately. Dur acknowl-

edges both actions.)

Spec 2: I garland you on behalf of
Mulakkadai.

(Throws his towel around Bhima's
neck. It is removed exactly as before.)

Spec 3: Raja Bhuja
Maharaja rajashri
Maharaja rajashri
The great landlord The great
landlord
Acting Revenue Officer The
Acting Revenue Officer
Of Vadiva Street, Punjai
Village—
Raja raja Govinda Raja
Naidu
Govinda Raja Naidu
offers Brother Bhima Brother
Bhima
a thousand gold coins.
Be victorious Be victorious!

(He pins a rupee note on Bhima's
clothes.)

Spec 4: Maharaja rajashri Maharaja
rajashri
The younger brother of the
great landlord
of Vadiva Street, Punjai
village
Subbaraya Naidu Subbaraya
Naidu
offers a thousand gold coins
to
Raja, raja raja the great and

glorious
Duryodhana Maharaja
Be victorious Be victorious!

(He pins a rupee note on Dur's
clothes. Two others come running up



and pin more rupee notes on Dur and
Bhima. Another two bring garlands
made of frogs and lizards and place
them round the heroes' necks. Musi-
cians run up and begin to play in
front of them. Dur and Bhima are
possessed, and begin to dance again.
The garlands are removed from their
necks. The screen is now twisted into
a rope that is held between them. Dur
and Bhima are dancing in a frenzy,
pulling at the rope and shaking it
about furiously.)

Bhi: (furious) You are trying to
change the boundary line,
aren't you?

Dur: It's you who's trying to change it, *da*.

Bhi: I'm not, you are.

Dur: No, it's you who's trying to change the boundary.

Bhi: You are.

Dur: I tell you, it's you.

(They pull the rope about as if it were the boundary line, still dancing.)

Rope 1: (to the man holding Bhima by his *thundu*) Watch it, watch it. Don't let go. Careful.

Rope 2: (to the other fellow) You be careful too, *da*. Careful, don't let go. Watch it.

Bhi: You're changing the boundary, aren't you?

Dur: It's you who's changing the boundary.

Rope 1: This is not the boundary line, let go.

Bhi: It's not a rope, it's a fence!

Dur: It's the wild castor tree fence grandfather built.

Rope 1: Your grandfather is the same man as that fellow's grandfather. Now let go, this is not a fence, it's a rope. Leave go.

Bhi: Your father and my father made up, because they had the same father. So why should the grandsons make up, *da*? There's nothing to hold us together, *da*. We can just take away the hayricks and pull up the fences. That's the way it is, *da*.

Dur: *Dey*, Bhima, there's such a thing as the right of possession, you know that? You revolting beef-eater, you!

Rope 1: Don't *da*. Don't.

Thundu 1: This man's father and that man's father were brothers, *'nga*. Didn't Pandu and Dhritarashtra stand united? Their father... (looks at the man standing next to him) Whatsisname? Their father?

Thundu 2: Say he was called Subban. What does it matter? Both these fellows have the same grandfather, that's all. Call him Subban.

Thundu 1: Subban, then. He set up a hayrick for them all to use.

Should it end up like this?
I told them not to fight. Did
they listen to me?
Now look, they are both
dancing in a frenzy.

Spec 1: Careful, careful! Don't let
anything happen. The show
has to go on.

Thundu 1: They were saying in
Thanjavur, you must always
hold a rope between Hiran-
yan and Narasimman. The
white *dorai*, collector of
Thanjavur warned them.
Remember what happened
in Aurangzeb's court when
one actor killed another!

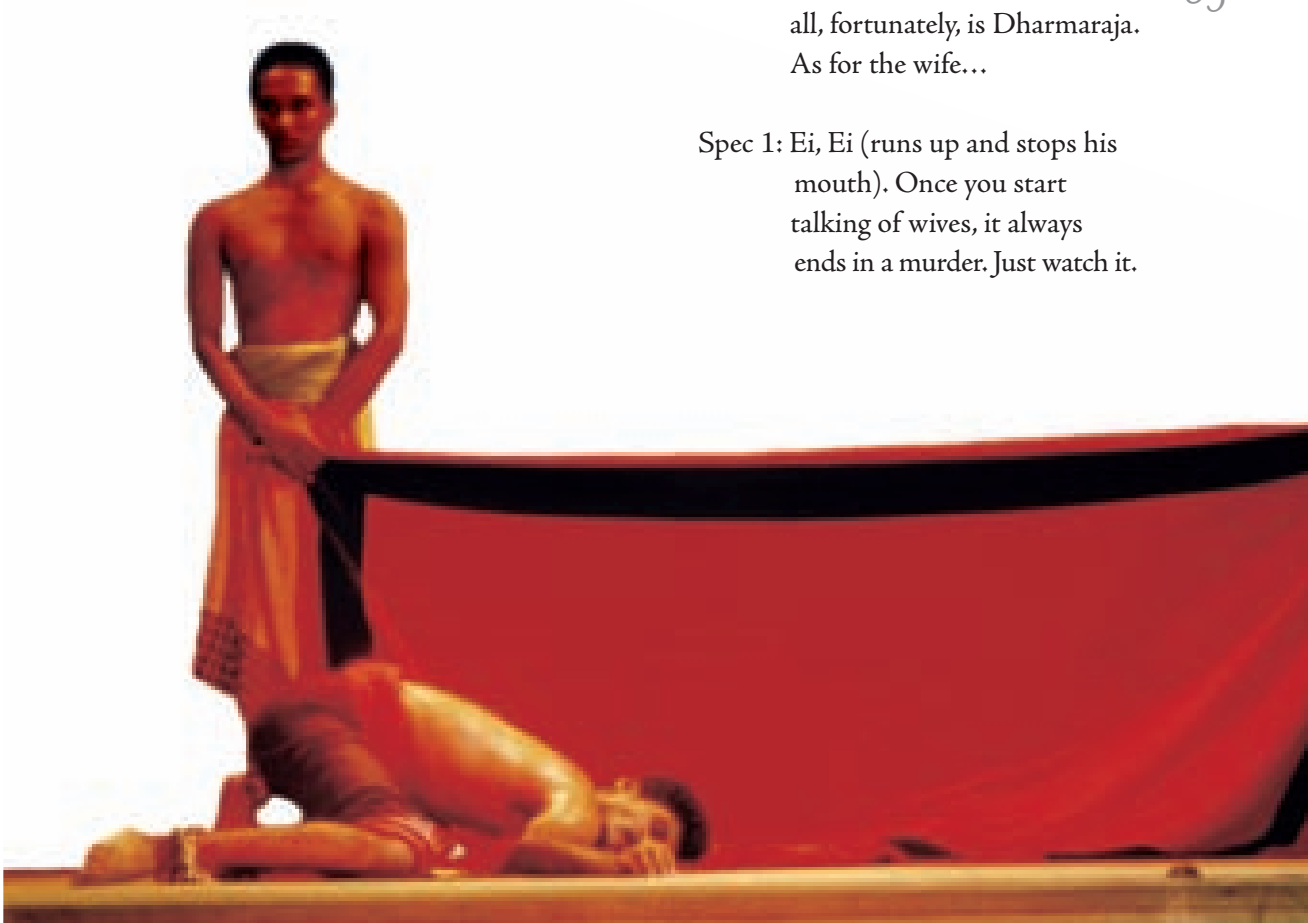
Spec 2: We told them that real
enemies shouldn't take up
opposite roles. But would
they listen to us?

Spec 3: What does it matter if you
lose a small piece of land you
can just stride across! Will
your whole clan go to ruin?

Spec 4: So, if this fellow is called
Duryodhana, then he must
have a younger brother called
Duhsasana, I think.

Thundu 1: Fine names they've given
them. Duryodhana, Duhsas-
ana; Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula,
Sahadeva. The hero of them
all, fortunately, is Dharmaraja.
As for the wife...

Spec 1: Ei, Ei (runs up and stops his
mouth). Once you start
talking of wives, it always
ends in a murder. Just watch it.





Thundu 1: She too has made a vow,
da. All these women in our
village are changing in the
way they think.

Thundu 2: All this sensitivity and
self-regard has gone too far. It
must be toned down a little.

(The drums sound with a fast beat.)

Dur: Shameless whoreson.

Bhi: Who are you calling a shame-
less whoreson?

Dur: You are the shameless whore
son. Today you'll sleep with
your elder brother's wife, to-
morrow with your younger
brother's.

Rope 1: Don't bring in this talk of
wives.

Rope 2: Don't talk of wives.

Dur: So what if I do? It's a cow-
ard who thinks the rope is
a snake. For the man who
dares, the ocean is only knee-
high.

Bhi: Beat the drum, *da*. Let me
beat him and break him and
let loose the sewer that is
flowing inside him.

(The *parai* drum is struck loud and fast.
Some of the spectators run up and try to
make it quieter.)

Specs: Enough now, enough.

Spec 1: It isn't a sewer that's flowing
inside him. And it isn't blood
either. It's molten, red-hot
iron that flows inside him.

(They stop the *parai* drums.)

Bhi: What did Duhsasana say yes-
terday? He said like mother,
like sons. He said that the five
of us married one wife,
Panchali, without shame. He
said we learnt from each other
to be shameless.

Dur: Well, it's true, isn't it, Son of
the Wind?

Bhi: See, See.

Rope 1: Quiet, quiet! She never slept
among the five of them on the
same mat, did she? Quiet. Quiet.

Bhi: I'll smash this dog Duryodha
na's thigh and end his life!
You needn't think these are
my words. These are god's words.

Rope 1: Oi, Annacchi, shut up, Oi.
You're fighting over a tiny
piece of land the size of a

hand-span. In the olden days, your grandfather set up a common haystack for the lot of you. Then because you complained that the cows of this house and the cows of that house were pulling away the hay and chewing it up, he divided it. And after the partition, he built a fence so that each of you could have your own land. Now you are making a big issue of it.

Bhi: It's true we five married one woman. Is that any reason for changing the boundary line? Do you think we don't know what you are saying behind our backs? Are we deaf? You needn't think we've lost our wits.

Dur: I only said let me join you five, and be the sixth. I said, just come and sit on my lap for a bit, that's all. (Slaps his thigh in demonstration)

Bhi: *Dey* (leaps at him)

Rope 1: Oi, Duryodhanaré, kindly shut up! We know you have a very broad lap; now shut up.

Dur: It's not just me wanting revenge; there's your older

brother as well. The one who was cast off and found drifting on the river.

Bhi: We dispatched him yesterday itself, don't worry. Same with your beloved younger brother. I myself pulled off his shoulder, drank his blood and finished him off. I'm going to break your thigh, and twist off your head and throw it to the crows. I'll feed it to the wolves.

Dur: This is Punjai, *da*, Punjai that belongs to Kodaarang Kondaan. Just like your wife belongs to your father.

Rope 2: *Dey*, Duryaa (tying him up) See this is what the Thanjavur *dorai* warned us about! I'm going to tie you up.

Thundu 1: *Dey, dey*

Thundu 2: *Dey, dey*

Rope 1: (helping to tie Dur up) Bhima, give it to him. Break his thigh. Let's finish it right now. Lift this fellow up.

(The two Ropes lift Dur and run off with him. Bhi tries to run after them. Some of the spectators hold on to him. They all run out.)

Workshop photos (pp. 71, 72, 75, 79) taken by Nirmala Ravindran, Arjun Shankar and Naushil Mehta.

Image on this page and on pp. 80, 82, 83, 85, 86 from Koothu-p-pattari's production of *Padukalam*.

Photo-credit: Mohandas Vadagara.



ArtConnect

An IFA Publication
Volume 1, Issue 1
January-June 2008

Contents

EDITORIAL

3

THEATRE IN AN ERA OF ENTERTAINMENT AS GLOBAL INDUSTRY

Akshara KV

Translated by S Raghunandana

4

CAUSALITY DENTURES

Text and Images by Abhishek Hazra

21

THE TWO LIVES OF MAHINDER MISIR

Ratnakar Tripathy

32

POETRY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Gieve Patel

with poems by

Atishe Chordia, Siddharth Bhatia,
Yoganand Chillarige, Muthu A, Ambika Kamath,
Mimansa and Mallika Gopal

44

ON THE ROAD WITH SURABHI

Text and images by KM Madhusudhanan

58

THE WORD ON STAGE: TRANSLATING FOR THEATRE

Arshia Sattar

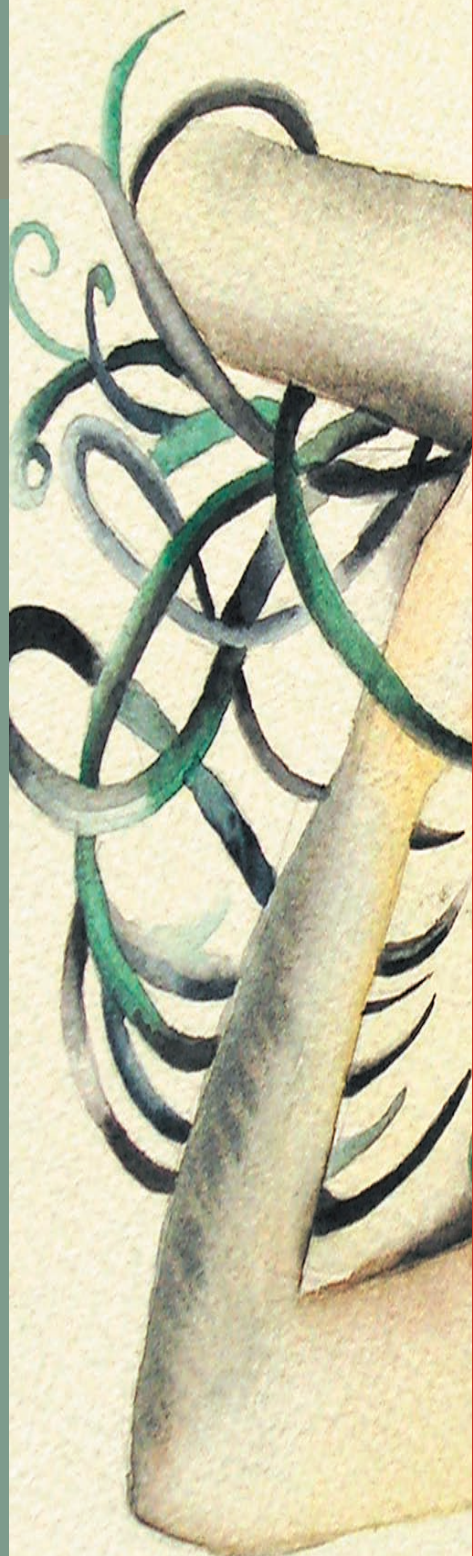
with

an excerpt from Na Muthuswamy's
Padukalam translated by Lakshmi Holmström

70



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