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Contents

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Cover Image

Female impersonator Hammigi Nilkanthappa as Jambuvati in the Kannada play *Chavatiya Chandra*, staged in the early twentieth century by Garud Sadashivarao's company, Sri Dattatreya Sangeeta Nataka Mandali. Photograph courtesy Prakash Garud and the Garud family.

Editorial

Gender is the string that ties together most pieces in this issue, which are written by practitioners of theatre, music, film, poetry and cartooning, and span almost a hundred years of history.

A very twenty-first-century perspective of gender informs Joshua Muyiwa's deeply personal essay in which he speaks of his obsession with the body—"a map on which we can pin down moments that made us". Tracing the journey of his poetry, which is also a journey of self-discovery, he describes how he has fashioned the man of his longings from the clay of his own experience.

We step back in time from the bold, colourful eroticism of Muyiwa's work to the muted sepias of understated sexuality in the early twentieth-century images of Prakash Garud's photo-essay. Garud, a third-generation theatre practitioner, has retrieved, from his family album, old photographs of theatre productions. Casting his eye on the female characters, which were usually played by male actors because 'decent' women did not act in those days, Garud reflects on the status of women in theatre and recalls some of the talented female impersonators of the Indian stage.

In IFA grantee Paromita Vohra's now-playful now-trenchant analysis of the Indian documentary, we discover an exciting though hitherto unwritten chapter that begins where formal history ends. Vohra dwells on the myriad artistic forms that broke the template of the 'issue-based' political documentary which privileges the collective over the individual. The makers of these new, biographical films bring out non-literal meaning and make use of performance to evoke a 'sensed' reality.

When IFA grantee Gokul TG documented the award-winning filmmaker G. Aravindan's weekly comic strip of the 1960s and 1970s, *Cheriya Manushyarum, Valiya Lokavum* (Little Men, Big World), he was struck by its immense popularity among women in particular. This led him to take a closer look at the female characters in the strip. Gokul finds that the auteur was compassionate and non-judgmental in his portrayal of the female characters, and that he tied their personal histories to the history of their times.

Sumana Chandrashekar, a Carnatic vocalist and a ghatam player, attempts to understand the constructs of gender and hierarchy within the realm of Carnatic music, and especially within percussion, through the inspiring story of her guru, Sukanya Ramgopal, who is India's pioneering, professional female ghatam player. Chandrashekar finds that Sukanya's musical journey has been a quest for identity for herself and her instrument.

We end this issue with an interview: Ashutosh Potdar in a lively conversation with Marathi theatre practitioners Atul Pethe and Waman Pandit on the thriving theatre network in the small towns and villages of Maharashtra—a network that has succeeded in fostering a larger theatre culture by reaching out to new spaces and new audiences.

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In this episode from *Cheriya Manushyarum, Valiya Lokavum (CMVL)*, Ramu unexpectedly comes into money. He plans to buy slippers or treat his friends, but ends up buying earrings for his sister.

Cartoon as Ethnography:

'Little Women' in a Big World

Gokul TG

Much before G. Aravindan gained fame as a national award-winning film director he had established himself in Kerala as a cartoonist. Gokul TG got a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts in 2011 to study and document Aravindan's comic strip *Cheriya Manushyarum, Valiya Lokavum* (Little Men, Big World) which appeared in the Malayalam weekly *Mathrubhumi Azhchapathippu* from 1961 to 1973. Featuring two central characters, Ramu and his mentor Guruji, it was a scathing satire on Kerala society and politics. Here, Gokul focuses on the women characters in the strip, and finds Aravindan's portrayal of them to be subtle and non-judgmental.

With *Cheriya Manushyarum, Valiya Lokavum* (*CMVL*) coming to be widely acknowledged as a precursor to the modern-day graphic novel, G. Aravindan has re-entered the consciousness of the generation that knew him only as an auteur, as a cartoonist. In fact, the weekly strip had no pre-determined plot that would qualify it as a novel, but the loyal readership that it had built up over thirteen years had unwittingly read into it a novel-like structure as it followed the evolution of Ramu from an innocent, educated, unemployed, young protagonist into a scheming, lonely, megalomaniacal businessman. This novel-like structure was all the more apparent in the collected editions that came out in 1978 (Bees Books) and 1996 (DC Books) even though they contained only two-third the number of strips that had appeared in the weekly.

However, in retrospect, it was the spiralling-cyclical narrative structure that Aravindan adopted for *CMVL* that was most responsible for rendering it like a novel. To begin with, Aravindan had entirely disposed of the usual narrative strategy, in the comic strip, of placing the characters in a timeless limbo and then working on variations of thematic subsets. He boldly let his characters age, fall in love, land jobs, get married, migrate, compromise their ethical standpoints and undergo organic behavioural transformations. In the bargain, he captured the essence of post-Independence Kerala society as it grappled with the pangs of nation-building and made a radical break from the morals and ethics held so dear by the previous generation. So complete was Aravindan's trust in the memory and intellect of his reader that he would have some characters disappear from the narrative midway, only to turn up years later, having grown richer or fallen upon bad times, thus mirroring the world the reader lived in. This, in the words of *Indian Express* editorial cartoonist E.P. Unny, "helped the Malayali for the first time to perceive 'time' in a comic strip".

Art critic Sadanand Menon places Aravindan in the Indian storytelling tradition of the Kathakar. "Like a true Kathakar, Aravindan would often deviate from the main narrative, take a detour, explore it, and then effortlessly return to the main thread to pick the story up from where he had left it," Menon remembers. This narrative style, along with the good run he had in the most prestigious Malayalam literary journal, afforded Aravindan enough space and time to map a

society in flux. This feeling of liminality, of being neither here nor there, so evident in the times immediately following Independence, was the backdrop against which the strip unfolded, and Aravindan's open-ended cyclical narrative style was best suited for such an endeavour. *CMVL* is a mine of visual information on the rapidly unfolding societal changes of those years, and this turns the strip, albeit a work of fiction, into an unintended ethnographic text. That the author of such an ethnographic document is not an objective outsider with a scrutinising gaze, but someone who experienced and lived the zeitgeist, adds to its appeal.

Despite retrospective attempts from some quarters to brand the strip as incomprehensible, arty, and limited in popularity, it was quite a hit among its readers, especially women. Author and translator Prema Jayakumar maintains that the strip taught a whole generation of readers to read the Malayalam weekly *Mathrubhumi* backwards, as it were, starting from the last page where the comic strip appeared and moving to the front. She also acknowledges the strip's foremost influence in the shaping of her aesthetic sensibilities and her preference for narrative understatement. This could be true for many other readers as well, for Aravindan used to make regular references to world literature, music and New Cinema in his comic strip. He would show Ramu and his philosopher-friend and mentor Guruji deliberating on Albert Camus' latest book or Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya*, or enjoying Pannalal Ghosh's music, without succumbing to the 'common reader' myth or pandering to so-called 'popular demand'. He had no reservations about the intellect of his readers or their capacity to imbibe new ideas (credit must also go to the weekly's iconic editor N.V. Krishna Warrier who shared this outlook and supported the comic strip with great conviction). The strip's intellectual quotient never deterred its readers; in fact, as was obvious from their letters to the editor, many appreciated this quality, while almost everyone enjoyed the strip at its most basic level as an interesting serial narrative.

The Malayali reader of those times was no stranger to serials, having being introduced to serially published novels both in the original and in translation (mainly from the Bengali) through the weekly, and the comic strip was a natural extension of the format they had grown comfortable with. A strong sense of self-identification with the central

characters that comes with addictive serial reading is quite prominent in the letters to the editor that I archived with the help of a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts. The love and empathy for the educated, gullible but intelligent Ramu is strong especially during the early years but tapers off during the later part of the narrative as he compromises his morals and ethics and metamorphoses into a profit-driven, cold and conniving businessman.

Female Readership

The comic strip, despite its predominantly male cast, had a strong female readership. Most women eagerly awaited the weekly's next instalment to find out if Ramu had passed an exam or found a job. Unny remembers how his aunt and her friends would eagerly wait for each week's issue to land on their doorstep. As was common then, only a few homes actually subscribed to the weekly, which would then be passed around the neighbourhood over the week. "I have seen women who had to wait for their turn to lay their hands on the weekly, eagerly enquiring of those who had already read the week's strip, about the job interview that Ramu was to attend that week," Unny reminisces. Some of them even shot off letters to the editor, addressed to Ramu, conveying their collective prayers for him and even proposing to send him a 'terylene' shirt if he would send them his shirt size (*Mathrubhumi Azchapathippu*, Volume 41, Number 9, Page 5, 19 May 1963). In their letters, they also reminded him of his duties as a brother to his still unmarried sister Rema (Volume 47, Number 1, Page 5, 8 June 1969) and reprimanded him when he turned his back on his friends and moral values (Volume 47, Number 29, Page 5, 5 October 1969).

If one were to use these letters to make generalisations about *CMVL*'s female readers, it could be safely assumed that they were traditional by nature, for they seemed to gravitate towards the central protagonist Ramu whom they idolised as a brother, lover or friend, and not towards the women—some of whom were quite radical—that Aravindan created. What makes their responses not so traditional, though, is the way they took to the serial graphic narrative and broke the prevalent myths, in Kerala's male-dominated society, about women somehow lacking the intellectual capability to digest such 'cerebral' fare. The women brought the strip into a more inclusive domestic sphere, and its popularity, reach and longevity

Leela, who began her career as a government employee, becomes a female escort.

increased in a way it couldn't have, had it been confined to the male-dominated public space. Interestingly, as someone who never pandered to 'popular demand', Aravindan's characterisation of women in his strip appears to be in direct contrast to the general nature of the female readership that followed it. This apparent disparity warrants a study of the strip's female characters.

The Lost Love

Leela, Ramu's first and only true love, is a key character in *CMVL*, maybe next in importance only to Guruji and the protagonist himself. In fact, it is the newly employed Leela who, by dumping the unemployed Ramu for her co-worker, provides the first turning point in the narrative of the strip. The strip had been floating in a state of limbo till Leela jilts Ramu—an act which did away with any sense of innocence and perpetual goodness that readers must have started associating with the central characters. This very act made it clear that *CMVL* would be unlike any other strip to which readers had grown accustomed.

More importantly, it is here that we first see Aravindan evolving multifarious strategies to move the narrative forward by transcending the everydayness of the comic strip and attempt to build an overarching narrative theme. This would later play a crucial role in providing the strip with that novel-like structure that would endear it to generations of readers and thereby overcome the ephemeral nature of the art.

Leela would continue to make appearances in the strip over the years, first as a worker in the social welfare department, then as a social worker in New Delhi and later as a high flying escort in the power circles of the nation's capital. While Ramu hates her initially, he later comes to terms with this loss. Towards the fag end of the strip he bears no ill will towards Leela, even wishing her good cheer while turning down a genuine attempt on her part to find him a job. It is as if he had realised that she, like him, was a mere victim of the times they lived in. In that sense, Leela is an alter-ego of Ramu, a Ramu who realised early enough that the secret to survival lay in keeping pace with a rapidly transforming society, a society in which people had grown up with morals and values that were completely at odds with reigning realities. Ramu's later willingness to compromise his values stems from this lesson learned early in his life.

രാമുച്ചേട്ടനു വേണ്ടി
ഒരു വഴിപാട്

ഒരു കത്ത്

രാമുവിന്,

—സുശീല

Letters written by female readers of *CMVL* addressed to Ramu.

It is important to note here that Aravindan fleshes out the character of Leela with great compassion and dexterity, refraining from any value judgement or gender bias. This makes Leela the true 'hero' of the strip, someone who early on walked a path that invariably everyone in the story would later tread.

The Demure Sister

A reader might imagine he has found the perfect antithesis to Leela in the demure Radha, Ramu's loyal, loving sister. In spite of her family's best efforts, the beautiful Radha remains unmarried till the end of the strip, first because of the family's inability to cough up a 'decent' dowry and then on account of her having crossed the 'marriageable age'. While Leela, her friend, escapes her encumbering surroundings early enough, Radha remains the quintessential 'domesticated' Indian woman. To his credit, however, Aravindan never allows this apparent contrast between these characters to regress into an easy whore/angel binary. While Leela

Introducing Latha the engineer, Ramu's co-worker, who handles her job like a true professional.

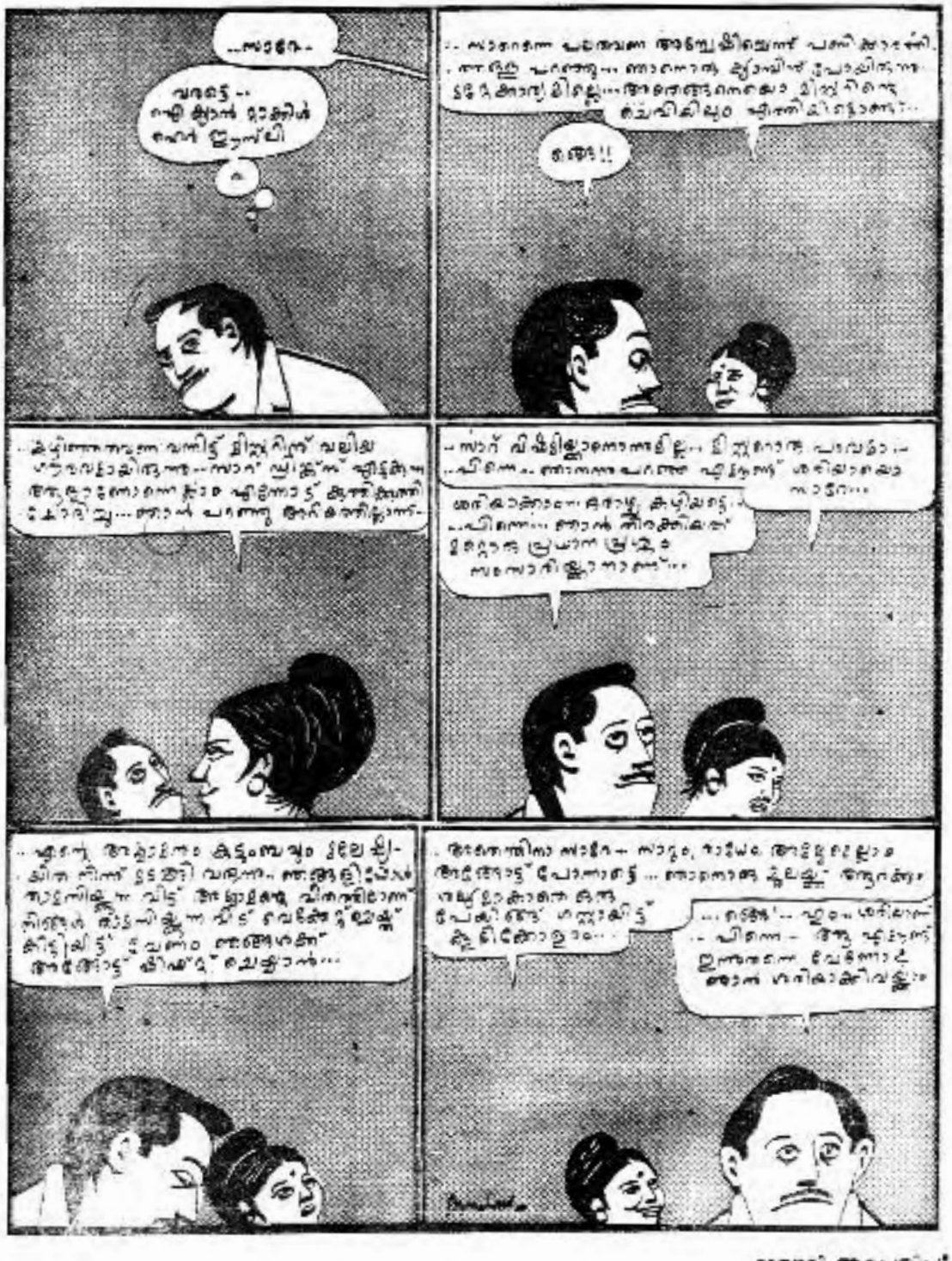
exhibits a lot of care and concern that is seemingly at odds with her ruthlessly ambitious demeanour, it is a highly suppressed sexuality that rounds off the character of the otherwise shy and reserved Radha. Far from being diametrically opposite, Leela and Radha actually subsume each other, the former being the actualisation of the possibilities inherent in the latter. This suppressed sexuality of Radha, the most beautifully drawn woman character in the strip, owes much to the reigning societal perceptions of the 'ideal woman' of those times. Though never expressed overtly, Aravindan's lines suggest certain undercurrents of vivacity and sexual passion in Radha, which she seeks to hide well in an attempt to conform to this ideal woman archetype. She remains at the fringes of the panel, muttering an occasional line of dialogue and mostly sporting a sad and distant look, burdened as she is by an oppressive, biased society. She rarely ventures outside the confines of her house, and when she does, is subjected to an intense, ogling male gaze. The character of Radha allows Aravindan to make critical observations about the chauvinistic nature of a society that, despite political independence and the spread of education, steadfastly holds on to the gender prototypes it inherited.

The Co-Worker

Latha, one of the most impressive of the women characters of *CMVL*, makes a very brief appearance but leaves a lasting impression. An engineering graduate, she joins the firm that Ramu manages as a clerk and in no time proves to be an intelligent and efficient employee. However, she and Ramu become victims of a slander campaign run by a local yellow journalist, which forces her to give up her job. What sets her apart from others in the strip is a strong sense of the dignity of labour and willingness to learn her job like a true professional. It is interesting to note that the 1960s and 1970s were a time when women were beginning to get equal opportunities in the workplace because of the big strides made in women's education in the preceding decades. Aravindan uses this sub-plot to make a telling comment on the vulnerability of woman at the workplace and more importantly, society's reluctance to accept a change in the status of women in spite of the tall claims about progress and development.

The Other Woman

Nothing captures Ramu's moral degradation better than the changing



Janu uses her sexual alliance with Ramu to manipulate him.

contours of his relationships with women. Towards the end of the strip, Ramu has an adulterous affair with Janu, the vivacious middle-aged wife of his tenant. This relationship is purely sexual, of mutual convenience, and devoid of any feelings of love and respect that marked his earlier relationship, with Leela. Janu, being aware of the effect she has on men, deftly manipulates Ramu to extract money from him, often sending subtle messages bordering on blackmail, while continuing to enter into 'profitable' affairs with others from his circle. While Ramu had simply wilted, some years ago, when a yellow journalist falsely accused him of having an affair with his co-worker Latha, this time he 'manages' the gossipmonger and kills the story with clinical precision. With Janu, women become mere objects of desire and gratification for Ramu, something he was never guilty of in his earlier relationships. His relationship with Janu is as hollow as his relationship with his rich friends and symptomatic of his failure as a human being. In the end, there is no trace of love and compassion left in him and his tragedy is complete.

According to Unny, *CMVL* had the strongest and most interesting women characters in Malayalam literature after Uroob's Rachiyamma. (Rachiyamma is the titular character of the short story collection *Rachiyammayum Mattu Pradhana Kathakalum* by P.C. Kuttikrishnan alias Uroob who belonged to the progressive writers' group of the 1950s.) A seminal characteristic of Aravindan's art was a sustained use of understatement as a narrative device. Subtle and non-judgemental, he always strove to keep his narrative open-ended and susceptible to multiple interpretations. He used images to convey the subtleties of existence that words could never aspire to express. A glance, gesture or posture of his female characters would reveal layers of their inner worlds, the unspeakable and the unspoken. The master tied their personal histories to the history of the times.

Gokul TG is a comic artist based in Thrissur, Kerala. He pursues his Ph.D on the Indian comic strip at the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam.

Gender and the Documentary Film:

Capturing a Sensed Reality

Paromita Vohra

An odd lady who haunted film festivals led Paromita Vohra to look more closely at the evolution of the Indian documentary film and to ask an apparently frivolous question: Why do so many male documentary filmmakers grow a beard? Between the anecdote and the question lies an unwritten story—of new artistic forms that have broken away from the agit-prop template. Vohra says that these new films, many of them by women, consist of layered individual narratives that explore meaning through what is said between the lines. A gendered awareness and questions about truth and reality have led to myriad explorations of form that have reinvigorated documentary film culture in India.

Kamlabai Gokhale acting in a play. She and her mother Durgabai Kamat, who acted in Dadasaheb Phalke's Mohini Bhasmasur (1914), are acknowledged as the first ladies of the Indian screen.
Photograph courtesy Lalji Gokhale's private collection.

It was February 1992 and the second edition of the Bombay (now Mumbai) International Film Festival of Documentaries, Animations and Shorts (BIFF, now MIFF) was underway at the National Centre for the Performing Arts. I had been working as an assistant to the well-known filmmaker Anand Patwardhan for eighteen months. It was a job with a view. As a pioneering figure of Indian independent documentary, Patwardhan was someone who independent documentarians of all ages contacted or visited. For a young person, it was an exceptional way to be directly plugged into 'the scene': what was going on, who was making what, and what filmmakers were arguing about. I would eagerly go to every screening, devour every videotape I could find. It is fair to say that for a twenty-two-year-old I was uncommonly aware of the current documentary scene.

That year, at the festival, a woman with a wild shock of hair came up to me and gave me a flyer. She said, "Come and see my film, I've made a brilliant film long ago, it is showing at the festival." Taken aback at how someone could unabashedly sing her own praises, I stammered acceptance and fled. Her name was Nina Shivdasani. I asked someone who she was and they shrugged. I never went to see the film.

Nevertheless I kept bumping into this woman over the many years that followed, mostly at film events. Almost always she would tell me, "You know, I have made a brilliant film. And I made it all that time ago, in the 1970s." Each time I would respond with awkward politeness and flee. It even became something of a jokey anecdote for me. God alone knew what this film was about, because no one I knew had heard of it.

And that was the operative phrase: 'no one I knew'. No formal written history of the Indian documentary film existed. You haphazardly absorbed a sort of oral history of remembered films and ongoing occurrences just by being 'in the scene'.

In 2004 Shai Heredia curated the second edition of her film festival Experimenta. Featured in it was *Chhatrabhang* by Nina Shivdasani Rovshen and I thought, "Oh good grief! Let me go see what this is all about."

All I can say is that Nina Shivdasani was right. She had indeed made a striking film and she had made it "all that time ago", in 1975.

Chhatrabhang is a narrative based on a true story, set in a village with separate wells for lower and upper castes. One hot, arid summer, the lower-caste well runs dry. Despite their trepidation, the lower-caste communities are so driven to anger and despair that they storm the upper-caste well and draw water from it. It is a moment of great triumph. But the higher castes in collusion with the police extract a violent retribution, and whole families are wiped out in the massacre.

The film is shot in a village similar to the one on which it is based, with its residents as the actors. Here is an excerpt from an interview Shai Heredia did with Nina Shivdasani during Experimenta 2004, which talks about the methods she used in the film:

> Heredia: So were the villagers drawing from their own real experiences in a way?
>
> Shivdasani: Yes. They knew their own truth. Most of what they were saying was in their minds already. I would just give them a gist or a line or the idea and then their own improvisation and spontaneity would take over. This was very interesting…a true-life incident combined with as much of the reality of that incident along with a certain amount of fiction to supplement where it needed it. So this complex play of real and fiction is what turned it into a really strong work. I went on a research trip, took photographs, did a lot of taping and then wrote a script outline with minimal dialogue and narration—all the rest is free-form, *dehati* language which the villagers spoke themselves.[1]

This is the most notable thing about the film: the drama hovers in a strange space where you strongly feel it's a documentary and yet you know it is not 'real'. An almost parallel sense of fiction and non-fiction co-exist and inter-play, an effect achieved with artistic intent—through dramatic shot compositions and precise rhythm, which produce a blurred space where past and present, fiction and reality together arrive at a certain truth. One might say it is not so much testimony as evidence of experience.

I had found the most incredible end to my jokey anecdote. Over fifteen years I would repeatedly meet a strange lady

and she'd tell me how she'd made a brilliant film long ago. And guess what? She had! The film shared the FIPRESCI prize at the Berlin International Film Festival 1976. In the Q&A session at Experimenta 2004, Shivdasani said that when she ran into censor trouble, she wangled a meeting with (then Prime Minister) Indira Gandhi and told her that it was impossible for her film to be censored because the Berlin festival authorities forbade changes in any film they had given a prize to. How this was believed is anyone's guess, but it worked. She had her censor certificate, albeit through strategy, not confrontation with the State.

The anecdote may be over but it opens up many questions: Why is Nina Shivdasani not famous? Why was no one working in the 1970s and 1980s familiar with her name or her film? Why was she completely missing from the history of the Indian independent documentary?

A Sensed History

A formal history of the Indian documentary film would go something like this: In British-ruled India in the 1930s, a few companies produced non-fiction accounts of important events such as freedom fighter Lala Lajpat Rai's funeral and the devastating Quetta earthquake of 1935, and these were exhibited through the same channels that fiction films were. From 1940, when the Film Advisory Board was established, the colonial government took complete control of raw stock distribution and began producing war propaganda films. Films Division (FD) was established post Independence, in 1948. Its mandate was to transmit the idea of India to the people and make them aware of how the government was carrying out its Five-Year Plans. Peace propaganda films, you could call them.

Although 'Films Division' is often used as shorthand for 'tedious and boring', FD did make some interesting films until the late 1960s, most famously under the stewardship of chief producer Jehangir Bhownagary; some of the leading lights were Sukhdev, S.N.S. Sastry, Pramod Pati and K.S. Chari. When the Emergency was imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975, censorship robbed FD films of much of their experimentation. It was a time of tremendous political injustice and social uprising against the State. A series of films linked to people's movements began to be made in the independent space.

This point marks the end of the formal history—a good example being documentary filmmaker B.D. Garga's excellent book *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non-Fiction Film in India* (Penguin Books, 2007)—but later documentary practice was little recorded or observed except in the more informal space of dialogue at documentary screenings or occasional conferences. It is commonly accepted that the pioneering films of the independent movement are Anand Patwardhan's *Waves of Revolution*[2] (1975) and *Prisoners of Conscience*[3] (1978). They display a passionate commitment to resisting political injustice and are strongly centred on the idea of the testimony—of both the filmmaker and the filmed, perhaps. They are direct, with no artistic digression, and in the agit-prop mode. They are the base from which Patwardhan developed his unique style of the political essay-cum-mobilisational film. Others too began making films related to people's movements: for example *Voices from Baliapal* (Ranjan Palit and Vasudha Joshi, 1989), *Aar Koto Din* (Shashi Anand, 1989) and *Something Like a War* (Deepa Dhanraj, 1991).

Was there a women's history inside this history? Because that's how it's usually told, isn't it—inside the 'main' edifice of history, a women's room?

There is no account of female directors in non-fiction film until the 1970s. In 1974 Vijaya Mulay made an animation film *Ek, Anek aur Ekta* about unity in diversity, for the Government of India's Centre of Educational Technology (CET). The film, and the song it features, "*Suraj ek, chanda ek*", are now nostalgically much shared on YouTube. Mulay went on to direct several films for CET as well as FD and some of them won National Awards, but frankly, none of them are remembered in the way *Ek, Anek aur Ekta* is. Mulay, fondly called Akka by many, has been a significant part of State initiatives around media and education and has represented the idea of the Indian documentary at film festivals abroad. Her book *From Rajas and Yogis to Gandhi and Beyond: Images of India in International Films in the Twentieth Century* (Seagull Books, 2008) details how Indian culture is represented in international cinema. But she has been more an institutional figure than a filmmaker.

Now we have this odd conundrum. Two women make their first film around the same time (1974-75): one, an indictment of the caste system

made with artistic power; the other, an animation film for children, exemplifying the Constitutional ideal of equality and unity, which is nice enough but not extraordinary in ideas or execution.

Why does one woman make it to the sensed history and not the other?

But let's not take up the women's-room approach. Let's put it another way.

Two people make independent films in 1975: Shivdasani, a powerful exploration of caste inequality and violence, and Patwardhan, a cinematically naïve but passionate and committed record of a mass movement. Why is the latter so prominent, and the other, a strange lady I run into at events who is compelled to tell me time and again that she made a brilliant film, perhaps because no one else will?

The answer may or may not rest in gender. We will come back to it shortly.

Nothing but the Truth

I have discussed John Grierson's influence on the Indian documentary in an essay co-written with Dr Arvind Rajagopal.[4] Grierson's idea of the documentary being creatively shot reality and primarily a tool to convey democracy to the masses, and his discomfort with favouring the individual over the collective—these were central to the Indian independent documentary experience.

During my initial research for a project on the evolution of the Indian documentary film, for which I got a grant from India Foundation for the Arts in 2009-10, I was struck by how many people had arrived at documentary not through a desire to make films but through an involvement with organised political work and discussion. The reigning notion was that since films were made for 'the people', to show the social conditions that led to their oppression and help bring about systemic and social change, they would not focus on individual narratives. The filmmaker's task was to give voice to the truth revealed by this 'unvarnished' sociological reality, a truth that was marginalised in mainstream and government-sponsored media.

Deepa Dhanraj, a filmmaker from Hyderabad who had been radicalised by her experience of the Emergency, had been working with a feminist group, Yugantar. I interviewed her in

2010 and she described how they functioned:

> I remember coming to meetings...in those days, and it would start at twelve and [we would] leave at ten. We were—what?—like twenty-four, twenty-five, many of us were single. You had the kind of mental space in your life to get obsessed with these...things. It was a completely different kind of way of entering politics. And at that moment was when I felt, okay, why not make films? [We felt] that there are exciting things that women's groups are doing in various parts of the country and how do you share this...how do you convey the power of what they were doing and can you convey it with...our newfound feminist theory which was in its infancy? Like we wanted to do a film on tobacco workers in Nipani. You could do it as a labour politics film, around wages and conditions of work etc. but the idea was to say, what does it mean?
>
> What is the feminist understanding? I couldn't tell you. But it was there, like a sort of inchoate thing, it may have been that we picked women as protagonists, that we wanted some of their personal stories....And you have to understand that it was very collaborative, so you can't go against the politics of other people in the group. You have to have consensual decisions....It wasn't just a film we were doing and moving on, you were living this stuff, you know...in Nipani, we went and stayed in that slum, in one room over there to shoot. And it was actually the women who got us the access to make that film. They showed us. Take a shot of this, now show this, this person suffers this....It's enough if women speak, because they really had not spoken. You'd never heard stories like this. That just may seem naïve...but I remember at that time thinking that it's such an amazing thing.

The explosive power of these early records remains meaningful even today. Dhanraj's *Something Like A War*, on government family-planning policies and what it meant for women to be 'targets' and to lose autonomy over their own bodies, is a feminist classic with good reason. It was a film made, as Dhanraj said to me, "in a

white-hot rage". The relentless uncovering of appalling facts and the ironic juxtapositions of quotes from the authorities about the "war against population" coalesced into a tight and resonant work.

Meanwhile, there was an interesting development within the feminist context in the 1980s. Several film collectives emerged, the most noted being Mediastorm, formed in 1986 by six women—Shohini Ghosh, Sabeena Gadihoke, Shikha Jhingan, Ranjini Mazumdar, Sabina Kidwai and Charu Gargi—who had graduated from the Mass Communication Research Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia. They made several films on the important political issues of the time. Not to put too fine a point on it, many more women than men got into collective filmmaking, though there were exceptions like the Drishti Media Collective started in 1993 by Shabnam Virmani and K.S. Stalin in Ahmedabad.

With the advent of video, community video projects mushroomed. 'Media access' became the buzzword; the idea that putting a camera in the hands of 'the people' would give them the tools to articulate their concerns gained currency after the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) initiated the Video SEWA experiment in 1984. SEWA is an Ahmedabad-based trade union of women working in the unorganised sector. As part of its media project, the women used relatively cheap and portable U-matic video equipment to make films about issues important to them, in their own, unmediated voice.

An interesting iteration of this was the community video work by the women of the Deccan Development Society (DDS) in Andhra Pradesh, where rural Dalit women began shooting activist films around their own concerns as labourers and farmers. In this process they arrived at an intriguing critical taxonomy of shot types. For example: Patel (landlord) shot = Low-angle shot (which makes the subject look like a towering figure); Gayadolla (bonded labourer) shot = Top-angle shot (which dwarfs a person); Sangham (the collective) shot = Eye-level shot.

Cast in a Template

An initiative that had evolved from a powerful urge to express, explore, understand and mirror a set of experiences turned into a template for the political documentary. The 'issue' became the film's guiding force. There

Women with tags on their foreheads waiting to be sterilised at a camp in Maharashtra where operations are conducted assembly-line style. From Deepa Dhanraj's 1991 film *Something Like a War*. Still by Navroze Contractor.

was an almost conscious attempt to dissociate what was considered 'political' from the filmmaker's individual sensibility or artistic engagement with a political question. Among these 'issue-based' films, a large number were on 'women's issues'. Owing their allegiance to the idea of the women's collective, they recorded the women's oral testimonies and captured their feistiness, but not through new narrative forms or strong individual styles. The term 'documentary' came to mean an amalgam of the 'educational' thrust of the government, the 'uplifting the marginalised' slogan of the political elite and the 'giving voice to the voiceless' endeavour of activists.

Despite its exciting beginnings, community video projects often followed a set pattern, and to this day they are funded on the basis of what I will call a 'noble savage' understanding: that all you need to do is put a camera in the hands of untrained people and by sheer virtue of their marginalised condition they will be able to communicate through this new medium. Equating technology with empowerment is a Soviet-era view, which increasingly ignores a seminal feminist understanding—that power resides in language and syntax, and not merely in being able to speak. And while technology was given to the people it was often not accompanied by education in the film language that the elites were conversant with.

There were some who criticised or critiqued the turn that documentary was taking. Partha Chatterjee, in an essay on Indian documentaries in *Cinemaya*, dismissed activist films as signalling the death of Form, praising instead the documentary work of fiction filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal and Kumar Shahani.[5] His opinion is debatable. The best activist films were not lacking in form, even if their makers chose not to discuss form; some of their early work, in fact, evoked a vibrant sense of showing you the world anew, as most art does. It was just that, over time, a single Form had become paramount and even hegemonic. As Deepa Dhanraj said in an interview with Madhu Bhushan in *Deep Focus*, "The reason I feel for not many individual filmmakers breaking from the standardised mode is the insidious peer pressure from the Left which is still a strong reference point."[6]

Nevertheless, or perhaps therefore, by the end of the 1990s, when video was

no longer new and the industry of developmental, 'issue-based' films had expanded so much that it almost became a substitute for the old FD, some filmmakers started questioning their own practice in a changing political landscape.

Saba Dewan described some of these troubling questions in an interview I did with her in 2011:

> What might have attracted me to take up a commissioned film, say on Mahila Samakhya [a government programme for empowerment of rural women initiated in 1989]...is the politics of Samakhya till then. Samakhya was not just a literacy programme. There was hope, there was optimism, there was politics...and some independent women's groups too were working there. Most of the NGO culture in India comes in after the Emergency, so they were still young and very political....But I think through the [19]90s... [there] was a certain co-option of NGO politics in becoming systems of distributions for the state....Once you get used to huge amount of money, then terms like 'mandate' become important. Mandate is always from the funders, they decide their mandate, you write your proposal according to that....They were the ones funding your films, documentary screenings at that time use to happen through NGO circuits, women's groups, so they were all praises for your work. I think for me there was a certain disillusionment....It was somehow not the truth. They were making me question my ideas as a woman. Since being a filmmaker, being a woman, both the things are enmeshed... questions arose of—what is my politics? What am I saying...what is my form?

Women were not the only ones asking these questions. In an interview I did in 2011 with Amar Kanwar, who is well known today for his documentary films and installations in the poetic-visual-essay mode, he recalled the discomfort he used to feel:

> I found that every film I was making I had to hone my skills of minimising [the filmmaker's] presence. And [I] had therefore collected a whole bag of tricks of how to minimise this and... devise a space where my audience feels that it is actually face to face with the territory of my film and

> that I am not in between. Now the more skilled I got at this...the more people liked the film. And I had also started to feel a little uncomfortable with this skill that I was acquiring, and also what I was getting...from the documentary community, particularly...those who appreciate...those who approve, peer groups, clients, teachers.

Said Between the Lines

Orality was central to the Indian political documentary, which was founded on testimonies. In the classic political film there was an assumption that once people spoke, they and the film had said everything there was to say. It was all about giving people an opportunity to speak, not about what is hidden in the speech of those who are often not allowed to speak.

Feminist theory had a different take on oral history. It recognised a non-literalism within orality, a 'sense' of a meaning that opened up entirely new ways of looking. The act of listening to accounts of people was also the act of listening to what was being said between the lines, what remained unsaid and how things were said.

The filmmaker Madhusree Dutta narrates an interesting story in an interview with Bhaskar Sarkar and Nicole Wolf in *BioScope*.[7] She and feminist lawyer Flavia Agnes co-founded the Mumbai-based organisation Majlis, which has both a cultural and a legal centre, and which has the mission statement 'Culture as Right, Rights as Culture'. A woman arrived at the Majlis legal centre along with her daughter who had been in a violent marriage. In speaking for her daughter she blamed herself for raising her daughter "in an ambience of fear". Dutta reports that the woman said, "I gave her fear as an inheritance and that is why she could not cope with her own life. Punish me but please help her." Dutta says in the *BioScope* interview:

> That became the synopsis of the film [*Memories of Fear*]. [In that woman's story] there was also a separation between law and rights. The mother's testimony could not be a part of the daughter's legal case as memories are not considered evidence.... Formally, *Memories of Fear* needed an overlap between the woman's memory of her own life and the legal case of the daughter's domestic violence....

Sagira Begum doing zardozi embroidery in Sameera Jain's 1997 film *Sagira Begum*.

> For the first time I attempted to place contrived narratives [stylised performances, embellished re-enactments] back to back with standard testimonies.[8]

Although criticised at the time for "mutilating the integrity of the testimony", the film led Dutta to an exploration of this form, which resulted in significant films that used elements of performance strongly inflected by her background in theatre: *Scribbles on Akka* (2000) and *7 Islands and a Metro* (2006).

Similarly, other films which worked with protracted testimonies, or biographies, expanded the understanding of the documentary form and its political nature. Notable among these were *Kamlabai* (1992), Reena Mohan's film about Kamlabai Gokhale, the first woman to act on the Indian screen; and *Sagira Begum* (1997), Sameera Jain's film about a seventy-five-year-old zardozi worker

Family group portrait of Kamlabai Gokhale (extreme left), her mother Durgabai Kamat (centre, holding baby), and her sons Lalji Gokhale (second from left), an accomplished tabla player and Chandrakant Gokhale (second from right), a veteran actor of the Marathi stage and Indian screen, seen next to his wife. Photograph courtesy Lalji Gokhale's private collection.

in Old Delhi. Neither film inserted any material that was not testimony. In a way the biographies of these women were 'performed' via their individual stories and their unique way of comporting themselves. These women had lived through and been part of major historical events: Sagira Begum had seen the Partition of India and Pakistan and the subsequent ghettoisation of Delhi's old city, and Kamlabai, the growth of Indian cinema. Their personal stories were a type of record of that history.

The evolution of these cinematic forms is almost visible in this story that Reena Mohan told me in 2010, about the making of *Kamlabai*:

> We entered her flat and she was sitting in her choli and petticoat that you see her in, [in] the film, but I said, you are sitting like

Replicating the poses in the old family group portrait, Kamlabai Gokhale (centre) with her son Chandrakant (second from right) and his family. Still by K.U. Mohanan.

this! Aren't you going to get ready? And she said why? What's wrong? This is what I wear. So I said you've got to wear a sari and proper blouse you know, this is a film and...so she changed. Oh it's terrible, actually. Then I said you can't be sitting on the bed all the time, you've got to sit in different parts of the house. We had these plastic chairs and she sat in one and Rekha [the Marathi interviewer] sat in one and Ranjan [Palit] said the frame is looking very empty and bare. So we pulled out this rack from the second bedroom, brought it within the frame and her background, brought all the trophies from the top of the cupboard. And soon Rekha said '*bara aaji...*' you know in a formal way, and she was pitching her voice a certain way.

I kept getting the feeling this is

Kamlabai Gokhale, first lady of Indian cinema, still going strong. Stills by K.U. Mohanan.

> not right. Mohan [K.U. Mohanan] and Suresh [Rajamani] and Ranjan and me and Rekha sat down and I said what's going wrong?...you are putting her in a chair and bringing down these trophies and making her change clothes and that doesn't feel like who she is. The notion that I am talking to this first lady of the Indian screen and I am going to get... facts was very strong somewhere. So it was very structured interviews, now we've done the childhood, now we've done the marriage, now we talk about her first male role....Every time she was being cute and jokey, we were switching off the camera and I was saying that now she'll settle down and we'll switch on the camera, then we'll get on with it.

The idea that a documentary is a public record that must be about public achievements, and that it requires a certain type of performance from the subject, is palpable in this story. This notion is influenced, in turn, by the idea that there is a consistent arc of history into which one just fits the 'women's experience', a women's room in the bigger house of history, rather than an experience which continues to reshape how we see history.

Reena Mohan eventually shook free of this idea of a reconstructed documentation, following only the way in which Kamlabai spoke and how she presented herself as a person while she remembered the experience, and not the milestones, of her life. Considered a classic, *Kamlabai* is a beautifully shot, forty-minute film made up of one woman speaking, or performing herself.

Redefining the Political

With the making of such biographical films, which recognised non-literal meaning and evoked a 'sensed' reality, the idea of the political had to be re-negotiated. Madhusree Dutta comments on these films in her essay "In Defence of the Political Documentary":

> These films are distinct among the sea of films that were produced in the South Asian subcontinent during this period. They are biographical films with an agenda related to nationalism. They are non-linear, with sublime aesthetics, and yet are political. The number of films produced in

> this genre is growing by leaps and bounds. Encouraged by easily available digital technology, filmmakers today can afford to spend more time with the protagonists, developing layered engagements, also altering their own agenda in the process.[9]

It is hard to say if the many new explorations of form in documentary are specific to women, although, as the researcher Nicole Wolf points out in her unpublished dissertation, "...there is a wide range of prolific explorations of documentary mode filmmaking that has been and is continuously happening in India by women filmmakers…Namely there is commitment to filmmaking practices which is deeply invested in contemporary political questions… that takes multiple cinematic forms, (and) is thus inextricably linked to reflections on, negotiations of and the working upon notions of the real."[10] The presence of the filmmaker as audience, as interlocutor and not rapporteur, is implied in the performances of subjects such as Kamlabai and Sagira Begum. The personal space in which this encounter happens imparts a gendered quality to the intimacy and interaction between subjects and filmmakers, and indeed to the very act of filmmaking.

Rahul Roy spoke of this in an interview I did in 2011:

> Since Saba [Dewan] and I used to work together and lot of our films were on gender and on women, over a period of time I just felt that...it was an extremely comfortable position to be in and...[also that] it was limiting. I started questioning my own role in those films and I felt that if I am interested in gender then I should be looking at men's lives [too]. So that was the starting point and after that it was more a thing of hurtling down a certain path and I keep engaging with that theme in different ways in different circumstances and situations. But eventually it [the gendered awareness] blurs the lines....So I think in filmmaking I am less and less interested in making masculinity the object....I find it extremely limiting and also problematic to make just that into an object. What's more interesting is actually how do you implicate gender in other situations and then read off those situations.

Gendered awareness and questions about truth and reality had led to myriad explorations of form. These filmmakers were wrestling with the weight of a certain *type* of inherited history of documentary form and practice. In the process they were also compelled to acknowledge the ideas of performance that are inherent in documentary practice and political activity, and which become normative as a history is created.

So much of the history of form is about the history of form you've received—or, sometimes, perceived.

Here is a common form of history provided in the 1990s in particular. Shoma Chatterji, writing in a 1994 issue of *Spectrum*, the catalogue of MIFF's Indian non-competitive section, describes the independent documentary movement:

> The Emergency triggered a series of films starting with Anand Patwardhan and followed by others. …From the 1980s a simmering movement made its presence felt within the realm of Indian documentary films. The simmering gained momentum and speed, garnered itself for action, and defined itself as a movement with a politico-cultural identity of its own. It stands by itself, its head bloody, but unbowed, under the pressure of bureaucratic suffocation and suppression, official red-tapism and a dictatorial, even fascist, censorship.[11]

Through the rest of the account there is curiously little else to describe the nature of the movement in terms of its cinema. There is instead a stance, a pose on a poster, a demeanour or behaviour that marks it. A similar tone can be found in a 1999 report from the *Deccan Herald*, about a fellowship project initiated by the organisation Majlis.[12] The writer spends a few paragraphs describing Madhushree Dutta as a fiery, gutsy woman on the basis of an encounter she had with the Mumbai police, before getting to the point of the report.

It is not cinema that is being spoken of here so much as comportment.

A Matter of Performance

To elaborate my meaning, I would like to describe Saba Dewan's lovely film *The Other Song*[13] (2009). It is a

wonderfully warm, but fairly straightforward journey into the world of tawaifs (courtesans) in search of a lost or obscured thumri, and through this, a lost or obscured life, tradition and aesthetic.

A significant sequence in this film is of a classical music mehfil in Benaras, organised at the haveli of an old, elite, merchant family by the Kashi Sangeet Samaj as part of its centenary celebration. The gathering and musicians are mostly male and upper-caste; in the old days there would have been courtesans. The ambience is in stark contrast to the frayed glamour of the courtesan world, indicating that a sanitisation and perhaps brahminisation has taken place.

For me, the sequence strikingly brings out the issue of comportment in the arts. There is a manner in which these artists carry themselves, with import, with gravity, with punditry, with the stately pace of experts. This is quite in contrast with the comportment of the women who people this film—their mischief, their tartness or sweetness, their fragile vanities and arrogant glamour. It may well be that here, the men are technically far more accomplished singers, having had the opportunity to refine their craft; they have not acquired the quicksilver, flirtatious twists necessitated by the kind of performance where one must make regular eye-contact with the audience, not unlike that eye-level shot which the community video women in Andhra Pradesh aptly named the Sangham shot. The 'sense' of distinction between the comportment of both sets of artists and their art may be subtle but it nevertheless provides irrefutable evidence of hierarchy. *The Other Song* brings out a 'sense' that the world thinks that the male artists are doing real, serious work, whereas the louche courtesans, while fun, are not to be taken so seriously as artists.

Similarly, I find Shoma Chatterji's description of the independent film striking for its personification: "It stands by itself, its head bloody, but unbowed." It sounds like a description of a performance, not of a film. And yet, what is a documentary film but a performance of the filmmaker? When Thomas Waugh labelled these political films the "committed film" he pointed out that in doggedly documenting a certain politics, the filmmaker enacted a performance of commitment.[14] The more passionate

Writer, poet, journalist and playwright Bharatendu Harishchandra with his courtesan mistress, Madhavi. Photograph courtesy Bharatendu Collection, Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras Hindu University. Still from Saba Dewan's *The Other Song*.

the performance, the better the film: The more derivative the performance, the duller the work. An important element of this performance was often the rite of passage of censorship. Battles with the Central Board of Film Certification or the 'right-wing' were a badge of validation of a film's political significance. This is not to imply that this is not a genuine battle or problem in any society, particularly ours, but censorship often became a means of judging a film's importance. Similarly, it was not Madhusree Dutta's filmmaking but her battle with the police that marked her as a warrior and hence significant, according to the *Deccan Herald* report.

These performances and the manner of their performing—the comportment of the filmmaker and the film—conferred status on both. That which did not fit into this comportment might well struggle to be recognised, or cause those who view it to be uncomfortable with recognising it. This idea of the comportment of a film is echoed in a conversation I had with a critic who told me he loved my films because they were funny and political but he could not imagine giving them a prize because though they were political, they could not be serious, because they were too enjoyable. Another experience I had was after I had screened my film *Unlimited Girls* in 2002. The film, about feminism in India, is in English and Hindi, and its form and content are rooted in urban contexts. A few days later I received a four-page letter from a man about how my film was elitist, not genuinely political because it is urban and humorous, and that I, *with my short hair and my manner of dressing, had silenced the suffering women of rural India*. The writer obviously felt, as

many do about women who laugh too loudly, that the film and I had not comported our selves well enough to be deemed political.

A Frivolous Question

Which brings me to an apparently frivolous question I have frequently addressed to my documentary filmmaking colleagues: Why do so many male documentary filmmakers have a beard?

This performance of commitment may have various comportments, or rasas. While the ideas of the unvarnished form may no longer have such a tight hold, the notion of significance still comes via comportment. Eventually no matter what your chosen form, its enactment varies depending on the rasa you choose, the register of the film, and often—though by no means always and only—it is important that there be an aura of fervour or gravity to it, something that 'carries weight'. Sometimes these rasas of seriousness, the comportment of the ascetic, the warrior, the guru, the seer and seeker of truth, the arduous carrying of weight on your shoulders requires the growing of a beard. Of course I'm only joking. Aren't I?

In this history of warfare and warriors, how could someone like Nina Shivdasani have found a place? A woman who, quite apart from creating a political work of art made outside the context of organisational politics, had got her censor certificate through strategy, not chivalric public confrontation?

The history of Indian documentary is far more hybrid than the monolithic one being bandied about. The gendered nature of this history and its valorisation had enforced a somewhat gendered practice along fairly conformist lines. When this history was questioned in feminist terms, it resulted in new and exciting political understandings which found articulation in diverse artistic and resonant forms that reinvigorated documentary film culture in India.

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Poster of Paromita Vohra's 2002 film *Unlimited Girls*.

ENDNOTES

1. Shai Heredia, 'Excavating Indian experimental film', unpublished research project, Experimenta India, 2004. Available from Shai Heredia at experimentaindia@gmail.com.

2. *Waves of Revolution* documents the non-violent Bihar Movement of 1974-75, which was initiated by students and led by the veteran Gandhian Socialist Jayaprakash Narain (JP). The movement became the symbol of resistance to dictatorship, culminating in the electoral defeat of the Congress Party in March 1977.

3. *Prisoners of Conscience* focuses on the political prisoners of the Emergency, the muzzled media and the over-100,000 Indians who were arrested without charge and jailed without trail.

4. Arvind Rajagopal and Paromita Vohra, 'On the Aesthetics and Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film: A Conversation', *BioScope: South Asian Studies*, Vol. 3 (January 2012), pp. 7-20.

5. Partha Chatterjee, 'Indian Documentaries in Perspective', *Cinemaya*, No. 28-29 (July-September 1995), pp. 32-36.

6. Madhu Bhushan, 'Interview with Deepa Dhanraj', *Deep Focus*, Vol. 1(3) (November 1988), p. 38.

7. Bhaskar Sarkar and Nicole Wolf, 'An Interview with Madhusree Dutta', *BioScope: South Asian Studies*, Vol. 3 (January 2012), pp. 21-34.

8. Ibid., p. 22.

9. Madhusree Dutta, 'In Defence of the Political Documentary'. Available at http://infochangeindia.org/film-forum/news-a-views/in-defence-of-political-documentary.html.

10. Nicole Wolf, 'Make it Real: Documentary and other cinematic experiments by women filmmakers in India', unpublished dissertation, 2007.

11. Shoma Chatterji, 'The "Investigative" Documentary', *Spectrum India*, (1994), p. 15.

12. 'Gutsy and Different', Deccan Herald, 1 August 1999.

13. Saba Dewan's *The Other Song* was researched and produced with two grants from India Foundation for the Arts in 2001-02 and 2005-06 respectively.

14. Thomas Waugh, *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984).

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Female impersonator Hammigi Nilkanthappa as the ravishing Jambuvati in the play *Chavatiya Chandra*.

Pretty Men:
Golden Age of the Female Impersonator

Prakash Garud

(Translated from the Kannada by Usha Rao)

All photographs courtesy Dr Prakash Garud and the Garud family.

A rich whiff of rare history wafts up from the photographs of this family album. The family is that of Garud Sadashivarao who founded the Sri Dattatreya Sangeeta Nataka Mandali theatre company in the early twentieth century. Sadashivarao brought a breath of fresh air into Kannada professional theatre and personally trained countless young actors. His grandson Prakash Garud takes a second look at the family archives and shares his thoughts on the social taboos that restricted female actors, and the talented impersonators who convincingly occupied their place on stage until such time that women could reclaim it for themselves.

There is no definitive record of the moment when female actors entered the world of Modern Theatre in India. The Russian adventurer-musician Gerasim Lebedev is credited with having brought proscenium theatre to India, and Modern Indian Theatre is said to have originated with his staging of two European plays, which he translated into Bengali, in Calcutta in 1795 with male and female Bengali actors. However, it would take several decades for society to accept women on stage. According to Lata Singh, "Women began to be paid to perform roles as actresses for the first time with the staging of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Sharmistha* in 1873 by the National Theatre in Bengal."[1] But theatre continued to be considered a profession unfit for 'respectable' women.

In the heyday of Company Theatre[2] in India, it was always men who played the female roles. Men convincingly portrayed characters that epitomise the 'feminine essence' in classical Sanskrit drama, such as Shakuntala in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntala* (The Sign of Shakuntala); Vasantasena in Shudraka's *Mrichakatika* (The Little Clay Cart); and Vasavadutta in Bhasa's *Swapna Vasavadattam* (Vasavadatta's Dream). Narayan Shripad Rajhans, better known as Balgandharva, was the star of Marathi Company Theatre and an outstanding female impersonator. As he grew older, his female roles were handed over to his colleague Goharbai Karnataki who hailed from Bijapur. She too was an extraordinary artist but the patriarchal audiences of her time, instead of appreciating her skill, blamed her for the decline of Balgandharva.

In Company Theatre in Kannada, women of 'respectable' lineage did not appear on stage. Among the audience, too, 'respectable' women were segregated from the rest. The only women who dared to be actors were those of 'ill repute', such as devadasis or those who were *sani*, the popular term for women who had converted to Islam.[3] But these pioneers find no place in theatre history.

In the golden age of Kannada Company Theatre, roughly between 1905 and 1930, female characters were mostly played by men. Here are some photographs of performances of plays staged by Garud Sadashivarao's company, Sri Dattatreya Sangeeta Nataka Mandali. As I looked at these images closely, what arrested my gaze were the poses of the female

impersonators who, besides being accomplished singers and dancers, were able to create the illusion of femininity through their affectations, sinuous grace and skilful projection of coquetry.

The Illusionist

The photographs on this page and the title page illustrate the various poses of female impersonator Hammigi Nilakanthappa in the roles of the protagonists Sharavati of *Vishama Vivaha* and Jambuvati of *Chavatiya Chandra*. Sharavati, who is forced to marry the ageing emperor Ashoka, is said to possess "unparalleled beauty", while Jambuvati, daughter of forest king Jambuvanta, who marries Lord Krishna, is "as beautiful as the wild jasmine" that grows in her forest home. When Hammigi Nilakanthappa played these eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds, he was in his early forties. To create the illusion of a ravishing young woman he had to not only look the part but also sound it, and perhaps his exceptional singing ability helped him achieve the alluring feminine cadences of his characters' speech. Looking at these photographs I am struck by how his poses resemble those of Balgandharva, whose craft and body language had a profound influence on the female impersonators of the Kannada stage. Most Company Theatre artists subscribed to the theory that acting begins with imitation and that one's skill is later honed by using one's individual talent.

Hammigi Nilkanthappa as Sharavati in *Vishama Vivaha*.

Jambuvanta gives his daughter's hand in marriage
to Lord Krishna, in *Chavatiya Chandra*.

Shot in the Studio

The image on the previous page, from *Chavatiya Chandra*, looks as if it were retrieved from a wedding album. Although this is a scene from the play, the photograph has been taken in a studio during what we would now call a post-performance photo session. Jambuvanta the forest king is giving away his daughter's hand in marriage to Lord Krishna. Hammigi Nilakanthappa is Jambuvati; Garud Sadashivarao, Jambuvanta; Sitarama Bhatta, Krishna; and Krishna's companion, the Vidushaka (jester and commentator), is Gangavati Basavanna. Standing beside Jambuvati are her servant, and her two female companions played by boys whose faces haven't yet sprouted moustaches. In Company Theatre, such young boys, who were being trained in dance and music, played 'side' (i.e. minor) female roles before graduating to the part of the hero or the heroine, popularly called raja-party and rani-party ('party' being a corruption of 'part'). I do not know who played these 'side' roles because there is no record of them, and I could not locate any knowledgeable viewer from that era who might identify them.

A modern touch in *Vishama Vivaha*: a character in trousers.

Experiment in Realism

The images on this and the facing page are from *Vishama Vivaha*, written by Garud Sadashivarao, and performed in 1910, and seem to suggest that the play experimented with using a 'realistic' box set. In the fledgling years of Company Theatre, attempts at creating 'realism' in acting and other aspects of theatre were quite crude. In the play, king Ashoka marries Sharavati, who was engaged to his son. The maiden rebuffs his amorous overtures, for she is

King Ashoka (Garud Sadashivarao), his second wife Sharavati (Hammigi Neelkanthappa) and son Kamalakara (Sitarama Bhatta) in *Vishama Vivaha*.

enamoured by the prince. Hammigi Nilakanthappa is Sharavati; Garud Sadashivarao, the old king; and Sitarama Bhatta, the young prince Kamalakara. The playwright conceived *Vishama Vivaha* as a social play. But it is possible that audiences viewed it as a historical play since it foregrounds the characters of a real king, queen and prince, although the situations it depicts have no historical moorings whatsoever. All the women characters in these photographs were played by female impersonators.

Evergreen Magic

Maya Bazaar, also titled *Vatsala Apaharana*, occupies a special place in the annals of Company Theatre. Written by Garud Sadashivarao and first staged in the 1920s, it was performed by numerous Indian theatre companies all through the century; in fact, Surabhi, a company from Andhra Pradesh, performs it even today. It also found its way into popular cinema, and people still recall the famous thespian S.V. Rangarao's fantastic performance in the role of Ghatotkacha in the 1957

In this scene from *Maya Bazaar*, Abhimanyu (Sitarama Bhatta, extreme right) has fatally felled Ghatotkacha, whose mother Hidimbi tries to kill Abhimanyu while Lord Krishna (Garud Sadashivarao) restrains her, and Krishna's sister Subhadra looks on. The female impersonators remain unidentified.

Telugu film *Maya Bazaar*. The playwright came up with a new arena in which the Pandavas and the Kauravas could compete—the wedding of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu and Balarama's daughter Vatsala. Since many people, including the bride's mother and the Kauravas, oppose this alliance, Bhima's son Ghatotkacha and Krishna intervene to unite the couple. Vatsala consents to being kidnapped. There are several female characters (and hence impersonators) in this play. Perhaps the dramatist was aware that if there is a wedding, the women must be in charge! In Manoranjan Bhattacharya's seminal play *Chakravyuha*, Abhimanyu's story is tragic, but in *Maya Bazaar* it is delightfully frolicsome. Ghatotkacha conjures up enthralling magic on stage—scenes created with the most rudimentary technical support—and I can't help wondering whether we, with all the technical wizardry we have at hand, can successfully replicate the fantastic scenes that thrilled audiences a century ago.

Honourable Murder

Many images from the well-known play written by Garud Sadashivarao, *Yechchama Nayaka*, are in the form of letterpress printing blocks; this was the technology used to print pamphlets and posters of plays. Many such wooden blocks that could have helped us recreate the history of theatre are now lost to us, and I believe it is vitally important to archive whatever we can lay our hands on. In this scene from *Yechchama Nayaka*, Bayamma is slaying her wicked father Jagadevaraya. Incidentally, a play by the same name and on the same subject was written by the famous comedian K. Hirannaiah and staged by the pioneering Kannada theatre director Gubbi Veeranna. Some believe that Yechchama Nayaka, who

The murder scene in *Yechchama Nayaka*.

Banashankari Paage as Shahzadi and Shakuntala Kulkarni as Maulvi in *Ugra Kalyana*.

fought to protect the kingdom of Karnataka, was a sixteenth-century historical figure. His story appears in the novel *Kumudini* by one of the early Kannada novelists Galagantha (1869-1942). A tribal chieftain, Nayaka is said to have fought to protect the kingdom of Vijayanagara after the reign of Krishnadevaraya. The story of his struggle constitutes the plot of Sadashivarao's play.

Women at Last!

Finally, I want to present two photographs from Company Theatre, not of female impersonators but of female actors. These are from *Ugra Kalyana*, staged at the National Drama Festival in New Delhi on 25 December 1954. Banashankari Paage plays a female character called Shahzadi, and Shakuntala Kulkarni plays a male character called Maulvi. At long last, society had begun to accept female actors playing the roles of women and even those of men!

Dr Prakash Garud is a puppeteer, theatre director and the Managing Trustee of Gombe Mané, Dharwad.

Ghatotkacha kidnaps a willing Vatsala in *Maya Bazaar.*

ENDNOTES

1. Lata Singh, 'Modern Theatre as epitome of middle class civilized culture' in Rohini Sahni, V. Kalyan Shankar, Hemant Apte (eds), *Prostitution and Beyond: An Analysis of Sex Workers in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 322.

2. Company Theatre is the popular term for the commercial theatre companies that dominated the Indian stage from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Their spectacular and melodramatic productions, interspersed with a lot of song and dance, were highly successful at the box office.

3. Company Theatre actresses such as Bachhasani and Nanjasani were among the few who were identified as *sani*. They generally belonged to the weaver community, in which families were dominated by women.

Jambuvati (Hammigi Nilkanthappa) tends to her wounded father in *Chavatiya Chandra*. Seated on the floor is Vijaya the Vidhushaka.

Self-portrait in Muthuramalingam's bathroom,
2010, by Joshua Muyiwa.

Writing Desire:
The Body as Looking Glass

Joshua Muyiwa

When Joshua Muyiwa started writing poetry, as a teenager trying to understand his own desires, he felt trapped by the genderless quality of his text and constrained by the assumption that the desired object must be female. From exploring the abstract emotion of love he had to progress towards articulating to himself, and then fleshing out, the man he longed for, "my own Adam". While doing so, he had to refashion his own body, create an 'I' as well as a 'You'. Using language to make up desire, not necessarily to reveal it, his writing became a catalogue of other people's wants, confessions and experiences filtered through him. Muyiwa describes his continuing obsession with the body and how it has shaped and changed his writing.

When I look into my own poetry I see people. I begin to see gestures. I begin to remember their bodies; there is something so truthful about the body. In remembering, I never hear voices. I am deaf to people's voices. I can't mimic anyone's voice. I want to, always, tell the story. When I look into my own poetry filtered through Canadian poet, essayist, translator and professor Anne Carson's exploration of Eros in her book, *Eros: The Bittersweet*, I glimpse that my poetry deals with the concepts of body and biography.

In 2011, I spent the whole year writing and re-writing nine poems, *The Catalogue*, an attempt to map the relationship between a photographer and a poet, or image and text, using seminal photographs in the history of photography. Before attempting this work I knew I needed to read. I needed to read writers writing on their practice, writing about the image and fabric of love. Anne Carson and Roland Barthes were perfect examples for this study. Carson has this primal, 'manual' style and Barthes is a wise, distant uncle. I spent a few months wallowing in feelings: I didn't want to write another word because I thought Carson and Barthes had said everything on everything. But, having been heartbroken, I had a lot of time to wallow. And I had more feelings; this time I wanted to write them out, so I did. They were random lines, words, situations from television, music, anything posted on Twitter. A lot of people seem to tweet about heartbreak.

But then, while digging through old emails, excavating for clues to the moment the first crack appeared, I came across a BBC Documentary series, *The Genius of Photography*, buried deep in the Inbox. By the end of the series, my random lines had found structure. I wanted to tell my story, *the* story. I wanted it to reflect everything that was informing it, everything that had informed it. I had spent too much time talking about photography and not enough time responding to it. I wanted to state my case. I knew that *The Catalogue* must be a work of doing, it must unabashedly be about heartbreak. It must not shy away from pastiche, a technique mastered by Carson.

Through reading *Eros: The Bittersweet*, I received clues to understanding my own work. There seemed to be a sense of the direction I was headed, a direction explored in the months that bore *The Catalogue*. Initially, when writing poetry, I was interested in the abstract emotion of love but I felt trapped by the

genderlessness of the text, and also by the inherent understanding that the desired object was female—at least, in the responses of my initial readers, who said things like "One can't tell if you are writing to a boy or a girl, that's what I like" or "I thought you were gay, but all your poems are for girls".

Since this was also a time of understanding my own desires, longings, I wasn't able to flesh them out. After reading Carson, I had also greatly panicked that, like the conundrum faced by the lyric poet, I was assigning actions to the emotion of love like bullying, crushing, grinding, biting, gnawing, but if I was the one loving and therefore performing those actions, why was I not in the text? And if I were to insert myself performing these actions, then I would need that desired body to exist. I would need to situate the erotic in physiology, rather than in concepts. I would need to place it in the body. It had to be articulated.

But besides 'the shaft, his male hardness, throbbing member, broad chest, big arms' written about brazenly in the Mills & Boons, I encountered no man I wanted, longed for. I needed to articulate to myself and then proceed to write this man, wrest him out of these coy phrases, so I could bully, crush, grind, bite and gnaw at him. Through this process of writing, I began to understand my own motives, especially at a time when moments of tactility were brief, quick and filled with silence. Through this process of writing in the blanks of the lover's body, I began to fashion the world around me, but beginning with my own body. It was important to understand and acknowledge stories told by others and yourself about your body. I was no longer ashamed of representing my body, of crossing over the threshold of the proper to become shameless, to be naked. How could I know the threshold? By reaching out with my toes till I hit wood. But only on finding the boundary and then grappling between the gap could I free the erotic.

No. 4: Shiva

Shiva,
I want a man with skin
like filigreed silver
with grooves and ridges
for me to hold on to
and climb from his
toes to his lips.
Fingers like bamboo reeds
with strength and flexibility
to reach into
my hard to reach places.
Legs like a coconut tree,

thick and a darker shade
at the thighs.
A tongue that is forked
so he can play
with my perineum and glans,
leave me brimming
and thirsty.
Lips that are like
thighs, so he can swallow
me, keep me and send
me out a born-again.

Shiva,
I want a man to love
he should be like
an ocean – large and all-holding,
so even if I drink
him whole, he will still give more.
I want to be his Lakshmi
and sprout from his navel
and know no other place.
I want him to be Narasimha
and reach into my belly, pull
out my heart and burn
his name on it.

Anne Carson wrote, "Eros is an issue of boundaries." He now existed because certain boundaries did. Writing the body, skin, fingers, legs, tongue, and the edges of the man I desired, longed for, I finally knew what to play with. The definitions of this desired body have allowed me a compass to navigate my desires in the real world. This process has been cyclical, a you-scratch-my-back-I-scratch-yours process. I began with flagging the edges of this body, knowing the dimensions of each area of his, all the while surprised at how readily he was forming, my own Adam. I started writing at sixteen and it took till two years ago to finally have him—the lover—fully fleshed out, and to have me bodied. Though this tangential trip has been inspired by black, feminist and women poets who exposed the body in ways that empowered and charged the vocabulary used to describe the body, I was willingly and excitedly using language crafted by this breaking down of the dam, but I was using it to make up desire, not necessarily to express or reveal desire.

Rorschach Inkblot 2

Come, put your hand
against my face,
graze against my skin
alternating soft, silky patch
against remnant astro-turf skin.
Now, curl your hand,
retract a little and let go
against my face,
alternating soft, silky patch
against remnant astro-turf skin.

Dab, the blood of your knuckles,
roughly on my dreading hair

and paint lines on my face,
alternating soft, silky patch
against clotting blood on skin.

Dance, extend your fingers
towards me and reach out
to drying rivulets of blood
and move that knee
and make contact, harder, harder.

Prawn, on the floor,
watch me draw my knees
closer to my chest
and come down and whisper.
Just whisper.

What is the difference I'm marking between making-up, expressing and revealing desire? This posturing is again backed by Carson, who wrote, in *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*:

Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.
Beauty makes sex sex.

I didn't want to challenge or re-configure the notions of desiring, but rather had to learn a way to understand and negotiate my body, my own sexualness, with this object of beauty I was lusting for. Therefore, I had to make it up, even if it was just the simple task of listing it out and then rendering it as something else. In a way, learning and writing what a beauty-thing is to me has led me to *writing* it, thereby to loving it. Because this learning was so personal, resulting in the insertion of 'I' and 'You', and these 'I's and 'You's had definite physiological boundaries, my erotics finally had its playground.

Untitled

Let's fall in love with
the same person.
It could be me or you.
I would prefer me.
And then let's take a road-trip
to some small town in Karnataka.
How about Koodli?
The place where the Tunga meets
the Bhadra, let's you and I meet.
Okay, get ready, learn to say my name.
It is Joshua Olatokunbo Rahoul Muyiwa.
Fuck you, it is sexy if you say it right.
We will drive into an empty field,
park under a large banyan tree.
Then, we will kiss and bite
the seat covers into small clouds of
dandelion
and then fuck.
It will be tongues groping, fingers tasting,
toes hearing and skin seeing.
It will be the kind of sex
that will make us cry and moan
and the banyan tree will stretch
its tendrils to whip our butts.

But remember, we must both scream
Joshua.

My writing, in effect, became biographical by virtue of it being a document, a personal catalogue or a catalogue of other people's confessions, experiences, wants, filtered through me. But the wonderfulness of poetry is that it is through the blurring of strict categories that it allows the reader, the listener, to make up their own minds whether it is a fictional or non-fictional account. Though the intention might be biographical, the very act of writing creates either an exaggeration or an understatement but never the exact. Thus, by escaping into the just-missed, or hereabouts, there is a way in which it leaps from the particular to the universal. The very act of writing down for me created a mode of understanding myself; it is therefore possible to see a shift in the concerns of my poetry towards pinning down my 'lover' self.

Untitled

I am not used to having the bed to myself,
anymore, it usually is two heavy-weight
boxers
battling it out for more legroom,
or sometimes, I use my experience of
shoving
previous lovers over and push.

But, now, it is an empty bed,
I flail about, my hands don't have to be
removed
from under your neck,
and my nostrils aren't tickled by your
smell,
and though, like a mist-wrapped morning,
I'm cocooned in your snoring,
My nights are now spent wishing the fan
was less vocal, that the shuffling feet
of the neighbours on the floor above would
stop,
that the boys on the corner attempting
to smoke their first joint would find
another place
to experiment, and the Alsatian next door
would stop
barking at the pink light.
Meanwhile, you who is not used to me,
probably yawning, is snoring,
posting your final tweet for the night,
but pause a moment in bed,
the blanket gives too easily to your pull.

But, in the past two years, my work is changing, it is interested in the absence of the body, not in the sense of abandoning the lyric, confessional style I've mostly adopted, but interested in how my man's body makes impressions in spaces he inhabits, and the changes I experience in his absence. Probably, lately, I could see my work as being interested in the lack, rather than in the possessing. It is interested in

investigating the back-stories of my own repeated re-tellings, it scopes out things that happen, and the happened. Sometimes, I feel like I've come to a point where I just want to share the room with my lover's body, not notice it, even trip over it. While before I wanted to act on his body or be acted upon, now I want to not act or not be acted upon, and still look to the body to understand and record this impact.

Untitled

We had thought, if we had a place,
it would all be fine,
I could run around in my underwear –
even if your hands didn't always
reach out to graze my thigh
or wrestle me down,
but even in your boxers,
I'd always be greedy,
my tongue constantly slithering
licking the air of your sweat –
we had thought, the place would mend itself,
the dust would avoid the spaces,
we frequently used – dust doesn't settle on furniture, objects and people, we love,
because we touch them regularly.

We thought, if we had a place,
poetry would peel from the walls
and photography would snap itself
at the moments of cross-sections –
they lied, the bohemians –
because, to keep going,
we must hold each other by the wrist,
our ankles must be deep in sweat
and there must be no dust.

Being concerned with 'lack of', I'm still amazed by the vulnerability with which the body recognises and pines for absence, and how when present it begs to be controlled, shaped. Thus, the body is the addressed because it is absent, but it is privy because it is present, listening to records of its absence. But I can only take this route because I learnt, along the way, important lessons from black, feminist and women writers, and even through my flatmate's thesis: the body is a weapon. And now, I think, my writing presently negotiates two lessons, where I'm finally learning, a little, to deploy the body, but stealthily, powerfully and at my command, as well as to envelop, protect and safeguard myself from its assault.

The Catalogue: Nine

Confidential: this message is only for the photographer or A Poet Makes a Self-Portrait of Himself
Joshua Muyiwa (1986-)
Self-portrait in Muthuramalingam's bathroom, 2010

You must understand, that we have learnt to settle into our definite role but we haven't let go of our ability to covet.
And Dibutades, I began to wonder if ignoring Sontag's warning
about the seduction of image would be exciting. Photography like
poetry happens in the careful editing or the purposeful reign of disregard,
but the choice has to be made after the work is done.
Never in the beginning, the end or the middle of the process.
It happens in setting the limits of the story, it sometimes exists in the elements
outside of the frame and sometimes in the tiniest moment in the image, but, this
moment even the photographer discovers after he has made the image.
It is like we arrived into each other's lives after desperately needing a break from fiction, from story-telling, and actually wanted to hear a more exciting anecdote.
One we weren't telling. We wanted to be startled, just once. Sometimes, it was too overwhelming to be quiet and at the times,
we were hollowed out from all the catharses. But, we tried.
And that will always be good enough.
But, the question isn't that. It is, if you noticed at all?
Did you notice the overwhelming, the hollowing out, the draining out
of this person's every iota to make this happen?
Did you acknowledge it? Did you in anyway return it?
Or did you leave it gray-green, a static television in a room,
an over-cooked segment of garlic, what did you do in this time?
But, of course, you did. Mr. Fox Talbot of our times. You understood
photographs must be made of the beautiful and if ugly then in a beautiful way.
Kalos. Beauty. Greek.
Calotype. Beauty-thing. English.
You accounted by being selfish. You didn't want to regret.
No motivation is more romantic.
You didn't want this beautiful moment to disappear. You wanted to record it.
You wanted to stay. But the beautiful moments ran out of things to say.
There were other beautiful things in the viewfinder.
Sometimes, it takes a long time for the picture-taking to drain the image
of this initial wonder. Sometimes, just a while.
The eye is fickle. Even if the heart is anchored.
We are anxious never wanting to betray either organ
and always making a decision using our feet.
We surmount the tug of coming together.
Despite thinking, 'I wouldn't want me.'

We break the spell. We touch. We talk. And yet, if the feet say: stay or go. We heed.
Never thinking outside of the two options. By virtue of our choices, we become photographers or poets.
Minor White said the state of mind of the photographer while creating is a blank….When looking for pictures…the photographer projects himself into everything he sees, identifying himself with everything in order to know it and to feel it better. And Sontag echoed thought is seen as clouding the transparency of the photographers' consciousness.
Ah, thought in execution is the difference between us.

Before *The Catalogue*, discovering the body was about the boundaries, bones, fleshing it out, fucking it, wrestling with it, missing it. And these various explosive encounters highlighted and informed the route to my present understanding of my own body. Except that with this series, there is also shyness, insecurity, unsureness, lethargy, awkwardness, all the things I had thought I needed to dispose of, to be bold about the body. I realised I was constantly using the bodies I had discovered and created—they seemed to grow of their own accord, independently and frozen. I was afraid to use my *own* body and the bodies of my lovers. I was afraid to catalogue the changes in my present body, my own changing notions of boldness. Though, I always thought, I was inserting my present, I seemed to situate *them* in a particular place and time where there was an immediate possibility of finding the crack, the fault line. I seemed to skim over the internal conversations that finally revealed the crack.

In *The Catalogue*, there is an attempt to include those internal conversations, to use the different shapes, actions and weight of the body to talk about tracing and digging through the rivers, rivulets and tiny streams that make up the ideas of 'what it means to be a lover'. For me, right now, it means to be hesitant, unsure, to second guess, and nothing reveals this infarction more than the body. In my own life, my body has changed from something that needed unravelling and naming, to something that wavers between the magical and the scientific. I stopped noticing only the bodies I had created, my own and my lover's—filigreed skin, thigh-like lips, coconut-tree legs—and started noticing my *own* body and the bodies in the world around me: the perfect ankles of this boy who never wears shorts and you can only see his ankles when he mounts or dismounts his motorbike. I was shamelessly interested

in the workings of these bodies in different situations. I was interested in my *own* body in different situations.

While before I would risk my body being in different situations, now the quality of the risk-taking has become different. So also in the writing: earlier, the risk of writing blatantly about the body was about exposing it, but now, the risk is also about being shameless in terms of the body loving, grieving and experiencing such other emotions. The poems in *The Catalogue* don't directly refer to any specific body-type for either the photographer or the poet, but there is a strong, suffocating sense of the body. I'm grappling, somewhat, with understanding the elements that made this possible and can only tentatively say that my ideas of boldness, of loving, of sex, of reality, of dream and of memory have changed. I no longer want to distance myself from these incessantly shifting ideas and still want my work to be able to speak to everyone. The body became that bridge between taking something particular and making it universal.

Writing about the body was something I needed, and still do, but lately, it has become something I love to do. And now exploring outside of the strict boundaries of my lover's body, I need everything and anything to write about the body, my own and my lover's. It doesn't have to just be things that turn me on, it could be the mundane, the action of smoking a cigarette and then crossing the road, listening to another person talking, it could be presence, it could be absence. I am investigating and investing each action with meaning. I want to take situations and then see bodies inhabit the space. I am interested in the effect of the body on a space, on another body. I want to just go into the effects. Not too much, for me, lies outside the body. It stores little anecdotes, it is privy to the fact that most encounters are theatre. Perhaps I want to write about this theatre, this performance. To be a lover is to understand that it is performance. To be a relatable actor one must perfect the body language of the character; to write about the lover, I had to embody it, and observe when others embody it.

But the renewed obsession with regard to the body comes most from sudden comfort with it. I am not afraid of the power of the body to express itself; rather, I am learning to channel it to tell a more authentic story, and in some instances tell the story by ignoring it in order to be authentic. The body has become a wonderful playground, it can be both erotic and ordinary. I love the

slothful body, the body that leaks inhibitions in order to commune with a space, a body that grapples with the contours of itself till it envelops it whole. Much like a lover who comes into your room and makes the space their own, seeming irreplaceable, like they've always been there. But for me the most beautiful realisation is that the body allows for grand gestures. It learns to share, to express, to welcome, even before the heart has been won over. It is also the map on which we can pin down moments that made us.

I know that I'm still learning about my body, and my relationship with it might change, but I don't ever want to be afraid to acknowledge and catalogue it. Writing about the body has taught me that there are reasons why it is feared. We never know whether our bodies will betray us, so wicked, it is like having a best friend who knows every secret and is also talkative and flaky. But who doesn't want that patient ear even if it comes at a risk?

But mainly writing the story of my own body and the bodies of my lovers has allowed me to find my place in the scheme of things. In some way, the writing has been therapeutic; in all its bustlings and staggerings, it has allowed me to escape and at the same time come back. Such a wonderful symbol, the body remains. By writing about it I wish to publicly revel in it.

And at the most basic level, I think, I am interested in mortality. Like that wall in the kitchen with the pencil markings, the body possesses markings of growth, of nearing the end. But the process of marking that milestone is joyous, an achievement. The body wonderfully remains the site that juxtaposes the notions of success and failure, of being open and closed, of being easy and being stupendous. I think that most times in life we constantly negotiate these positions, and the body clues us in on our place in the spectrum. While first writing, I attempted to bind the body, pin it down and now I want to watch it, embody it, discard it, but pick it up again. I want to play with it but also be bored with it. But I never want to give up on it. I want to continue having a long, intimate conversation with my body, and I want to eavesdrop on conversations between bodies. And I want to write them down in order to understand my own meandering desires.

Joshua Muyiwa, 26, is a writer, poet and television fanatic.

Notes from the Margins:
The Feminine Voice of the Ghatam

Sumana Chandrashekar

All photographs courtesy Sukanya Ramgopal

The earthen pot or ghatam, one of the simplest instruments in folk music traditions, has long remained on the fringes of the world of Carnatic music. Subject to the politics of hierarchy and patriarchy, the ghatam has coincidentally suffered the same fate as that of the female Carnatic musician. To be a woman and a ghatam player is to be doubly marginalised, says Sumana Chandrashekar. By examining her guru's inspirational life and music, she attempts to uncover the reasons why percussion is considered a male domain in Carnatic music, and explores the many forms of discrimination in the concert space.

Sukanya Ramgopal, India's pioneering female ghatam player.

The fragrance of fresh earth; the incessant sounds of a ringing clay pot—when such seemingly random sensations began to overpower me, I knew it was a calling I could not ignore. Years after training as a Carnatic vocalist, the ghatam too had silently entered my life.

I began to seek my guru. After many months of searching for the kind of guru I had in mind, I finally landed up at the house of Sukanya Ramgopal. I knew Sukanya[1] to be one of the greatest ghatam players of the country and one of the finest exponents of Carnatic percussion. That she is today the country's only (and possibly the first) woman ghatam player to perform professionally was, to me, merely additional trivia. "This instrument draws me. Will you take me as your student?" I requested her hesitantly, unsure if she would have the time for a beginner. She happily agreed. After a couple of classes she said to me, "For thirty-five years I have waited for a female student! I'm glad you came."

I was elated. But gradually these words began to intrigue me. The piece of trivia I had gathered about Sukanya began to take on new meanings and raise new questions. Why were there no other women playing the ghatam? Why had she not had a female student for thirty-five long years? I began to look for answers. The ghatam and my guru became my windows into a world that, as a vocalist, I had never spared much thought for. It is through their journeys that I attempt, in this essay, to understand the constructs of gender and hierarchy within the realm of Carnatic music and especially within the realm of percussion.

'Ghatam' in Sanskrit is a generic name for a pot; it is the *ghata*/*ghada* in Hindi and *gadige* in Kannada. Although the earthen pot is one of the simplest instruments found in several folk traditions across India and elsewhere, it was only towards the latter half of the nineteenth century that it made its entry into Carnatic music. We do not know how and when it did so, as its early history in Carnatic music has been poorly documented. Legend has it, however, that a musician walking past a village heard a farmer's plough hitting an earthen pot that his wife was carrying and, enamoured by the sound it made, he decided to use it to accompany his music.

The early years were those of experimentation. In a period when

Sukanya playing the mridangam in 1972 as a Class 10 student of Sri N.K.T. National Girls' High School, Triplicane, Madras.

existing Carnatic music instruments such as the veena, nagaswaram, flute and mridangam had attained a certain degree of musical sophistication, and when most experimentation, especially under royal patronage, focused on new kinds of compositions, on 'Indianising' the violin, or on experimenting with the Western idiom of music, here was an unsophisticated, humble instrument from the countryside that was trying to find its own voice and space.

A few percussion artists who had trained in the mridangam and the chenda tried out the fingering techniques meant for these instruments on the ghatam. For a long time the ghatam served as an accompanying instrument for *kathakalakshepams* (musical discourses), bhajans and other community singing performances where the music was light and simple. It was also used to provide comic interludes in 'serious' musical performances: for instance, ghatam players would simulate the sound of the train or create other comical sounds by playing on different points on the instrument and by placing it in different positions.

Such acts perhaps attributed to the ghatam player the qualities of a jester,

Sukanya receiving a certificate of appreciation from Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer in 1973. In the middle is her mridangam guru Harihara Sharma.

not to be taken too seriously. Although the instrument was eventually assimilated into Carnatic music it continued to remain on the fringes. For a long time, even as late as the 1960s, accompanying for *pallavi*[2] was considered the exclusive privilege of mridangam players. The ghatam was deemed unsuitable and the ghatam player seen as lacking the necessary expertise for this role.

Like the ghatam, women too were considered unfit for and incapable of rendering *pallavi*s. *Pallavi* singing, with its intricate mathematical calculations, was the exclusive forte of men. Women, believed to be inept at numbers, were therefore expected to focus only on *bhava*, emotion, and not attempt 'cerebral' music.

Less than Equal

Gender bias was evident not only among male artists but among concert organisers as well. For the male artist's concert, the organisers would specially choose each accompanying artist. Not

so for women's concerts. Organisers would ask the female lead artist to bring her own 'party'. The names of the musicians in such a 'party' were usually not announced in the publicity material. Female main artists were invariably paid less than their male counterparts. Since male singers generally did not prefer ghatam accompaniment, ghatam players mostly accompanied female singers, and they would have to be content with the paltry amount that came to them from a concert that was already under-priced.

The female artist and the ghatam player were, therefore, subject to a similar politics—of hierarchy and patriarchy. Perhaps it was this that brought the two together. Most leading women singers, for some reason, warmly accepted the ghatam. In fact, several ghatam players of yesteryear such as Umayalapuram Kodandarama Iyer, Vilvadri Iyer and K.M. Vaidyanathan owed their musical careers to women singers such as K.B. Sunderambal, M.L. Vasanthakumari, M.S. Subbulakshmi, D.K. Pattammal and others who supported and nurtured them.

Sukanya (right) playing prince Rajendran in *Rajaraja Cholan* staged during the 1974 annual day celebrations of Ethiraj College, Madras.

When it came to learning a percussion instrument, the mridangam was preferred since it was regarded as indispensable to a Carnatic concert. It was believed (and to a large extent is still believed) that by training in the mridangam, one would be able to play any other percussion instrument. This belief was warranted to some extent when it came to the khanjira which, like the mridangam, is a drum with a flat surface made of skin, and is played with ease by many mridangam players. However, the ghatam is different: its material and circular structure demand a training methodology and a practice that is radically different from the mridangam's.

I do not know if the challenge that the ghatam posed to the hegemony of the mridangam also contributed to the tension between the artists of the two instruments. But a certain disdain for the ghatam was widespread. Nevertheless, ghatam artists were gently, insistently and imaginatively asserting their identity. My favourite story is of Alangudi Ramachandran (1912-1975), one of the foremost ghatam exponents of his time. He came up with an innovative idea to popularise the instrument he was so passionate about. He frequently placed advertisements in local newspapers, announcing his concerts with a picture of himself with his ghatam. He even had 'GHATAM' as his telegraph address: telegrams addressed to merely 'GHATAM' would reach him!

Despite the existing politics, some boys were encouraged to specialise in the ghatam or the khanjira—the morching came much later—because, given the dearth of percussionists other than mridangam players, they stood a good chance of performing in concerts and earning a living. Mridangam player Harihara Sharma encouraged his son Vikku (ghatam artist Vikku Vinayakram) to take up the ghatam so that the boy could supplement the family income. If there were two mridangam players at home one of them would have been redundant!

Historically, the ghatam (as also the khanjira and the morching) has been classified as an *upapakkavadya*, a sub-accompanying percussion instrument, occupying a secondary status in relation to the mridangam. The trajectory of the ghatam and the ghatam artist seems to me to be strikingly similar to that of the woman, the female artist, who also has for long been considered an *upapakkavadya*, playing second fiddle to a man.

It is these trajectories—of the ghatam and the woman—that I see embodied in Sukanya's musical journey. Hers is the position of the doubly marginalised: not just a ghatam player but a *female* ghatam player. But instead of relinquishing this position in the face of sharp criticism and humiliation, her music and her life have persistently challenged patriarchal attitudes and questioned the hierarchy of percussion instruments. She has also re-imagined the ghatam as a melodic instrument and moved it from the sidelines to centre stage.

Women in Percussion

A question that has always concerned me is this: why is percussion in classical music considered a male domain? Why is it rare today to find women percussionists in Carnatic music? Temple sculptures and murals across southern India stand testimony to the fact that since medieval times, women have routinely played percussion. Even during the early part of the twentieth century there were accomplished female mridangam players who were respected as brilliant performers as well as tutors. Ranganayaki Ammal was a pre-eminent mridangam player who regularly accompanied her brother, the famous violinist Tirugokarnam Ulaganatha Pillai. Between 1942 and 1960 the duo travelled across the country and even to Malaysia, Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) and Singapore for performances. There were many others such as Kanakambujam, the first woman mridangam player to perform in the Madras Music Academy, Hamsadamayanti who played the mridangam for T. Balasaraswati, and Thanjavur Pakkiri Ammal who was a versatile thavil player.

Another artist was N. Rajam, the young on-screen mridangam player seen in the 1948 Tamil movie *Krishna Bhakti*. Rajam, according to film historian Randor Guy, "was adept in playing on that inimitable percussion instrument. During the song recording the noted mridangam artist of the day, S.V.S. Narayanan, played on the mridangam. Kumari Rajam 'acted' the scene well because she knew to play the instrument!"[3]

The women mentioned above were perhaps the last of many generations of women percussionists. It is noteworthy that all of them belonged

Sukanya performing with her guru Vikku Vinayakram (second from left) during the 1978 annual day celebrations of their music school Shri Jaya Ganesh Talavadya Vidyalaya, Triplicane, Madras.

to the community of hereditary temple dancers and musicians: the devadasis. Most boys and girls in this community were taught the fundamentals—vocal music, a melodic instrument and a percussion instrument—after which they were free to specialise. For example, M.S. Subbulakshmi was well-trained in playing the veena and the mridangam. So many women took to percussion with ease. However, we find a steep fall in their numbers, a phenomenon that coincides with the anti-nautch and the nationalist movements that intensified between 1928 and 1947.

Percussion as a gendered space in Carnatic music was among the many outcomes of the nationalist and the anti-nautch movements, which formulated and formalised certain societal values and stereotypes, including those concerning women, and which sanitised and classicised Carnatic music, creating strictures around its transmission and performance. It soon became a common practice for girls from the upper castes to be trained in singing or playing melodic instruments, while percussion became an almost exclusively male preserve.

Sukanya leading a team of young percussionists studying at Shri Jaya Ganesh Talavadya Vidyalaya in 1978.

Enter Sukanya Ramgopal

This was the world into which Sukanya entered. Growing up in the 1960s, in the Triplicane area of Madras, Sukanya seemed to have deeply imbibed the eclectic spirit of the neighbourhood. Consumed by a passion for percussion, the young school girl sneaked out of her violin class, barged into the mridangam class in the adjacent room, which was being conducted by Harihara Sharma and said, "*Mama* [uncle], I want to learn the mridangam. Will you teach me? Can we start right away?" The liberal-minded teacher responded warmly to Sukanya's unbridled passion and soon began teaching her. He spared no effort in honing her skill, and within a couple of years she had begun to accompany concert artists on the mridangam, and even won music scholarships.

However, one day, upon closely watching Vikku practise, Sukanya realised that the ghatam was her true calling. When she expressed her desire to learn the instrument, Vikku was astounded. "This is not for women. You will not be able to play on it," he said. Perhaps he had his own reasons. The Manamadurai[4] ghatam which he

plays is thick and heavy: extracting a sound from it requires extra effort, and mastering it would be a challenge for anyone, man or woman. But even before Vikku could make up his mind, Sharma had started giving Sukanya ghatam lessons. "Would the instrument distinguish between a boy and a girl?" he had admonished his son.

"When I was told that women wouldn't be able to play the ghatam, it only fuelled my passion. I loved the instrument and nothing would deter me," Sukanya recalls. Before Vikku returned from a year-long concert tour, Sukanya's playing style and fingering technique had been fully adapted to the ghatam. Seeing that he had been proven wrong, Vikku accepted her as his student.

Nevertheless, there were moments when Vikku felt that his investment in a girl would be in vain. Marriage would put an end to all her endeavours. When even female singers struggle to pursue their careers after marriage, it was impossible that a percussionist wife would find any support, he feared. But Sukanya reassured him that she would not sacrifice her instrument at any cost. If she did not find a family that respected her ghatam, she would not marry. While such tensions between the guru and the shishya quickly subsided, other artists in the field were disturbed by a girl's unusual foray into a 'male' space. Vikku's decision to teach a girl shocked many of his male colleagues, especially vocalists and mridangam players, and they kept trying to dissuade him from doing so. But by now, like his student, Vikku too was firm in his resolve. He taught her wholeheartedly and continues to guide her to this day.

On the home front Sukanya's unusual life choices did create some ripples. The twelve-year-old's fascination with the mridangam might have been considered a childish fancy but when the sixteen-year-old embraced the ghatam, her father disapproved so strongly that he refused to speak to her for over a month. It was only much later in life, when he saw Sukanya's reputation grow, that he acknowledged her decision. Throughout this period it was her mother who remained a constant support and companion.

Bias in Concerts

Learning the instrument was just the beginning of her negotiations

with the 'male' space. The performance arena further fortified gender stereotypes. There were spaces where women were not allowed, spaces where women percussionists were not allowed, and spaces where the ghatam was unwelcome. Being a female ghatam player was, in these circumstances, the most undesirable combination.

Sukanya was about fifteen when Kothamangalam Subbu, the famous Tamil writer and filmmaker, passed away and the family organised a *harikatha* performance in his memory. K.C. Tyagarajan was performing the *harikatha* and he took Sukanya along to play the mridangam for him. Subbu's son was visibly unsettled to see a girl in a *pavadai* (long skirt) entering with the mridangam. He called Tyagarajan aside and said, "We do not want women to perform here. Could you send her back and get a male accompanist?" Sukanya says, "That was the first time I was refused a concert because I was a woman. It is ironical that it happened at the residence of Subbu, who was also a major champion of women's rights."

Another case in point was a veena concert at the Madras Music Academy. Normally, the veena player is accompanied only by percussion artists, and if there are two of them they generally sit on either side of the veena player, facing one another. The mridangam player for the day, a senior man, told the veena player before Sukanya had arrived at the venue, "I hear that a girl is playing the ghatam today. Tell her not to sit facing me. She can sit on the side." When Sukanya arrived, the message was conveyed to her. The concert was about to begin. Sukanya took her ghatam and even before the mridangam player could sit down, she made herself comfortable in the spot facing him. He was furious. The concert went on and it was time for the *tani avarthanam* (percussion solo). The mridangam player refused to play his solo, knowing that if he did not play, neither could the ghatam artist. He was attempting to wind up the concert when the audience started shouting "*tani avarthanam*". The mridangam player was forced to play. He finished his part and Sukanya responded with a brilliant solo. When she finished, much to the mridangam player's dismay and fury, the whole house burst into applause.

For Sukanya, such victories have been innumerable. Today she is regarded

even by her guru as the best exponent of the Vikku *baani* (style) of ghatam playing, a unique playing technique that Vikku has evolved. He explains that he consolidated the various existing playing techniques and created several of his own to suit the demands of the sturdy Manamadurai ghatam. This *baani* employs different parts of the hands—all the fingers, palm, wrist, nails and knuckles—to produce sound, and entails playing on various locations on the instrument. Sukanya has not only perfected these techniques but has also created many of her own.

Hindu discourse commonly employs the body as a strong metaphor to describe the society and the world. It is therefore not uncommon to see music and musical instruments likened to the body. One myth about the origin of the ghatam is that god Ganesha played on his pot-belly and that was how the instrument was born. The ghatam is played in a manner that defies all prevailing notions of the 'slender' female body. Placed on the lap, the pot becomes an extension of the stomach. The woman who plays it is perceived as being pregnant or ugly!

The *gumki* is an inimitable booming sound produced by pressing the

A 1977 press clipping from *Dinamani* of a concert review in which the critic upbraids Sukanya for playing "a little too much" and not following tradition during the *tani avarthanam*.

mouth of the ghatam to the stomach. To generate this sound, the male ghatam players of earlier times generally performed bare-chested. Browsing through my guru's old photographs one day, I was intrigued to see a picture of one of her performances. In the midst of male ghatam players, who were performing with shirts unbuttoned, was Sukanya, clad in a sari. How then did she manage the *gumki*? After much

hesitation, I broached the topic with her. Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "One day while practising I tried to 'adjust' my sari and play. It worked," she said with a smile. The adjustment had obviously brought the ghatam in direct contact with the body. This 'open' method of playing does not exist today. Sukanya too requires no such 'adjustments' to produce the *gumki*. But her mastery over this 'male' technique is something that few men can match.

Further, Sukanya has shattered the prejudice that a woman's fingers are too 'delicate' for the ghatam. The force needed to produce sound on the instrument often leaves its imprints on one's hands. The first time I complained to her about the cuts on my fingers, she affectionately passed her hand across mine, smiled and said, "So you have been practising well." She herself cherishes these 'signs' on her fingers and retains them through constant practice.

Carving New Spaces

The concert platform strongly reinforces the hierarchies among percussion instruments. In a Carnatic music concert, the main artist generally sits in the centre. The violin and the mridangam players sit on either side of the main artist, facing each other. The *upapakkavadya* artists sit diagonally behind the main artist, either next to the violin or the mridangam.

These positions for instruments appear to have been fixed in recent times. Was this done purely for aesthetic reasons or to establish hierarchies? Some old photographs and records indicate the absence of any rigid formulae for seating and naming such as is prevalent today. A 1936 photograph shows the great khanjira exponent Pudukottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai in the foreground while Palghat Mani Iyer, the mridangam player, is seated by his side. There are also records which mention violinist Rajamanickam Pillai first, followed by the name of the main artist. The seniority and expertise of accompanying artists seem to have governed seating arrangements and naming order. I am not sure when the hierarchies among musical instruments were formalised and when they began to be reflected in their arrangement on stage, but I can think of a probable reason why.

Since the mridangam was made of hide, playing it was equivalent to touching a dead animal and hence taboo for orthodox Brahmins.

Therefore the mridangam and khanjira masters came from the 'lower caste' community called Isai Vellalar (literally 'those who practise music'), which had changed its original caste name, Melakkarar, following the Dravida Self-Respect Movement of 1925. While women belonging to the Melakkarar community continued to be called devadasis, 'Isai Vellalar' was a term that encompassed both men and women who practised music, according to T.J.S. George.[5] By the early twentieth century Brahmins had started breaking the religious taboo against playing the mridangam, and by the latter half of the twentieth century they were dominating the field of Carnatic percussion.[6] By positioning the mridangam in front, therefore, perhaps the upper castes were asserting their social position. It is possible that such a stratification of musical instruments became more explicit when the last beacons of the Isai Vellalar community passed away.

The established hierarchy among instruments meant that the *upapakkavadya* could never occupy the front position, let alone take centre stage. However, Sukanya was dissatisfied with the lower status accorded to the ghatam. Could it not become a lead instrument? Midway through a highly successful career Sukanya was seized by a creative unrest that inspired her to embark on another musical journey.

In this undated clipping from *Kalkand* magazine of an interview with Vikku, he says his first female pupil was a Japanese girl in California, and that he had initially hesitated to accept an Indian girl, Sukanya, as his student.

Having established herself in a male world, she now began seeking an enlarged role for her instrument.

She found the answer in melody, the musical 'other' of percussion. To extend the ghatam's expressive range, Sukanya invented the Ghata Tharang, where she plays six or seven ghatams of different *shruti*s (notes). In 1995, when Sukanya presented the Ghata Tharang at a music conference, nobody imagined that this novelty would go any further than a lecture demonstration. Some musicians even said, "Why does a woman have to indulge in such things? Moreover, the ghatam is just a 'side' instrument."

However, Sukanya disregarded such opinions about the ghatam's assigned position in Carnatic music and broke new ground. Today, the Ghata Tharang is hailed as a unique performance idea and has won great acclaim in India and abroad. By seamlessly blending melody and percussion, the Ghata Tarang has centre-staged the ghatam and the ghatam artist. In 1995, Sukanya also formed the Sthree Thaal Tharang, an instrumental ensemble of women artists. As its very name and even its performance aesthetics suggest, Sthree Thaal Tharang is an initiative to reclaim percussion for women.

Hindustani vocalist Vidya Rao, in her essay 'Thumri as Feminine Voice', says:

> As women in patriarchal societies, we are familiar with limitations, constraints, and small, confining spaces. We live in confining spaces—both physical ones...and ideological ones....I believe that women can and have extended their limited spaces in dignified, creative encounters....I think one way of doing this has been to extend this space without rejecting or vacating it but by exploring and working with what is available within it, by re-interpreting its constraints to discover unexpected richness.[7]

These words seem to encapsulate not just the journey of the female artist but the journey of the ghatam as well.

"There is a fire within that refuses to be quelled," my guru often tells me. For a moment, I wonder who is speaking—the woman or the ghatam. Well, perhaps it is both. For me, Sukanya's life seamlessly weaves together these two contested yet equally charged trajectories. In her musical journey one finds a quest for identity—both for herself and for her instrument.

As I am about to conclude this piece, a verse from the fifteenth-century poet Kabir peeks out of my old notebook, as though in response to my thoughts:

is ghata antar baag bageeche, isi mein sirajanahaara
is ghata antar paaras moti, isi mein parakhanahaara
is ghata antar saat samundar, isi mein nau lakh taara
is ghata antar anhad garaje, isi mein uthat phuvaara
keheta kabir suno bhai sadho, isi mein sain hamaara

In this vessel are gardens and bowers,
In this, the one who made them

In this vessel are diamonds and pearls,
In this the one who discerns them
In this vessel are the seven seas,
In this, the nine million stars

In this vessel the unstruck sounds,
In this, burst the fountains

Says Kabir, listen seeker friends:
In this is my guru.

(Translation by Vidya Rao)
I marvel at Kabir's metaphor of the ghata. Does he see it as a Universal Womb from which springs all creation? Does the ghata, to him, embody the earth, the primordial feminine energy that nourishes and sustains the world?

The fragrance of fresh earth and the ringing sounds of the clay pot come back to me and I set out on yet another journey—in search of that guru; in search of that unstruck sound.

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I also thank Ms Indu Jayanthi Varma, Director, Tapasya Kala Sampradaya, Chennai and Mr K.N. Akash, grandson of Ranganayaki Ammal, for sharing information on the women percussionists, on whom little documentation exists.

ENDNOTES

1. For the purpose of this essay, I have taken the liberty of using the first names of my revered gurus Sukanya Ramgopal and Vikku Vinayakram without adding the suffix 'ji' or 'sir' that I normally would to indicate my respect.

2. Pallavi is usually a one-line composition set to a single *tala* cycle. Considered to be the touchstone of musical creativity, it allows for immense improvisation in raga and *tala*. The rhythm structure could range from the simplest to the most complex.

3. Blogpost by Randor Guy on www.sangeetham.com available at http://tfmpage.com/forum/29107.20880.03.21.22.html

4. A small village near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. It is one of the major ghatam-making centres.

5. T.J.S. George, *MS: A Life in Music* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2007), p. 84.

6. Ibid., p. 86.

7. Vidya Rao, 'Thumri as Feminine Voice' in Nivedita Menon (ed), *Gender and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 475.

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Creating Theatre Spaces:
Connecting Art to Local Life

Atul Pethe and Waman Pandit
in conversation with Ashutosh Potdar

Maharashtra stands out for its unique network of theatre activists that takes plays to small-town audiences. Atul Pethe, playwright and documentary filmmaker, travels to urban and semi-urban places in Maharashtra conducting 'Arogya Samvad' (Health Communication) workshops. He directs plays and tours with his performances in and outside Maharashtra. Waman Pandit is in the printing industry and is also a performing artist based in Kankavli. There, he leads the theatre organisation Vasantrao Acharekar Sanskrutik Pratishthan, which has extended its network to small villages, towns and cities in Maharashtra and to the Konkan region in particular. Engaging the two theatre activists in a conversation about their intertwining journeys is Ashutosh Potdar, who writes plays and is closely involved with the Marathi theatre scene.

Ashutosh Potdar: Atul, you grew up in the culture of Theatre Academy, Pune. You used to do theatre like a man possessed. What was your position as a director at that time? How did you look at Marathi theatre and at your own theatre practice?

Atul Pethe: I began doing theatre around 1983. Initially, I was influenced by the professional theatre of Kashinath Ghanekar, Prabhakar Panshikar and Dr Shriram Lagoo. Theatre has been the most distinctive and respected feature of Marathi culture. But I was simply jolted out of my senses when I saw *Mahanirvan* written by Satish Alekar and produced by Theatre Academy. It shattered my concept of theatre and fundamentally changed my very perception of it. This play was completely different from what I had seen on the Marathi stage until then. It made me introspect about the very meaning of life itself.

Later on, I saw plays like *Begum Barve* and *Ghashiram Kotwal* which changed my perception of human beings. It came as a revelation that theatre can present the very questions that life confronts you with. I began doing theatre of this kind. I read plays by Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar, saw them performed, but the plays I wanted to do were certainly not going to be by Tendulkar or Alekar.

This was in the 1980s. Twelve young playwrights in Maharashtra had been selected for workshops under a Ford Foundation grant. I was one of them. A new generation of writers was on the rise. With the assassination of Indira Gandhi, demolition of Babri Majid and growing trend of globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation, society was going through a process of disintegration. Later, computer technology and IT centres too contributed to this fragmentation. While a new middle and upper middle class was emerging, cities were being transformed into metros, and villages were getting ruined. All this was clearly reflected in the plays of the twelve playwrights. It is important to note that they had issues and sensibilities that were singularly different from those of Alekar, Tendulkar and Elkunchwar, who had launched a devastating, frontal attack on society. Maybe their kind of plays was no more possible in a society that was so fragmented! I felt I could connect to playwrights like Makarand Sathe and Shyam Manohar much better. Sathe's plays like

Thombya, Sapatnekarancha Mul, Golayug, Charshe Koti Visarbhole were, in a sense, an articulation of the post-modern sensibility. I was soon grappling with the challenge of staging these plays.

Ashutosh: I remember an article you had written in the journal *Samantar* about Theatre Academy. On the one hand, you had talked about how it had contributed to the development of your generation, but on the other, you also confronted them with some critical questions. This was a very important phase, wasn't it?

Atul: You are right. This was a strange crisis. I believe such crises are necessary in the growth of a generation. A play like *Mahanirvan* had confronted people from the previous generation with a similar kind of crisis. The audiences were totally flummoxed! Now, our plays like *Thombya (Idiot), Sapatnekarncha Mul (Sapatnekar's Baby), Golayug (Lump Age), Charshe Koti Visarbhole (Forty Billion Forgetfuls)* or *Sheetayudhdha Sadanand (Cold-War Sadanand*) were seen as abstruse, incomprehensible. Actually these plays presented a very complex experience but people were unable to grasp it.

I was getting restless and had a feeling of stagnation. I developed differences of opinion with Theatre Academy, which led to conflict. I felt that the plays that we and the Academy were doing did not articulate the angst of my generation. I did not want the language of attack, of playwrights like Tendulkar. Those plays offered me neither the content that I wanted to articulate nor the language for that articulation. I felt an urge to engage honestly and critically with the reality around me. *Ghashiram Kotwal* and the atmosphere it created were indeed a great contribution of the Academy to theatre. But there was an overwhelming feeling of saturation. We could not relate to the old generation. We wanted to create a new generation, create our own audience. We had arrived at the crossroads.

Ashutosh: I agree that strong differences of opinion had developed. Nonetheless, a new network was emerging, linking theatre activists across diverse locations. The Academy had created centres in many small towns. Their plan of reaching plays to diverse audiences as part of their Prekshak Pratisad (Spectator Response) scheme initiated in collaboration with Ford Foundation had yielded good results. It created a

I believe theatre includes all the arts that help build society. This is why theatre activists for me are social workers.

huge network of theatre activists, while at the same time each centre in the small towns had its own independent identity. Let me turn to you, Waman Pandit. Your organisation, the Vasantrao Achrekar Sanskrutik Pratishthan in Kankavli, has been active in theatre for a long time. Could you tell me how you viewed this scene?

Waman Pandit: I look at all this from a completely different perspective. For me, the theatre movement is social work. Atul posed questions to Alekar's generation just as Alekar had questioned Bhalba Kelkar. Every generation has had to face such a crisis. Ten years hence, there will be other writers and directors with different perspectives. I believe theatre includes all the arts that help build society. This is why theatre activists for me are social workers.

Now, coming to the four centres created by Theatre Academy with the assistance of Ford Foundation, different directors worked there and directed plays. But we did not agree to accept a director who was 'given' to us. We wanted one who shared a rapport with us and was familiar with the infrastructure. So we invited Atul Pethe and Prasad Vanarase. We did not want the plays to be directed by the same old people. It is very important to work with people who have diverse ways of seeing, a different ideological base. I was working as a director and giving a chance to other youngsters to direct too, but I felt that they would surely benefit from Prasad, who had basic training in theatre. They would learn from Atul's rich experience. Not only directors, even a painter could stay and work here for a couple of weeks! People could come and watch him at work, talk to him; he might respond if he felt like. For me, the creation of such a space is important, the networking is important.

Ashutosh: In recent times, what kind of directors and artists did you invite to Kankavli?

Waman: Basically I wanted the kind of person who rejects tedious old notions, strives hard to search for something innovative and constantly tries to do things differently. It was not as if Theatre Academy offered us directors and we rejected them. But I didn't want to follow their procedure. When Atul came to me, he hadn't decided on any particular play. As a director, his outlook was like, 'Let me gauge what's happening here, what *can* happen here, what their psychology is like'. He wanted to work in such a spirit of inquiry.

Ashutosh: Let me come back to you, Atul. What led you to the idea of networking?

Atul: After my stint in Theatre Academy, I went to Nashik for a job. I wanted to do *Waiting for Godot* in Nashik. Naseeruddin Shah was going to direct it and I was going to act. I wanted to do the play in Nashik. And it was then that the point Pandit is making hit me hard. When I read the play in front of theatre people in Nashik, none of them liked it. They couldn't understand what it was all about. Then I realised that the people there had different issues. They simply did not relate to the kind of theatre I had been exposed to at Theatre Academy. When the actors and the writer understand my social and political ideology, only then can I bring a play into being. I cannot force a play into life. Once I understood this, I changed track and chose to do some one-act plays there.

I also read scripts of some local playwrights like Manohar Shahane and Vasant Kanetkar and thought about how to connect with the local people. I did not evaluate the plays; value judgments were best left to history, I thought. Initially I used to feel slightly superior and think that I had something to teach them. But gradually that disappeared. I pondered over my wide-ranging interests and realised that while I was in Theatre Academy, I was exposed to so much, simultaneously. Apart from plays, I read books, poetry, saw films and dance programmes. You can't have a mature sensibility unless you are exposed to many art forms, lectures by experts on various topics, social and political movements etc. Then I started the Samakaleen Kala Mahotsav (Contemporary Arts Festival) in order to bring likeminded people together. It was an initiative that arose out of my need to connect.

Rather than just insist on doing a play, is it possible to connect with the people and the environment around you in a more fundamental way?

Ashutosh: So the networking grew out of the interaction between contemporary art and social life?

Atul: Yes. The most wonderful thing that happened was that I was able to connect with the place, relate to the youngsters. Many students from the architecture college joined the group and they brought in very different perspectives. I realised through my interaction with them that each community of artists has its own strengths which I may lack. Whether it is Nashik or Kankavli or Jalna, my basic aim was to understand the local people, their way of life and sensibilities, as Pandit has said. Rather than just insist on doing a play, is it possible to connect with the people and the environment around you in a more fundamental way? Does that interaction help you develop as a human being and as an artist? This was crucial for me.

Waman: Just as I was in search of a likeminded director, Atul also was in search of an organisation to which he could relate and which would reciprocate his beliefs. The most basic requirement is social consciousness; it is an essential precondition for theatre to happen. What is important, as Atul says, is to develop as human beings. If theatre people who share such an approach get connected, it will make a significant impact. That is why it is absolutely essential that theatre networks are built.

Ashutosh: The important point is that you do not look at the actor as only an actor...

Waman: What is important is the process through which an actor becomes an actor, develops his personality; because through him the society can develop too.

Ashutosh: So for you a theatre group is a group of people with social awareness, artists who are socially aware.

Waman: And if they aren't, they should try to be.

Ashutosh: But Atul, you seem to have a different perception. As a director, you realise that you have your own ideology and the members of the group may have their own. Then you get together and the process of making a play begins. Developing the actors as a group, developing their theatre sensibility—how does this happen?

Atul: Let me get back to my Nashik experience. There were many theatre groups in Nashik when I went there but somehow I was not able to relate to any of them. Now, my relationship with Pandit goes back many years. I have been regularly attending the theatre festival that the Acharekar Sanskrutik Pratishthan organises every year. It provides a wonderful opportunity for groups doing alternative theatre. It is an amazing experience to perform before the Konkani audience, to engage in the post-performance discussions with them…that's been an enduring, exhilarating and educative experience for me. Then I realised that I was able to relate to these people from Kankavli because of their theatre sensibility. That did not happen in Nashik. So I began my own theatre group there.

You know how it is. It is generally said that ninety-nine per cent of what a director does is management and one per cent, creativity. For me, choosing the right actors for a play was only the first step; I had to organise workshops to prepare them, develop them intellectually, increase their awareness, train them in physical movements, develop a sense of rhythm in them… and all this, not just for the play. Through reading, speech training and interaction they would become better human beings, grow richer as artists. They read stories by Manohar Shahane, Gangadhar Gadgil and Va. Pu. Kale, engaged with the question of what constitutes Marathi literature and the Marathi stage. This raised their level of understanding and helped them bond with each other. Such a process was also useful for developing their sense of different styles of acting.

A play has to be produced with as little money as possible.

At the same time I had to look for places for rehearsals and take care of finances as well. I had put in some of

my own money and some others had pitched in with whatever they could afford; a play has to be produced with as little money as possible. My Theatre Academy experience had taught me that like a singer, an actor also has to practise a lot. And the more he performs the more professional he becomes. By professional I don't mean doing business, but gaining proficiency in the technical aspects such as lights and sound, apart from acting. That is why stage performances are absolutely necessary for actors. But where do I do them? Not in regular theatres because my plays don't do well at the box office. So I have to take the next step: take on the role of a producer. Then I realised, why spend money on travelling to other places in search of performance spaces? Why not explore the spaces in Nashik? I was able to locate thousands of spaces where we performed: small villages, community halls, temples, college halls.

Each space comes with its own limited but completely different audience.

There are many advantages to a director's creating his own spaces for staging a play. Each space comes with its own limited but completely different audience. For instance, people from Ozer, a small place near Nashik, would never come to see my plays. But suppose *I* went to them? I might be able to attract at least a few spectators from there! I could draw them into discussions, speak to them, and this would lead to theatre education. So we went there, and an artist, a painter from Ozer, became our friend. We arranged an exhibition of his paintings. This amounts to much more than just doing a performance and saying, "I have come here to educate you; I've done my job. I'll leave."

Now let me come to the last point, which is the economics of theatre. During my four-year stint in Nashik I'd written a paper on this. When we designed a play, we would think about factors such as, what vehicle do we have and how many people can it hold? If we visit one town, can we do two plays instead of one? Or three? Can we do a poetry-reading or story-reading along with the play? Thinking out such permutations and combinations helped us work out the economics. Now, Pandit (I wouldn't call him just a 'manager'), as the person in charge of a whole institution, has a particular

perspective. His place, Kankavli, is a small township with a population of just around 10,000. But 700-800 people take time off at night to come see the play—that is nothing short of a miracle for me. This tells me that Pandit looks at theatre as a serious, purposive activity. This perspective, this ideology is what brings us together.

Ashutosh: This is a very valid point. But Kankavli also becomes significant because of the attempts to create a theatre culture. Pandit, you organise one-act play competitions and theatre workshops, invite various people, go to nearby villages. As a result, you not only help create an audience, you also create small spaces for doing theatre. Tell us a little more about this.

Waman: Well, it's a little difficult to say exactly what we do. You work with a perspective towards a goal. The work that you do and the discipline with which you do it, both have an impact on the environment. When people around you have watched you doing this work consistently for thirty-five years, their mentality certainly changes. They also start thinking about what they can do, start feeling responsible. Creating a sense of responsibility is very important for me.

Ashutosh: Let's come back to the larger point of networking. In the play that you did in Kankavli, *Mi Mazhyashi*, the protagonist enters in the form of a Rakshasa, speaks a certain kind of language, and all of it, even the live music, originated from the local culture. The play travelled, and in the process you went on networking, creating cultural spaces. How did you connect with the local people?

Waman: You cannot plan for such connections to happen. An audience that relates to the work of a particular director may not relate to another director in the same way. The spaces created in the process of doing *Mi Mazhyashi* may not be useful for another play.

Ashutosh: But a lot of planning did go into it, right?

Waman: Let me explain this with an example. As part of the project with Ford Foundation and Theatre Academy, we began organising a theatre festival every year. One year we decided to stage the plays in Kudal the day after they had been performed in Kankavli. But we could not continue with this practice the year after that. In contrast, the festival of experimental plays that we began organising some

The locality where sex workers lived, or the road where I performed, became theatre spaces for me.

two years later has been going on for the last ten years. Something happens once but there is no guarantee that it will happen again the same way. Atul, what do you feel?

Atul: The success of the play is in being able to perform it in various places. You can create your audience, your theatre spaces. But this requires a lot of thought and planning. For instance, I did not go to the slums with *Waiting for Godot*. I needed to think about who I wanted to address. You cannot make mistakes as far as the audience is concerned, otherwise they may desert you, sometimes even permanently. The time also should be right. You cannot do a play on the day of a World Cup cricket match. Where you perform also depends on the kind of play you are doing. And we would perform in spaces for two or three years continuously to retain them.

To make it economically viable we avoided big theatres in Mumbai and went to colleges. They have libraries, Marathi departments, they are familiar with our literature. It might be Kirti College or Ruparel or Vaze-Kelkar, you get a readymade audience. We no longer needed theatres or advertisements. But that space should not die out. To keep these spaces alive I would organise theatre workshops, show films, etc. I had to constantly keep in touch through a series of activities.

Then we went further. I was working in Mumbai in the Aids Control Society. There was Theatre for Aids, Theatre for Transgenders, Theatre for Sex Workers. The spaces in which such theatre was performed were naturally different and, for the first time in my life, I got an audience that I would never have expected for my plays before. I did a play on the issues of sex workers, with and for sex workers. The locality where sex workers lived, or the road where I performed, became theatre spaces for me. The point is that a theatre space is not just a hall or infrastructure; it means new places for performance and new audiences.

Exploring theatre spaces involves relating to different people in various locations...and this requires thinking, planning and consistent effort.

But one needs to find entry points, the people who control these spaces. So if I go to Kolhapur, for instance, there may be a Deval Club, but I will also have to relate to people like Comrade Pansare and his workers unions, or the Shramik Pratishthan, or a friend like Sanjay Haldikar who does theatre with children in prison. Then I am able to do four performances in Kolhapur. I can perform at nearby places too. Normally, no plays travel to Nipani, but I found a space there which belonged to an organisation run by one of my friends. Then there could be Gadhinglaj, or villages nearby. The point is that exploring theatre spaces involves relating to different people in various locations, working at different levels, and this requires thinking, planning and consistent effort.

Waman: Another important point is that you might say, I've written this play, my job is done, but your work doesn't get over just like that. Besides forming connections and finding your own audiences, it is important that your plays find a resonance with organisations like ours, because we also have our own spaces, our own audiences. If that happens, networking becomes easier.

Atul: NSD [National School of Drama] had organised a month-long workshop in collaboration with the Vasantrao Acharekar Sanskrutik Pratishthan. I was there for three days. Many people from Kolhapur and surrounding places had participated in it. This contribution of the NSD is very important because organising a month-long workshop in a remote place is not easy. In my discussion with the people from the organisation, I said, why don't you organise such programmes yourself? They asked me, why don't you come here? I said okay, I will. The beginning was that easy.

After I went there, I realised that rather than working with a readymade play there, the challenge was to do a play which is a product of that environment. Then the people will identify with it. I tried to bring the Konkan region into

It is commonly said, who's interested in a play, who'll come to see it? But that is not really true. In remote areas there is a great yearning for theatre.

my play, their theatre traditions, especially Dashawatar, their language, the colour and structure of their houses, their music and the local dialect of Marathi. I tried to bring in a new interpretation of Diwakar Krishna's dramatic monologues [his 50-odd 'Natya-Chhata' pieces loosely based on Browning's monologues but in prose form, which were a first in Marathi literature]. We performed in forty to forty-five places. Later on I went to Jalna, where there is no theatre, no infrastructure for doing a play. We managed to do theatre there as well, but for me Nashik and Kankavli really are the major highlights of this journey.

Waman: While doing *Mi Mazhyashi*, I realised that people from all over Maharashtra have an urge to see theatre. But plays don't reach them. So taking this play to them was a great achievement. It is commonly said, who's interested in a play, who'll come to see it? But that is not really true. In remote areas there is a great yearning for theatre.

Ashutosh: Now let us come to a different point. Very often the networking is more at an individual level. The individual is a source of inspiration for the play, for creating theatre spaces and providing motivation for different activities. But how can that network help to create a wider theatre culture? The general experience is that some kind of slackness creeps in. It is fine that Atul went to Kankavli, Sangli or many such places and did theatre there. But what happens after he leaves? How do the local theatregoers, audiences and actors, take it forward? How do they develop the network further? What is their responsibility? How can networking foster a larger, new theatre culture?

Atul: Of course, whatever experience I have had may be quite limited. But I would like to humbly state that the seeds I had sown in Nashik are sprouting today. There are many people there today, involved in theatre, cinema, painting etc. We are still in contact. I visit them regularly. Jalna,

The idea that theatre spaces can be created, has taken strong root in Maharashtra.

Kankavli—these places now have an audience which has seen a play. That audience begins to see more new plays. People who are in some way connected with me—like the group Aasakta from Pune, or Samanway—now go and do theatre there. A seed may sprout in many ways!

Waman: Basically it is important that a culture of doing such theatre is created. After Atul, another director may come. He may do different kind of plays. But the very fact that a basic foundation is laid, that the seeds of the culture have taken root, is important.

Atul: A person like Naseeruddin Shah has taken his plays to Kankavli—that theatre space has become available to his group too. So what is created is not limited to one Atul Pethe, one organisation. Many play competitions get organised in Kudal, in other places around Kankavli, in Goa. They may be different from Vasantrao Acharekar Sanskrutik Pratishthan, but the very fact that it is happening is a sign of life. A positive and vibrant picture of theatre seems to be emerging in Maharashtra today. I mentioned only a few names but many small groups have become active now.

Waman: Many of us are not even aware that such spaces exist. We did around forty performances of our recent play. Before that, when we worked with Prasad Vanarase, we staged seventeen performances. We staged eleven performances of *Thank You Ajoba*. Atul's *Mi Mazhyashi* was staged in thirty-seven places. This will go on increasing. Many more groups will be able to utilise these spaces. I feel that theatre has taken strong roots now.

Atul: A new theatre group in Pune called 'Natak Company' performed a play in a residential colony. They have revived a tradition that had been discontinued. Theatre Academy used to do this in its time, and I had done it to some extent, but this practice

You perform, take a plate around to collect money or sell tickets. Whatever money you manage to collect is yours.

had stopped. Now it seems to have re-started. I find it very important that the awareness that we can do theatre anywhere is growing once again. The idea that theatre spaces can be created has taken strong root in Maharashtra.

Waman: I must mention the networking that our organisation has initiated with a scheme called 'Natakghar'. Since we have the infrastructure, any group or people can come there and perform—for instance, a play, poetry reading, solo performance or dance programme—free of charge. You perform, take a plate around to collect money or sell tickets. Whatever money you manage to collect is yours. Now this has taken roots. Eighteen performances have taken place there. People come from distant places to perform: Goa, Nashik, small towns. When you are doing proscenium theatre, a lot of your energy gets wasted in running around for infrastructure facilities like lights, sound and such stuff. Now we have made the facilities available. If many more such places get created, that will be great for networking. The other day Chandrakant Kale did *Natakache Tare*; he managed to collect more than Rs 2,500 by passing his bag around.

Atul: Just as Kankavli has Natakghar, Pune has Sudarshan Hall. Today one can see plays from all over India there. So it is not just individuals like Atul Pethe and Waman Pandit who have worked out this approach. Many people have been taking theatre to small places. Even Dr Shriram Lagoo. We did *Surya Pahilela Manus* with him and staged it at many small places including Talegaon. What I mean is, from great actors like Shriram Lagoo and Mohan Agashe to hundreds of amateur artists, theatre people have worked in small plays and performed at small places. Small theatres spaces are enriched and strengthened when great artists like Dr. Lagoo perform there.

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Contents

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