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Curtain Call



**English theatre
is flourishing**

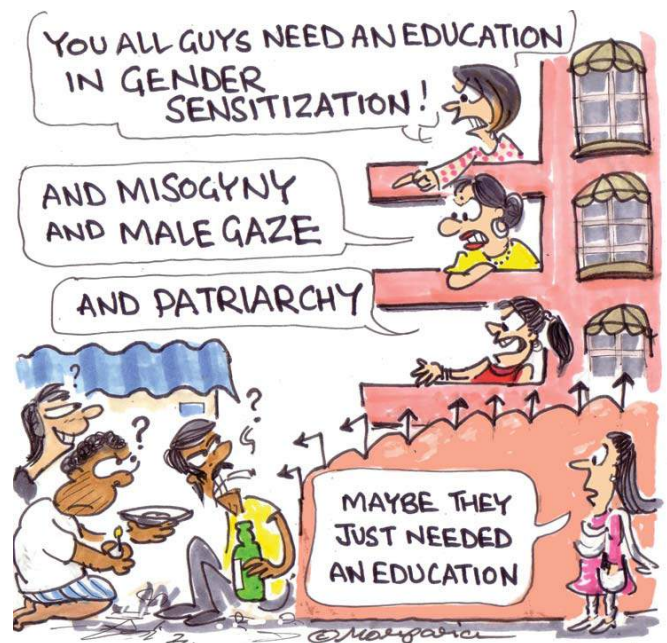
In the company of theatrewalaha

**KNOW INDIA BETTER
Coffee - on your mind**

**FACE TO FACE
Arvind Gaur**

Great Indians: Badal Sarkar / Machindra Kambli / Safdar Hashmi

MORPARIA'S PAGE

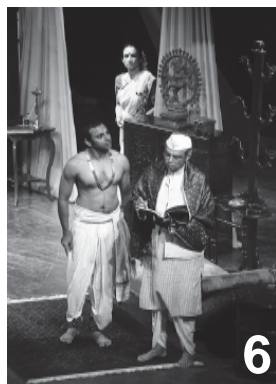


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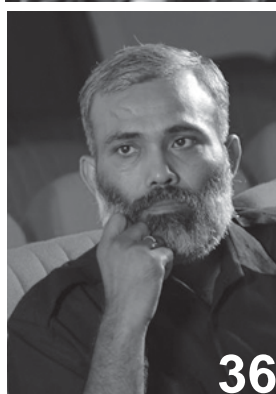
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

You can quit if you have a firm resolve


I am no regular reader of OIOP. I got a copy of your September 2013 issue on addiction from a friend and was quite impressed with the issue. As I was reading the articles on different addictions and case studies in the magazine, I travelled to my earlier days when I too was a tobacco addict. I started smoking when I was in my teens. My first puff, as it happens, started as a fun. At that age, smoking meant a great thing. When my father got to know about it, he was furious and he thrashed me left and right. I promised him that I will never smoke but old habits die hard. I continued to smoke and I soon realised that I have got addicted to it. Not, that the realisation bothered me. My smoking continued even after my marriage and the birth of my daughter. My daughter never liked my smoking and wanted me to quit. I could not, even after trying to give up on several occasions.

I lost my father two years ago and being the eldest of my siblings, I lit the pyre. When the rituals were over, I felt a strong urge to smoke but I looked at the pyre, I remembered

the promise I had given to my father years ago. At that moment, I took a decision that I will never smoke again and I haven't ever since. Yes, there have been occasions when I have felt tempted to go back, but this time, I did not want to break my promise to my father. My family is happy about my decision and so am I. You only need a firm mind to quit addiction and if you can control your urge and stay true to your resolve, then you can remain addiction free. This is the lesson I have learnt. I only wish I could have quit when my father was alive. It took not much time to start smoking but it took 30 long years of my life, to get rid of it. Life is better today, I can say that.

– B. Ravi, Trichy, Tamil Nadu

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INDIA

Theatre appreciation, Mumbai ishtyle

*Variety is the spice of Mumbai theatre which is more visible in the kind of audience it attracts, says **V Gangadhar** as he recalls amusing, absurd and even astonishing reactions to stage performances in Mumbai.*

THERE are good plays, there are bad plays. They are watched by good audiences, bad audiences. Mumbai is lucky, for the city stages plays in four languages – English, Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati – and occasionally in Bengali and South Indian languages like Kannada and Tulu. Yes, variety is the spice of Mumbai theatre.

Audiences for the theatre in the four languages differ a lot depending on their economic background, life style, education and so on. The English stage attracts the most elitist crowds. Marathi, the most knowledgeable; Gujarati, the most sex-starved and Hindi, the most number of free pass holders. A regular theatre-going resident of Mumbai for over 40 years, I have closely studied the audience appreciation patterns of all the four groups.

English plays were staged in the best theatres like the one at the National Centre of Performing Arts (NCPA), Sophia College auditorium, St. Andrews College and the small-budgeted plays did well at Prithvi. I have noted a lot of differences in the approach to English theatre over the years but the domination of Parsis and adpersons continues. Middle aged or old Parsi women with a visible growth on their upper lips did not hesitate to enact roles of Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth I or American heroines from the South as featured in the plays of Tennessee Williams. Eighty plus old Parsi women often appeared on wheel chairs to cheer their favourite sex comedies drenched in double-meaning dialogues. Mumbai adpersons had the confidence to get away with anything because they had a captive audience and a media which ate out of their hands. One of the ad-gods had the gall to produce and direct 'Othello' with the lead role going to Kabir Bedi, good looking, but one of the most wooden stage and screen actors. The unanimous verdict for the play was that Kabir would have made one of the best-ever stone pillars used in the play.

Along with audience numbers, levels of audience appreciation too went up. One did not climb up the social ladder without watching English plays. This was a problem for the moneyed Gujarati audiences who found absurd drama and stage

adaptations of Miller, O'Neill, Williams or Pinter rather hard to follow. But then how to justify their presence in the auditorium or make their presence felt? Groups of such people found the answer. They kept on laughing throughout the play as though they understood every bit of the dialogue. Of course, those who really understood the play, kept quiet during the intense, emotional moments. Can you imagine gusts of laughter from different corners when the agonised hero cried out that his heart had been torn into pieces, a violated heroine prepares to end her life or an aged couple, unable to bear insults from their son and daughter-in-law pack up to leave. Our affluent patrons found all this hugely amusing!

English theatre audiences in Mumbai seemed to be susceptible to cold and cough. At the prestigious and expensive NCPA, the coughing began at one corner, then covered more patrons and finally everyone was coughing while trying to cover their mouths with their hankies. Mind you, there was nothing in the dialogues or action to generate such coughing or was it some audience-attention-gasping trick? Despite stern admonitions, the 'elitist' audiences often had to attend to tuneful mobiles and it was difficult to concentrate on the play with mobiles going full blast on either side. Quite a few of such 'fans' of English theatre were delighted at the emergence of sex comedies. Thank god, there was no morbidity or melancholy. Bharat Dabholkar's 'Bottoms Up' and sequels like 'Sons of Bottoms Up' lived up to their names. 'Paisa Vasool' chortled the audiences as they were enveloped in a stageful of bottoms.

Besides the Irish Coffee at Prithvi, the other status symbol was the 'achievement' of having watched 'Vagina Monologues'. A demure young Gujarati cooed, gushed to her admiring friends, "Bahot saras play che. Amara college ma stage karuvana che ane hoon Vagina nu role karuani chhu" That is genuine theatre appreciation! ■



The writer is a well-known satirist.

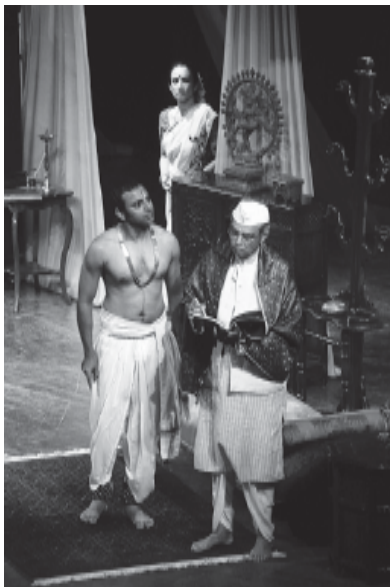
English theatre is flourishing

*English theatre is definitely having a good time now with an audience out there, hungry for fresh work and more and more producers, directors and actors interested in staging original English plays. Availability of sponsorships is also adding to the zing, says **Deepa Gahlot**.*

TILL a few years ago, English Theatre in Mumbai meant official or unofficial rip-offs of foreign plays. While groups like Lillette Dubey's *Prime Time* made it a policy to try to do as many original Indian plays as possible, they made it worthwhile for playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Partap Sharma to write plays. Dattani's *Dance Like A Man* is the longest running English play and still packs in audiences—the success of this play went on to prove that audiences wanted their own stories to be told... in English.

Catering to a young audience

Change often creeps up without warning. Theatre regulars, at Prithvi Theatre, for instance would notice that the crowd hanging out at the café, as well as the audience has changed—they are younger now, and look for plays that speak to them. It's pretty much what has happened to cinema as well, it is aimed at a different demographic - youngsters with disposable incomes, looking for 'cool' entertainment.



The success of Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like A Man* went on to prove that audiences wanted their own stories to be told... in English (Photo courtesy: The Primetime Theatre Company)

Marathi theatre, still rich in ideas, is struggling for audiences; a Gujarati theatre walla complains that the audience is mostly 40-plus, for teens 'Gujju' theatre is just not cool. If the Hindi play being staged is not youthful or trendy enough, it runs to empty houses too. The young audience – if it goes to the theatre at all—prefers English.

Today's college kids and young executives speak to one another in English, some of



A still from *Between the Lines*, directed by Nandita Das

them think in English, and for their entertainment choose English plays (or multiplex movies). That may well be because a lot of young playwrights are writing in English.

Originality to the fore

All these years, original plays in English were such a rarity, that for a long period of time Dina Mehta and Mahesh Dattani were just about the only playwrights doing original work in English, with Partap Sharma and a couple of others adding a little to the numbers; and there was Rahul DaCunha writing for his group Rage. Everybody else did adaptations of foreign plays by playwrights like Shakespeare, Moliere, Shaw, Ibsen to Neil Simon, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard. And now, in the last five-six years or so, after Ramu Ramanathan, Vikram Kapadia and other led the charge, at least a dozen promising English playwrights have popped up—Anuvab Pal, Meherzad Patel, Ajay Krishnan, Ran Ganesh Kamatham, Divya Jagdale, Siddharth Kumar, Akash Mohimen, Abhishek Majumdar, Manjima Chatterjee, Swar Thounaojam, Akarsh Khurana, Bobby Nagra to name a few.

It could be, as a cynical theatrewala commented, because anybody writing in Hindi, Gujarati or Marathi is quickly snapped up by films and TV, where money and exposure is much more. Akarsh Khurana, whose group Akvarious, is one of the most successful contemporary English theatre groups in Mumbai, believes that in a stronghold of Marathi and Gujarati theatre, English theatre is thriving; it is doing much better than Hindi

theatre, which is perceived by young audiences as outdated or archaic, something with an old-school vibe. “When we started 13 years ago, English theatre was a rarity, now it is a common a thing. It has managed to strongly cultivate a massive audience. Also, he adds, “English theatre has wider reach in the country. The South does not accept Hindi theatre at all, so they are losing out on half the country and catering to the Northern belt that is not yet alive to theatre. There are two big centres for English plays now—Mumbai and Bangalore. So the trend is quite clear, and though we did do two Hindi plays in 2008, now we are comfortable doing English plays. We may do an *Out Town* or *Rebecca*, but our strength is contemporary English plays like *The Interview* and *Some Times* that work with an urban audience all over India.”

Keen audience, ‘globalisation’, business, entertainment and more

Whenever there was motivation, in terms of an event, like Postcards from Mumbai at Prithvi some years ago, or the Writers’ Bloc workshops and festival, the Thespo Festival or the NCPA’s Centrestage Festival, a large chunk of the work submitted was in English—and by writers not just from Mumbai, but other cities too. The influx of new English playwrights, according to Rahul DaCunha, who is one of the organisers of Writers’ Bloc, is also because many of them don’t know Hindi, and so there is no opportunity in cinema. But there is an audience out there, hungry for fresh work, plus more and more producers, directors and actors interested in staging original English plays. It also means, however, that the subjects of the many of the plays are urban, the form and expression Western. In recent

years, more and more English plays are travelling all over the country—because young people everywhere relate to them—and also abroad, where they sometimes reach a crossover audience.

Then there is the ‘globalisation’ of Mumbai theatre—some of the prominent groups tour with their plays. And next to Gujarati theatre (which has its own rules and logistics), English plays travel further, whether they are classy Lillette Dubey and Rahul DaCunha plays or Paritosh Painter and Vandana Sajani farces and anything in between. Producer Ashvin Gidwani does two



A play in English from Bhopal at the NCPA’s Centrestage Festival

version of his plays—Hindi for the upcountry audiences and English for foreign tours. And, a large section of his audience, he claims, is not NRI.



Vir Das’s *History of India* runs to full houses even in a 100-seater like NCPA’s Tata Theatre

Apart from creative opportunities, there is the other side too—business. There is corporate funding available for theatre, very limited if compared to what fashion and sports draw, but it means those who have access to it, design their plays for a corporate audience, and most of them watch English plays. And no matter how much the Hindi theatre people may grumble, sponsorship is still easier for the English theatre folks to swing.

Another addition to the already burgeoning English theatre scene in Mumbai, is the huge and growing popularity of Stand-up Comedy, that has moved out of the pub circuit to become a legit entertainment option, playing in theatres. Vir Das’s *History of India* runs to full houses even in a 100-seater like NCPA’s Tata Theatre. Other comedic performers like Anuvab Pal, Sorab

Pant and his East India Co. medy and Improv Comedy group

Schitzengiggles are packing in the young, upmarket and liberal crowd that wants to unwind over the weekend with some easygoing entertainment. ■

(Photos’ courtesy: NCPA/Narendra Dangiya)



The writer is a Mumbai-based film and theatre critic.

Maxim

Theatre is a wonderful thing. It is the greatest temple on earth. In that temple Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Sikh and Parsee all get together. Nobody comes and asks who is in the next chair. A Pandit sits with a Mulla. A communist friend may sit with a socialist friend. All sit together. That is a beautiful way of bringing people together and teaching them how to behave. They would laugh together, cry together. It is the biggest temple that could be built for the benefit of the nation.

– Prithviraj Kapoor

The growth of Hindi theatre

Hindi theatre fraternity is looking at expanding its horizons and reaching to one and all, but requires support from the state government, corporates and other institutions to flourish, writes Om Katare.

WILLIAM Shakespeare once said, "All the world's a stage and men and women are merely its players". If we observe, if we look closely, we can see these players everywhere around us. They are eating their only meal of the day, celebrating a friend's birthday, going through their daily struggle, hoping for things to get better, spending time with their loved ones and some just trying to make ends meet. I said if we observe, but we don't. We walk the same route everyday lost in our world, ignoring the stage we are on, ignorant of the part we play. Theatre makes us aware of the stage we are in.

The origin of Indian theatre goes back to at least 5000 years and was closely related to ancient rituals and seasonal festivals of the country. According to legend, the very first play was performed on heaven when gods, having defeated the demons, were enacting their victory. Theatre in India had started as a narrative form with recitation, singing and dancing becoming its integral elements. Initially plays typically revolved around religion, local legends and mythology. The development of modern theatre in India began with a change in the political set up with 200 years of British rule bringing Indian theatre in direct contact with Western theatre. Theatrical themes underwent a drastic change and plays began to showcase the picture of the common man.



A still from 'Chinta Chod Chintamani' directed by Om Katare (Photo courtesy: Om Katare)

The torchbearers of Hindi theatre

Hindi theatre is produced mainly in North India, and has extended to cities like Mumbai and Bhopal. Having its roots in traditional folk theatre it is also influenced by Sanskrit drama. Hindi theatre kick started with writers like Bhartendu Harishchandra in late 19th century and playwrights like Jaishankar Prasad,

Mohan Rakesh followed. IPTA movement created a new brand of theatre practitioners in Hindi speaking areas, especially with IPTA Mumbai. Establishment of Prithvi Theatre by veteran Prithviraj Kapoor was a landmark in Theatre world. Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885), a theatre actor, director, manager, and playwright, was a pioneer in the field of theatre. Famously known as the father of modern Hindi literature, he wrote as many as 18 plays and various prose. He was most noted for his politically charged plays like *Andhernagari* (City of Darkness) written in 1881, which was a clear satire on the British Raj and *Neel Darpan* (Indigo Mirror) which focussed on the plight of indigo-plantation worker under the British Raj. Eventually Bharatendu became director of *Hindi Natak Samaj* (Hindu National Theatre) in Banaras.

After Bhartendu whose productions were largely funded by himself and by the Maharaja of Kashi, Hindi theatre went through a tough phase. Theatre practitioners struggled a lot due to lack of sponsors, efficient theatre managers and other financial reasons. There was hardly any professional theatre for many decades discouraging writers to take to playwrighting. Works of writers like Jaishankar Prasad and Upendranath Ashk were mostly read, but hardly staged. Despite the presence of a large audience, Hindi theatre remained a struggling force. Existing conservatism at that



Establishment of Prithvi Theatre by veteran Prithviraj Kapoor was a landmark in Theatre world

time did not allow female actors to take up stage. Hindi theatre received a fresh impetus with the formation of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). For the first time women started taking part in theatre in huge numbers. It created a generation of theatre practitioners and playwrights, like Krishan Chander, Kaifi Azmi, Balraj Sahni, Mohan Segal, Dina Pathak, Shanti Bardhan, Durga Khote, and inspired Prithviraj Kapoor to lay the foundation of Prithvi Theatre.

Prithvi Theatre gave an impetus to Hindi theatre

Prithvi Theatre, the brainchild of Shashi Kapoor and his better half Jennifer Kapoor, is one of the first intimate theatres in India which has been inspired from The National Theatre in London. Prithviraj Kapoor wished to spread theatre and give an opportunity to people to create stories on stage. Prithvi gave a new dimension to the world of theatre and allowed people to experiment with ideas. The first ever live performance at Prithvi was by Majma Theatre group headed by Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri. Their play *Udvast Dharamshala* was performed at the opening of Prithvi Theatre on 5th November 1978.

Prithvi Theatre gave Hindi theatre groups like Ank, Yatri and Ekjute their first kiss of fame. In fact, Yatri theatre group was born at Prithvi Theatre itself. These three groups along with IPTA defined Hindi Theatre and took it to another level. Even after 35 years, these groups are going strong and displaying some of the best plays. Later a lot of other theatre groups emerged like Arpana which is headed by Sunil Shanbag and Ansh by Makrand Deshpande. This non-profit organisation has come a long way and is one of the most famous places for entertainment in the country.

Before the establishment of Prithvi, Hindi plays were performed at Chhabildas School at Dadar. Pandit Satyadev Dubey who



Satyadev Dubey will be remembered forever for his immense contribution to theatre

was a renowned theatre practitioner staged plays at Chabildas along with Amol Palekar and Amrish Puri. Satyadev Dubey was known for delivering breakthrough performances in theatre. He will be remembered forever for his immense contribution to theatre.

It was in 1952, that the Government of India established Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) to promote performing arts like dance, drama and music. Establishment of National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi was another landmark in the realm of Hindi theatre.

Ebrahim Alkazi who later became the director of NSD was known for his fine direction in the world of stage. Some of his productions include classics like *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, *Andha Yug*, *Tughlaq* and *Asadh Ka Ek Din*. He had a fresh approach towards theatre and exhibited sophistication in his plays. The standards he had set up from his work inspired an entire generation.

Theatre culture gets a boost

In the later years of 20th century, many states formed their state academies for the arts and this gave boost to the theatre culture. Cities like Jaipur, Shimla, Chandigarh, Lucknow and Bhopal started having their own theatre groups and culture. However theatre largely remained driven by amateur groups, as theatre wasn't a financially viable activity. Most groups could not afford expensive props, technical system and newspaper advertisements and relied heavily on mouth to mouth publicity. People opted for regular jobs in companies for their livelihood and met in the evenings for play readings and rehearsals at hired venues. They could never take it up as a profession as theatre doesn't yield



A still from *Raavanleela*, directed by Om Katare, which has completed over 60 shows (Photo courtesy: Om Katare)



Lubna Salim and Yashpal Sharma in Gulzar's *Atthanniyaan* directed by Salim Arif (Photo courtesy: Salim Arif)

income for survival. Payments to cast and crew depended heavily on the success of the shows. Lack of support and funding from the state government led theatre practitioners to gain support from the rich corporates. They started performing for individuals and companies who could shell out funds and come in support of the art form.

Habib Tanvir was another veteran in Hindi theatre, who made his debut with the production of Hindustani version of Kalidas's *Shakuntala* and later produced Shudraka Mrichakatika's *Mitti Ki Gadi* (Little Clay Cart) in *nautanki*-style, using tribal artistes. He successfully wrote and directed *Agra Bazar* (1954). Later he wrote *Charandas Chor* (1975), *Gaonka Naam Sasural*, *Mor Naam*

Damad and Kamdeo ka Apna Basant Rituka Sapna and staged Asghar Wajahat's *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya* (1990).

Expanding horizons

With the increasing popularity of television soap operas, home videos and cable TV, audience moved away from theatre for a while until a new enthusiastic breed of directors came up with innovative ideas and chose to do experimental and improvisational theatre. Theatre directors and producers started looking for new avenues for theatre. Today theatre is done in clubs, banquet halls and terraces. Theatre fraternity is looking at expanding its horizons and reaching to one and all.

Publicity is no more a problem now because theatre is much publicised in magazines, newspapers and even on radio. The principle issue of theatre, current or pre-historic has always been money. In India there are very few grants and initiatives from the government towards an art form like theatre. In places like America and Europe, corporates and government plough back money in the society which is used towards the development of theatre and other art forms. There is also a need to inculcate theatre in our education system in order to churn out more people who would like to take it as a profession. It's high time that people start taking it up as a profession.

Any form of art needs to flow like a stream, it needs to constantly manoeuvre its course with time. Theatre has been the same for many years, its growth has been stagnant. Theatre being a live and direct medium can never die. All it requires is support from the state government, corporates and other institutions. ■

The writer is renowned theatre personality and a Diploma holder from Filmalaya Academy, Mumbai. He founded Yatri - a theatre group, in 1979 to provide wholesome and meaningful entertainment to the theatre audience. Yatri has grown from strength to strength and has so far produced



more than 60 productions and has over 5000 plus performances to its credit both in India and abroad. Yatri has 10 running plays round the year. Om Katore was awarded the prize for Excellence in Theatre by the Maharashtra Rajya Hindi Sahitya Academy in 2004, in honour of completing 25 years of Leadership in Hindi Theatre. He has conducted 30 theatre workshops for adults and children and trained over 800 aspiring actors.

Festive times

International theatre festival "Going Solo" will be held in India in October 2013. The festival will bring together renowned solo acts from across the world. The plays will be staged at three Indian metros, Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru.

Theatre thrives wherever Marathi manus exists

*Marathi theatre continues to draw crowds and has a great future. But those involved should look at it like a venture which needs hard work and new ideas to make it a success and sustainable enterprise, says **Ashlesha Athavale**.*

ONE of the great loves of Marathi *manus* is theatre. Despite time constraints due to job and domestic responsibilities, the average Marathi person never misses watching plays. Just as the Hindi film industry churns out films every week, there are new Marathi plays opening every week all over the state. While the commercial plays are more visible in Mumbai, Pune and towns like Nagpur, there are many groups of amateur artistes performing locally across the state. One can say that theatre thrives wherever the Marathi *manus* exists. The audience for these plays is also a discerning one. Going to the theatre is a tradition we ingrain into our children. The theatre culture is deeply rooted within us and can only be compared to the love for theatre that can be seen across the seas in that other theatre aficionado, the British *manus*.

The Marathi *manus* is involved with theatre wherever he is. Even outside Maharashtra, like in Goa, the Marathi-speaking people are devoted to theatre. Marathi people come together and put up plays even in the UK and the US. Some years ago, a group of people based in the US performed *Sundara Manamadhe Bharali*, a popular play.

The golden era of Natak Mandalis

The birth of Marathi theatre is attributed to Vishnudas Bhawe. A lack of interest in studies, but great interest in music, led Bhawe, considered the father of Marathi theatre, to create the art. In 1843 in Sangli, he staged the first performance of *Sita Swayamwar*. He created many other plays after this and established the Sanglikar Natak Mandali, a theatre company. He also created puppets and staged performances with them. He generated interest in this new art form and many people took to theatre.

The early period was dominated by playwrights like Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar, Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, Govind Ballal Deval and Annasaheb Kirloskar. They wrote musical plays known as *Sangeet Natak*. The music in such plays is known as *Natya Sangeet*. The great singer-actors like Bal Gandharva,

Keshavrao Bhosle, Bhaurao Kolhatkar and Deenanath Mangeshkar thrived in this period.

Some of the noted drama companies of the time include Kirloskar Natak Mandali, Lalitkaladarsha, Balwant Natak Mandali and Maharashtra Natak Mandali. This was the golden age of Marathi theatre. These *mandalis* would travel all over the state in huge groups. Often an entire coach of a train would be reserved for them. The groups would not just consist of the director, actors, stage hands and costume men, but also barbers and staff to cook for everyone. In addition to stage equipment and costumes, they also carried kitchen supplies including implements and ingredients with them.

Of the well known plays in the period, Kirloskar's *Sangeet Saubhadra* was first performed in 1883, but it is so loved that it is presented even today. It is the story of Arjun-Subhadra brought together by Krishna's plan.

Another play of the time that created waves, was *Keechakwadh*. Khadilkar's play was a story from the Mahabharat's Viraat parva. When the Pandavas are in hiding, the brother-in-law of Viraat, Keechak lusts after Draupadi. He tries to win her over until Bheem kills him. The play opened in Pune in 1907 and became a success. But in 1910, the British government began to look at it differently. That year, in an article in the *London Times*, it was said that the play was symbolic of the then political situation. Keechak was symbolic of Lord Curzon, Draupadi was Bharatmata and Yudhishthir and Bheem represented the fiery and sober schools of thought among freedom fighters. It was also later said that there were attempts on the lives of British officers since the play was staged. A collector was killed in the same theatre that the play was staged, etc. As a result, the play was banned in 1910 and the ban lasted till 1916.

Ram Ganesh Gadkari was another noted playwright whose plays were staged from 1916. Two of his extremely popular plays were *Ekach Pyala* and *Bhaavbandhan*.

After 1925, due to the growing influence of radio and cinema,



Shivaji Underground in Bhimnagar Mohalla, a play that became a talking point due to its content

there was a slump in Marathi theatre. But cinema and radio also showed the western theatre scene. Inspired by this, K. N. Kale, Anant Kanekar, G. Y. Chitnis and S. V. Vartak started a theatre group called Natyamanvantar. In 1933 Vartak's *Andhalyaanchi Shaalaa* was the first Marathi play to have an actress, Jyotsna Bhole. Until then, men would play the roles of women. A prominent actor who convincingly played women's roles, was Bal Gandharva.

From 1933 to 1943, was the Atré Age of Marathi theatre. The fiery journalist, author, playwright wrote many plays which had social significance.

M. G. Rangnekar's plays portrayed issues pertaining to the Marathi middle class.

Veer Vinayak Damodar Sawarkar's plays *Usshaap*, *Sanyastakhadga* and *Uttarkriya* were about socio-political issues. Another important name is that of B. V. Warerkar, or Mama Warerkar. His plays include *Sanyaashaachaa Sansaar*, *Turungaachya Daaraat* and *Sattechey Gulam*. He tried to create awareness about various issues plaguing society.

Marathi theatre from 40's to 90's

After *natak mandalis*, came organisations like Rangayan, Progressive Dramatic Association and Aawishkaar – formed by groups of theatre personalities. Their focus was experimental theatre. They brought forth many different subjects and in a sense, created and taught an audience to accept these new ideas. The Marathi audience developed a taste for experimental theatre. Many prominent theatre personalities like Bhalba Kelkar, Shreeram Lagoo, Vijaya Mehta, Arvind Deshpande, Sulabha Deshpande and Arun Kakade were involved with such organisations, and some of them continue to work with them.

In the forties, fifties and sixties, emerged playwrights like Ve

Va Shirwadkar, who further enriched Marathi theatre. Some of his notable plays include *Doosra Peshwa*, *Vaijayanti* and *Kounteya*. He and Pu La Deshpande also adapted English plays into Marathi. Pu La's noted plays include *Ammaldaar*, *Bhagyawan* and *Tuzhe Aahe Tujapashi*. Other notable playwrights of the period include Baban Prabhu, Bal Kolhatkar and

Madhusudan Kalelkar.

This period also saw Vijay Tendulkar, Vasant Kanetkar, Jaywant Dalvi, Sri Na Pendse, Vidyadhar Gokhale and Ratnakar Matkari give Marathi theatre new subjects. Gokhale tried to resurrect *Sangeet Nataks*. Tendulkar's plays took Marathi theatre beyond Maharashtra and India. His plays that changed the face of Marathi theatre include *Gidhade*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Baby*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Mitrachi Goshta* and *Kamala*. Mahesh Elkunchwar, Satish Alekar and G. P. Deshpande are the names that can be taken as theatre personalities who came after the illustrious group of Tendulkar, Dalvi and their contemporaries.

In the late eighties and nineties, Sanjay Pawar, Prashant Dalvi, Jayant Pawar, Premanand Gajvi, Shafaat Khan, Makarand Sathe, Datta Bhagat, Chetan Datar and Rajiv Naik made a name for themselves.

The nineties brought cable television and many theatre personalities, especially actors and actresses, made a beeline for serials. While this changed the arithmetic of financial gains for them, some remembered the worth of theatre and continued to act in a play or two. In the 2000s and more recently, the 2010s, many of them have returned to theatre completely. Some playwrights and directors made the transition from theatre to film. But actors, prominently Ashok Saraf, Sayaji Shinde, Prashant Damle, Kavita Lad, Reema, Amruta Subhash, Sachin Khedekar and Sonali Kulkarni have returned to theatre after honeymooning with TV and films.

Reviving old plays, a new trend

Marathi theatre has moved with the times, with writers and directors injecting different ideas into it. A trend sometime back was that of musical plays. These new plays did not have classical music like the early plays, but modern music with reference to the story. A prominent such play is *Eka Lagnachi Goshta*. A play that is constantly remade by directors and actors because of its timeless appeal, is *Tee Phularani*, Pu La

Deshpande's adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *My Fair Lady*. National School of Drama director Waman Kendre turned it into a musical play some time back.

Marathi theatre has also been enriched with adaptations of plays from other languages. Some of these well known plays are *Saunshaykallol* – *Othello*, *Natasamraat* – King Lear, *Ain Vasantaat Ardhya Ratri* – A Midsummer Night's Dream, *Khurchya* – Chairs, *Ajab Nyay Wartulacha* - The Caucasian Chalk Circle, *Nagamandal* – from Kannada and recently *Piya Bawari* - from Sanskrit.

While there are many new plays happening all the time, the current trend is that of reviving old Marathi plays with a new cast. Actor Sunil Barve began the trend a few years ago by reviving five plays in this manner. The plays were *Suryachi pille*, *Lahanpan dega deva*, *Hamidabaichi kothi*, *Zhopi gelela jaga zhala* and *Andhala Daltay*. He said he wanted a new generation to see these plays. Following Barve, actress Neelam Shirke also revived *Mahasagar*. Currently, the play *Lekure Udanda Zhali* is on with a new cast.

Experimental theatre popular outside Mumbai

The future, as its past, is bright for Marathi theatre. Some of the promising playwrights who will play a major part in it, are Dr. Vivek Bele, Paresh Mokashi, Manaswini Lata Ravindra, Rajkumar Tangde. Dr. Bele is known for *Katkon Trikon*, *Makdachya Haati Champagne* and very recently, *Ali Baba ani Chalishitle Chor*. Mokashi, known more outside Maharashtra for his film *Harishchandrachi factory*, is basically a playwright, and like his earlier gems, *Sangeet debuchya muli* or *Mukkampost Bombilwadi*, he will certainly come up with more. Manaswini who came into the limelight with *Cigarettes*, is another such playwright. Tangde is the playwright of *Shivaji Underground in Bhimnagar Mohalla*, a play that became a talking point due to its content. In it he represents the other Maharashtra, who can also claim Shivaji, but have until now, been restricted to holding onto just Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Tangde's thought-provoking play has ensured that viewers have more expectations from such playwrights.

Leading director Vijay Kenkre believes the future of experimental theatre lies outside Mumbai. He says Pune has at least two to three spaces where people involved with experimental theatre can rehearse and perform, while in Mumbai there is just one school which has given it space, the home of Aawishkaar. He says, "Outside Mumbai, experimental theatre is thriving in Pune, Nagpur and other areas in the state. There, those involved don't have the temptation of television. All the leading playwrights of parallel theatre for instance, are from Pune – Dr. Bele, Girish Joshi, Chandrakant Phansalkar and others. There are also other promising names like Irawati Karnik, Madhugandha Kulkarni

and Manaswini. But for survival, some of them have had to move to commercial theatre or TV serials."

He believes commercial theatre is also doing well, but says that the revival of old plays – which are dialogue oriented – suggests that the new generation of viewers likes them because of the language. But he adds a word of caution for theatre personalities. He says, "A new generation, that is under age 40 is being attracted to theatre. But while they like these dialogue-oriented plays, I wonder if their own language is good, and so, how long will this interest last? Like cinema and music has changed, production should also change. Perhaps we should give the young audience something larger than life, something of grandeur to keep them interested. We are also getting a new crop of well-trained actors and have to put them to good use. We have to think of all this for the future. Producers should also change. They should learn how to market plays. Just an advertisement in newspapers is not going to help."

Young playwright Madhugandha Kulkarni agrees. She says, "Marathi theatre producers should learn how to market as per the times. They have a lot to learn from Gujarati producers. Marathi producers shouldn't rely only on mouth publicity or advertisements in newspapers. They should reach out to people in new, different ways."

Kulkarni believes attracting enough audience is necessary to ensure a play's success. A play will not go on only on the strength of its story, actors or direction etc. A steady audience has to be provided for it. She gives the example of the Marathi play *Lali Leela* in which she acted. She says, "It was a very good play but it did not do commercially well in Marathi. On the other hand, a Gujarati producer saw its potential and marketed it so well that it became a hit. People know it as a Gujarati play! I am not against Marathi plays being taken into other languages. But what Gujarati producers could do, should have been done by Marathi producers. Marketing is a major part of a play's success."

Marathi films or TV serials have not been able to sustain the audience's interest consistently, while Marathi theatre has. Interest in films and TV has waned over time, but theatre still continues to attract crowds. Marathi theatre has a bright future, but those involved in it should not rest on this assumption based on the current situation. They

should look at it like a venture, which needs hard work and new ideas to help make it a success and ensure that the success lasts. ■



The writer loves to watch Marathi theatre, read books and travel. She is a freelance journalist and translator. She has translated Siddharth Pardhe's autobiography 'Colony' from Marathi to English.

The vibrant hues of Gujarati theatre

*The history of theatre in Gujarat dates back to thousands of years and it continues to show promise. Presently, there is a healthy upsurge of a young band of actors, but if contemporary theatre won't reflect societal trends and concerns, it might turn into a puppet of powerful vested interests, cautions **Manvita Baradi**.*

REGIONAL theatre in India is distinct. The character of people and its culture are reflected in all the art forms. More so in theatre. Theatre is the producer and the product of the society.

I would like to separate the discussion on 'Gujarati theatre' and 'theatre in Gujarat'.

Gujarati theatre in Mumbai – a successful business model

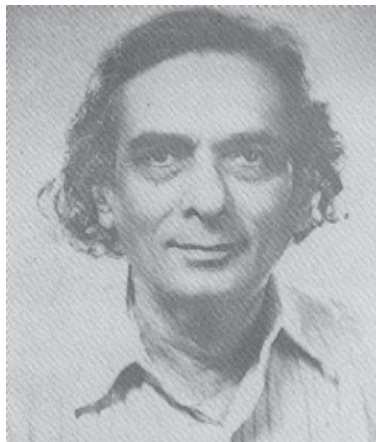
Gujarati theatre is the theatre which is produced in Gujarati language and which reflects the culture of its people, and their aspirations. It can be produced in Gujarat or in Mumbai.

Mumbai is the largest producer of plays in Gujarati language. Even more than the total productions from Gujarat. The commercial value is carefully worked out — content, plot, performers, sets, costumes. The formula works. Many a time it is a bad replica of the Bollywood successful formula. There is a mix of 'social drama' with jokes, stock characters, dialogues and loud music. The film on stage is loved by many and since this film is performed 'live', is in demand. The theatre companies producing these plays are in serious business. The performers are full timers. The product- a play -has to be marketable- and there are agencies and brokers who buy these products.

Plays produced in Mumbai in Gujarati language are very popular amongst the agencies who source them in theatre auditoriums for social groups and clubs in Gujarat. These agencies or brokers claim to know the taste of the Gujarati speaking audience and can serve them the right dessert after long business hours. Most plays are scheduled to be performed at 9.30 pm in auditoriums, and a social group would have purchased tickets for its members in bulk, via the brokerage agencies. It is indeed interesting and a highly successful business model, and many times bulk purchase of plays and

plots are 'booked' many months in advance.

Such Gujarati theatre appears to be a poor cousin of films, but has a tremendously successful business model. These equations allow regular productions and performers being able to choose their full time occupation as performers. There are some bright performers who are risk takers and may be once in a while, come up with interesting plots or story lines. Most plays are intense heightened drama tending to be melodramatic – propagating status quo, hardly any experimentation with performance spaces. It brings in new trends in fashion - new styles in dressing and drawing room furniture.



Jashwant Thaker, the doyen of Gujarati theatre

Theatre scene in Gujarat – a passion but part time

Theatre in Gujarat has a different story, particularly theatre performed in Gujarati language which is experimental in its content and approach. The brokers or agencies never buy their products since it is never a regular supply. Nor can they pre-book them. Or give them a recipe and order it for a festive season. It is a theatre which a few groups in cities of Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Surat, Rajkot, Bhavnagar, Navsari, produce, and many a times irregularly. They do not have a calendar of productions nor

are their plays sourced by any clubs or membership organisations. They might want to bring in a perspective on a story and share with the audience. They neither have a box office, nor a broker. They hope to receive financial support from government or sometimes corporates and find monies to produce a play somehow. They do not pay their actors enough to be able to pursue a career in theatre. Most performers and actors have full time jobs elsewhere. Theatre happens only in the spare time - as a passion.

History of theatre in Gujarat

Let us understand why is there such a distinction. Let's look at history to seek some answers.

The oldest performance space in the world ever found - older than even Greek amphitheatres - is in Gujarat. A formal performance space was found in Dholaviraan Indus Valley civilisation site. This is about 5000 years ago. Many of the Buddhist caves in Gujarat suggest performances took place then as well- which is about 2000 years ago. We do have Jain texts and manuscripts documenting conversations in the form of dialogues. We have had well developed folk theatre- Bhavai - with sophisticated and evolved performance style - its music, steps, costumes, content- relevant to that time - a commentary on society then. A complete theatre with dance, music and drama.

Gujarat also evolved a Parsi theatre form by borrowing some elements from European theatre influences and song-drama from folk. This too had lots of songs and drama – which gave rise to an Indian film genre as well. The Bhavai performers were patronised by the community. The Parsi theatre actors and their companies were patronised by the box office. The modern Gujarati theatre has continued its traditions of making an economic sense. But in the process has lost its content value.

Post independent theatre in Gujarat and Mumbai saw rise of many dramatists. But the culture of parallel theatre verses the commercial theatre evolved in the 70s and 80s. The character of this 'parallel' Gujarati theatre blossomed as envisioned by Jashvant Thaker and Chandravadan Mehta. Mrinalini Sarabhai established Darpana in 1949. Through training, research, publishing and extensive travels at home and abroad to stage dances, plays, puppet shows, *Bhavai* shows etc., she has made a noteworthy contribution to Gujarati theatre. Darpana's theatre branch was initiated in 1959 with Kailash Pandya and Damini Mehta joining it. Kailash Pandya received his training from Jayshankar 'Sundari' and Jashvant Thaker. Damini Mehta was groomed by Harkant Shah in Javnika. Kailashbhai as well as Damini ben had already made a name in the field of theatre. For two and a half decades then on, Darpana made a remarkable contribution. During the initial five years, it staged plays translated from Tagore and those written by Chandravadan Mehta, Chunilal Madia, Jayanti Dalal, and occasionally produced those written

by Raghunath Brahmabhatt and Dahyabhai Dholsaji.

The staging of plays written by budding playwrights, most of whom are today active in the mainstream of Gujarati playwriting, was a form of an assault. In this venture, the process carried greater emphasis than the number of shows. It was also appropriate that an institution with a rich heritage accomplished this task. Aakanth Sabarmati was a gathering of playwrights and theatre practioners in 1970s in Ahmedabad, which gave new directions to Gujarati theatre. It had practioners who had

travelled, studied abroad, studied theatre and literature, and created a movement outside of the formal theatre space then.

While in Mumbai, Pravin Joshi emerged as a director in 1961 following a drama festival organised by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. In 1963, Pravin Joshi joined Indian National Theatre (INT) and produced the first play, *Mograna Saap*, and got four awards. Following adaptations, among the original Gujarati plays he presented were *Moti Verana Chokmaan*, written by Ramji Vaniya, and *Kumar ni Agashi*, written by Madhu Rye.

In the modern Gujarati non-amateur theatre, Kanti Madia's name stands next to Pravin Joshi's in terms of popularity. He founded Natya Sampada in 1967.

In *Atam ne Ojhalmaan RakhMaa*, a play directed by him, the role of Prof. Vidyasagar was played by Upendra Trivedi. He staged many adaptations and stood tall by the care and concern they were treated with, high production norms and excellent direction.

Upendra Trivedi went on to dramatise and direct *Jher to PidhanChhe Jani Jani*, and later worked with Adi Marzban at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. After working for a while in Natya Sampada, he gave a brilliant performance as an actor in *Abhinay Samrat*, a play produced by his own theatre troupe.

It is estimated that between 1960 and 1970, more than 7500 shows of 250 new plays were performed. On an average, 50 to 200 shows of each of the successful plays were held.

Sitanshu Yashashchandra's *Tokhar (Equus)*, directed by Mahendra Joshi, and *Aa Manas Madrasi Lage Chhe* were novel experiments. Later, Sitanshu introduced new patterns in playwriting with *Kaho Makanji Kyan Chalya*, directed by Nimesh Desai and *Grahan*, directed by Mahesh Champaklal. Constantly and consistently active on the stage, always entertaining with new enterprises, and above all, training and grooming his colleagues all along, was Adi Marzban, a brilliant



dramatist of this phase. Actors like Pheroze Antia, Homi Tavadia, Burjor Patel, Dinyar Contractor revered him as a guru. After obtaining a theatre diploma in Mumbai, Vishnukumar Vyas had joined IPTA. Beginning with Rang Bhumi in 1948, and then working in Rang Manch and INT, he acted many roles, directed many plays, imparted theatre training to many. Spectators would still remember Gopalbapa of *Jher to Pidhan Chhe* and Charudatt of *Mrichchhakatik*.

Vanlata Mehta is a perceptive actress of Gujarati theatre. She has brought alive on the stage more than sixty roles. Having begun to act at a young age, Madhukar Randeria achieved popularity with his acting in many plays, most staged more than a hundred times.

Jayanti Patel joined INT and acted for a decade in many plays. He also wrote plays *Neta Abhineta* and *Mara Asatyana Prayogo* (My Experiments with Untruth). With Madhukar Randeria he produced *Rangilo Rajja*, which ran for 100 nights.

Right from the time the Drama Department at Vadodara University was set up, remarkably unique plays have been staged as a part of theatre training. Many theatre stalwarts were associated with it. Plays produced by trainers as well as trainees are still regularly being staged. These directors and those trained by them have all along continued to make an impact on the theatre activity in Gujarat.

After the era of radiant new plays written until 1975-1976, Labhshankar Thaker's *Mansukhlal Majithiya*, written at Akanth, was now imaginatively directed by Darpana. He similarly wrote *Pilun Gulabane Hun* and it was staged by Darpana. This was not a singular development.

At about the same time, a playwright Subhash Shah formed a troupe of actors at Huthisingh Visual Arts Centre and engaged himself in enhancing his experience of stage production.

Playwright and theatre activist Hasmukh Baradi groomed a number of young persons into a newly formed actors' troupe and diverted his attention from drama production to production planning and guidance. He initially provided guidance to the production-training-research oriented activity that culminated in Garage Studio Theatre (headed by Janak Raval and Manvita Baradi and now known as Theatre and Media Centre).

There seemed a distinct possibility of it becoming the phase of struggling creative writers. The contract show system had turned the 'new' professional theatre into a manipulated organisation. The absence of a director who could re-enact an integrated picture of life in Gujarat on stage in a comprehensive manner had created a void.

To a small extent, the playwright therefore engaged himself in direction to the best of his ability, and to a large extent turned towards planning and organising a group or an activity. And yet Gujarati theatre and drama need directors so that the playwright, the actor and the audience can mutually enrich

one another and manifest their over-all perception of life.

In Gujarat, Street theatre was extensively used during Nav Nirman agitation in 1973. Many groups performed during reservation agitation and also post communal riots in Gujarat from 1985 onwards. NGOs too used the form to communicate key messages. Ahmedabad based Unnati, CEE, AWAG, Disha, SEWA, Lok Natya Manch, Garage Studio Theatre and Theatre and Media Centre, Samvedan Sanskritik Manch wrote their own issue based plays, conducted theatre workshops with the community groups they were working with and performed extensively. Aditi Desai, Hiren Gandhi, Saroop Dhruv, Bhupesh Shah, Hasmukh Baradi, Janak Rawal, Saumya Joshi have been working regularly. Somehow the street theatre movement never caught on in smaller towns or cities. Excepting in centres like Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Surat, Bhavnagar and the movement did not capture theatre practioners' attention in Rajkot, Bharuch or Navsari. It was used in Bhuj and Kutch though during the post earthquake re-construction time by local troupes and some from Ahmedabad. But has not been a sustained activity.

At Garage Studio Theatre, Hasmukh Baradi, Janak Rawal and this writer prepared actors differently – the troupe discussed the content, wrote their own script and then the actor developed his/her own character. It produced about a dozen plays. Jingles and dance movements were extensively used costumes and props were minimal. Post-performance questions by the audience were addressed and discussed. The issues concerned communal divide, malpractices in educational system, plight of common man, awareness of heritage conservation and post-earthquake reconstruction. The group used 'theatre as therapy' in post-earthquake stressed scenario.

A healthy transformation of society is not possible without a dialogue with its members. Street Theatre, if properly used, can create this dialogue. Other mass media remain monologues. The latest in Gujarati Theatre is a kind of very healthy upsurge of the young band of actors – the 'Y' generation for production and its related activity, prominent among them are Saumya Joshi, Kabir Thakore, Budhan etc. The enthusiasm is welcome, with a little caution that effort should result in a meaningful activity, reflecting the 'Present' of the society in it, otherwise the strength of this participatory maximum will be absorbed by the powerful forces of the vested interests. ■



Photos' courtesy: Theatre Media Centre, Ahmedabad

The writer is a Theatre Practioner, Architect and an Urban Planner. She is a trustee and a member of the team of Theatre Media Centre also known as Garage Studio Theatre since 1976. Active in theatre in various capacities as an actor, director, designer or as a researcher, she with her team is working in Ahmedabad.

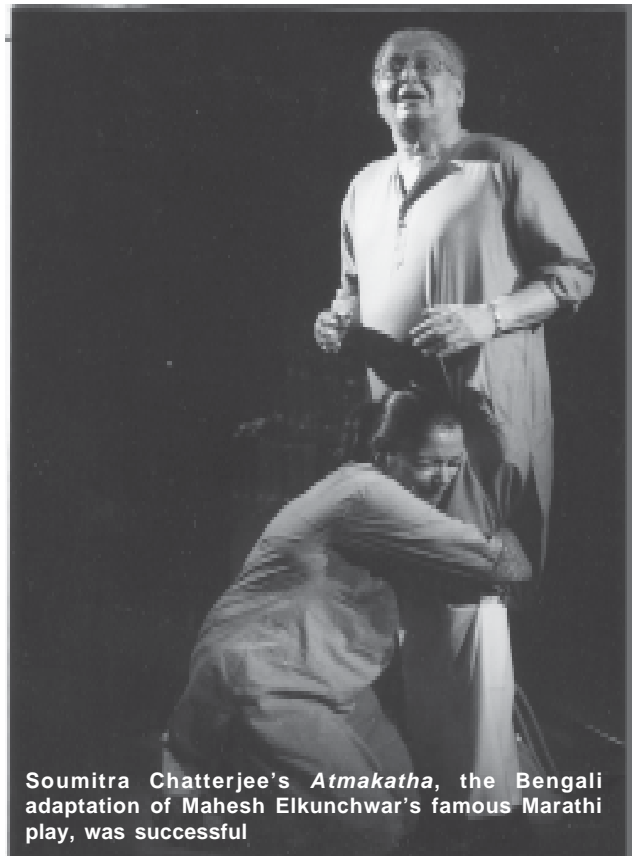
Bengali theatre and some immortal pillars

Bengali theatre groups are exploring new subjects, new ways of performing, interpreting old classics and mythological texts through modernist and postmodernist readings, and are transcending boundaries of culture, language and performance, writes Shoma Chatterjee.

BENGALI theatre came to Bengal from beyond shores more than 200 years ago. It received great impetus from Herasim Lebedeff, a Russian, who came to Calcutta in 1787. Along with Goloknath Das, he staged two English comedies, *Disguise* and *Love is the Best Doctor* in Calcutta in 1795 with both plays featuring Indian characters. In 1831, Prasanna Kumar Thakur established *Hindoo Rangamancha* in Calcutta and staged Wilson's English translation of Bhavabhuti's *Uttar Ramacharitam* which could be said to have laid the foundation of modern theatre in Calcutta. Nabin Chandra Bose's *Jorasanko Natyasala* (1854), the private stages of Asutosh Deb and Ramjay Basak (1857), *Vidyotsahini Mancha* (1857), *Belgachhia Natyashala* (1858), *Metropolitan Theatre* (1859), *Shovabazar Private Theatrical Society* (1865), *Bahubazar Natyashala* (1866) and *Baghbazar Amateur Theatre* (1868) marked the entry of the 'babus' and the aristocracy into theatre. Baghbazar Amateur Theatre's two young members, Girish Chandra Ghosh and Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi dominated Bengali theatre for nearly four decades.

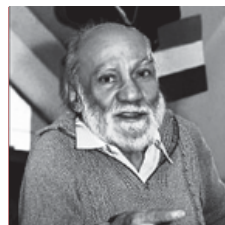
The other influence came from theatre-in-the-round, or, folk theatre known as *jatra* though theatre scholar Kironmoy Saha insists that there is a difference of opinion about which of the two – English theatre of Calcutta or the *jatra* form of performance – was more influential in creating and shaping Bengali proscenium theatre. Brajendra Nath Bandopadhyay denied any link between old Bengali *jatra* and Bengali theatre. Amulya Charan Bandopadhyay on the other hand, claimed that *jatra* alone can claim to be the parent of Bengali theatre. The difference is ascribed to the fact that the two scholars concentrated on two different periods of the growth of Bengali theatre. The fact remains that both English and *jatra* influenced the evolution of modern Bengali theatre. Other folk performing forms that combined dance, music and acting were also popular. Among these are *Jhumur*, *Leto*, *Alkap*, *Gambhira*, *Kathakatha* and so on but *Jatra* was the most popular and influential.

The author outlines some of the pillars who, through different genres of theatre, both in form, content and presentation contributed immensely to Bengali theatre.



Soumitra Chatterjee's *Atmakatha*, the Bengali adaptation of Mahesh Elkunchwar's famous Marathi play, was successful

Pillars of Bengali Theatre Badal Sarkar (1925 – 2011)



Badal Sarkar drew theatre out from the confines of the folk and the urban styles into the Third Theatre – exposing us to an unconventional theatrical dimension of free theatre, courtyard productions and village theatre. Sarkar's free theatre often throws up the eternal debate questioning which is more important - form or content. "Content is primal," he would insist, almost pre-empting the question "form always follows content." His emphasis on the actor's body and minimalism

on stage draws all attention to the point he chose to direct it on - the message. His emphasis on actor's training strengthened the form of his theatre, preventing it from lapsing all too easily into a diatribe and yet it does not compromise on entertainment that automatically integrates itself into the performance. The actors themselves form the props – a tap from where water is drawn, a machine whose wheel is being turned by other actors, a stream flowing through a rocky terrain, the works. They sing, dance, recite, lecture, fight, argue, jump, and take somersaults on the performance space, always off-proscenium, always without make-up and costume, always without props.

He began by performing in small halls and with benches and stools to create varied shades of relationship between actors and spectators and moved on to the open streets, gardens, parks, everywhere, turning the whole world into a stage without reference to Shakespeare.

Sambhu Mitra (1915 – 1997)



Sambhu Mitra is perhaps the most powerful personality in modern Bengali theatre. His interest in theatre is traced back to his boyhood. He joined Calcutta's commercial theatre in 1939. He could observe and be close to theatre personalities such as Sisir Bhaduri, Ahindra Choudhury, and Sarajubala Devi.

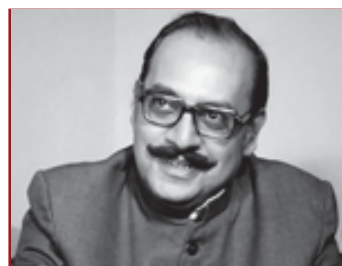
He joined IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) in 1943 and directed *Nabanna* along with Bijon Bhattacharya in 1944. The play created mass awakening against British imperialism and strengthened the people's resolve to liberate themselves from the British. Mitra quit IPTA to form *Bohurupee* with noted playwright Manoranjan Bhattacharya in 1948. *Bohurupee* soon occupied an august position within Bengali theatre thanks to the painstaking efforts of Sombhu Mitra and his actress-wife Tripti. With his wonderful physique, a mellifluous voice honed with rigid practice, mastery over acting, wide reading, a poetic sensibility and understanding of a director's play in its totality are qualities that mark him as a rare talent.

His pioneering work comprised Rabindranath Tagore's plays considered unfriendly for theatrical production because of their symbolism, language and rejection of established norms of proscenium theatre. *Rakta Karabi* (Red Oleanders, 1954) remains a milestone. As an actor, he played characters by Sophocles, Ibsen, Tagore and Brecht. Other plays were *Chenra Taar*, *Char Adhay*, *Ulukhagra*, *Putul Khela*, *Dasachakra*, *Mudra Rakshasa*,

Oedipus and *Galileo*. His ability to make optimum use of minimum infrastructure for the most complex plays was another quality. He translated Greek classics like *Raja Oedipus* to Bengali and yet sustained the ambience of the original. As director, the total design of the production was important for him.

He was bestowed the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship for lifetime contribution (1966), the Padma Bhushan (1970) and the Ramon Magsaysay Award (1976.) He passed away in Kolkata on May 19, 1997. His daughter, Saoli Mitra, is an independent theatre activist.

Utpal Dutt (1929-1993)



Dutt began his career as a stage actor when he was a schoolboy, in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. He took theatre beyond the geographical parameters of the stage. Like Augusto Boal, Dutt felt that all theatre is

political. He believed that theatre could never be meaningful if it does not consider the political ethos within which it has to negotiate the terms of the volatile and fluctuating relationships between and among human beings.

Though he had a thick portfolio of films, the stage remained his first love and his troupe continued its movement in serious political theatre. Dutt strode like a Colossus in Bengali theatre staging one production after another and, at the same time, trying to evolve a comprehensive theory of Epic Theatre which, he hoped, should serve as a model. Utpal Dutt, closer to his own theatrical tradition and Stanislavsky (the Russian theatre director and actor), aspired to raise his Epic Theatre based on the reinvigorating power of myths, while Bertolt Brecht formulated his vision by subjecting this very myth to question. In his productions, some of them breathtaking, Dutt achieved what he wanted to (in his own words) – "reaffirm the violent history of India, reaffirm the material tradition of its people, recount again and again the heroic tales of grand rebels and martyrs."

He carried with one experiment to the next, not once moving away from his belief in the need to merge politics, literature and theatre. "I do not advocate that things be portrayed either as black or as white. I say that is precisely what Marxism disallows. There is no such thing as black and white in life, there are only grays," he would say and promptly enact a completely black character in a Hindi or Bengali film! This contradiction makes Utpal Dutt stand apart.



Chapal Bhaduri spent his life playing female roles

Chapal Bhaduri (1938 -)

Chapal Bhaduri, alias Chapal Rani, or Queen Chapal, leading lady of Bengal's traditional, travelling folk theatre-in-the-round, the *Jatra*, spent his life playing female roles. He feels, thinks and speaks like a woman. Stepping into female roles came naturally to him. His performances in *Raja Debidas*, *Chand Bibi*, *Sultana Razia* and *Mahiyashi Kaikeyi* were big hits. "In the 1960s, I was one of the

the highest paid 'actresses' of the *jatra*. I performed in villages, districts and small towns, till my pay packet swelled to around ₹7000 to ₹8000 per month. Young men would swoon through the window of the improvised green room to catch a glimpse of their favourite 'Chapal Rani," he reminisces.

As the sixties came to an end, women stepped out to play female roles. Male actors like Chapal Bhaduri suddenly found themselves almost without work. Chapal found an opening with Kamala Opera. He was paid ₹100 per show for a part in *Durgesh Nandini*, sometimes doing three shows in one day to make both ends meet. "But it was too late. Petromax lighting with 1000 volts was passé. They were replaced by modern, loud and dazzling lights that brought out the difference between the 'imitation' woman and the 'real' woman," he says.

In 1995, he began playing Shitala, the poor person's dreaded goddess of small pox and disease, in dramatised performances of the goddess' sacred saga for ₹40.00, ₹50 and ₹60 per performance at different temple precincts in the city and also sometimes at the Ramakrishna Mission and Omkarnath Math. He feels proud that he has inspired three very good films revolving around his life. One is a *Performing the Goddess – The Chapal Bhaduri Story*, a documentary made by Navin Kishore. The second is a telefilm directed by Koushik Ganguly called *Ushno Taar Jonne* (Bengali) in which he played himself in a small cameo. The third one is *Just Another Love Story* (Bengali-English) a feature film.

Soumitra Chatterjee (1935 -)



Few outside West Bengal know that Dadasaheb Phalke winner Soumitra Chatterjee is not only an outstanding performing artiste who has portrayed different characters in 14 films of Satyajit Ray or has acted in around 300 films over his 53-year-old career in films but has directed and acted in more than a dozen plays. He is the only Public Theatre director whose

innovative planning for stage productions and thought-provoking style of presenting different sequences on the stage is no different from any group theatre director's mode of working. He has given Public Theatre a completely different look from many standpoints. His plays focus on contemporary life mixed with crisis and confrontation.

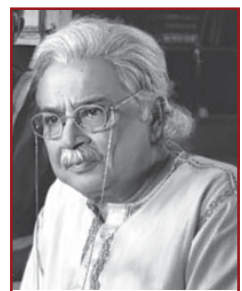
Recognition came with his sterling production of *Naamjibon* with which he established himself firmly into the professional stage of Kolkata. *Neelkantha*, written and directed by him with himself in the title role, first staged in 1988 when revived several years later on the Kolkata drew a full house every time. Other successful plays are *Rajkumar*, *Tiktiki (Sleuth)*, *Atmakatha* (the Bengali adaptation of Mahesh Elkunchwar's famous Marathi play) and most recently, *Raja Lear* adapted from Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Chatterjee's Bengali adaptation Antony Schaffer's original *Sleuth* named *Tiktiki*, had had more than 125 shows within three years, each to a full house. The two actors, Soumitra Chatterjee and Koushik Sen held the audience enthralled with their brilliant performance.

"Natasamrat Sisir Kumar Bhaduri's theatre inspired me deeply. His way of walking about on stage, creating a character, his unique style, made me decide to become an actor. I had seen plays of the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) before seeing Bhaduri on stage. I also saw *Bohuroopi* plays. I have not been consciously influenced by any single school, but have imbibed different things from each. I watched Sisir Bhaduri perform in Srirangam's *Prafulla* the night before Srirangam, his group, was closing down in 1956. My fundamentals in acting are from his plays. His portrayal in and as *Chandragupta* will remain the best stage performance I have ever seen. He taught me to read Bertolt Brecht," Chatterjee recalls.

Manoj Mitra (1938 -)

Manoj Mitra is an institution unto himself. He is a renowned playwright-actor-director who, despite having authored around 100 short and full-length plays, besides doing cinema and television, has been sidelined as a regional theatre person. But he is more a national-level contributor considering that many of his plays have been staged by the most



outstanding theatre personalities from other regions in languages other than Bengali. Among them are Habib Tanvir, Ratan Thiyam, Rajinder Nath, Waman Kendra, Ali Zakher and Jamaluddin Hossain of Bangladesh. His theatre group Sundaram is now 55 years old. Lesser known professionals, amateurs, school and college students from Kolkata,



Saoli Mitra's *Ekal Yatra*

Bengaluru, Chennai, Jammu, Mumbai, Manipur, Odisha, Sydney, Canberra, Toronto, Birmingham have also staged his work.

Some of Sundaram's most brilliant productions are –

Sajano Bagan, Parabas, Alokandhar Putrakanya, Chhayar Prasad, Sovajatra, Munni O Saat Chowkidar, Ja Nei Bharatey, etc. "All my works are firmly grounded in my world; they breathe the same air and talk of the problems that touch me. It is through this personal, individual perspective that I can hope to touch my viewers. I would even say that regardless of the content of the play, if a dramatist is successful in depicting the lives he is talking about that is half the battle won," he says.

Beyond boundaries

Today there are dozens of Bengali theatre groups performing across the world. Among them are

Rudraprasad Sengupta's *Nandikar*, Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Tritiyo Sutra*, Meghnad Bhattacharya's *Sayak*, Koushik Sen's *Swapnasandhani*, Bratya Basu's *Bratyajon*, Debesh Chattopadhyay's *Sansriti*, Saoli Mitra's *Pancham Baidik*, Usha Ganguly's *Rangkarmee*, the late Ramaprasad Banik's *Chenamukh*, the late Jochhon Dastidar's *Charbak*. They, along with many others are exploring new subjects, new ways of performing, interpreting old classics and mythological texts through modernist and postmodernist readings. The directors also work freelance for other groups across the theatrical map, pushing the boundaries of culture, language and performance. ■

The writer is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author.



She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many awards. She is currently Senior Research Fellow, ICSSR, Delhi researching the politics of presentation of working women in post-colonial Bengali cinema 1950 to 2003.



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Theatre of Assam and Manipur: close proximity in contrast

*While Manipuri theatre is faced with the challenge of articulating a present that is caught in the vortex of bitter social and political conditions in the state, theatre in Assam is bearing the brunt of divisive politics. In such situations, the theatre fraternity is finding it difficult to carry the humane message inherent in every creative pursuit to the expected height, writes **Manoj Barpujari**.*

ASSAM had contributed significantly to the theatre tradition of the eastern part of India in the Medieval Age. The great Vaishnavite saint-scholar, playwright and a colossal figure in the cultural and religious history of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568) nurtured the Bhagavata tradition and reformist movement through theatre and interestingly, his first dramatic performance was *Chihna Yatra* which is described as a 'dramatic representation with signs and paintings'. It was a pantomimic show with a scenic background to emphasise the effect. The use of painted scenery unquestionably signifies what extent drama was developed to in the fifteenth century Assam. This pageant show was developed later into regular plays with music, dance and dialogue styled as *Ankia Nat*, their theatrical enactment of the Krishna cult popularly being known as *Bhoana*. Though *Ankia Nat* bears no resemblance to the anka type of Rupakas of Sanskrit drama, it is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the articles of Vaishnava faith. Sankardeva himself called these dramatic compositions *nat* and *nataka* after the Sanskrit terminology. Although he created seven plays, they were enough to lay a foundation of future dramatics. Art scholar Dr. Kapila Vatsayan rightfully remarked (in her celebrated anthology '*Traditional Indian Theatre*') that though *Ankia Nat* had a few common characteristics of various Vaishnavite theatre forms like the Ramlila and Raslila of north Indian states, the Bhagavata Mela of Tamil Nadu, Krishnattam of Kerala and the Pahlada Natakam of Odisha, it had unique features.

Heralding the *Satra* (Vaishnavite monastery) culture

After Sankardeva, his successor Madhavdeva contributed five short plays termed as *Jhumura*. Both the master and his disciple were responsible for heralding the *Satra* (Vaishnavite monastery) culture where the *Namghar* (hall for congregational



Heisnam Kanhailal's play *Pebet* was well received in the country and abroad

prayer) provided the space for theatre arts to flourish in the fifteenth century. Their activity influenced other followers to contribute immensely; they used local language, songs, music and dance, particularly the popular folk forms like *Ojapali* choruses. All this gave rise to a class of craftsmen who specialised in making theatrical accessories like costumes, decorations and masks, thus giving a shape to a dramatic movement which is still going strong all over the Brahmaputra valley. It is noteworthy that Sankardeva's style of presenting *Ankia Nat* is akin to the Brechtian epic theatre or dialectical theatre depending on the performance of a *Sutradhar* (interlocutor) where actors frequently address the audience directly out of character (breaking the fourth wall). *Ankia Nat* follows to a certain extent the text on Sanskrit dramatic theory, particularly with reference to the use of Sanskrit verses called *Nandi*, the role of the *Sutradhar* and performance of the preliminaries (*Purba-ranga*). But unlike in Sanskrit plays, the *Sutradhar* is an integral part of an *Ankiya Nat*. In Sanskrit dramas, the *Sutradhar* disappears altogether after the invocation, whereas in *Ankiya Nat* he remains all along on

the stage combining the functions of a producer and a running commentator. He dances with the orchestra, opens the play by singing and reciting the Nandi verse, introduces the characters and delivers brief discourses on the ethical and spiritual points of the plot. In fact, the *Satra* culture was largely democratic as it invited people from all sections of the society irrespective of race and religion, caste and creed to participate which further boosted the newly developed theatre discourse in Assam.

The advent of the mobile theatre movement

However, the opera like and musical drama of the Vaishnavite era was sidelined after the advent of the British rule and arrival of the proscenium theatre in Assam. The first Assamese drama with contemporary story was *Ram Navami* written by Gunabhiram Baruah in 1857. It was followed by *Kaniyar Kirtan*, the second serious social play written by Hem Chandra Baruah in 1866. At that time mythological plays were also written in western style. Realistic social drama and comedy appeared in the later half of the nineteenth century. Two of the pioneers in that stage of Assamese modern theatre were Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Padmanath Gohain Baruah, both of whom relied heavily on comic characters to drive home their message for social reform and uplift. The mobile theatre movement in Assam was taking root by then, in the beginning of the twentieth century; but its popularity could hardly give impetus to original plays, rather the groups opted for translated and adapted plays from Hindi and Bangla theatre. At that time, a new consciousness emerged largely due to some unique efforts by Jyotiprasad Agarwala who is considered the doyen of modern Assamese music and drama. His romantic plays like *Sonit Kunwari*, *Rupalim* and *Karengar Ligiri*, socio-political plays like *Lovita* as well as dance-drama like *Nimati Koina* were historic contribution to Assamese theatre. After him, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Satya Prasad Baruah, Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Mahendra Barthakur, Arun Sarma, Basanta Saikia and many others put their stamp of originality and modernity in Assamese play with different genres, from realistic to absurd with themes ranging from mythological to contemporary issues.

Sadly, the torch-bearers of modern Assamese theatre could not ensure longevity of the amateur tradition. It was rather the professional mobile theatre groups that had been giving succour to the artistes and technicians in the Assamese theatre world. First it was Brajanath Sharma, whose name



A scene from a play in Assam's mobile theatre

Sadly, the torch-bearers of modern Assamese theatre could not ensure longevity of the amateur tradition. It was rather the professional mobile theatre groups that had been giving succour to the artistes and technicians in the Assamese theatre world.

will ever remain etched in golden letters in the history of modern Assamese drama for his path-breaking journey of *Jatra* (mobile theatre) through the theatre group called Sila Kalika Opera started way back in 1921. And after him two brothers Achyut Lahkar and Sada Lahkar took hold of mobile theatre in the 1960s by setting up the famous Nataraj Theatre. Different groups came and vanished from the scene, but some names had found permanent status with immense fan following, one such group being Kohinoor Theatre started in mid-1970s by Ratan Lahkar. They also enjoy the reputation of a viable and sustaining industry. Though it has certain things in common with the *Jatra* of West Bengal— for example, the roving nature and performance on makeshift stages – the Assamese mobile (*Bhramyaman*) theatre put in much more effort for technical perfection and has evolved from depictions of mythological stories to themes of contemporary nature like Princess Diana's death mystery, terror strikes by Osama Bin Laden and adaptations of blockbuster Hollywood and Bollywood cinema showing *Superman*, *Dracula*, *Anaconda*, *Jurassic Park*, *Titanic*, *Devdas* to name only a few. But in this way they also gave way to gimmicks and mockery of serious theatre often citing the

spectators taste as a reason for it. The true spirit of theatre is carried forward by some young activists who are mainly alumni of the National School of Drama (NSD), namely Baharul Islam, Rabijita Gogoi, Sukracharya Rabha, Pabitra Rabha, Jyotinarayan Nath, and others who are self-taught, like Rafikul Hussain, Nayan Prasad, Naren Patgiri, Gunakar Dev Goswami,

(Continued on page 40)

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Coffee exudes an aura of drama, and cloak and dagger intrigue. India is the only country in the world that grows shade-grown coffee, said to be the finest mild coffee in the world. If you want to experience the aromas of coffee, then Chikmagalur and Coorg in Karnataka are the perfect locations. While Chikmagalur is considered to be the birthplace of Indian coffee, Coorg has a great deal to offer to the tourist –, forays in the Dubare forest, waterfalls, village walks and plantation treks among others things.

Coffee on your mind

Text and photos: Gustasp & Jeroo Irani





A village snuggled in a forest in Chikmagalur, untouched, unspoilt

BABA Budan, a 17th century Sufi saint, first tasted coffee when on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and got addicted to it right away. The problem was that he would have to do without his caffeine fix once he got back in India and to make matters worse, the Arabs frowned on smuggling coffee bean out of the country. However, Baba Budan was a resourceful man and he sewed seven beans into the folds of his cloak before setting off on his long trip back to his homeland. On his arrival he planted the beans in his garden on the slopes of Baba Budangiri Hills near modern-day Chikmagalur in Karnataka. Today, his efforts have borne fruit and the region is considered to be the birthplace of Indian coffee as bushes heavy with berries stretch to infinity across terraced slopes. And it was here in the green plantation-clad hills that we made a solemn vow! We would never have instant coffee again! Enchanted by the colour and romance of a beverage that stimulates the senses and the intellect, and a brew that has even spawned revolutions, we decided that we would savour nothing but the real McCoy. How could we even look a cup of instant coffee in the eye,

after learning about what goes into a perfect brew from coffee experts? Indeed we became coffee snobs overnight in line with research which suggests that with rising levels of affluence, people switch from tea to coffee. (Witness the mushrooming of coffee cafes in India.)

The coffee lore

The saga of coffee unfolded before our eyes and we learnt all about the nuances of making a satisfying cup from Dr. Pradeep

“I want it neither black or white, but brown, which ought to be the colour of honest coffee – that’s how we make it in India, where devotees of perfection in coffee assemble from all over the world.”

– R. K. Narayan, celebrated Indian writer

Kenjige, head of Research and Development, Coffee Day (the company that launched the Cafe Coffee Day chain and owns over 10,000 acres of coffee plantations in Chikmagalur) as we trampled through the 400-acre Kudregundi coffee plantation. Indeed, Dr. Kenjige gave us a peek into the world of coffee which is sustainable in that it nurtures nature rather than ravages it. And this is more so in India where the plant is under constant

threat of a deadly pest – the white stem borer. The only way to keep it under control is to make sure that the coffee plant is not exposed to direct sunlight. As a result India is the only



Workers tending to coffee saplings in Chikmagalur

country in the world that grows shade-grown coffee, said to be the finest mild coffee in the world. Other countries like those in South America have cut down their forests to produce the sun-grown variety.

Here luxuriant jungles meld into coffee plantations where soaring silver oaks and slender areca nut trees provide shade to tender coffee bushes laden with aromatic coffee berries. Creeping pepper plants wrap themselves around the silver oaks like obsessive lovers... Everywhere new life sprouts from the red earth but the lifeblood of Chikmagalur is coffee where the plantations are interspersed with small green patches of paddy and fruit orchards. Around us were some hundred shades of green, melting and merging.

In these idyllic settings Dr. Pradeep Kenjige regaled us with coffee lore, probably the most riveting being that of Kopi Luwak which is one of the most expensive coffees in the world. And this is because it is made from coffee berries eaten by the civet cat. In the feline's stomach, enzymes seep into the beans which are then expelled by the cat in its droppings. The beans are gathered, thoroughly washed, sun-dried, lightly roasted and brewed to produce what is the most aromatic coffee. Production is limited to an annual 400 tons and a handful of countries. Singer Madonna and other self-obsessed celebs have a passion for Kopi Luwak which it is said stems the process of ageing.



Aromatic coffee berries

Indeed coffee exudes an aura of drama and cloak and dagger intrigue; its history bristles with intriguing stories like the one about an ancient Turkish law that permitted women to divorce their husbands if they failed to provide them with coffee! The Turks love their coffee and, not surprisingly the first coffee cafe in the world opened in Constantinople (today's Istanbul) way back in 1475.

But the discovery of coffee dates even further back in time to 800 AD when an Ethiopian goatherd found that his flocks got animated after eating the berries from a certain bush. He popped a few in his mouth and gave mankind its most favoured perk-me-up brew. Over the centuries, coffee drinking spread to the



Coffee plantations in Chikmagalur where soaring silver oaks and slender areca nut trees provide shade to tender coffee bushes laden with aromatic coffee berries

Middle East and North Africa where the distribution of the bean was tightly controlled by these countries.

As Europeans acquired new colonies, they used skulduggery of sorts to obtain the legendary beans and soon the hillsides in South America grew verdant with lush plantations. Indeed the huge plantations in Brazil had an innocuous beginning – a few coffee plants were smuggled by a governor’s wife to her dashing lover in a colourful floral bouquet!

Chikmagalur — untouched and unspoilt

The next day we decided to explore the other charms of Chikmagalur which rolls lyrically off the tongue. The quaint town which means “town of the younger daughter” is not on the well-trodden tourist trail which makes it a destination that few people have heard of. Therein lies its lure... untouched, unspoilt.

We had trekked for about an hour from Sitalayyanagiri hill to the foot of the highest peak in Karnataka – Mullayyanagiri.



Nirvana Swami Mutt at Chikmagalur



A beautiful pond at the mutt



The coffee beans ready for picking

Just as we were about to ascend the 400 shallow steps hewn into the hill, we were arrested mid stride by the hooting wind. Violent gusts lashed us and a gentle drizzle started but we were distracted by the views that unfurled all around us. The landscape was daubed with a hundred shades of green – from mossy green, to lighter and deeper hues that glistened with rain-washed splendour. Tendrils of mist clung to the tree tops like bridal veils or billowed and blotted out everything to within a few feet ahead of us. Occasionally, the mist parted to reveal



A coffee picker in Coorg with a sack of harvested beans

the lush coffee plantations of Chikmagalur and emerald paddy fields below us and the green tumble of hills above us. The wind seemed to be blowing at around 60 km an hour, someone speculated, and so we abandoned the idea of climbing all the way to the top.

Instead we headed back to Chikmagalur, our car manoeuvring the winding road that curved around the bulging belly of the hills, slashed by waterfalls, and scything through dense forests. The hills that we had just climbed became a smudged mirage



Coffee bloom in Coorg



Coffee seeds being roasted at the coffee museum, Chikmagalur; (R) Dr. Pradeep Kenjige explains the finer points of brewing the perfect cup of coffee

in the distance and suddenly we were aware that the wind had died and the wafting breeze was mildly scented with the fragrance of the coffee berry. Midway down the narrow hill road, a local film shoot was in progress – the hero with smouldering eyes waited patiently as his make-up man powdered his nose while the starlet was throwing tantrums, apparently, because her rather bizarre outfit was too tight for her. Much as we would have liked to stay on and witness a couple of takes, we drove on.

On an impulse, we stopped at the Nirvana Swami Mutt – a charming traditional ashram and temple. We ducked under a low entrance that led to interlinked courtyards where potted plants and flowers bloomed. An ancient step-well in a sun-dappled wood nearby exuded a timeless feel. And with typical Indian hospitality, we were invited to stay for a simple lunch of curried vegetables, rice and ragi porridge.

Suffering by then from sensory overload, we made our way to The Serai, a luxury resort owned and run by Coffee Day Hotels and Resorts Pvt Ltd. Coffee is the leitmotif here for The Serai is located in the midst of a 70-acre coffee plantation where coffee bushes grow lushly green, shaded by tall silver oaks, their ramrod straight trunks mantled with creeping pepper plants. To restore our perspective and joie de vivre, we sipped



a cup of delicious South Indian style filter coffee in the gazebo of our villa which came with a plunge pool, open-plan bathrooms, indoor and outdoor showers, rosewood furniture and Italian marble.

Soon the Oma spa, which in Sanskrit means Life Giver, beckoned; our limbs ached and we craved a good massage. And we were pleasantly surprised to find that here too the fragrant berry features in many therapies. We were pummelled and massaged with nourishing oils blended with coffee extracts and scrubbed briskly with the signature scrub which uses the estate's finest coffee. We emerged after one and a half hours, soft and supple, wreathed in the fugitive aroma of coffee! By

then it was twilight and a denim haze smothered the resort as we headed for our villa in the whispering silence, fractured by the cicadas' loud chorus that rose and fell in the coffee plantations that encircled the resort. Aptly enough it is the cicada love song (the loudest in the insect world) and only males sing to attract females for mating!

The Perfect Cup of Coffee

The perfect cup is the Holy Grail of coffee. According to Dr. Pradeep Kenjige, head of Research and Development, Coffee Day, connoisseurs will be the first to admit that there is no such thing as perfection as tastes vary from palate to palate. Of the 80 cultivable varieties of coffee beans two - Arabica and Robusta - have been commercially exploited. The aromatic Arabica grows at higher altitudes while Robusta delivers a stronger caffeine kick. A good cup of coffee is essentially a blend of the two.

Each coffee bean has around 1,200 volatiles or aromatic compounds trapped in it (a grape has around 800) and they become active when roasted to between 140°C and 240°C. Incidentally, instant coffee is freeze-dried at over 240°C at which point all the volatiles have been sacrificed and artificial flavours have to be added to the tasteless powder make it resemble the real thing.

The task of master blenders is to determine different proportions



Roasted and ground Arabica coffee beans

of Arabica and Robusta; how to roast the bean: light, medium or dark as well as the degree to which the bean is powdered: coarse, medium or fine. A darker roast and fine powder make a stronger brew.

The proof of the coffee is eventually in the sipping and to do so, we stepped Dr. Kenjige's lab which brimmed with different kinds of filter coffee making machines including the French Press and the espresso machine from whose nozzles flows the



The cup that cheers



A picturesque waterfall at Coorg

finest expression of the brew.

What defines the espresso machine is that it is able to extract all the coffee volatiles at temperatures between 93°C and 95°C and at a pressure of 10 bar (the pressure in a car tire is between 2 to 3 bar). This concoction is the base, the alpha of good coffee which is then embellished to create cappuccinos, lattes, Americano etc., with the addition of steamed milk, cream and water.

Just as wine lovers and buyers “taste” before purchasing so do coffee buyers and cognoscenti who wish to evaluate the aroma and flavour. Cupping is also a valuable tool to evaluate defective coffee and to create different blends. It starts with chewing the roasted coffee bean and then sniffing and sipping different blends as they trickle out of a hissing espresso machine.

After the initial shock of tasting something bitter, a variety of subtle flavours start to emerge. The hundred percent Arabica has a tingling sensation while a blend of 25 percent Arabica and 75 percent Robusta is heavy on the tongue. Expert cuppers then comment on taste, acidity, aftertaste, body and

The history of coffee bristles with intriguing stories like the one about an ancient Turkish law that permitted women to divorce their husbands if they failed to provide them with coffee!

number of other hidden nuances: smoky and sharp, a hint of spicy berries and almonds, a touch of chocolate and vanilla... before paying homage to the final altar of the coffee taster – a spittoon. A wine cellar and a coffee tasting lab are probably the only places in the world where spitting in genteel company is considered very classy.

The Coorg adventure

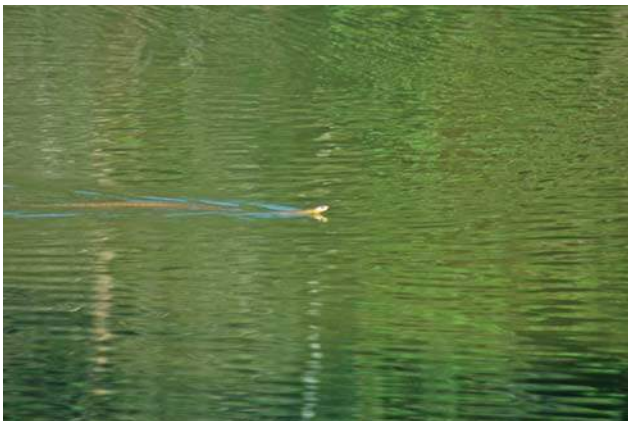
Our next stop in the neighbouring coffee district of Coorg in Karnataka, we got down to the basics and dirtied our hands as we helped pluck plump red coffee berries, moving gingerly through the dense coffee plantation, which even the slanting sun could not penetrate. Dressed like the coffee pluckers with nimble fingers whom we tried to imitate, we were revelling in an “experiential vacation” offered by the eco-friendly Orange County Resorts. The

plush retreat at Siddapur offered its guests a bouquet of rustic pleasures that we happily plunged into. The air was spiked with the fragrance of coffee, pepper and cardamom and seemed to spur us on to heightened activity.



Crossing the Kaveri in a coracle which is a small, circular country boat

Yes, Coorg has a great deal to offer the tourist – forays in the Dubare forest, home of creatures, great and small. Like the time we sat outside our luxurious cottage sipping our first cup of filter coffee. The crisp morning air was spiked with the fragrance of the surrounding forest and the aroma of spices and coffee wafting in from the neighbouring plantations. Birds chorused a morning raga. A thin veil of mist danced over the lake whose green-blue surface was in sharp contrast to the riot of vegetation that defined its banks.



An enormous snake swimming across the lake with its head, studded with two beady eyes, protruding over the surface

Our attention was drawn to a rippling in the water. It was then that we noticed what appeared to be a floating stick, started to move. It was an enormous snake swimming across the lake with its head, studded with two beady eyes, protruding over the surface. Suddenly our Coorg adventure started to bristle with endless possibilities. It was as though the forest surrounding the resort had sent an emissary with an invitation to explore its wild domain where nature rather than man still called the shots.

In fact, a few of her residents – a herd of elephants – had gate-crashed civilisation the previous night and feasted on the bounty of the jackfruit trees within the resort. “No problem,” Ganesh our guide reassured us as we looked with misgiving at the fresh droppings near the section of the electric fence the behemoths had ripped apart. “The elephants are probably miles away and the chance that we will run into them is slim,” he said. Yet, we found ourselves harbouring the irrational hope that maybe we would get lucky and experience a close encounter of the terrifying kind with these enormous beasts. And then again, just the thought of a chance confrontation sent a chill through our bodies.

Now don’t get us wrong: we would love to have come face to face with elephants, or for that matter even panthers and tigers,



A pepper plantation in Coorg

but from the safety of a safari vehicle. However, having entered their realm on foot was another ball game all together. Sensing our edginess Ganesh reassured us once more that jungle treks are relatively safe for the simple reason that animals have a very keen sense of smell and hearing and an equally heightened aversion to humans, a combination that ensures that they keep their distance. And the thick forest cover makes their task even easier.

Nevertheless we did surprise a stray cheetal or spotted deer at the fringe of a clearing on a slope ahead and below us. The absence of wildlife aside, the jungle trek was very different from a more conventional game drive. For viewing the forest from the eye level of an animal, we started to appreciate its role as both a refuge and a harbinger of danger. Without the safety, convenience and speed of a vehicle we were able to relate to the surroundings at a personal and intimate level. The chatter of unseen birds, the rustle of the wind flirting with

The discovery of coffee dates back in time to 800 AD when an Ethiopian goatherd found that his flocks got animated after eating the berries from a certain bush. He popped a few in his mouth and gave mankind its most favoured perk-me-up brew.



A tribal chieftain who also doubled as a witch doctor

the trees, the creaking emitted by the enormous bamboo groves that studded the forest, the fragrance of vegetation laced with the musty aroma of life regenerating out of fallen trees: we were assailed by a symphony of sights, sounds and aromas.

All along the trail, nature expressed itself in myriad ways: parasitical creepers clawing at their host trees; plants that seemed to virtually grow out of rocks; wrinkled, twisting vines wove eerie designs across the forest-scape; young saplings jostling for a toehold of earth and a ray of sunlight; purple and white blossoms peering out from under the leaves on the forest floor... The desperate battle for survival appeared to grow more intense as we came to the Kaveri river which flows like a life-giving prayer through the region.

Here we rested for a while, sat on rocks and let our feet

dangle in the refreshing water before continuing on our jungle trek. This time we were headed for a tribal village that lived within the forest. Soon enough, we arrived at a clearing with a cluster of mud huts where Ganesh introduced us to the tribal chieftain who also doubled as a witch doctor. On gentle persuasion, he showed us the tools of his trade – chicken legs, tarantulas, tortoise eggs and a scorpion that dangled from a string – which are powdered into a concoction which is given to ailing members of his family and tribe when required. The following day we drove down to the Elephant Camp at Nisargadhama, 35 km away, where the elephants were being given their morning bath under the shade of gulmohur trees painted orange-red with brilliant blooms. We joined the mahouts as they scrubbed down these enormous, yet gentle beasts and were later rewarded with a ride on their backs through a thickly wooded forest.

We then drove to a Tibetan settlement at



The crisp morning air spiked with the fragrance of the surrounding forest and the aroma of spices and coffee wafting in from the neighbouring plantations is a perfect setting for morning walkers in Coorg

Bylekuppe (another 5km away), the second largest in India after the one in Dharamshala in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh in north India. The flavour of the village was very Buddhist: monks in dark orange robes spinning prayer wheels and colourful pagoda roofed monasteries. However, the absence of surrounding mountains made the setting almost surreal. That evening we climbed into a coracle, a small circular country boat, and paddled out to a little outcrop in the middle of the

Kaveri river. We sat there listening to the song of the forest: the rush of the river; the impatient, amorous chirping of crickets and insects; the occasional 'plonk' as overhanging branches deposited fruit in the river... the water surging around us started to change colour, from silvery-blue to gold and orange as it reflected the fiery hues that the setting sun painted across the sky above.

As dusk spread its veil across the forest we climbed back into a coracle and paddled back to shore. That night we sat on the balcony of our cottage, gazing up at the millions of stars that speckled the inky-black sky above as we sipped a rich dark brew: coffee, of course.

Fact File

Chikmagalur lies about 150km north of Madikeri, the main town of Coorg.

Mangalore (150km) Mysore (180km) and Bangalore (240km) are the closest airports to Chikmagalur. Kadur (40km) is the closest railway station.

Innocent in the ways of tourism, Chikmagalur has a handful of home stays and a couple of hotels. Top of the heap is The Serai built to blend with nature and not overwhelm it.

Located at a height of over 1,900 metres, Chikmagalur is



Butterfly on a bloom



Namdroling monastery at Bylekuppe in Coorg, the second largest in India after Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh

pleasant year round and is also an ideal base to explore the spectacular Halebid and Belur temples, historic Sringeri, Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary and hiking expeditions.

Mysore (120km) Mangalore (140km) Calicut (180km) and Bangalore (250km) are the closest airports to Madikeri. Mysore is also the most convenient railway station.

By way of accommodation, Orange County at Siddapur, 25km outside Madikeri, is undoubtedly the pick of the lot. There are a few other options in and around the main town of Madikeri. Coorg is a year-round destination with the months from October to January being rather chilly. Coorg is green and quiet in the monsoon. ■

For more information visit: www.karnatakaturism.org,

www.theserai.in and www.orangecounty.in

Gustasp and Jerroo Irani are travel companions for whom life is a never-ending journey. Over the last 25 years they have travelled extensively across India and the globe, taking the rough with the smooth; sampling different cultures and cuisines. In the process they have trekked in the Australian Outback, slurped snake soup in Hong Kong, have danced with the



Samburus in Africa, stayed with a local family in a Malay village, cracked the Da Vinci Code in Paris...

For them, writing and photography are more than just freezing moments of that journey; it's a passion.

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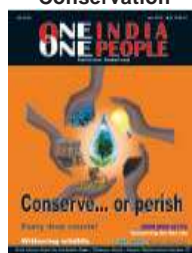
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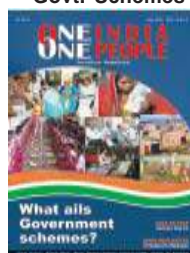
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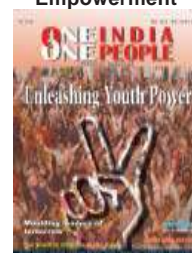
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Principal Dr. Suresh Nair unveils the OIOP club banner



A view of the audience



A student reads out 'Who Am I?'

Vidya Prasarak Mandal's Kannada High School, Mulund (E), Mumbai



Mrs. Sucharita R. Hegde, trustee and managing editor, OIOP, presents the OIOP club membership certificate to principal Mrs. Nirupa Jorpur (second from left) and the trustee Chitrakshi Shetty



Students recite a prayer



A view of the audience

Vidya Prasarak Mandal's Kannada Jr.College, Mulund (E), Mumbai



Mrs. Hegde presents the OIOP club membership certificate to vice principal Mr. Ajay Kumar Jadhav



Mrs. Hegde addressing the students



Students taking the OIOP pledge

Khar Education Society's College of Comm.& Economics, Khar, Mumbai



Mrs. Hegde presents the OIOP club membership certificate to principal Dr. Nandini Deshmukh. Also seen: chief co-ordinator Ms. Jaya Dudani



Mrs. Anuradha Dhareshwar, Editor, OIOP, speaking on the occasion



A view of the audience

“A thriving theatre scenario will help in the betterment of society”



Arvind Gaur is a man with a mission. Though he studied to be an engineer and worked as a journalist initially, it was theatre that gave a purpose and meaning to his search for a medium that could help him explore and express the social issues that were happening around him. It was to bring a change in society through the medium of plays, that he founded the theatre group Asmita in 1993. Since then, he has consistently built a committed and passionate team of young actors, who are conducting his street plays at every nook and corner of Delhi, be it educational institutions, residential colonies, offices, and even slums and markets.

Asmita has carved a niche for itself in the Indian theatre scene by staging plays of varied socio-political interest, while not losing out on mass appeal. Name a contemporary issue and Gaur's team has staged a play on it. Besides creating awareness about social issues, he wants his plays to create a debate in society and inspire people to participate rather than remain mute spectators.

Arvind Gaur spoke to **Rajlakshmi Pillai** about the need for a cultural policy, his role as a trainer, his experiences with theatre stalwarts and the future of theatre in India.

You have an engineering degree and then worked as a journalist. What made you take up theatre as a fulltime profession?

I studied electronic communication but did not feel any inclination towards the subject. I had done theatre with different groups during my student days and enjoyed it a lot. I guess I was in search of a medium that could help me explore and express. It was this search that took me to journalism. I worked with newspapers and then PTI TV for some time. I wanted to explore the different social issues that were happening around me, and found that there was no better medium than theatre for it. That was how I decided to get into theatre full time and founded 'Asmita' theatre in 1993. And then there was no looking back. I could take up any issue and present it through theatre. Theatre, I would say, is the strongest tool of communication.

Why did you feel the need to set up a theatre group Asmita?

When I was doing my first play *Hanush*, a professional actor backed out at the last minute in the opening show, as we could not pay the money he asked. We were left in lurch, not knowing what to do. It was then I realised that we needed our own actors. So we started training new actors and gave them opportunities to perform. We also make them politically and socially aware. That was how Asmita came into being. Asmita means identity. Aren't we all in search of an identity? We were also in search of our identity when we began. Slowly, Asmita became a group of trained actors. It became our biggest strength. Our training process is tough,

disciplined and continuous. I have found that trained actors are more committed and professional. They understand our theatre better.

We have integrated Asmita with society, with people and with their life. Our plays cover issues that are a part of common man's existence. Earlier, we did more stage shows and fewer street plays. But now, we do more of street plays. I can proudly say that we have managed to forge a connection with people and society. Our slogan is theatre for change, theatre for awareness, theatre for action. Awareness about issues is not enough, instead what is required is the will to act to bring about a desired change in society. That is what we try to achieve through our plays. Create awareness and motivate people to act.

How difficult is it to sustain a theatre group in India?

Theatre that manages to connect with society can alone sustain. Marathi, Gujarati, Kannada and even Assam touring theatre, which are connected with society are doing well. These theatre groups are not only professional but also commercial. Sadly, this is not the case in north India.

We do not have a culture policy even after 66 years of Independence. The government only acts as a sponsor and allocates funds but does not work on infrastructure. In north there is a serious lack of infrastructure. In Mumbai, there are good auditoriums whereas in north India, though there are many theatre festivals happening, there aren't enough auditoriums. Government allocates money in the name of culture, but no one knows where this money is spent or who gets it. There is absolutely no accountability.

Another need is decentralisation of institutions. We have 16 IITs but why only one NSD? We need a NSD in every

state. Only with decentralisation of art and cultural institutions, sustainable theatre can happen. In north, conditions are not favourable for actors to make a career in theatre. Due to lack of proper planning or policy, the government is not able to provide them with a platform. This is one major factor hindering theatre scenario in north.

In south, there is a cultural environment. Art is deeply associated with the daily life of people and connected with rituals. In north such a connection no longer exists. In Asmita, we had decided that we will not take funding from the government but from the audience. We do not encourage free entry. Our tickets are priced at a modest Rs. 50/- And we have managed to sustain our theatre group since the last 20 years.

I believe your first play was Bhisham Sahni's *Hanush* in 1993. Can you share the experience and memories?

Bhisham Sahni is one of my favourite writers. I have done some prominent plays like *Madhavi*, *Kabira Khara Bazar Mein* and of course, *Hanush* with him. I chose *Hanush* to be my first professional play because I could identify with its story. *Hanush* is about a creative artist and inventor who spends 15-16 years making clocks. The vested interests in society destroyed his art instead of appreciating his skills. This is the story of every creative person. The system works to destroy creativity and this is a fact faced by every creative person.

Hanush, in a way, gave me everything that I am today. I learnt the basics of theatre from *Hanush*. I learnt valuable lessons that serve as a guiding light even today. It laid the foundation for my future. My journey began with *Hanush* and gave me a firm footing in theatre.

You have had opportunity to work with many theatre veterans like Bhisham

Sahni, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and many more. Can you share some of your experiences and theatre craft of these men that influenced you?

I have had the good fortune to work with many stalwarts. Habib Tanvir is someone with whom I have worked the most. His theatre was political yet cotemporary. He brought theatre to people. He had a big influence on me. Peter Brook's *Mahabharat* was a learning experience. Mallika Sarabhai and Dario Fo are other influences. Vijay Tendulkar's writing had a theatrical element. His play *Ghasiram Kotwal* raises questions on the corrupt system. When we did the play, it was the time when America attacked Taliban. It was America that created Taliban against Russia. And when it got out of hands, America wanted to put an end to Taliban. This is what our system also tends to do. This is the issue that *Ghasiram Kotwal* raises. Vijay Tendulkar allowed his director to interpret his writings and that helped directors like me. Girish Karnad is another favourite writer.

You are involved in every aspect of theatre as an actor, director, trainer, translator, script writer, play producer, et all. Which role do you enjoy playing the most?

I enjoy the role of a trainer the most. The person who is in front of you is new, he has come with a dream, he has inherent talent, he wants to explore it – we help in that exploration. I don't just teach there, for me too, it is a learning experience. Those lessons help me in my direction, translation, street plays and in my study. New actors have a lot of fresh energy and are committed. When I see such passion in the newcomers, I am confident that they will create something out of an empty space and that thought interests me.

Your plays tackle many contemporary themes and social issues. How relevant are street plays today? How does it impact society?

A street play is the strongest medium to connect and initiate dialogue with people. In street theatre, the actor goes to the audience, that audience who is busy and running about in their life. This audience could be in a market, in a colony, in a college, in an office, or anywhere. The subjects that we take up are the ones that are an inherent part of their life. This triggers their interest and we try to initiate a dialogue with them. Thus street plays are not limited to the performers but it also motivates the audience to be a part of it. Our plays are very popular and we get invitations from different places to perform. Our play on corruption was a widely discussed one and there was so much demand that at one point, we were doing six to seven shows at a time in different places.

Another play *Dastak* based on the Delhi gangrape incident, is also very popular. When the protest at India Gate was on, our group was in the forefront staging the play. The play was much in demand and we did shows in Delhi University, in slum pockets and many places and it did help in creating awareness about violence against women. It created a wave amongst people who identified with the play and we got invitations from different places to perform. Similarly we take up many other socially and politically relevant issues, and try to build a bridge with the people inviting them to be a part and discuss and debate. We motivate them to come together for bringing about a change. We ask for people's reaction and we try to include their opinion and suggestions in our script. In the process, we also learn. This is the effectiveness of street plays. It helps bring an issue to the fore and creates debates and inspires people to act to bring about a solution. This is the strength of street plays and that is why

they are an effective medium to bring about a change.

What is more satisfying to you? – performing in an auditorium or performing a street play? What difference do you see in the audience reaction?

Good plays get the same reaction at both places. In auditorium, the audience takes time out to watch your plays and on streets you will find people from different backgrounds watching you. In stage plays, the audience usually is merely a spectator, whereas in street plays, the audience airs its opinion and gives feedback and suggestions. The issues that we take up are mostly the ones that people identify with or have experienced them in their life. For us, audience feedback is of utmost importance. So be it, stage plays or street plays, we provoke our audience for reaction and encourage a dialogue. Since they trust us and have faith in what we are saying, both kind of audience actively participate and interact with us. Many a times, there are debates also. We also get to learn from these interactions. It is these interactions that have helped us grow.

For us, the audience is very important. They are our supporters, our anchors who encourage us. Our plays are for our audience and we are constantly striving to make it more interactive and involve audience in our plays.

In India, especially, it is perceived that it is difficult to earn a decent livelihood as a theatre person. What is your take on this?

As I told earlier, lack of a culture policy and proper planning are a deterrent for the actor's survival. There are issues, but then it is a problem in every field. Just as a doctor or engineer takes 4 to 5 years to establish himself, a theatre actor can sustain himself once he is established. Since the last 5 to 10 years, there has been a significant

change with many opportunities in the form of theatre workshops and professional theatre groups. Trained theatre actors get respect in TV and films. So the situation today is much better and will only improve in the times to come. Actors also need to understand that there will always be short comings. They may not be able to lead a luxurious life and there will be phases of struggle. But they should continue with their passion and do good work. Rest will fall into place on its own.

What are Asmita's future plans?

We live in the present. We focus on what we have to do today. We want to pursue our activities with more strength, passion and commitment. Our biggest challenge today is to be able to take up as many contemporary issues as possible and take them to people. We want to create more awareness about the democratic rights of citizens and make them understand their responsibilities and motivate them to demand accountability from the government. We want to carry on the movement that we have started, raise issues and inspire people to be a part of the change.

How do you foresee the future for Indian theatre 10 years from now?

Positive and much stronger. There is enthusiasm in youth towards theatre. Campus theatre is developing in Maharashtra and south India. Street plays are re-emerging in north India. Schools are including theatre in their syllabus. Theatre is going to roots. In the coming years, theatre will only emerge stronger. A better bridge is developing between theatre and cinema. If government develops a proper culture policy and art institutions are decentralised, there can be better environment for theatre. A thriving theatre scenario will help in the betterment of society. Hence theatre should be encouraged for our future and for our next generation. ■

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(Continued from page 22)

Rayanti Rabha etc., the list is not complete though. Of late, groups of theatre-loving youths belonging to different ethnic tribes keen to work on their respective language or dialect, folk tales and folk art forms are emerging; they are at initial stage, but expected to add diversity to the existing scene.

The theatre movement in Assam and Manipur – poles apart

Today there are nine amateur theatre groups in Assam drawing yearly financial grants from the cultural department of the Government of India. But there are almost 40 amateur theatre groups in the neighbouring state of Manipur who draw the same from New Delhi. Though adjacent to each other, these two states of north-east India are poles apart as far as the achievements in world theatre are concerned. While the mobile theatres of Assam caught national and international attention for quirky feats on the stage enacting most recent events taking place anywhere in the globe, both in life and in celluloid, the Manipuri theatre artistes took the world by storm through their captivating dramaturgy: as if in Assam they brought the world to the stage; but for their counterparts in Manipur 'All the world's a stage' (a quote from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*)!

Shumang Lila - Manipur's roaming theatre

Manipur also has its own version of roaming theatre called *Shumang Lila*, a combination of *Shumang* (courtyard) and *Lila* (play or performance), which is performed in a very simple style without any raised platform, any set design or heavy props such as curtains, background scenery, visual effects and so on, but with only one table and two chairs. It is performed in the middle of an audience that surrounds it from all sides leaving only one passage serving as entrance and exit path to the green room. *Shumang Lila* is performed by a touring band of professional artistes on invitation basis. Originally the beginning of *Shumang Lila* was made through *Phagee Lila* (farce) performed during the reign of king Chandrakirti (1850-1886). This dramaturgy got new lease of life in 1918 with the epic play *Harishchandra*. In 1950 scripts were introduced and in the 1970s background music and playback singing were added to it. On the other hand, the world of *Phampak Lila* (stage drama) was started in Manipur in 1902. In those times plays were mainly Manipuri adaptation of Bengali plays. But mid-1920s saw the beginning of truly Manipuri plays.

The Manipuri theatre artistes took the world by storm through their captivating dramaturgy: as if in Assam they brought the world to the stage; but for their counterparts in Manipur 'All the world's a stage'.



A still from Ratan Thiyam's play *Uttarpriyadarshi*

Slowly and gradually the historical and mythological plays gave way to the social drama.

Ratan Thiyam – a master in stagecraft

Theatre has been part of the most popular and oldest festival of Manipur called Lai Haraoba since time immemorial. The festival is celebrated to please traditional deities recollecting the stories of the origin of the universe and evolution of life on earth. The pace of theatre movement was geared up with the institution of various groups such as Manipur Dramatic Union (1930), Arian Theatre (1935), Chitrangada Natya Mandir (1936), Society Theatre (1937), Rupmahal (1942), Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union (1968), Kalakshetra Manipur (1969), Chorus Repertory Theatre (1976), Manipuri Ensemble (1986), Forum for Laboratory Theatres of Manipur (1992) etc. The Chorus Repertory Theatre was formed by Ratan Thiyam, one of the finest theatre directors the country has produced. An alumnus of the National School of Drama, he was the director of the country's premier theatre institution from 1986 to 1988 and presently appointed as its Chairperson. A master in stagecraft, apart from all other aspects of theatre, his works profess a deep concern for humanity in the midst of political chaos. Thiyam is also known for his use of traditional martial arts of *Thang-Ta*, eye-catching histrionics and other dramatic chores in his plays. Most successful plays under his direction are *Urubhangam*, *Chakravyuha*, *Karnabharam*, all of which are interpretations of different episodes of the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* in the universal context; *Lengshonnei* which is

an adaptation of Brecht's *Antigone*, a satire on failed politicians of his home state; *Uttarpriyadarshi*, an adaptation of Agyeya's famous Hindi verse play based on a story of redemption of emperor Ashoka, an individual's struggle against his own inner dark side and a plea for peace; *Ashibagee Eshei* and *Ritusamharam*, Henrik Ibsen and Kalidasa's play respectively, both of which provide inner look at the epoch-making events of death and destruction in today's world, and so on. His production of *Andha Yug*, the Hindi play by Dharmavir Bharati, was famously staged in an open-air performance in Japan on 5th August 1994, a day before the forty-ninth anniversary of Atomic Holocaust in Hiroshima. The way he combined ethnicity, theatrical prowess and social concerns is incomparable. Indeed, Thiyam made every Indian proud by winning handful of laurels in Greece, Mexico, Edinburgh International Drama Festival and the US, apart from the highest honours in the performing arts conferred by the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Heisnam Kanhailal changed the language of Manipuri theatre

Another important figure of contemporary Manipuri theatre is Heisnam Kanhailal, who founded Kalakshetra Manipur, a theatre laboratory that explores a new vocabulary in the existing language of the medium. After getting admission in the NSD in 1963, he had a problem with the languages of instruction and ultimately had to leave without finishing the course. After a period of hesitation and hardships he rediscovered his cultural roots in true Manipuri tradition that defied 'commodified folk and rural performances' (in the words of theatre historian Rustom Bharucha in his book *The Theatre of Kanhailal*). He emphasised on daily rituals of physical culture of Manipur to prepare his actors; but his awareness of indigenous resources said to have begun only after he was introduced to the celebrated methods of the 'Third Theatre' by Badal Sircar. The psycho-physical exercises of the Euro-American theatre of the late 1960s could be held responsible for Kanhailal's new found techniques, but he moved away from Sircar's way as it clashed with his own ethos. For example, in Sircar's theatre eye-contact is strongly upheld among actors and between the actor and the spectator; but it is almost a taboo to look someone in the eye according to the laws of physical

culture in Manipur. Kanhailal soon evolved a separate theory in his theatrical language termed as the 'Ritual of Suffering'. All throughout his plays, he stressed on theatrical power and resilience in the face of adversity and turmoil. The humanity is a suffering lot and theatre only helps understand the complexity of the situations and the process of this understanding is another ritual according to Kanhailal. He even successfully experimented with non-proscenium theatre space by performing in *mandap* i.e. prayer hall or temporary shed. His famous plays include *Pebet*, based on a folk-tale, *Memoirs of Africa*, created upon the text of a Manipuri poem, *Migi Sharang*, *Draupadi* etc., all of which are well received in the country and abroad. Some other personalities, both veteran and young, who brought glory to Manipuri theatre with splendid creativity are G. C. Tongbra, a veteran of over 70 plays and often fondly called 'Shaw of Manipur' for his exploits in satirical humour; Dr. Lokendra Arambam who initiated documentary drama and Kshetri Jugindro, a fine exponent of eternal values through dramatics, just to name a few. Not only did they add variety and quality to Manipuri theatre, but also kept on enthraling the spectators at home and far corners of the world.

It goes without saying that theatre in Manipur is faced with the challenge of articulating a present that is caught in the vortex of a bitter feud between the state power and insurgency, and between an all-pervading poverty and poverty of the polity. On the other hand, Assam is boiling in a fratricidal contradiction amongst different ethnic communities due to divisive politics. The theatre fraternity in such situations might find itself in a dilemma— the overall gloom and confusion having made it more difficult to carry the humane message inherent in every creative pursuit to the expected height. Yet perhaps they believe what Vsevolod Meyerhold once said: 'Yes, the theatre can play an enormous part in the transformation of the whole of existence'— in social spheres too. ■



The writer is a senior journalist and art critic based in Guwahati. An ardent follower of the theatre movement in India, he is an accomplished Assamese poet and has ten books to his credit. He received the Swarna Kamal for best film critic for 2011 at the National Film Awards.

Did you know?

The plays of ancient poet and playwright Kalidasa who is believed to be one of the earliest dramatists of India, were one of the earlier works from India to have found fame and appreciation in Europe. Iconic German poet and playwright Goethe had this to say about Abhijñānashākuntala, one of Kalidasa's masterpieces, "Here the poet seems to be in the height of his talent in representation of the natural order, of the finest mode of life, of the purest moral endeavour, of the most worthy sovereign, and of the most sober divine meditation; still he remains in such a manner the lord and master of his creation."

National School of Drama: Time to reinvent

*While the contribution of India's premiere art institution, the National School of Drama (NSD) to the existing theatre scene is beyond doubt, the direction in which it has worked in the last several years needs serious introspection, says **Salim Arif**.*

THE National School of Drama in New Delhi has had a very special place amongst all the Art institutions of our country. A result of the Akademy initiatives of late 1950's, NSD as it is popularly called, grew into an autonomous body from the umbrella of Sangeet Natak Akademy in 1975. This could happen because of Mr. Ebrahim Alkazi who spearheaded the institution for 15 years from 1962 and virtually laid the foundation for theatre academics and a semblance of professional Hindi theatre in India with his formation of NSD Repertory company in 1964. Alkazi's productions of *Andha Yug*, *Ashad Ka Ek Din*, *King Lear*, *Kanjoos*, *Baki Itihas*, *Razia Sultan* and *Trojan Women* became landmarks of Indian theatre and NSD got acknowledged as an institution of excellence.

A glorious beginning

Like so many other centres of theatre movement in India, NSD Repertory and school reached its zenith in 1970's, when its forceful impact on the Art scene in India was felt with several of its students doing exceptional work in several regions of the country. Madhu, Sai Paranjpe, Om Shivpuri, Sudha Shivpuri, Jyoti Vyas, B.V. Karanth, K. Sontakke, R.G. Bajaj, Mohan Maharishi, B. M. Shah, Amal Allana, Surekha Sikri, Uttara Baokar, Prema Karanth, M.K. Raina and Manohar Singh plunged into exploring new texts and performance techniques for the benefit of modern Indian theatre. *Tughlaq*, *Evam Indrajit*, *Suno Janmejaya*, *Hayvadan*, *Ala Afsar*, *Ras Gandharv* were some new plays from regional languages into Hindi and a vital window opened to view what rest of the country was thinking and doing in theatre. Some original Hindi plays like *Adhe Adhure*, *Lehron Ke Rajhans*, *Surya ki Antim Kiran se Surya Ki pehli kiran Tak* also got performed during this decade. Then graduates like Nadira Babbar, Raj Babbar, Rajendra Gupta, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Bansi Kaul, Bhanu Bharti, Jaishree, Ratan Thiyam, Rohini and Jaidev Hattangadi, Ranjit Kapoor, Prasanna, D.R. Ankur gave a new impetus to provide a sustained vibrant theatre scene.

Rajesh Vivek, Pankaj Kapoor, K.K. Raina, Vijay Kashyap, Annu Kapoor, Anupam Kher, Anang Desai, Dolly Ahluwalia,

Raghuveer Yadav were the others to contribute with their work with NSD Repertory Company. With plays like, *Begum Ka Takia*, *Mukhya Mantri*, *Chopra Kamal Naukar Jamal*, *Saiyaan Bhaye Kotwal*, *Mahabhoj* running to packed houses, NSD Repertory Company became the show-window of the modern Indian theatre. Several NSD graduates like B.K. Giri, Saba Zaidi, Sushil Kumar Singh made a mark outside theatre with their noteworthy work in Doordarshan. Around the same time, some of its illustrious alumni got opportunities to work in films and made an immediate impact with their brilliant portrayals of complex roles in the neo realistic films of Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and others. With the closure of acting course in FTII, Pune, NSD became the sole institutional actor provider to alternate cinema of 80's and 90's.

A period of unrest

Termed Western in approach and one responsible for stifling of Indian theatre traditions, Ebrahim Alkazi resigned in 1977 following a period of unrest created by disgruntled elements outside and in the school. B.V. Karanth, a bright ex-student and foot soldier of theatre came in to take over as Director in 1977. Endowed with experience of working in Hindi heartland and Karnataka with several productions to his credit, Karanth had his own view of what was needed to re-invent NSD for the coming age. He tried to compliment and improve what was missing in the earlier curriculum. Specialisation in Acting, Stage Craft and Direction was scrapped. It led to a confused body of students who were now expected to be jack of all theatre trades. Karanthji had a flair for music and a way with use of elements drawn from traditional and folk theatre in plays, but sadly led a movement which made others use these elements as a cosmetic dressing up of very mediocre theatre. In spite of his best intentions, the changes did not help NSD. Play productions started to happen in 5-6 weeks and even less. This led to a flurry of half baked-half realised shows, where students, especially actors got little scope of detailed characterisations and time to assimilate nuances of each genre. Surprisingly before he could settle,

Karantthji decided to move on within three years of his reign to Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, where he was given the opportunity of forming his own professional theatre company, leaving the school in doldrums. NSD Graduates like B.M. Shah, Mohan Maharishi and Ratan Thiyam became Directors after B.V. Karanth and tried to bring in a meaningful change to the school, but all of them got very short tenures. This was also the phase where urban realistic model of theatre was considered western and regional forms were the new mantra. This search for Indian-ness in Indian theatre led to a Ford Foundation, SNA and other revivalists' supported movement outside the school, leading to several productions which were interjections of two months to one year kind in folk forms than that of having any significant consequence. What should have been a period of consolidation for the emergence of a vital National Theatre, got lost in the constant change of these Directors who came for two to three years and had to leave for various reasons without giving any meaningful thrust to the school. Indian Theatre lost its way and NSD became an institution training students knowing fully well that all of them would not be able to get absorbed in sparse professional theatre companies of India.

Theatre actors take to films and TV

This phase coincided with the opening of Doordarshan and the subsequent invasion of satellite channels, leading to a large number of actors and directors finding work on television to sustain themselves. Sai Paranjpe, Ratna Pathak Shah, Deepa Sahi, Neena Gupta, Alok Nath, Anita Kanwar, Anupam Kher, Satish Kaushik, Kavita Chaudhry, Anang Desai, Karan Razdan were followed by Renuka Israni, Himani Shivpuri, Seema Biswas, Irfan Khan, Nawazuddin Siddiqui amongst several others to the increasing field of television soaps and feature films. Anil Chaudhry, Ranjit Kapoor and Ajay Kartik made their mark as writers followed by Atul Tiwari, Sutapa Sikdar, Tigmanshu Dhulia, Swanand Kirkire, Piyush Mishra and others. Films and TV became the showcase of NSD to rest of India.

The silver lining amidst a stream of issues

Meanwhile Kirti Jain, another graduate and senior professor, took over and brought emphasis back to academics in 1990. Several programmes initiated by earlier directors like extension programmes, children's theatre, theatre in education all got a new life. She was followed by R.G. Bajaj, D. R. Ankur and Anuradha Kapoor as directors who brought in a sense of continuity and stability to the school. From a modest institution meant for educating students in theatre, NSD now became a body that almost monopolised official Indian theatre. This parallel positioning to the existing professional activity in several

regions of India by private initiatives has isolated NSD from mainstream theatre practice.

An additional activity that came to stay in NSD with increase in funding was the festival of plays Bharangam which has sadly started taking a lot of time and energy at the cost of academics. An educational institute holding a National theatre festival of plays having a flawed selection policy with shows that do not represent the best of Indian Theatre, and has no far reaching impact on either the quality or practice of theatre in India, is a question that needs to be answered by policy makers. The same amount of money which is spent on a Bharangam can fund a Repertory company in one state for a year, which is much more needed for students training in theatre than this assembly of plays from all over India in Delhi. This aspect of NSD initiating professional companies in collaboration with states, creating spaces and places for its students and other theatre workers needs to be looked at seriously if it has to have any relevance as a training centre of theatre. While the value of the institute and its contribution to existing theatre scene is beyond question, the direction in which it has worked in the last several years needs serious introspection. Like so many other areas of public life in India, NSD thrives in a state of self-denial. Knowing fully well that there are not many opportunities to get professional employment in theatre, it is selling this dream to students each year and creating actors for TV and Films.

The recent appointment of Waman Kendre, the well known Marathi theatre personality and an ex school pass out amidst needless controversy says a lot about the importance of NSD and its directorship. He brings with him a mainstream theatre vision which should provide some hope that the school will have a connection to existing professional models and strive for creating a much needed space in middle class minds of India for theatre as a respectable part of social activity. ■

Salim Arif, one of the most popular directors on Hindi scene in India, is an illustrious alumnus of National School of Drama, New Delhi. A very well known name in the field of Indian Theatre and Films, he is currently the Head of Department of Actors' Studio in Whistling Woods International, Mumbai, Asia's leading Film School. He has been a consultant for period details in Anil Sharma's *Gadar* and Mani Ratnam's *Guru*. His critically acclaimed play *Aap Ki Sonia* has been performed extensively in India and abroad. He is also on the visiting faculty of several prestigious institutions including National School of Drama, New Delhi, Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, BNA, Lucknow, National Institute of Fashion Technology, Mumbai and National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. He is also a resource person for Sangeet Natak Akademy, New Delhi. He was awarded the prestigious Urdu Adab Award of U.P. Hindi-Urdu Award Committee for his contribution to theatre.



In the company of theatrewallahs

*Theatre companies have been playing an important role in nurturing the health of theatre. From creating a base for systemic training, startling innovations and experiments, to providing lucrative opportunities, it is an exciting time for theatrewallahs, says **Quasar Thakore Padamsee**.*

INDIAN theatre is a rare beast. Government initiatives are few and far between, and often restricted to regional guidelines or just Delhi. Therefore the onus for the health of the theatre culture falls firmly on the performing companies themselves.

The industriousness of theatre groups

Ever since Independence virtually every landmark initiative of theatre in India has been through the enterprise, drive and industriousness of its theatre companies. To be fair, 'company' is a bit of a misnomer. Most of these troupes are a collection of performers usually governed by a strong artistic leader, who is often the director and plays most of the meaty parts. Ever since Prithviraj Kapoor's founding of Prithvi Theatre, this system has been in place. Slightly feudal, it requires the utmost loyalty to the group and its 'owner'. Until recently theatre troupes would guard their talent closely refusing to let it work with other outfits.

While it does seem a little draconian, what it did do was create a base for systematic training that was not available except at the National School of Drama. Prithviraj Kapoor managed to imbibe his actors with a sense of truth, shying away from the melodramatic histrionics that had dominated

the stage until then. Similarly Habib Tanvir was able to use western techniques with his folk artistes in Chattisgarh at Naya Theatre. Production by production the aesthetics got stronger and eventually it became one of THE most respected theatre companies in the country.

As with any group of people, holding them together often requires a charismatic leader. Prithviraj Kapoor, Habib Tanvir, N. Muthuswamy of Koothu-p-patrai, Safdar Hashmi of Jan Natya Manch, and K.V. Subanna of Ninasam were all incredibly passionate and charismatic. The trend continues even today with Neelam Mansingh's The Company in Chandigarh, Makrand Deshpande's Ansh in Mumbai, Joy Michael's Yatrik in Delhi, and many others.

Developments that helped popularise theatre

However, there were exceptions. Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) had chapters in Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata, each led by different committee of people, based on their socialist principles. Theatre Group Bombay (TG) formed in 1943 became a charitable trust with proper office bearers after the death of their founder Sultan 'Bobby' Padamsee. In fact just as Prithviraj Kapoor was introducing Hindi theatre to the heartland of India, TG was doing startling innovations in Mumbai - introducing audiences to western texts like Salome and Hamlet, supporting English language playwriting by holding visual enactments, a monthly theatre newsletter, and performances on terraces to combat the paucity of venues available.

Similar English language initiatives appeared in other cities: Artistes' Repertory Theatre (ART) in Bangalore, Red Curtain in Kolkata, and the Madras Players in Chennai.

However, most great developments in theatre have often been around a group of theatre companies coming together. In Mumbai, the Chabbildas movement became an important chapter for experimental Marathi theatre. Theatre Unit, Awishkar and other companies joined hands to popularise a small school auditorium to stage serious plays, rather than the raucous crowd pleasers. Initiatives like this gave writers like Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar a place to be



A still from the writer's latest play *Peasant of El Salvador*

performed. More recent initiatives like the Writers' Bloc festivals - where groups volunteer to premiere the work of new writers that have emerged from a playwriting workshop - have been incredibly successful in developing new generation of writers. The most significant 'coming together', though, has been the formation of the India Theatre Forum (ITF), an organisation formed with the aim of sharing knowledge skills and solutions with groups nationwide. The ITF organises an annual seminar, where groups send representatives to participate and learn from the stories of others.

Other developments have occurred out of an artistic progression. Safdar Hashmi's Jan Natya Manch of Delhi and Badal Sircar's Shatabdi in Bengal took theatre out of the buildings and put it on the street corners, making it accessible to everyone. This completely changed the way of thinking about theatre. No longer did it need a stage, lights or equipment.

Some groups have made more structured initiatives for the 'greater good'. Padatik of Kolkata, TG of Mumbai, and Vikalp of Mumbai have all held regular playwriting awards, to encourage young writers, enticing them with extravagant cash prizes. The fifteen year old Thespo (managed by TG and QTP), is an all India youth theatre movement, that has been instrumental in encouraging young people to take to the art form.

Changing structures

Many groups are taking on more infrastructure-related projects, because of their burning need to perform. However, to cope with this extra workload, the structure of theatre troupes is slowly changing from just a repertory of actors. The modern theatre group has a strong artistic director, a close coterie of decision makers, and a valuable non-performer on whose legs the company really runs. Actors are now placed onto this frame work, and although the artistic decisions and working styles may vary from group to group, the organisational structure remains relatively similar. RAGE for example is led by the triumvirate of Rahul da Cunha, Shernaz Patel and Rajit Kapur. While Rahul directs most of their work, Rajit and Shernaz are the primary producers. Similarly Company Theatre, which complete 20 years this year, is led artistically by Atul Kumar, but would never have been this if not for production manager Sachin Kamani. In fact Akvarious who is easily the most prolific theatre company in Mumbai, uses a wide assortment of actors, and shares them generously with other companies. While this trend is most prevalent in the English and Hindi theatre of Mumbai, it is slowly being adopted elsewhere too. Groups can no longer financially afford to keep actors tied down, and actors can no longer creatively afford to remain tied to just one group. It is an adaptation to the modern scenario. Actors learn to work in different styles, and groups receive casting flexibility to pick the cast for the play they want to do, rather than choose



A still from *Khatijabai of Karmali Terrace* directed by Quasar Thakore

the play for the cast they have.

The last ten years has seen a deluge of theatre companies forming. Some are the result of an individual wanting to play certain parts, and rallying a group around him/her. But more interestingly there are a number of writer-led collectives – Actors Ensemble India Forum and Indian Ensemble Theatre in Bangalore; Aranya, Aarambh, and Ansh in Mumbai; Tadpole Repertory in Delhi; and many others across the country. These groups have been formed to give voice to the writers' words. Most are led by director/writers, but it means the staging of an exclusive new canon of work.

Along with structure, theatre companies today are also clearer about the kind of work they want to stage. The earlier 'just want to do a play' mission, no longer holds, since there is so much theatre happening now. Primetime Theatre Co. for example, only stage work in English by Indian authors, Veenapani Chawla's Adishakti experiments in merging ancient Indian folk techniques with updated story-telling, and Perch in Chennai have suddenly found their voice in telling simple stories differently.

Carving a commercial angle

There is also a commercial angle to some groups. Evam from Chennai, ACE Productions and Ashvin Gidwani Productions in Mumbai, and Great Indian Nautanki Co. in Delhi have worked out a financial model which works for them. These companies choose their work and cast based on what they think the market will hold, rather than an artistic choice. While purists shudder at the thought, the fact is that they are able to provide regular and lucrative employment to a large number of people, allowing theatre to take one more step towards becoming an Industry.

Non performing theatre companies promoting theatre

However, the most remarkable trend is the formation of non
(Continued on page 50)

Smaller towns hungry for drama

Akarsh Khurana writes about how smaller towns across India have over the last few years surprised him with their affinity and understanding of theatre. He is convinced after these visits that there are more places with a thriving theatre scene to be explored.

IN 2011, a few days after we announced shows of *The Interview* at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, I received a mail from a doctor in Hisar, a small town a few hours out of the capital. He wanted to know if we could come a day or two earlier and perform for them as well. My knowledge about Hisar was limited. I knew that my wife had been there with a Makrand Deshpande play that she was acting in. And thanks to sharing backstage space with him during *One on One*, I knew that the very talented Yashpal Sharma hailed from Hisar. A few e-mails later, I discovered that it was his very theatre group that was organising the same.

Being a part of Hisar history

Anyhow, things got finalised and we fit Hisar into our schedule. After a lovely roadside *dhaba* breakfast, we reached our destination. It seemed at first like one of those small highway towns in the North, where roads are desolate and booze is cheap. We were then led into the Jindal Steel facility – a township on its own, with state of the art factories, a lovely



The Interview staged at Sudarshan in Pune, Maharashtra



The Interview sets up at Natarani in Ahmedabad, Gujarat

and spacious guest house, and an auditorium at par with any in the country. Moments after our very hospitable hosts settled us in, we were swamped by the local press. It was then that we found out that we were going to be part of Hisar history. *The Interview* was going to be the first English play ever performed at Hisar. Definitely momentous, but also rather scary. How would it go down? Was it too urban in its setting? Is it too contemporary? Was it the right play for such an occasion?

We had two performances, and all our fears were laid to rest. The audience was as receptive and mature, and perhaps more sensitive, than the best big city house. And Hisar joined the list of smaller towns across India which have over the last few years surprised us with their affinity and understanding of theatre.

Passion for theatre in small towns

When we started off doing theatre 13 years ago, travelling with theatre meant going to Pune, and if we were lucky, Delhi and Bangalore. When Kolkata and Chennai happened,

we felt like we'd covered the country. When Goa happened, we were just very pleased (for all the wrong reasons). Five years ago, when Ahmedabad, Coimbatore, Nagpur and Vadodara opened their doors to us, we began considering ourselves as a national theatre company with better coverage than Loop Mobile. We were absolutely wrong. Our limited knowledge didn't see that this was the tip of the iceberg. Yes, we were aware that theatre troupes existed in every possible corner of the country, but our thinking was British. We regarded them as scattered princely states, where performances were customised for their own audiences. Today our eyes have opened and how! We have now had the good fortune of performing at full blown theatre festivals in places we'd never imagined even driving past. And we've been humbled by their understanding of, and passion for all kinds of theatre.

Aligarh. Bareilly. Gorakhpur. Jabalpur. Kozhikode. Kurukshetra. Sonapani. Thrissur. Just to name a few. And every experience has been heartwarming.

In Bareilly, a surgeon organises an annual theatre festival with close to 15 plays from all over the country, and doesn't sell a single ticket. Entry is free. It is a community building exercise. And invariably a 500-seater auditorium packs in 800 people. The audience is perhaps one of the most giving I have ever seen. And there's nothing like meeting strangers in the market the next day, who beam at you and call you by the name of your character in the previous night's show.

In Jabalpur, one parent theatre group split into two, and now there is a wonderful professional rivalry that exists in the city. It also results in more theatre. The organisers and viewers are very distinguished, well spoken, keenly aware about theatre, and extremely respectful towards artistes in the field. You can tell how much theatre means to them, and it is rather humbling.

In Thrissur, which is a sleepy town where you have to walk long distances to get a bottle of water, and you'll probably



A stage set up for *The Interview* in an open ground in Thrissur



The cast of *The Interview* gets ready in a makeshift greenroom in Thrissur, Kerala

pass elephants bathing on the way, an open ground rapidly filled with over 1200 people who came and watched our show attentively, even though some people were so far they couldn't see the actors' faces. My favourite memory is landing up for set up, and finding it odd that all the lights were coincidentally rigged exactly where we needed them to be, only to discover that students from the local drama school had studied the video recording of the play that we had sent and pretty much figured out our light plan. That initiative was just overwhelming.

Even after these visits, I'm convinced we've only scratched the surface. Every state in the country is filled with towns and 'hamlets' that have some sort of a theatre scene, and they definitely have an audience. On travelling there, you sometimes discover a very rich theatrical history as well. I think that the day is not far (I'm considering it too) when the 'travelling theatre company' concept comes back in full force. Recently Sunil Shanbag travelled into the heart of Maharashtra with *Cotton 56*, *Polyester 74* and performed in some places that are not even on the map. Now that's reaching out. Theatre has always been a strong tool of communication, and there are clearly enough opportunities out there. More than this article could ever throw light upon. My brief was to write about how there is a surprisingly large presence of theatre aficionados in the B and C centres of the country. But after what we've experienced firsthand, a lot of these places get an A in my book. I want more. And honestly, so do they. Please excuse me while I go rent a bus for my troupe. ■



The writer is the proprietor of Akvarious Productions. In the last 13 years, he has produced over 40 plays, of which he has directed 17, of which 2 have won the coveted Best Play prize at the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards.

Saga of street theatre

*Street theatre is an entertaining and powerful medium to highlight the social and political injustices happening in a society. As a political form, it challenges the hierarchies of society allowing its audiences an undifferentiated arena. However, street plays are not encouraged because they pose a challenge to the authorities, says **Arjun Ghosh**.*

AS a form street theatre makes its presence felt in various college and university campuses throughout the country, primarily through college and university festivals and competitions. The ease with which a street theatre performance can be organised is the primary reason behind the popularity of this art form.

Organisers and participants of such competitions approach the form from a well defined perspective. In fact, performing teams are given instructions on the basis of a definition of street theatre that invariably is a list of “don’ts” - actors are not to use costumes; they cannot use properties (props) other than rudimentary items such as, a stick or a gamcha; though the street play must convey a “message”, it cannot tell a “story”. Unfortunately, it is this definition of street theatre which perpetuates itself as a common sense and for most people the form is associated with sloganeering and is denied any scope of being regarded as a serious art form. But it is a definition which serious practitioners of street theatre, those who practice the art form as part of a movement for political change, would disagree with. Yet the reality is that the versatility of street theatre has encouraged institutions, organisations and even commercial houses with diverse motives to adopt the form for propagating ideas or promoting products.

The birth of street theatre in India

The inception of street theatre in India is synonymous with the history of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). Founded in 1943, IPTA was a part of the pre-Independence consolidation of artistes and writers against the twin evils of fascism and imperialism. IPTA was founded in the sidelines of the All-India Congress of the Communist Party of India in Mumbai. On the one hand, it tried to mobilise people against the possible threat of a Japanese take over and, on the other, it campaigned against the apathy of the British Indian administration in the face of the famine which devastated Bengal in 1942. In its theatrical models IPTA was heavily influenced by the agitprop theatre experiences from revolutionary Russia and China as well as the work of Western Marxist thinkers like Romain Rolland who in The People’s Theatre put forward a manifesto of an alternative model for progressive theatre. IPTA is also to be credited with providing



A street play is usually performed with the audience in a circle

impetus to the popularisation and politicisation of many indigenous performance forms such as *powada*, *tamasha*, *burrakatha*, *harikatha*, *poorakali*, *jatra* and *kabigaan*. It buckled the trend of the commercial stage by taking its plays to non-theatre going audiences. Extant records show that Feisal Alkazi and Habib Tanvir organised plays in Mumbai’s slums in 1944. IPTA squads would travel into interior villages, on foot, to perform their plays. This experience formed the germinal point of street theatre in India. In the period immediately following independence, when the Communist Party was banned, IPTA was forced to adopt guerilla tactics to perform its plays while evading police persecution.

Emergence of modern street theatre

It was in the mid-1970s that street theatre, as it is known today, emerged. The signal event that can describe the political atmosphere prevailing in the country was the internal Emergency imposed in the country in 1975. The oppressive atmosphere surrounding the Emergency gave rise to a civil rights movement which impacted in diverse spheres. Street theatre also emerged as a powerful medium through which those opposed to tyranny and oppression could voice themselves.

Street theatre in northern India took shape through the Jana Natya Manch or Janam (New Birth). Janam was formed in 1973 by a group of young enthusiasts, who inspired by the

ideals of IPTA, decided to put together meaningful and entertaining theatre to non-theatre going people, primarily the working classes. Simultaneously, and independently a similar movement took shape in Karnataka in the form of Samudaya. They performed adaptations of Shakespeare and Brecht. In 1978, Samudaya performed *Belchi*, a play written by Krishnaswamy, based on the killings of dalit agricultural labourers in Bihar. *Belchi* was extremely successful in portraying the repression of the Emergency and struggle of the dalit and landless peoples against oppression. By the early 1980s street theatre had become a form of protest and political mobilisation and was adopted by many progressive activists and artistes. Stree Sangharsh, a group in Delhi, pioneered by Rati Bartholomew, Maya Rao and Anuradha Kapur, performed a series of anti-dowry plays, the first among which was *Om Swaha* (1979). The play presented the insensitivity of a society which treats woman as a commodity of exchange in marriage, ultimately leading to her death. Later on, Stree Sangharsh performed plays which included the themes of self-immolation by widows and rape. *Dafa 180* exposed the loopholes in a proposed law on women in custody. Stree Sangharsh gave way to Theatre Union in 1983. The group continued to perform till the late 1980s. The other notable street theatre group in Delhi in the 1980s was Nishant, led by Shamsul Islam and Neelima Sharma. The group continues to perform street theatre on issues ranging from communalism to American hegemony.

The discussion so far has centred around street theatre activity which closely identifies itself with the Left and Progressive forces in India. The distinguishing feature of this set of practices is a close alignment with a larger movement for political change, though the groups may have varying distances from political parties of the Left. Being the source of street theatre in the country it is this branch that can claim legitimacy of being the authentic practice of the form. For the individuals involved in this branch, theatre is a voluntary activity. Ideology



After every show the actors would go around the spectators and request them to contribute a token amount to the group



Safdar Hashmi - his contribution to street theatre is immense

forms the binding force for their continued involvement in the field. Most actors willingly devote their time in what they consider to be a campaign for a more just world. The street theatre of the Left is characterised by collective creativity. Most activities – beginning with scripting of the play – are collectively done. There is a conscious effort to avoid specialisations. It also tries to be financially independent and avoids funding from corporate houses, funding agencies or the government. This form of theatre survives mostly through donations, sale of merchandise like magazines and cassettes, and post performance collections. After every show the actors would go around the spectators and request them to contribute a token amount to the group.

Street theatre is the chosen medium for many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies and even political parties outside the Left. But unlike the street theatre of the Left, where ideology is the principal motivating factor for actors, here actors are paid for each show. The priority for this variety of street theatre is often set by the funding agencies like Oxfam or the Ford Foundation. Thus, a vast majority of NGO-based street theatre focuses on sexual health. In fact, street theatre of the NGOs has played a major role in promoting awareness concerning AIDS and the prevention of the spread of the HIV. Other than the NGOs, several government agencies working primarily under the aegis of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Family Welfare use street theatre to campaign against alcoholism, for family planning etc. Some other messages that are sought to be propagated through street theatre are: prevention of wastage of oil and water and awareness about consumer rights. Apart from this corporate promotions also make use of street performances and road shows.

Organising street plays

Street theatre groups, in order to create plays which are effective, need to maintain a live link with the people. In most cases, the groups are either based within the community



Jana Natya Manch performing *Gadha Puran*

for whom they perform or they maintain an intimate working relationship with mass organisations like trade unions, students' or women's organisations. They also encourage the audience to participate in post-performance discussions. By its very nature street theatre is a mobile form. Its performances happen among audiences who are not habitual theatre-goers. It may happen in a street corner, a busy marketplace, or a factory gate in solidarity with striking workers, in slums, in office complexes, middle class residential colonies, schools, colleges, parks, at public meetings or rallies. Who are the actors of street theatre? Since street theatre is part of a political movement it functions like any political organisation. It seeks to involve in its ranks as many participants as possible from the section of society which it claims to represent. For instance, a street theatre group like the Andhra Praja Natya Mandali which gives representation to the desires and demands of agricultural labourers, recruits a large number of agricultural labourers within its ranks. A group which seeks to represent

the viewpoints of the women's movement would attempt to bring within its fold as many women as possible. Traditionally, in our society women have not been encouraged to participate in performances. Dalits, too, have found it difficult to attain success on the commercial stage, even though among rural landless dalit communities there thrives some of the most vigorous performance forms. Therefore, groups which work towards the empowerment of these groups try to involve them. The killing of Safdar Hashmi and the numerous attacks that street theatre artistes have had to face over the decades point out to the potential of the form. Yet the often asked question is – how effective is it? Does it impact the minds of its audiences? Unfortunately, there can be no conclusive survey to answer these questions. A play raises questions and tries to encourage the audience to act to confront the 'oppressive' reality. However, the spectators then go back to the same oppressive reality and are exposed to far more powerful media like the television and movies. A play, therefore, is not enough and must be backed by other forms of movement for change. However, plays are essential in questioning the values that exist in our society and street theatre is an effective medium to put forward politics in an entertaining way so as to cause the spectators to think for themselves. ■

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Photos' courtesy: Jana Natya Manch
(*'Saga of street theatre'* is a reproduction of excerpts from an article first published in the October 2008 issue of One India One People.)

In the company of theatrewalabs

(Continued from page 45)

performing theatre companies. They still work in the broader field of theatre, but within a specialised area. The generically named Theatre Professional Pvt. Ltd. is dedicated to training the actor, not showcasing him or her. Their recent initiatives have included the formation of the Drama School Mumbai, a one-year intensive performing arts programme. Similarly Junoon, founded by Sameera Iyengar and Sanjana Kapoor, aims to bring 'theatre' into the public consciousness. Their plans include school initiatives, children's workshops, tours of shows, and even demands for cultural space in the construction of new townships. In Delhi, Teamwork Productions have taken

to managing artistic events that often include theatre projects. The Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards and the India Showcase at the Edinburgh Fringe are just two small examples of their managerial agenda.

Indian theatre is at a remarkable place in its history. There are more plays, more actors, more new scripts and more performances than ever before. There are more groups being formed, fuelled by passionate young people armed with strong ideas. It really is an exciting time to be in the company of theatrewalabs. ■

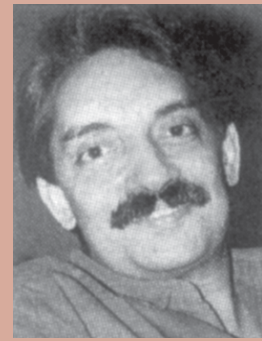
(Photos' credit: Ameet Mallapur)



The writer is a theatre-holic. He has been working with theatre company QTP since its inception in 1999, as its Artistic Director. He is also one of the founders of Thespo, the all India youth theatre movement.

The country needs a new breed of economists and leaders

Uttarakhand disaster is destined to repeat itself with increasing frequency and severity in days to come. And the severity of the disasters will only become worse. Meanwhile a billion people and more are left stranded with outdated technologies and processes that were foisted on them by powerful coterie intoxicated with their own arrogance, ignorance and avarice.



Bittu Sahgal
Editor, *Sanctuary* magazine

AS I watched in horror few months ago, at the news of the Uttarakhand disaster, which began to unfold with small reports at first and then more, and more and more, I recalled a trip by car, boat, helicopter and on foot to the Northeast of our India. This is where the plot to destroy virtually the entire Himalayan range was hatched over a decade ago by conspirators including technocrats, politicians, contractors and even some very dodgy environmentalists ever-willing to endorse ecologically lethal plans in exchange for consultancies, preferential treatment, or appointments to plum committees.

I was on the outskirts of the wildlife-rich Tale Valley Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh on 1 August 2001 on an official site visit to the Subansiri on behalf of the Indian Board for Wildlife. I was investigating claims by the promoters of the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project that “no threatened plants or animals existed in the Lower Subansiri Valley.” Of course, the leopard and elephant spoor I had seen had put paid to that casual claim within five minutes of disembarking from the power boat that carried me with several officials who had hesitatingly suggested that there was “no real point” taking a boat since a helicopter view would be best! Several naturalists had surveyed this area over the years and consistently affirmed that the Lower Subansiri Valley was one of the richest wildlife vaults in India. Unfortunately, across India, all that Nature has provided us is in the hands of planners who understand little about sustainability and even less about development. What I saw was pure heaven, virtually untouched by human hands and thick with the evidence of biodiversity in all its avatars. Bird song followed us everywhere, insects buzzed, animal trails revealed spoor and the canopy above us was thick.

It is in such fragile and exquisite landscapes that a coterie of dam-builders and politicians has combined to plunder virtually all of India. In the process, Himalayan slopes have been deforested. Mangroves in the Sundarbans and Orissa have been stripped. Mighty rivers such as the Ganges and Brahmaputra have been poisoned. Cities have been assaulted

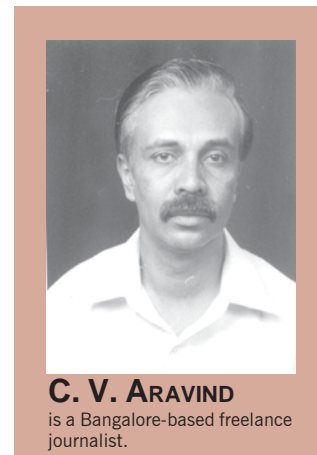
by rapacious constructions with virtually no environmental mitigation or protection steps taken.

It is this litany of environmental horrors that took such a vicious toll of Uttarakhand. And I shudder to think what will happen to us when the Brahmaputra river reveals its angry face. Across the subcontinent, almost half a million poverty-stricken farmers and fisher folk have chosen to commit suicide because their land and water resources have been so badly ripped apart that food, livelihoods and hope have vanished. Rather than face climate-related crop failures and empty nets that left them unable to pay back loans taken for chemical pesticides and fertilisers, or motorised boats and nets... family heads choose to give up on their families and their lives. What is wrong with the economists’ calculators? How come the most life-saving, economically vital infrastructures such as forests, rivers, grasslands, swamps, glaciers, corals and coasts are so undervalued? How come no smart economist is ready to measure the immense services offered by these natural ecosystems... such as flood control, water supply, oxygen supply, carbon sequestration and storage and the fertility such ecosystems bequeath to our farms?

Frankly, nature is never going to send out judgments, only consequences. Deforest the planet... you get floods and droughts. Deplete oceans.... you get empty fishing nets and hunger. Kill soils with pesticides and fertilisers, and soil organisms die and soils will not deliver food. Burn ungodly quantities of coal and oil and you will get a warped climate, with its attendant cyclones, diseases and the manifold uncertainties that will make a mockery of all financial projections. In truth even climate change is little more than a manifestation, a symptom of a much deeper malaise... economics gone wrong and unsustainable lifestyles. Will the economy, biodiversity and climate co-exist? It’s possible. But not until the fossil economists, tutored in old schools, are replaced by more progressive, more adaptive ones who accept that it is a mistake to take nature head on in a war that *Homo sapiens* cannot hope to win. ■

Feeding the teeming millions

The Food Security Bill seeks to banish hunger from the country. It is now the duty of the state governments to streamline the Public Distribution System by avoiding bottlenecks and ensuring that there is no dearth of supplies at any given point of time. The prime focus should be on implementing the scheme in letter and spirit without any deviations.



THE UPA government now at the fag end of its second term in office has not exactly covered itself with glory what with the spate of scams that have stained its innings. However there have been a few redeeming features in this tenure like the passing of the Food Security Bill which seeks to banish hunger from the country. It is a sorry state of affairs that even after nearly seven decades of independence all that our policies and plans have succeeded in is making the rich richer and the poor poorer. A vast majority of Indians still go to sleep on empty stomachs and raise children that are malnourished and half starved. The Food Security Bill which seeks to provide foodgrains to nearly fifty percent of the urban and seventy five percent of the rural population should ensure that heavily subsidised rice, wheat and coarse grains reaches the homes of the poorest of the poor. The subsidy which is calculated to be in the region of around ₹1.30 lac crores per year could turn out to be a heavy burden on the government exchequer but the salutary feature would be that essentials which were never within the reach of the poor would now be available to them. The state governments ruled by other than the UPA allies have already raised a ruckus about not having been taken into confidence before the bill was passed, but as it stands to benefit the poor the protests have eventually died down. The availability of rice at ₹3 a kilo, wheat at ₹2 and coarse grains at Re1 should turn out to be a godsend for those living below the poverty line as the costs would be much lesser than what they now have to shell out for their rations. The onus is now on the state governments to correctly identify those who are to be covered under the scheme as it is vital that only the really deserving are brought into its ambit. The state governments which manage the Public Distribution System will also have to streamline the distribution by avoiding bottlenecks and by

ensuring that there is no dearth of supplies at any given point of time. The prime focus should be on implementing the scheme in letter and spirit without any deviations.

While discussing the need for providing wholesome foodgrains at subsidised rates to those who cannot afford to purchase them at market rates the canteen facilities provided by the government of Tamilnadu deserve a mention. Years back the late M. G. Ramachandran, (MGR), matinee idol and former CM of the state, had revived the noon meal scheme for school children during his tenure which had originally been the brainchild of another former CM and Congress President K Kamaraj and this populist scheme which continues to this day has been providing wholesome meals to school children at government schools across the state. The present CM, Jayalalitha, a protégée of MGR, has gone a step ahead and her government has set up canteens all over the state where breakfast and lunch at heavily subsidised rates have been made available to all and this has turned out to be a boon for those belonging to the lowest strata of society whose earnings have never been sufficient to feed their families. The serpentine queues at these canteens are a clear indication that the government has fulfilled a dire need.

Eventually all these subsidies might bleed the exchequer dry but none can doubt that these measures which have taken a long time in coming are extremely essential to sustain large sections of the country's population. Agriculture which still remains a gamble in the monsoons has long ceased to be viable and the migration of large chunks of people from the rural hamlets to the cities is ample proof that they have been left with no alternative as their very survival was at stake. Governments both at the Centre and the state have the bounden duty to ensure that the basic needs of all citizens are taken care of and steps like the Food Security Bill are proof that they are now seized of this aspect. ■

COOL CHAMP

Try to answer the questions below and send your answers along with your name, address, date of birth, school and photograph to: **"YOUNG INDIA QUIZ"** One India One People Foundation, Mahalaxmi Chambers, 4th floor, 22, Bhulabhai Desai Road, Mumbai - 26. You can also log on to our website and answer our quiz online at www.oneindiaonepeople.com. We will choose two winners (the Cool Champs) from all the correct entries and publish his/her photograph and name along with the answers in our next issue. **(Last date for entries: October 20, 2013)**

Quiz No: 117

1. From which book was Shyam Benegal's 1978 film **Junoon** adapted?

- a. Pigeons in Flight ☐
- b. Pigeons and Flights ☐
- c. A Flight and Pigeons ☐
- d. A Flight of Pigeons ☐

2. Which former Indian Prime Minister's birthday is celebrated as 'Kisan Divas' (Farmer's Day) in India?

- a. Lal Bahadur Shastri ☐
- b. Chaudhary Charan Singh ☐
- c. Jawaharlal Nehru ☐
- d. Rajiv Gandhi ☐

3. 'Chanderi' and 'Maheshwari' sarees are native of which state?

- a. Uttar Pradesh ☐
- b. Maharashtra ☐
- c. Assam ☐
- d. Madhya Pradesh ☐

4. The **Nagarahole National Park**, a part of the **Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve**, is located in which Indian state?

- a. Karnataka ☐
- b. Kerala ☐
- c. Tamil Nadu ☐
- d. Meghalaya ☐

5. In which state of India can you find the rare art form **Rogan**? (Clue: OIOP, September 2013 issue)

- a. Rajasthan ☐
- b. Gujarat ☐
- c. Nagaland ☐
- d. Maharashtra ☐

Answers to Quiz # 116

QUESTION 1

Answer: (a) Ashwin Sanghi

The Krishna Key (2012), the third book of best-selling author Ashwin Sanghi, can be termed as a historical fiction cum thriller. All his books including *The Rozabal Line* and *Chanakya's Chant* were critically acclaimed and popular among book lovers.

QUESTION 2

Answer: (c) Service before Self

Rated to be one of the best institutes in the world, the National Defence Academy or NDA trains cadets of the three services before their pre-commissioning training. The motto of the NDA is 'Service before Self', to which the cadets adhere to not just during their service period but all through their life.

QUESTION 3

Answer: (d) Arvind Kejriwal

The contribution of Arvind Kejriwal, activist and founder of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), in the enactment of RTI (Right to Information) Act is noteworthy. He won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership in 2006 for his immense Contribution to RTI.

QUESTION 4

Answer: (d) Deepti Naval

Naval is a multifaceted personality. She is an award-winning

actress, writer, painter and a photographer. *Lamha Lamha* was her first collection of Hindi poems published in 1981.

QUESTION 5

Answer: (b) Rajasthan

Gagron fort, situated in the town of Jhalawar, in Rajasthan is a rare example of a hill and river fort. Even today, it retains that grunge, rebellious almost arrogant air that makes it stand out even amongst the mightiest of forts. (For more information, read OIOP August 2013 issue)



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Quiz No. 116

WINNER

Siddhesh M Prabhudesai

Borivali (West), Mumbai-91



Making of Durga

FESTIVE FARE

WEST Bengal has many skilled artists known as 'Pals' who produce the most magnificent idols of Goddess Durga. Though the idols can be made out of various materials like fiberglass, Plaster of Paris, thermacol or paper pulp, clay continues to be used on a large scale. Clay idols dissolve easily in water and cause no harm to nature. This characteristic of clay makes it the best choice for idols.

Only sun — dried clay known as apakva or terra cruda is used to make Durga idols. It signifies fertility.

The artisan first makes a bamboo or a straw structure of the deity. Then straws, jute ropes and strings are used to give the idol a proper shape. Clay gathered from the banks of the Ganga is applied three times over the frame of the idol. More



water is used in the second mixture of clay to fill up the crevices in the frame. In the third layer thin pieces of cloth are stuck over the idol. Each time the clay is applied, the idol is left to dry in the sun. The face, hands and the feet of the idol are made separately, attached to the frame and left to dry. Once the clay model of the idol is completely dry, the first coat of

colour, that is white, is applied. Then two more coats of colours, yellow or pink and red, are applied to the idol. Once this is done the goddess is ready to be decked up with ornaments and beautiful clothes and placed in the pandal.

Plaster of Paris is the modern version of clay but causes a great deal of damage to our environment. PoP is a mixture of chemicals like phosphorus, magnesium, sulphur and gypsum which do not dissolve easily. If PoP enters water it kills fish, damages plants and does not let water flow easily causing stagnation. It pollutes water resources leading to skin and blood diseases and breathing problems.

Marwar Festival

RAJASTHAN offers one of the most colourful vistas of India with its vibrant culture and heroic past. Jodhpur plays host to one such show of local art and culture — the Marwar Festival.



It is an annual festival held in September-October on the full moon night of Sharad Purnima. It was earlier called the Maand festival.

It is held at Mehrangarh fort and Umaid Bhawan at Jodhpur. For two days, these two structures are lit up, adding an air of festivity to the city.

The festival showcases Maand music and the flamboyant dance of the region. Tourists flock to the festival to catch a glimpse of various folk dancers and singers who recreate the myths and legends of historic Marwar with their mesmerizing performances. The festival also features horse-riding and polo.

Maand is the classic style of Rajasthani folk music which revolves around the gallant and romantic tales of Marwar's rulers. The Marwar festival is mainly organized to provide a platform for Maand musicians.

BADAL SARKAR

He weaved magic on stage (1925-2011)

SUDHINDRA Sarkar, born in 1925, famously known as Badal Sarkar (or Badal Sircar), passed away silently on 13 May 2011, when the state of West Bengal was celebrating the change of power. So, Badal Sarkar's exit warranted a little more than the little red ribbon that runs at the bottom of our television screens. As a young man in the 1940s, Sarkar was restless, moving from a private construction company to lectureships, and dabbling in Left politics. He moved to Europe where he was exposed to myriad theatrical forms and styles. Sarkar began writing plays from his thirties. He decided to take theatre seriously when he returned to India.

Sarkar evolved and defined his individual content, form, aesthetics and philosophy. He called this 'Third Theatre' which recognises, establishes and reinforces maximum intimacy between actor and spectators. His strategy and methodology appeared simple and uncomplicated. But peeping behind the apparent simplicity was a philosophy that made theatre a performance for the people, of the people and by the people.

Sarkar took the Indian stage by storm with *Ebong Indrajit* (1963) and *Pagla Ghoda* (1967). *Ebong Indrajit* (And Indrajit) deals with the monotony, stagnation and futility of the contemporary existence. The cyclical nature of the play draws a parallel with people who "go round and round." *Ebong Indrajit* hit Kolkata's stage circuit with devastating effect. He launched his theatre group, *Satabdi*, in 1967. In 1968, he was awarded the Sangeet Natak Academy Award, and was felicitated with the Padmashree Award the following year. He won the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship Ratna Sadasya in 1997.

His subsequent productions, *Spartacus*, *Sara Raattir*, *Hattomalar Opaarey*, *Bhoma* and *Michhil*, have been performed in villages, towns and cities. The "flexible, portable, inexpensive" motto of Third Theatre brought it close to the common man. *Michhil* (Procession) probably remains his best-known work. As each play unfolded, the audience would get sucked into the performance watching actors turning into props and Nature, dressed simply in

kurta-pyjamas, turning into a flowing river just now, changing into tube-well the next minute, whispering to the audience sitting on the floor, till the audience began to identify with the happenings even if the subject was distanced from its immediate experience.

Sarkar notes that "first" theatre refers to popular folk art forms such as Yakshagana. Second theatre is "Victorian", essentially Western theatre. His Third theatre blends some elements of the other two, besides cultivating its own feel and identity. Though it is sometimes referred to as 'street theatre', it reaches far beyond a mere theatrical performance on the street, away from the proscenium.

Badal Sarkar's plays could be watched either free, or with a sheet passed around or for very little gate money. Sometimes, Panchayat funding and commissioned performances took care of the gate money. For him performance was not only a form of creative expression. Nor was he looking at theatre as a form of elitist entertainment. His aim was to take theatre to the maximum audience possible, across public space, transcending schisms class, caste, community, the rural-urban divide, etc. His plays, he said are part of a counterculture, intending to expose media lies and Government untruths.

Uncovering blatant lies and myths through intense research, his plays are intended to initiate, trigger and bring about social change.

On a Saturday afternoon in 1973 at Curzon Park, opposite the Governor's House in Kolkata, Badal Sarkar and his group, *Satabdi* exposed Kolkatans to an unconventional theatrical dimension. "Free theatre. No tickets, government grants, industrial sponsors and wealthy patrons," he underscored. He recalls one night when they performed and it began to rain heavily, the 3000-strong audience refused to budge. The message was getting across. But that was nearly three decades ago. Most young theatre enthusiasts of today do not seem to have heard even his name, much less, the theatre he created, executed, stood for and drew attention to. ■

— Shoma A. Chatterji



MACHINDRA KAMBLI

Konkani quirkiness (1952-2007)

MACHINDRA Kambli's *Vastraharan* is a play I love and relish. I've seen it 17 times, excluding the two times in its latest *avtaar*. It still manages to surprise with its rustic verve and deliberately talent-less style. *Vastraharan* is about a play within a play that almost doesn't happen. It's Malwani, it's *lok natya* (folk drama), and in spite of being rooted within the tradition of the Mahabharata, it's cutting-edge *contemporary*. In fact with Kambli's deliberate-style of misdirection, it is able to move outside the usual Marathi middle class milieux and language. There's nothing snobbish or smug about it; nor clumsy-preachy.

When the spotlight faded on Machindra Kambli on a Sunday night during October 2007, it caused a tiny tremor. A show of *Bhaiyya Haathpaya Pasari* (a play about the assault on Mumbai by the north Indians and the inferiority complex among the Marathi *Manoos*) was houseful at Damodar Hall. It was a no show. Kambli had a fatal heart attack. Passion drew Machindra Kambli to theatre. His background was penuried. Born in Rewandi in Sindhudurg Zilla, he lost his father at an early age. His mother nurtured him. He earned Rs 15 doing odd back-stage jobs. He ironed stage costumes for Vijaya Mehta's theatre group. He hung curtains. In 1973, Mohan Tondwalkar (who became an adversary in the Marathi Natya Parishad) offered him a tiny role. And thus began his flirtations with acting. *Vastraharan* was a huge hit. It received an invite from the Maharashtra Mandal in London. There were budgetary constraints, especially since it entailed the travel of 22 actors. The Pride of Maharashtra would not travel to London. Kashinath Ghanekar (the houseful *samrat*) agreed to play a part in the play, as part of a fund raising show. Others followed. The who's who of Marathi stage. Master Bhagwaan (Dhritirashtra), Nana Patekar (Bhim), Ashok Saraf (Dharma), Master Sachin (Vidura), Dilip Prabhavalkar (Dev), Bali Dhuri (Duryodhana) and Ghanekar (Dushasana). The play was staged in London. Every entry was greeted with thunderous applause. This meant a three hour performance became a five hour show.



The key to the play is Kambli's Konkani quirkiness. It is pointed - and an integral part of this sprawling play. It is more than evident that Kambli - the Man from Malwan, had an ear for language and people's parlance. He would include Tukaram's *daarucha adda*. On an impulse he would surrealistically speak about Indra being the Lord from Kamathipura.

Nothing was sacrosanct. Arjun, Bhim, Krishna, Draupadi.

Naturally, in the post Babri Masjid era, the right wing objected to the denigrations. Once or twice, they tried to stop the staging. The right wing had another problem, the play was hugely popular. Particularly among Hindus who applauded at the shenanigans and humanisation of their gods.

A handful of self-righteous cranks resorted to picketing outside the auditorium before each and every show. Kambli used to serve *chai* and *batata wada* for the picketers. I must thank them, he mischievously remarked. They are giving me free publicity; at no extra cost!

Like all theatre producers he was tight-fisted, had an eye for detail and was a solid administrator. His theatre bus was a case in point. It was superbly designed with sleeper berths, a tiny bathroom, and a little visitor's lounge.

His final finale on a truck originated from Shivaji Mandir. Everyone was present. Friends, foes, fans. The accolades poured in. Sharad Pawar, the then CM, Deputy CM, Narayan Rane, MPs, MLAs, actors, artistes, audience. *Taty Sarpanch Namaha! Machindra Kambli Namaha!* And a final tribute would be to see *Vastraharan* in its new avatar. Digambar Naik's performance is not as '*halkatt or haraami*' as Kambli's was when he performed *Taty*; but hey the show is still super duper.

A must-watch. ■

— Ramu Ramanathan is a Mumbai-based playwright and director.

(These are excerpts from an article which was first published on the website Mumbai Theatre Guide (www.mumbai-theatre-guide.com). They have been published here after consulting Mumbai Theatre Guide.)

SAFDAR HASHMI

The champion of street theatre (1954-1989)

ON January 2, 1989, the convenor of Jana Natya Manch (Janam), Safdar Hashmi, died in a New Delhi hospital following a murderous attack on Janam activists the previous day by anti-social elements patronised by the ruling vested interests. Janam was performing *Halla Bol* in Jhandapur, Sahibabad, in support of the workers' demands led by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). People from all walks of life – workers, political activists, artists and intellectuals – came together spontaneously in a massive, unprecedented protest against this brutal murder. Today, Safdar's name has become synonymous with street theatre and the progressive cultural movement in India.

Safdar Hashmi was born to Haneef Hashmi and Qamar Azad on 12 April 1954 in Delhi. He spent his childhood in Aligarh and finished his schooling in Delhi. He did his M.A. in English literature from Delhi University. He married Moloyashree in 1979. After short stints of teaching in the universities of Garhwal, Kashmir and Delhi he worked in the Press Institute of India and then joined as the Press Information Officer of the Government of West Bengal in Delhi. In 1984 he gave up his job to work full time as a political cultural activist.

Safdar was one of the founder members of the prestigious theatre group Jana Natya Manch (1973). He came into the democratic cultural movement in 1970 as an undergraduate student of Delhi University. This work excited him – performing at *bastis* and factory gates, interacting with the young intellectuals, artists, writers, and poets, creating and organising – all this was not work but play. He was soaking up these experiences and growing – intellectually, creatively and ideologically.

Safdar was a dreamer and a doer. He was able to combine his creative talents with organising abilities. Performing for the people was not a 'feel good' action but a process of engaging with ideas and issues affecting the working people. It was essential to have excellence in the craft, the form, the aesthetics, and be alert on questions of ideas and

politics. He was never formally trained as a theatre person, but he learned by reading, watching, and actively seeking out friends and contemporaries from the theatre world. He had dreams for Janam, and he also had a very strong practical sense so that as soon as a dream crystallised, he would start thinking about how to give it shape practically. Safdar was and remained essentially a simple person. He delighted in creative work, and ideas excited him.

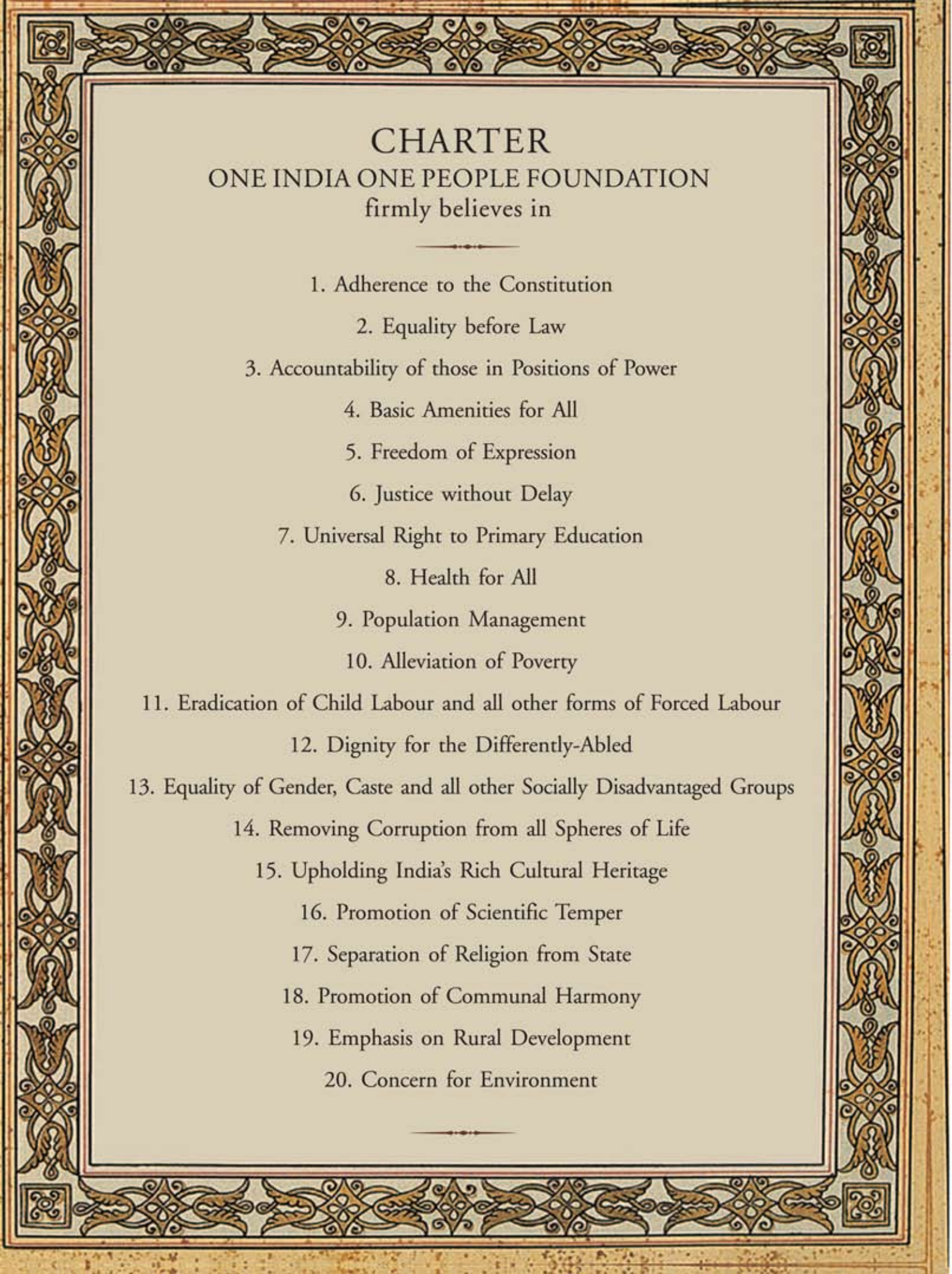
He embraced Marxism when still a teenager, and while over the years his understanding and grasp of more complex issues increased, he remained unwavering in his political commitment. In fact, he believed, quite rightly, that the Marxist method of understanding the world helped expand his creative expression. Safdar was not simply a remarkably creative person himself, he had a knack of drawing out the best from others. He was able to unlock the creativity in his co-workers, not in a formal teacher-learner format, but as co-workers of a creative collective.

He was a brilliant theoretician and practitioner of political theatre, especially street theatre. A versatile personality, he was a playwright, a lyricist, an actor, a theatre director, a designer and an organiser. He also wrote for children. His film scripts were much acclaimed. He wrote on various aspects of culture and related issues in journals and newspapers. His creativity and ideology were inseparable. In recognition of his contribution to the street theatre movement and to the growth of a democratic culture, the Calcutta University in 1989 conferred on Safdar the degree of D.Litt. posthumously.

Safdar's name has become a source of inspiration for large numbers of people across the country and beyond. In Janam, we remember him with joy and with a smile. The grief and loss cannot be repaired. They remain. But what endures is Safdar's dreams, our dreams, our convictions. Safdar lives with us. He lives among the people. ■

– Moloyashree Hashmi, President, Jana Natya Manch





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