

S. Raghunandana:

Listening to Sainath and then to Shiv, I've been thinking, the violence around us is so huge. It impinges on our lives. We're living in the midst of it, continuously. What does a theatre person like me do? All we have is our theatre space, if we're lucky enough to have a place where we can rehearse and perform! We have two, or three, or twenty people, working in a space, and responding to what is happening to the world and to us. Through the fashioning of theatre, to express the truth.

That is all that we can do. I cannot go and physically prevent Modi and his hordes from massacring people. I cannot go and physically stop George Bush and his cohorts from bombing Iraq and Afghanistan out of existence. So what can I do? I can fashion texts. But we know that the power of the word can only go that far.

Poets write, playwrights write, actors enact the act. Which means actors, theatre people, are the only people who enact something with their bodies. With the live body in front of live people. Which means I have to indulge in a different kind of reasoning, a different kind of creativity, than that which enables a Shakespeare to write. I take reality as an inspiration, I ingest it, then I have to indulge in a different kind of reasoning, producing images, gesture, image, enactment. Which I'd like to call "thick reasoning."

Let me give an example. Before the Babri Masjid was demolished, I had begun writing a play. After 6 December, I quickly finished writing it and rehearsed it with the professional company I was working with then, the Rangayana. The play is set in 1929-30, around the time of the Dandi March. There is a sadhu called Pipalananda, a disciple of Vivekananda, a votary of what today gets called Hindutva. There is a scene set in a railway station. There are village people there, there's a government officer who is eating raagi roti. Pipalananda talks of Hinduism being a big pipal tree, which will swallow, engulf, everything that comes in its way. He has the roti in his hand. With great violence, as he is speaking about Hinduism, he crushes the roti without even realizing what he is doing. He's in a trance-like situation and they are all looking at him terrified. The raagi roti is completely destroyed, and he then raises his arm as if he's had a sexual ejaculation.

It is not enough for a theatreperson to be able to write those lines, to be able to read those lines. What we have to do is to find the right gesture, the right image for it. I cannot bring all the violence around me on the stage – the burning of infants, the slashing of a pregnant woman's stomach, the gangs of killers, or the violence of bio-technology, or of malls, and so on. What I have to do is to try and condense all that into one image, and also to create a distance from it – so that the spectators can carry it with them and reflect and meditate upon it.

Or take *Othello*. As we all know, Iago is the bad man in the play, and his sidekick is Rodrigo. There's a line where he's talking about how he can corrupt, how he can destroy Othello. Here he mentions some vegetables. Very often, in production, people cut these lines, because Iago and Rodrigo go on and on. In our production, we had a tomato. After spewing the vilest kind of hatred for Othello, Iago, red tomato in hand, smashes it to pulp. This was a powerful image, and the people carried the image with them. Or in *King Lear*, the blinding of Gloucester. No amount of screaming, no amount of blood being shown, would perhaps be equal to the action of showing two candles going out at the exact moment when the daggers are thrust into his eyes.

As actors, all we have at our disposal is our bodies, and our samvedana, our ability to feel with and for the other.

It is of course a cliché of literary criticism that evil is fascinating, it is attractive, it is theatrical. My own insistence has always been that good is also equally theatrical. If only you can show that inside every noble or heroic character resides evil as well. So what we have to show on stage is the struggle inside this character against the evil, and the eventual triumph of good. That is dramatic. Otherwise, if the good is merely taken for granted, then the evil automatically becomes more fascinating. In the name of upholding the good and opposing the evil, we only make the evil attractive.