

Samik Bandhopadhyay:

“I will initially address some of the issues and points already raised as part of my response. I appreciated the point that was made by Shyamalaji when she spoke of the lack of ideology in a lot of theatre training, in the institutional theatre training in our country. I will just build a little bit upon her point. Now this is a problem that I have faced several times when I have come into a scenario when I take part in the deliberations of an institution, like the National School of Drama, of which, very very unfortunately, I happen to be the vice chairman at the moment. And several such organizations. I really don't know why I agree to be the member of the academic film council of the film institute at Pune, the member of the academic council of the film institute at Kolkata, a member of the board of studies of the Rabindra Bharat University, member of the board of studies of the 'new' theatre and film studies dept. which is going to come up at Allahabad University. I don't know why. For I find my role completely ineffective and useless. These organizations take their route, take their course, I speak, I am a minority, and nobody cares. But this is a problem that I face again and again. There are courses; there are syllabi which are designed for professional actors, say, at the NSD. There is almost inbuilt in the entire construction of the courses at the NSD, a resistance to “theory”. No theory, no history. We don't care for theory or history, we are here to learn the skills and we want to be professional actors. As is professional actors don't need a mind. They join a profession and like most other professions, not all, they will have their superiors, their masters who will give them orders, instructions which they will carry out. And they will have the necessary skills to serve. That is all that they will like to be trained in. for e.g. they just don't understand where the state is for every single student of the NSD, 3000 rupees/ month which is something still quite large if you think of the economics of our country, about the growing inequality and everything about which Sainath made us so conscious and made us so aware. 3000 is no joke! And the state gives it, and not the state, we give it! For what? To train people so that they can go and join the Bombay commercial cinema, which pays enormous money returns, to those who make it there. Why do we have to invest and contribute to the growing inequalities in the field of the performing arts, by playing this role, I don't understand. 20 or 30 students are chosen a year, through a very expensive nationally laid out selection process taking place in different centres and then Delhi itself for fairly long length of time. We go through this exercise, why can't it be made mandatory that the students should have, and there are any number of methods, scientific methods now available, to give them short course training in understanding English. It remains a problem that no person from any part of India who cant speak Hindi is not expected to contribute anything to the academic experience, the teaching experience, when it comes to skills there will be interpreters to translate the instructions but when it comes to theory, when it comes to thinking, when it comes to ideology, who have to deal with language, you have to deal with words, there is no escape. The fact remains, we were doing an exercise on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the NSD, preparing a roster of all the students who have graduated from the NSD, and it came to 900+. And about 150 of them could not be traced. We don't know whether they are alive, whether they are dead, nothing! They are vanished. After all this national investment. Think of the other 650-700 odd. You come from almost the whole country.

Try to recall the number, how many have you seen in terms of numbers, in your part of the country, in your language, how many of them? This year when by some strange arbitrary decision it was decided that this year's national theatre festival, the Bharatrang Mahotsav will feature only works by diploma holders of the NSD. Nobody else is allowed. We tried an exercise. I suggested at one point, now how do you choose, how do you make a selection? And I suggested this idea: let's choose two people who watch theatre, who write about theatre, who are critics of theatre. In the different centres, choose two for each centre, who are not products of the NSD, but who are serious theatre viewers outside the framework of the NSD. They have watched theatre in their own places. Give them a list of the people who have graduated from the NSD, in their regions, in their cities. And then let them advise us: these are the two or three or four people whose works have been good, have been worthwhile and let's invite them. Let that be the selection process. It is not a foolproof method. I am not claiming great things for it. But some attempt to bring in some objectivity. It failed miserably. A: the letters didn't go to these people for a long while. B: when we insisted, the letters went without the list of the people. Again get in touch, then the list go at the end and then in several cases the experts that we had chosen write back: sorry! We haven't seen any significant work from any of these people, sorry! So then this entire procedure, this entire method was truly dropped. Nobody discussed it. We must have people from all over the country so they were picked up. At the office level. And but worse than that the real point is that why, why, why, why, why do so many products from the NSD do not make any mark in the regional theatre. Those that survive in Delhi, those that work out certain spaces, certain opportunity, facility for themselves, in Delhi, fine. They are visible even, nationally. But how many of the 700 odd in the regions, what impact do they have on the regions? And one of the major reasons is, if you really talk to these people, I have tried to do that in several parts of the country not just my own state, i.e. West Bengal, because I travel a lot, there is no conception or a vision of a theatre. Of a theatre that he would like to do. He has all the skills, so he can be picked up by a Tim Supple, he can be picked up somebody else and used. They are available to be used. Is that professionalism? But somehow that has become the definition of professionalism. Usable tools are being produced by the National Drama Factory and being offered to the country, offered to the entertainment industry. So it's not a question of somebody's personal greed to get more money at the Bombay cinema. Not at all. This is the whole method. And this also becomes the model now for the different universities which are starting their theatre schools. Because somehow the NSD has this 'brand' value, still! Few people are aware of this basic fact that its about less than a hundred who would be visible who have a record to stand by out of the 700 odd produced by the NSD. Who cares? Who knows? So at that level, the point of reconstructing, revisioning the course, the methodologies of training. And I think this is an area that in the given circumstances, given all the pressure of the different responsibilities that Sanjana and her colleagues have taken up I think that there should be some effort to take this entire problem and try to create a number of parallel alternative courses. That should be part of the programme of our forum. That is what I think. I always feel uncomfortable, unfortunately whenever I meet Anmol Vellani. And for, Anmol knows that there have been several organizations, institutions with which I have been associated with at some point or the other, at the very initial stages and then I have walked off, which have been funded, supported by the Ford Foundation earlier, later by

the IFA with Anmol's very active concern and involvement. And with the best of Anmol's intentions, it's not a personal complaint against Anmol. What he himself has seen from these experiences, the point that he made so strikingly and so significantly, the lack of the multiple voices in an institution. An institution starts with multiple voices. When they go to the funding agency, there are multiple voices. There is an interaction, interweaving of the different voices, but once the funding system comes into place, the funding itself creates an authority. And the authority is bent on eliminating the multiple voices and becomes a singular authority. This has happened in institution after institution. And Anmol and I have been witnesses to several of these cases. I don't have an answer; I don't have a panacea to this kind of a thing. But, maybe again, the excellent point that Anmol made this morning when he said that it becomes easier for a funding agency, more meaningful for a funding agency to work with an organization like this forum. The forum which doesn't have its own project but a project for the entire theatre experience in the country. And there is interaction with the funding agency and this rather than the funding agency and an institution which has its own singular agenda. So a little more of the opening up of democratic space can happen out of this in funding. And when I talk of the decline and decay and collapse of these funded institutions, some of these are sad stories. Not just scandals, sad stories. When an institution with wonderful possibilities, great possibilities, great hopes of doing work in a small place, has created its own community, created a theatre going community, in a small suburban town nurtured it for years, eight years, nine years, then the funding comes, big funding. The first thing that happens, the group virtually breaks up. The director buys a plot of land and makes his own house, the first thing out of the funding money and the entire work style, survival style, everything changes. And those stay on with the group, one of these struggling groups, those who stay on, because they are poor and they need the money, they had never thought that they could make a living out of theatre, the kind of theatre that they were doing. Those who stay on are also internally corrupted. After a point of time, they leave the group and right now, I am aware of three or four of them who are virtually beggars. Great talents, great talents to learn. I know of this girl, this teenager, 16 yr old at that time, a Bengali thin poor little girl from a very very poor family who had come into the group. I had seen her in Manipur learning the Martial art of Thang-tha. She didn't have a body; she didn't have the basic nutrition for that, the basic nourishment for that. But a tremendous energy that she brings into it and I watch her performing for her guru at the end of 15 days in Manipur. A completely different, Bengali small town body doing the Thang-tha. The spirit, the energy, everything. And after she leaves the group, exploited by the group, in several ways, with the strength and authority of the funding behind it, now she can't do theatre the way she used to do. She goes to different NGOs, takes on assignments, in the last seven years she hasn't developed a bit, so she survives from one NGO grant to another NGO grant. And when she can't she comes to me and says, I need three thousand or two thousand or five thousand rupees to put my little girl to school. She becomes a beggar. From the dignity that she had earned for herself, built into herself, from her theatre. We destroy individuals like that. I am not talking of the other institutions which have gone the way of showing off, celebrating, and all the hard killed off. I am talking about these people. So, maybe, as Anmol said very rightly, who are the funding agencies accountable to? Actually there is no...we don't have any right to question the funding agency: why did you give money to them and why not them? Who are we? The funding

agency is an organization, an institution on its own terms, its own parameters and it will decide what it will do. We can't question them. But the harm, several institutions which have been atrophied with the funding support, with the funding turning authority. This is a question that we have to address. No answers but Anmol has suggested a possibility that if there can be an organization somewhere between the funding agency and where the funding reaches, maybe, I don't know. The last point that I would like to bring into play is again, at the forum level if we can explore this question more closely- The structure, the institutional organizational structure of the theatre groups. Something which began when the IPTA agenda was dropped. Several reasons why the IPTA agenda was dropped, we are not going into that. The immediate option that came in, the other pattern, the other institutional pattern that came in the non-commercial theatre, IPTA had given a model in the non-commercial theatre, and that model was abandoned. The new model was, there would be one supreme director at the centre and a group, a band of loyal actors. Again authority, individual authority, of course the director is an artist, a major artist. And soon the way it... something so modern as this was the period of the rise of the director, as opposed to the dominance of the actor. Itself a different ideological politics, part of theatre ideology. But immediately what happened in the cases say, Shombhu Mitra, the Government of India in the 1950s, or even into the 60's had this provision for a scholarship, for a 'shishya', in a 'guru-shishya' system. So I have seen forms in which an active member of the group 'bahurupi' directed by Shombhu Mitra signs the papers as a 'shishya', literally as a 'shishya', the word 'shishya' is used in the English form and Shombhu Mitra signs underneath as the guru. And the scholarship money comes to the guru which he hands over, part of it, to the shishya and part of it to the fund of the group. So even ideologically the modern director immediately becomes the guru in the institutional pattern. And the politics which is so anti-democratic. If you have a difference with the guru-director, your loyalty is in doubt and you better leave. And the groups crack and split according to that. They have been variations in this pattern I know, but I have tried to study the histories of several groups in West Bengal fairly closely and in some other part also. That pattern persists. So maybe even trying to explore the possibility of creating a kind of a model for a different institutional framework, structure for the theatre groups. The non-commercial theatre groups. And that would also relate to the way they use funds, the way they take funds, the accountability to their own members after they have received the funds. All these then can be related in a way. So these, I think, are exercises that we can undertake when come to talk about training and institutions."