

Shanta Gokhale: I'm going to go straight into the paper.

Where theatre happens is simple to make out. You go to a city or town, refer to the local form of communication, whatever it is – black boards placed at street corners, posters, handbills distributed in the park, bills pasted on walls or messages scribbled on walls, with chalk sometimes, vehicles roaming the roads with megaphones, amplifiers. Whatever the form of communication, theatre has to announce its presence. At its most expensive, it advertises itself in newspapers. If you are an insider and wired, you are even better off. You receive emails upon emails informing you about new plays happening, old plays, revived plays, children's plays. When none of this happens, when no friends call you and say, 'there's this play on at such and such a place and you simply have to see it', then you know that you're in a place where no theatre happens.

When I'm in Chennai, I know I'm in a place where no theatre happens. When I'm in Bangalore I know, today, I'm in a place where theatre happens – I shall come to the *today* later. When I'm in Imphal, I know I'm in a place where theatre happens. And when I'm in Nagpur, Sholapur, Kohlapur, Kankowli, again I know that theatre happens. And in Mumbai and Pune, you cannot escape theatre. It's happening all around and there are plenty of choices.

Before I wrote my book I went to two places. Calcutta, where I saw a play everyday, because I wanted to get a sense of theatre in these two places before I launched on my book. In Bangalore I met Mr. Marulasidappa, scholar of theatre, who gave me his book on Kannada theatre, which I could not read. I asked him if I could see a play; he said there was nothing on. I met Mrs Prema Karanth, who spoke about her theatre. I asked her if I could see a play, she said there was nothing on. I met Prakash Belawadi and said, "you are a young man of theatre, show me some theatre." He said, "we young people cannot still have theatre, because theatre here is still only Karnad, Kambar and B. Jayashree." Years later, I was at Mahesh Dattani's place in Bangalore. We were going to have a comfortable chatty evening when a friend called up. "What are you doing?" "Just sitting around chatting." "Why don't you come and see a play?" I just shot out of my chair. A play in Bangalore, yeah, yeah yeah, whatever it is, I want to see it! So we hopped into an auto and sped down to a hall, which I seem to remember was a wedding hall. And this was pure serendipity, because it was a brilliant production. The space was unbrilliant, to put it mildly. But, there was an audience. And this happened to be Girish Karnad's translation of Mahesh Elkunchwar's directed by K M Chaitanya.

The fact that there was this huge audience in this wedding hall suggested that there was an audience in Bangalore for theatre. So why was theatre not happening? This question was answered a few months after Ranga Shankara was inaugurated in 2004, when I began to receive regular monthly schedules. Every day was booked, mostly by Kannada plays. And I remember that during the inauguration one had heard murmurs – about Ranga Shankara being so far away, about whether theatre audiences would be there, would come. Was it going to work? One didn't obviously have to wait too long to find out, because theatre began to happen. Plays happened, people came. And in this case, how it happened was also a kind of lesson. Because the State, which normally should be kept at arms length from all cultural projects, had shown a lot of

enlightenment in this case by giving a plot of land and then staying strictly off that plot of land. Hutch also came in to underwrite some costs. And so it was a happy coming together of these two powerful agencies – the corporate and the government – and one woman with a vision and the spirit to make this thing happen, aided by a whole lot of like-minded people.

So now, I come to Maharashtra via Bangalore, and my very obvious proposition here is that, for theatre to happen – not sporadically, not because there are writers who are dying to write plays, not because there are actors who are dying to act, but in a sustained manner that results in theatre becoming part of the community life – then a dedicated space for theatre becomes essential. If such a dedicated space exists, theatre happens, but for such a dedicated space to be created, a need for theatre must exist in the community in the first place. The community demonstrates this need when it turns up in large numbers in crummy halls, which double up for weddings and thread ceremonies and even fashion shows, and then it takes its chance with whatever is offered. It shows its need when it is willing to make do with basic facilities, when it is willing to sit on floors, chairs, benches, anything; to twist, turn, crane its neck to catch the action on stage. When the need to see theatre is paralleled by the need to do theatre, where actors will even go out onto the roads and into parks to rehearse because there are no rehearsal spaces available, then one can say, the ground is fully ready for theatre to happen.

There is an alternative of course to the fixed bricks and mortar indoor space. Theatre can happen and actors carry the stage on their backs, set it up wherever the community feels the need to see theatre and perform with available facilities. Tirugatha works that way; so does the Assamese mobile theatre, which is out on the road for 9 months of the year. Achutlakar, its progenitor, saw that theatre had stagnated since the 60s, and decided to go to people's doorsteps with it. He built a stage of bamboo and wood that could be dismantled easily and began to roll through the countryside of Assam. In time, other companies decided to emulate him, and soon they were carrying stages the size of 3500 square feet along with them in trucks. 10,000 people became involved in this theatre movement and they covered something like 60 centres in Assam. The people loved this theatre; they went to it, come rain come shine. And the theatre they got, which according to the critics was not really theatre art and had no contributions to make to the aesthetics of theatre ... but it was the people's theatre. And they got plays about dinosaurs, they got the whole of the Titanic complete with the iconic pose of the lover on the prow of the ship. Along with that they also got Othello and they got problem plays like burning brides.

So in this paper, I'm going to sidestep the third force of theatre, which is the playwrights, actors, directors, and concentrate on what makes a community feel the need for theatre, and what happens when it does not have a dedicated space for it to happen.

Before I return to Maharashtra, I must make a note of a short conversation that I was part of, recently, in Calcutta. The participants were Priya Adarkar, who has translated four of Tendulkar's plays, and Gowri Ramnarayan who has translated two, apart from writing four of her own.

Priya says to Gowri: "What is Tamil theatre like?"

Gowri says, "There isn't any"

Priya says, "How can that be? Theatre has to be there. It has to happen everywhere."

Gowri says, “No. It doesn’t in Tamil Nadu.”

So she said, “Why not?”

And then, there was a half hour conversation while Priya, the staunch Marathi, would just not let go of Gowri, and suggested various ways and means in which theatre could be made to happen in Chennai. Finally Gowri said, “if you can make dance happen in Maharashtra, I can make theatre happen in Tamil Nadu.”

[much laughter]

This was not just a case of one-upmanship, though it shut up Priya! We have to return to this thing about the need for a certain performing art in a community. In connection with this, I’d like to cite the fact that the Raja of Sangli, who was patron to the supposed first Marathi play, instructed his multi-talented courtier Vishnudas Bhave to create and present a refined version of the Bhagwad Mela performance which he had seen and been impressed by. The refinement comprised of eliminating the dance element in the original. So it is to be noted that some historians of Marathi theatre who have denied the position of first play to Bhave’s Sita Swayamvar and would rather press the claim for the plays written by the Maratha Rajas in Thanjavur, have failed to take note of the fact that the Thanjavur plays were full of dance and could never form a tradition in Maharashtra.

Theatre in Maharashtra has followed the same trajectory from its folk traditional roots to the refined middle-class Brahmanic tradition, as Bharatnatyam and Odissi have followed in those parts of the country. Along the way its audience has changed drastically. So that, when I say that the Marathi community has demonstrated its need of theatre by the fact that the tradition of theatre has remained more or less unbroken over 165 years, I’m not talking about the same community at all. Like the philosopher’s shoe, the theatre-needing and theatre-going community has changed bit by bit and the theatre spaces that it has occupied has been at least partly responsible for this change.

So let’s see how this has happened.

Vishnudas Bhave’s first play, Sita Swayamvar is performed for the Raja of Sangli and his courtiers in the Sangli court. His play isn’t much different in its aesthetics or narrative content from the Dashavatar or Bhagwad Mela that are happening outside in public spaces. But, whereas the Dashavatar and Bhagwad Mela are tied to ritual and therefore to the temple precincts, Sita Swayamvar, despite its mythological narrative, is secular in the sense that it occupies a secular space. The Temple is all-inclusive, the court is all-exclusive. Thus the public feels no ownership towards this performance. 10 years later, Bhave is out on the streets with his troupe of players, looking for patronage. While he performs in the open courtyards of wadas in Pune and places like that, with the owners giving him whatever fees they think fit, when he visits Bombay he suddenly has a revelation. He discovers the proscenium stage and feels instantly fascinated and challenged by its possibilities. He presents his play Gopichand in the Grant Road Theatre in Mumbai, in which, so goes the advertisement – ‘the bundle of sticks on Machindra Nath’s head will be shown floating above his head!’ This play was seen by members of three communities – Hindus, Parsis and Muslims. This kind of gimmick might have not gone down well with a homogenous Marathi audience whose idea of theatre had always been bound to the edifying as

against the spectacularly entertaining. But Bhave, the practical man of theatre, gives this new kind of audience in this new kind of theatre, a new kind of experience.

The second result of Bhave's, and soon after that other playwrights' exposure to the proscenium stage is the idea of stage setting. The third is deployment of actors. When Bhave performed outdoors, it was on a natural or a built height with the audience sitting around. The movement of actors is governed by this arrangement, creating a direct dialogue between players and audience. The dialogue on the proscenium stage could not happen in quite the same way, but it then gave rise to the theatrical convention of frontality: the player always fronting the audience. And this is a convention from which Marathi theatre has still not liberated itself. In this connection I must recall the shocked gasp that went up in Ravindra Natya Mandir during the Moscow Art Theatre's production of Uncle Vanya. At one point, Uncle Vanya walks away towards the back, backing the audience, and with a very deft gesture throws his wine glass over his shoulder. The convention of frontality, had become so ingrained in the audience that now, since it had nothing to do with theatrical validity, this particular gesture and his walk away from the audience was construed as a breaking of propriety. To turn your back on the audience was to insult it, and the gasp that went up was a response to that!

[Pravin tells Shanta she has 1 minute, so she goes over to last bit]

Twice during the history of Marathi theatre, the cry has gone up for a house for theatre. This is something Sudhanva referred to – I didn't realise that the cry had also gone up in Delhi during the Drama Seminar. But in Maharashtra, twice. Once during the 100th year of Marathi theatre at the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh, which celebrated this centenary in a huge way. That is when the organisation pledged that it would raise money and build an indoor space. And when it was built, it was like your favourite daughter's wedding happening, because there was all the fanfare, there was pomp, there was a kind of religious awe about this thing. And there were politicians on the stage. Politicians have never been too far from Marathi theatre, right from the start, from the time of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. And here, this auditorium was inaugurated by Yashwant Rao Chavan.

Lastly, underlining the relationship between theatre space and theatre dependent community, is now the state of disuse into which this same Sahitya Sangh has fallen, because the Marathi speaker, who once lived in Girgaon, no longer lives there. The Marathis have sold out their chawls, their tenements, to other communities and moved to the northern and eastern suburbs of Mumbai. The communities that have replaced them in Girgaon have no use for theatre spaces; they are more keen on places from where they can carry on their business.

Last point which has to be made, and which could be an action point for the Forum – please note that there is no such animal as an architect specializing in theatre architecture. If you go into theatres that are built today, and find out that the toilet is next door to the performance space, and every time the flush is pulled the actor has to interrupt his lines, then you know why. So, I think really, we need to come down to the ground and decide that we have to have some way or the other, a course in theatre architecture in all the architectural schools in India so that we'll have better theatre spaces to work from. Thank you.