

[Presentation at Not-the-Drama-Seminar, Ninasam, Heggodu, March 22–26, 2008.]

What is to be Undone?

Sudhanva Deshpande

One of Lenin's most famous books is called *What is to be Done?* Lenin himself borrowed the title from a novel by Cherneshevsky. The novel, published in 1863, is call for a kind of ascetic radicalism in Russia at a difficult cusp as feudalism insisted on dying and capitalism refused to be born. Lenin's book is a political tract, and is aimed at explaining to workers the dangers of economism – the belief that economic demands themselves, in the absence of a political programme, can bring about fundamental change in society. Decades after Lenin's tract, Utpal Dutt chose the same title for his Shri Ram Memorial Lectures in Delhi, in which he made a fervent plea for a dynamic, popular, entertaining and political theatre. This is, then, an impressive and, I might say, intimidating lineage, and I will not pretend I belong there. Instead, in a gesture of both tribute and inversion, I choose to call this presentation 'What is to be Undone?', for it seems to me to be an appropriate follow up on 'Not the Keynote' address at 'Not the Drama Seminar'.

The cliché goes that theatre has no future, it lives forever in the present. But the present, goes the other cliché, is itself born of the womb of the past. What I wish to do here to reflect a bit on the early history of theatre, in order to make some points about where we are today. In so doing, the examples I choose will be mostly from the Marathi theatre, which I know a little about. Perhaps similar points can be made about other languages, perhaps not; I am not sure. In any case, the intention here is not to be panoramic or representative of every theatrical history; the intention is simply to bring up some resonances from the past about a present that we will discuss with some urgency in the coming four days.

1

In its inaugural year, the Marathi paper *Kesari*, established and edited by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, published a piece by Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, entitled *Natake karavi ki karu naye?* – should one do theatre or not.¹ Chiplunkar argued that those who wish that our country should tread the 'correct' or 'virtuous path' (*sumarg*) should help shape and stabilize the mind of the people. Like mercury, the human mind also needs to be stabilized. If it is not engaged in 'good' or 'proper' entertainment, it will stray. The human mind is naturally 'festive-loving' (*utsavpriya*), and if not engaged by more serious matters, there is no knowing where it will get entangled. Man needs entertainment, of course, but 'good' entertainment. This was the role of theatre. Naturally, then, he condemned the Tamasha and Lalit as being low and vulgar forms. This was hardly the first time such sentiments were being expressed. A good quarter-century earlier, in 1856, the journal *Dnyan Prakash*, commenting on a performance by the Sanglikar Natak Mandali, felt that the company has helped curb the interest in vulgar forms like the

¹ *Kesari*, I: 48, 1881.

Tamasha and Lalit and the frequency of these performances has gone down.² And it is not as if only 'low' forms like the Tamasha were looked down upon. Even a play like Kirloskar's *Shakuntal*, the first Marathi sangeet-natak, provoked controversy when it first opened in 1880. The journal *Induprakash* could not see the point behind doing a play that did not carry a 'message'.³ *Native Opinion*, another journal of the time, published two opinions on the play: one, while praising the play, felt that instead of presenting mythological tales, perhaps theatre should endeavour to depict the contemporary situation in the country, and when this happens, the real purpose of theatre would have been achieved. The other opinion was unambiguous – it praised the play, and felt that such plays were needed for the spiritual development of the people.⁴ Thank god, one is tempted to say, because otherwise the nineteenth century seems pretty austere. The poor Tamasha, however, found no backers, and was unanimously damned. Tamasha audiences, however, were oblivious to all this, and continued to happily subject their souls to moral degradation.

Vishnudas Bhave, universally regarded as the father of modern Marathi drama, saw his role as that of a regenerator: 'For a long time, national entertainment had stopped. It has now been re-kindled.'⁵ In 1861, when Vinayak Janardan Kirtane wrote the first 'historical' play in Marathi, *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe*, he made the Sutradhar say the following lines: 'O Vidushak, today I am going to take these people to a Marathi court . . . Which Marathi court? Not today's. Why should I take them to a court where . . . the kings are merely encaged parrots and do not even recognize the shadow of independence? I shall take them to the court of the senior Shrimant Madhavraosaheb Peshwa, who ruled as the son of the populace, at the mere mention of whose name Mussalmans would shudder and after whose death the entire Maharashtra desh became sad and lost its brilliance . . .'⁶ In a similar vein, the poet Gangadhar Ramchandra Mogre wrote a poem in 1882 urging Kirloskar to bring alive the heroes of Maharashtrian history in order to open the eyes of the people.⁷

With our modernity coming into its own, what changed was the question that began to be asked of theatre. The question was no longer how rasa can be created in performance and the spectator be given a satisfying aesthetic and emotional experience. The question now was: does theatre that does not have a political purpose have any right to exist? For the theatre practitioner of our times, this must seem a rather strange question, if not a question behind which lurks the terrifying shadow of authoritarianism. But the past is a foreign country, and they speak a different language there. What appears to us as a terrible colonial authoritarianism, could simply be an effort to grapple with the very difficult questions that the colonial encounter posed for a subject people as they embarked on their own quite complex (and often contradictory) transition to modernity.

² Quoted by N.K. Shanware, *Rajkiya Chalwal ani Marathi Natyasrushti*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1977, p. 5.

³ *Induprakash*, 31 October 1881.

⁴ *Native Opinion*, 6 November 1881.

⁵ Quoted in Shanware, p. 5.

⁶ Shanware, p. 11.

⁷ For the text of the poem, see Shanware, p. 16.

This also tells us something else quite interesting. In a recent, wide-ranging and excellent study, Aparna Dharwadker posits that ‘there is little significant theoretical or speculative criticism of theatre by nonpractitioners’, and that ‘despite the nationalist offensive, colonial Indian theatre remained preeminently a field of practice, not theory. Aside from some essays by Bharatendu Harishchandra, [Rabindranath] Tagore, and [Jaishankar] Prasad, critical discourse about theatre in this period remained secondary to performance or consisted of publicity materials and records of censorship.’⁸ What we have seen, however, is something quite different. During the colonial period, journals and periodicals are full of writings that express a certain anxiety about theatre and its social role; this anxiety is not purely ‘political’, but has something to say about dramatic forms (which is why forms like the Tamasha and Lalit are categorized as ‘low’ and ‘vulgar’); and that after Independence, there seems to be a noticeable shift away from social and political criticism to what Dharwadker calls ‘theoretical and speculative criticism’.

I wonder if this change reflects a change in the nature of theatre itself. Could it be that theatrical practice has tended towards more and more formal experimentation, at the expense of a connection with larger social and political concerns? If indeed that is the case, then is this a simple matter of theatrepersons suddenly saying to themselves, I need to bring in more politics in my theatre, or is it a much more complex process, related to where theatre gets done, and how?

2

The careers of modernity, nationalism, and theatre in Maharashtra were intricately interwoven, and developed in response to India’s increasing integration in the world capitalist system through the coercive aegis of colonialism. In other words, modern Marathi theatre was, in its moment of birth, simultaneously nationalist and capitalist.

Sometimes, theatre and nationalism entered into a joint venture. Thus, Kirloskar gave the publication rights to his plays *Shakuntal* and *Saubhadra* to the Aryabhushan Press, owned by nationalists Tilak, Agarkar and Apte. Tilak himself was a theatre aficionado, and the playwright Khadilkar – who worked as Tilak’s deputy on the editorial board of *Kesari* till Tilak’s death – says that the firebrand nationalist saw all his plays. Legend has it that Narayan Rajhans was christened Balgandharva by Tilak. At any rate, Tilak did attend some rehearsals of the Maharashtra Natak Mandali (the company that produced almost all of Khadilkar’s prose plays),⁹ and brought Sri Aurobindo and Lala Lajpat Rai to a performance of Khadilkar’s *Keechakvadh*, a fiery nationalist play that was subsequently banned by the colonial state under the infamous Dramatic Performances Act.¹⁰ The theatre-nationalism joint venture was a successful one. In 1921, after Tilak’s death, when Gandhi sought to raise money for the Tilak Swarajya Fund, superstars Balgandharva and Keshavrao Bhosale (ordinarily with separate companies) came together to star in

⁸ Aparna Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, pp. 66, 67.

⁹ As recalled by the actor Madhavrao Tipnis. See Chandrakant Martand Pradhan, ‘Madhavrao Tipnisanchya Smruti’, *Natyadarpan*, Diwali issue, 1975.

¹⁰ D.V. Amonkar, ‘Maharashtra Natak Mandali, 1904–1930’, *Natyadarpan*, Diwali issue, 1975.

Khadilkar's *Manapman*, for what is probably Marathi theatre's most celebrated single performance, which earned Rs 17,000.

Modern Marathi theatre, from its very birth, was a commercial, capitalist enterprise. This meant that theatre became more and more an urban enterprise. The significance of this has not, to the best of my knowledge, been theorized in the writings on Indian theatre (at least in the recent academic writing in English) because the nature of the change itself has not been fully understood.

The urbanity or urban base of modern Marathi theatre does not mean what we automatically assume it to mean: that it developed in Bombay and Pune. Far from it, as a matter of fact. Vishnudas Bhave's company was based in Sangli. The other major company of his time operated from Ichalkaranji, and had formed itself around the duo Balambhat Bapat and Babaji Shastri Datar. The first major Bombay-based company was the Amarchandvadikar Natak Mandali, established in 1855, a dozen years after Bhave's pioneering efforts. By this time, according to Ashok Ranade, there were at least eight established companies all over Maharashtra, and this number went up to about 35 by 1879.¹¹ The companies were based in towns like Kolhapur, Karad, Satara, Miraj, Belgaon, and so on. We could call this the urban hinterland of modern Marathi theatre. It is this urban hinterland that sustains the Marathi commercial theatre to this day. Ask any actor who works on the professional stage, and she will tell you that only about 25 to 30 per cent of performances take place in Bombay and Pune. The rest are in cities like Nagpur, Kolhapur, Solapur, Goa, Belgaon, Dharwad, Satara, Ichalkaranji, and so on. It is only recently that Bombay and Pune have started producing playwrights; the majority of an earlier generation of playwrights were born and at least partly educated in smaller towns. When Shreeram Lagoo turned professional, he acted with the superstar of his day, Kashinath Ghanekar. At his peak, for his really huge hits, Ghanekar had teams in half a dozen cities who'd be ready to mount the play at short notice. This meant that Ghanekar himself was the only one who traveled from town to town, touring!¹² And Akshara would agree that *Ninasam Tirugata* wouldn't be able to exist without a similar urban hinterland for the theatre in Karnataka. The same holds true for Hindi theatre, though somewhat differently. Too much discussion of Indian theatre turns out to be discussion of basically Hindi theatre, and Hindi theatre means, when you investigate a bit more closely, Delhi theatre. Yet, some of the most interesting Hindi theatre happens in cities other than Delhi: in Patna, in Bhopal, and even in Bombay.

The fact of the matter then is that theatre – whether professional or semi-professional, or even amateur – is sustained by this urban hinterland. If we wish to build a vibrant theatre culture in India, it is this urban hinterland that we need to build and nurture. We do the opposite. We valorize the metropolis, and are disdainful of the hinterland. This attitude is internalized by our actors, directors and writers. If you are an actor in Begusarai, you want to move to Patna. If you are an actor in Patna, you want to move to Delhi. And if you are an actor in Delhi, you want to move to Bombay! And that is how capitalism itself grows as well: through the increasing colonization of the village by the city.

¹¹ Ashok Ranade, *Stage Music of Maharashtra*, New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1986, p. 5.

¹² Shreeram Lagoo, *Lamaan*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 2004.

If theatre is to prosper, the lure of the metropolis needs to be undone.

3

The fact that modern Marathi theatre was a capitalist enterprise had another long term implication. As ticketing became important, theatre moved indoors, to playhouses, under the proscenium arch.

The elevated stage, the front and drop curtains, and wings now served to separate audiences from performers. The stage was now lit, while the spectators sat in darkness. Within a span of about 25 years, all these innovations had become part of the Marathi stage. The first auditoria came up in Bombay (1842) and Pune (1854). Front curtains appear to have become common by about 1865. Vertically operated curtains became the norm by about 1873. In this year, the Kolhapurkar Mandali began to use 'scenery' curtains. Around this date, box scenes, made up of flats forming the back and sides as opposed to an open set consisting of backcloth and wings, were introduced in Bombay. Gas lighting was installed at the Grant Road Theatre in Bombay in 1866 by an Italian company, at its own expense. At other places, kerosene lamps were introduced for lighting around 1875.

This meant, on the one hand, that the theatre became more and more a showcase for the actor. The modern techniques of stage design and lighting could focus on the actor and foreground him in ways that were hitherto unprecedented. The capitalist market, and these technical innovations, enabled the birth of the star system, which was entrenched by the early years of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the proscenium stage meant that the nature of spectatorship changed. Vishnudas Bhave's audiences around the middle of the nineteenth century 'used to exclaim aloud, advise the actors, cry out at the entry of the demon or even faint at his sight'.¹³ Within a quarter century, this had changed: the spectator-as-participant had been replaced by spectator-as-onlooker. Ashok Ranade describes the change thus: 'A gradual, weaning-away process takes place before a participant can become an onlooker. Stage-phase brings with it a new set of protocol and it contrasts perceptibly with behaviour-norms etc. associated with the other theatric phases.'¹⁴

It goes without saying that the advent of the proscenium was a radical change in Indian theatre; it could be argued, quite persuasively, that it signaled the advent of Indian theatrical modernism. The entire history of twentieth-century theatre could be read as a history of the proscenium.

Or could it? As I prepared my notes for this presentation, it occurred to me that the history of twentieth-century Indian theatre is as much a history of the proscenium as a history of the struggle against the proscenium. The attack on the proscenium has come from many sources. Let me take only a few, more or less random examples.

¹³ Ranade, *Stage Music*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Ranade, *Stage Music*, pp. 4–5.

When Shombhu Mitra quit the IPTA in 1943 [check date], the ostensible reason was his insistence that *Nabanna* be performed only on a revolving stage; he would not consent to the play being performed on even a non-revolving stage, much less on makeshift stages in the open. It is not my intention here to imply that there were no other reasons for Shombhu Mitra's split with the IPTA, but I think it tells us something that the matter on which things came to a head was in fact the form of the proscenium stage.

At the 1956 Drama Seminar of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, which Aparna Dharwadker calls 'the first sustained exercise in historical self-positioning', some of the most vocal and influential interventions – by Mulk Raj Anand, Balraj Sahni and Prabhakar Machwe – argued 'that colonial and late-colonial theatre institutions are no longer usable and anticipate[d] a future theatre radically unrelated to its colonial past. . . . [This] attack on colonial theatre forms follows mainly from the perception that they were imperialist impositions, destructive of the indigenous aesthetic and performance traditions that had prevailed for more than a millennium. Nothing symbolizes this process of displacement more powerfully than the conventions of Western naturalism and their spatial embodiment, the urban proscenium stage.'¹⁵ In Mulk Raj Anand's words, 'The most important problem of the modern era in the theatre is the basic contradiction between the symbolism of the Indian heritage in drama, with its poetic realism, and the naturalism of the Western theatre which percolated into India, devoid of its own organic sensibility, poetry and mechanical perfection.'¹⁶

Mulk Raj Anand was a writer, not a practicing theatreperson, and he rails against the 'Western theatre' with the zeal typical of a non-practitioner. In his Shri Ram Memorial Lecture, Utpal Dutt took a more complex and dialectical view of the matter: 'In order to re-establish an epic-style theatre we must first of all rid the stage of those frivolous structures called box-sets.' He called the European theatre 'a wonderful thing . . . if we can hack away from it the trivialities inflicted upon it by the upstart bourgeoisie.' He felt that young theatre enthusiasts need not rush about breaking the laws of theatre, but learn to 'use them at will for various effects.' 'But to use the theatre we must master its craft. We must trace the history of every part of it, the proscenium, the trapdoors, the apron, the cyclorama, the teasers, the painted scene, the constructed set, the curtain, and find out how and why it was used.' The challenge is to 'rediscover their mobility, their vitality, not to violate them.'¹⁷

Then there was Badal Sircar and his "Third Theatre," which was a self-conscious revolt against the proscenium. As Badal Sircar put it, "We had accepted the city theatre – the proscenium stage and the auditorium, the sets and the spotlights, in short the theatre imported from Britain more than a century back, and thereby we had accepted the fact that theatre cost money."¹⁸ In its stead, Badal Sircar created what he eventually termed "free theatre." "Free" has two meanings: "The first . . . that one does not have to pay a

¹⁵ Aparna Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, pp. 37, 38

¹⁶ Mulk Raj Anand, *Drama Seminar* [get exact ref.]

¹⁷ Utpal Dutt, *What is to be Done?*, Shri Ram Memorial Lecture, New Delhi: SRC, pp. 37–39.

¹⁸ Badal Sircar, *Voyages in the Theatre*, Shri Ram Memorial Lecture, New Delhi: SRC, 1993, p. 6.

certain amount of money The second . . . [that] there is no bondage, no dependence, no domination. To us, free theatre encompasses both the meanings, one leading to the other.”¹⁹

Street theatre of the left was also motivated by similar concerns, though Safdar Hashmi was careful to underline that he was not ideologically opposed to the proscenium itself: “some exponents of street theatre have tried to counterpoise it against proscenium theatre, dubbing the latter as a bourgeois, decadent and constricting genre, condemning it as a theatre of irrelevance, of airy-fairy philosophy, of frivolity [It] is absurd to speak of a contradiction between proscenium and street theatres. Both belong equally to the people. . . . Theatre cannot be dependent on the frills and trappings which surround it. Drama is born with force and beauty in any empty space whether square, rectangular or circular.” At the same time, the proscenium, for him, was not the apogee of theatrical development: “Theatre did not begin with the proscenium, nor has its evolution reached its final stage with it.”²⁰

A few years ago, when Prasanna edited a special number of the NSD’s journal *Theatre India* on ‘How “National” is our National Theatre?’, Chandradasan made the following point in his intervention: ‘The proscenium and safe box stage with its well-furnished light arrangements and FOHs [Front of House lights] are not the working reality of India. Indian theatre is more representational than presentational. And the audience has a friendly and participatory role in the execution as well as the understanding of the theatre.’²¹

I am sure we all have strong views on the proscenium stage, both for and against. My intention here is not to take up cudgels one way or another. What strikes me, though, is that there is virtually no serious study of the issue in all the critical literature I’ve read. No one, at least in English, has traced the history of the proscenium in India, and related it to the history of capitalist growth, the cultural geography of our cities, the processes of inclusion and exclusion of various social groups in theatrical activity, the intervention of the state and its cultural institutions in building and running proscenium stage auditoria, the role of the private sector, the development of acting and writing styles, the history of experimentation within and without the proscenium stage, the economics of mounting plays in the available auditoria in our cities, the availability of alternate spaces, and so on. It is quite striking that apart from Ninasam, which has carried out an extensive survey of theatre spaces in Karnataka, no other institution has, to my knowledge, taken even this first simple step towards facilitating a deeper study. All our talk of revitalizing theatre practice in India today will come to naught unless we understand, in some depth, the relationship of theatrical practice with the spaces where plays can be prepared and performed.

4

¹⁹ Badal Sircar, *Voyages in the Theatre*, p. 9.

²⁰ Safdar Hashmi, “The First Ten Years of Street Theatre,” in Sudhanva Deshpande (ed.), *Theatre of the Streets: The Jana Natya Manch Experience*, New Delhi: Janam, 2007, pp. 15–16.

²¹ Chandradasan, *Theatre India*, 11, 2005, p. 79.

Then there is the question of the “folk.” The late nineteenth-early twentieth century commentators – Chiplunkar and others – are more or less unanimous on this. Forms like Tamasha and Lalit are “low” and “vulgar,” and audiences need to be weaned away from them. By the time we come to the IPTA in the early 1940s, there is a complete reversal. Now, folk forms are seen as the “authentic” forms of the people, and urban, middle class artistes are urged to learn from these forms and compose in them in order to win the trust of the masses. It has become something of a fashion, of late, to deride IPTA on this. It is argued, for instance, that IPTA’s interest in “folk” was instrumentalist, only to win the political affiliation of the people to the communist cause, and that IPTA activists themselves were mostly urban, educated, middle class, more or less disconnected with the rural context. Personally, I see nothing particularly wrong with either of these. IPTA’s emphasis on folk forms was the result of a deep commitment to a socially and politically responsive art, an art that cares deeply for the majority of the working people. In our own times, as an intense agrarian crisis has claimed at least 150,000 lives in suicides alone over the last 15 years, we note that there is virtually no reflection of this in the theatre of our metropolises; worse, as Makarand Sathe’s play *Te Pudhe Gele*, which we have invited to this seminar underlines, a culture of deep apathy and indifference has overtaken our urban middle class. As for the charges of political instrumentalisation, again, who can say with all confidence that the Sangeet Natak Akademi’s or the Ford Foundation’s cause is more benign than the IPTA’s? In any case, reading some of the recent writings one gets the feeling that to criticize IPTA’s political partisanship is not so much to criticize IPTA as to criticize the very idea of a politically-committed art, not in the past, but *today*. Lastly, critiques of IPTA also tend to miss IPTA’s own complex and fascinating relationship with the *forms* it took up – this relationship was never a simple, straightforward one, and there was a great deal of experimentation that went with it. As Sumangala Damodaran’s ongoing research on IPTA music indicates, composers like Hemanga Biswas and Salil Choudhuri moved deftly and skillfully between at least four styles – the Indian classical, the Indian folk, the western classical, the Soviet agitprop – often mixing them up in startling ways. Were it not popular, one would have called it avant-gardist.

The Drama Seminar also spent a fair amount of time on the folk. Suresh Awasthi presented a paper on “Hindi Folk Drama,” and Dina Pathak on “Bhavai: The Gujarati Folk Drama,” while others, like Balraj Sahni, Mulk Raj Anand and Prabhakar Machwe, discussed folk theatre in their presentations.

Habib Tanvir, a member of the IPTA in the 1940s, but not a participant at the Drama Seminar, arrived at the folk traversing his own path distinct from both the IPTA and the Drama Seminar participants, by bringing to Delhi his first batch of six Chhattisgarhi actors in 1958, barely two years after the Drama Seminar. What people often forget when talking about Habib Tanvir is that he was not after folk *forms* as much as he was after rural *actors*; at any rate, that was, and remains, his primary motivation in going to the village.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi organized a “Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Folk Theatre” in 1971. The impetus towards this came from Suresh Awasthi, who had become Secretary of the Akademi in 1965 and who, along with Nemichandra Jain, was the chief ideologue of the “theatre of the roots” movement.²² In the early 1980s, the Ford Foundation began funding projects that sought to document the vanishing folk forms so that they could be used by contemporary theatrepersons in their work. These early Ford grants went to the Indian National Theatre in Bombay, the Madhya Pradesh Kala Parishad in Bhopal and the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial College in Udipi. The SNA then initiated in 1984 an annual scheme to assist young directors to develop productions using stylistic conventions drawn from folk theatre. In 1992, Ford initiated its Theatre Laboratory Project, which sought to counter the growing regional chauvinism in India by encouraging about a dozen theatre “laboratories” to experiment with folk theatre. Grants under the TLP went to Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury’s The Company which worked with the Naqqals; the Forum for Theatre Laboratory Theatres of Manipur, an umbrella organization committed to opening Manipuri drama to new theatre concepts; the Koothu-pattarai Trust, under the leadership of N. Muthuswamy, which sought to use therukoothu to evolve a physical theatre; Nandikar, for its work with local children’s theatre; Natyayogam, under the playwright K. Reghu for its work with performers and audiences in rural Kerala; the Jammu-based Natrang for its experimental “theatre-of images”; Bansi Kaul’s Rang Vidhushak experimented with the clown character; Root Trichur worked with Kerala folk theatre forms; as did Spandana in Karanataka, under B. Jayashree; Probhir Guha’s Living Theatre Laboratory sought to create a “theatre of living feelings”; and Kerala’s Ankanam, under actor-director K.C. Manavendranath sought to bring about a confrontation of contemporary theatre and Kerala’s dance-drama and martial art forms. While the SNA’s folk thrust has been written about – though not adequately – I am not aware of a single book-length study of Ford’s interventions in theatre or in the area of culture more generally. Even Vasudha Dalmia’s recent work, *Poetics, Plays and Performances*, which discusses the SNA at some length in the section “The Nation and its ‘Folk’,” makes not a *single* mention of Ford. I find this extraordinary.

I would like to emphasize two aspects of the SNA-Ford thrust. One, that it was about urban theatrepersons, more or less disconnected with the rural setting, groping for “authenticity” in their theatre. Two, that the SNA-Ford thrust was deeply ideological and because it emphasized the formal aspects – the song and the dance, to put it unkindly – at the expense of the text, it resulted in a profound depoliticization. The fact that the SNA scheme was specifically for *young* theatre directors, indicates that there was a conscious effort to shape the future of Indian theatre along this depoliticized trajectory.

In the 70s again, the “folk” got entwined with “Brecht.” Why one has to put the poor man in quotes is to point towards the fact that by the time he was imported into India, Brecht bore little resemblance to the anti-fascist communist of the 1930s and 40s. Here, in India,

²² Though let it also be said that in general, the ideologue tends to be more puritanical than the practitioner, and the participants at the Round Table – Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Ebrahim Alkazi, to name a few – were more circumspect about adopting the “theatre of the roots” slogan. See Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: OUP, pp. 173–77.

he was embraced by people who had little to do with Marxism, and even less with the communist movement – Vijaya Mehta, Ebrahim Alkazi, Amal Allana, to name only a few. Brecht became attractive to them for a whole range of reasons. Let me list a few of them, not in the order of importance. Brecht was projected first by the East Germans, who sent M.S. Sathyu and Shama Zaidi to the Berliner Ensemble in the early 1960s, and following Cold War logic, the West Germans began pushing Brecht quite aggressively through its Goethe Institut. Since the Berliner Ensemble was located in East Berlin though, and also because of the exertions of the Weimar Theatre director Fritz Bennewitz, Brecht’s association in the Indian mind with East Germany remained stronger. Brecht boosted our ego, by admitting that he had borrowed heavily from the classical eastern theatre traditions – he was far more familiar with the Chinese than with the Indian, but we can let that pass. Brecht allowed us to sing and dance, which we love to do anyway, but with Brecht we could pretend that our own exoticisation of the folk was in fact avant-gardist. More importantly, we could break away from the proscenium box set and the dramaturgy that went with it. As Alkazi put it: “Brecht has the greatest relevance to the Indian theatre today, not only on account of the content of his plays, but particularly because of their form. He has broken away from the closed form of the well made 3-act play and chiefly as a result of his intensive study of the classical Indian, the Chinese and Japanese theatres, he has evolved the loose epic style. He has used such devices of our own ancient theatres as the narrator, the chorus, song, music and poetry, to bring back colour and vitality to the insipid prose theatre of today.”²³

All this happened at exactly the same time that the Ford Foundation and the SNA were promoting “folk” and the Indian state was taking its first tentative steps towards globalization by organizing the famous “Festivals of India” in various countries. Brecht in India is a long and complex story, deserving a book-length study, or at least a doctoral dissertation. All I want to do for now is to point out that the upshot of all this was a complete and thorough deradicalisation of Brecht. To quote just one example, listen to this from Amal Allana: “Although I had studied Brecht in detail before, I only now began to understand the validity of his approach. My previous work had been contentwise non-committal towards the audience, revealing more a concern for aesthetics.”²⁴ It is amazing, isn’t it, that in 1982, after she had spent two years at the Berliner Ensemble, come back to India and directed at least six Brecht productions, she could say, with disarming candidness, that her work had been “contentwise non-committal towards the audience.”

As government and foundation funding for it has receded, the “theatre of the roots” movement has more or less run out of steam today. The roots themselves, the agrarian economy and social structure, are in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. Rural arts as a whole, not just theatre, cannot survive, let alone thrive, if the people that nourish it continue to die. The worst of it is that nobody seems to give a damn.

5

²³ Quoted in Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 186–87.

²⁴ Quoted in Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 188.

Exactly a century ago, in July 1908, Tilak was put on trial for his “seditious” editorials in *Kesari*. He was sentenced to six years’ imprisonment. In response, the Bombay working class went on a massive strike for six days, one for each year of the sentence. As many as 76 out of 85 textile mills struck work for a full week. The colonial regime called out the police and the army. According to official reports, 16 workers were killed, and nearly 50 wounded. Most workers, in the early 1900s, were illiterate. And yet, at least sixteen workers laid down their lives for editorials that thousands of others could not even read. This was the first mass political demonstration of working class unity for issues that did not, strictly speaking, concern them and their class – in the language of *What is to be Done?*, it could be said that the Indian working class was going beyond economism and gaining political consciousness. Lenin noted this development with satisfaction.

And now the twist in the tale – Tilak himself was incarcerated for editorials he did not write! They were written by Tilak’s editorial colleague, Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, among the leading playwrights of the time. Perhaps fittingly, the hidden hand of the playwright moved many, many actors to acts of courage and sacrifice.

Khadilkar himself earned the wrath of the colonial regime as well, when his play *Keechakvadh* was banned in 1910 under the notorious Dramatic Performances Act of 1876. Much has been said and written about this Act, and I don’t wish to go into all that here. Suffice it to say that in most states, the Act remains in force, under one form or another.

In Delhi, theatre groups have to seek police permission as well as a tax exemption certificate from the entertainment tax authorities, but *censorship* – where every playscript is minutely scrutinized – is not strictly followed. In some states, like Maharashtra and Gujarat, ordinary theatre groups face censorship routinely, every time they have to perform inside an auditorium. In Gujarat, I am told, the Censor Board is a very large body and you need to have the play passed by any one member. There are, of course, brokers who will ‘arrange’ this. In Ahmedabad, when Fade-in Theatres was doing a play on the riots of 2002, they had the play sent to one of the very few secular individuals on the Board, and were thus able to procure a certificate. Perhaps at some stage we will hear that story from Saumya, who is present here.

But as social pathologies of one kind or another grip us, as violence – both random and directed – engulfs us, we are increasingly faced with censorship imposed by goons on the streets. The sort of thuggery one sees the Shiv Sena indulge in has become all too common, and now the nephew seems hell-bent on outdoing the uncle. The theatre group I belong to, Jana Natya Manch, has faced several attacks, one of which had tragic consequences. That attack did not come from the Hindu Right, but, it is useful to remind ourselves, from the Congress. This is the same party that ushered in the Emergency in 1975, and launched a semi-fascist terror in West Bengal which killed, amongst others, Ashis Chatterjee of Theatre Unit in 1972, and Prabir Datta of Silhouette in 1974.

Now, there is no doubt that by and large, the theatre community in India has remained secular. But what happens if it doesn't? Recall that play, *Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy*, which came into prominence some years ago. There were protests by Congressmen against the play, and demands that the play be banned. I am sure much can be said in favour of such a ban, but I personally do not favour banning such plays. I believe that if someone really wants to put up a third rate play, he should have the right to do so. We have to oppose these things politically, not by invoking laws that are more likely to be used against us.

There is no question, however, that the biggest danger to performers in today's India comes from the Hindu Right. In August–September 2003, Habib Tanvir and his Naya Theatre actors were made the target of vicious, sustained, and pinpointed attacks in several cities of Madhya Pradesh for a play called *Ponga Pandit*, also called *Jamadarin*. Interestingly, this is a play neither written nor directed by Habib Tanvir, nor by his actors. This is an old Nacha piece, and has been in performance since at least about 1935. Naya Theatre has been doing the play since the 1960s. Tellingly, however, the play first came under attack in the immediate aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and since then has been attacked a number of times in a number of places, including Britain. However, there are ways you can hoodwink the fascists. In 2003 in Bhopal, Habib Tanvir was scheduled to perform *Jis Lahore Nahi Dekhya Voh Janmya Hi Nahi*, an anti-communal play. Habib Tanvir of course makes the Muslim fundamentalist say everything that your friendly neighbourhood Bajrang Dal goon would, but the Hindu Right cannot object to it, since it comes from the mouth of a Muslim. Anyway, after the performance, the organizers asked Habib saheb to introduce the actors. He said, "*Hum to kalakar hain, hamara parichay hamari kala hai*. So would you like to listen to some folk songs?" The audience said yes. The actors sang. Then Habib saheb said, 'We also have a little Nacha play. Would you like to see that?' The audience said yes. The protestors from the VHP and the BJP were outside the auditorium, and had no idea that the actors in the meanwhile were doing *Ponga Pandit* inside! On another day, as the actors were going to perform at a certain town where the VHP was waiting for them, Habib saheb stopped at a village and asked the villagers: 'Would you like to see a Nacha play?' Some of the villagers recognized his actors, and said yes. A makeshift stage was created at the chaupal, someone organized a couple of halogens and microphones, and the villagers watched *Ponga Pandit* with great enjoyment, as they had done for decades. And there was the occasion in Vidisha where I was present. When Habib saheb asked the audience, 'Would you like to see the play?', one single person got up and said no, and the police, armed to the teeth, moved with amazing alacrity to vacate the entire auditorium. Habib saheb watched this happen in silence, and said in the end: 'We have come to perform the play, and we will. Even if there is no one watching it.' And he did. The only spectators present were the filmmaker Sanjay Maharishi and I!

Five aspects of this attack stand out.

One, that it is relentless and repetitious. They pursue you all over the place, in every city and town and village. In the process, they seek to simply tire you out.

Two, these attacks get wide publicity in the press and so on. This is important for them, since it creates an impression that something is wrong with the *play* – but also because it creates an overall atmosphere of fear. When terror squads begin attacking works of art with regularity and success, the artist himself or herself begins to reformulate his or her creative expression for fear of offending someone or the other. Most such reformulations do not appear to be big compromises, and there is always some factor that justifies the compromise. But no matter how invisible, no matter how intangible, self-censorship *is* a form of censorship. It is a tribute to Habib saheb's courage that he did not allow this to happen to him, but we all know of other artists, celebrated and otherwise, who wilted. Recently, a publisher friend found that a book on women in the Shiv Sena was not being distributed in Bombay by her distributor, who was candid enough to admit that he did not fancy his showroom being smashed up.

Three, the state apparatus almost always colludes with the fascists under the guise of maintaining 'law and order'.

Four, it *is* possible to resist this kind of censorship with a combination of street smartness, guts, and sheer insolence. And theatre is a potent medium for this resistance, since it can become quite agile and unencumbered by technology.

And five, we often view this as an attack on the freedom of expression of the *artist*, which of course it is. But it is also an attack on the freedom of expression of the *spectators*, who, in the act of watching a play, are *also expressing themselves*. We often lose sight of this fact. And we simply cannot afford to, since it is the *people* who will protect the artist in the end. As Brecht put it: 'There is only one ally against the growth of barbarism: the people on whom it imposes these sufferings. Only the people offer any prospects. Thus it is natural to turn to them, and more necessary than ever to speak their language.'

The question of freedom of expression encompasses the whole of society, the toiling people in particular, for whom it translates into the right to protest their miserable existence. And this is the first right to be curtailed in any authoritarian setup. It is not a coincidence that precisely at the time that the question of censorship of art has burst upon us like this, there have also been attacks, judicial attacks I might add, on the workers right to protest and strike. There is a connection here that we'd do well to think about. The workers understand this. Sixteen workers gave their lives in that distant July for Tilak's right to publish editorials which most of them could not even read. In my own experience, I have seen how thousands upon thousands of workers and others raised their voice in protest and anger at the brutal murder of Safdar Hashmi in 1989. It can be argued that without *that* protest, the protest of the artists and intellectuals may not have amounted to anything more than a few photographs in some newspapers. We are not in this alone. Our strategy to fight censorship will have to revolve around the larger unity of artists with the working people. Our art must address them, must speak their language. This is of course not easy. But it can be learnt. What needs to be undone is the culture of indifference.

It is a question of survival. *Our* survival.