

Sundar Sarukkai:

I see we are in a very difficult situation. Hopefully at the end of this very short intervention, maybe you would see the activist role of theory, or the inherent activism present in theory/ theoretical reflection and philosophical reflection. I began this question yesterday, to the wonderful session on social theatre, by asking the question what distinguishes their act as theatre? What is it that differentiated them from people who went and taught, or NGOs, or political activists, and so on. What is it in their act that actually makes it theatrical?

Makarand in his paper did address the question. Let me problematize it in this way. We did not just watch theatre last night. We watched at least two theatrical performances today. One was Sainath, the other is Shiv. I want to ask, in what sense did Sainath and Shiv not perform to you? What sense were they not monologues? Is there a need to separate their performance here as theatre as against what we formally see as theatre?

And I want to come to it in a different direction. I want to talk about a personal experience. An experience which talks about the difficulty of writing about pathologies. Very briefly this was about a very important story on Einstein which broke a few decades ago, about Einstein's daughter who he never acknowledged in his lifetime. And his estate **tried**, decades later, to stop letters regarding it leaking out. Then in the 90s there was a book on it. In 2005, when everywhere they were celebrating the centenary of the "miracle year" of 1905, I wanted to reflect on Einstein in a very different way. So what I did was wrote a play called *Not An Ordinary Man*. It is a phrase from Einstein's letter to his son, with whom he had a very troubled relationship. One of his sons, became a schizophrenic and the other one was totally estranged from him. And we had a production of it, with just three characters in it. After the first performance, the audience was split exactly into two. Men, particularly the scientists, were extremely upset. Women responded to the play in a very different manner. A very well known scientist who was also at our institute said that you've destroyed my last icon in science.

It bothered me to some extent, because that was not the aim of that play or that's what I thought was not the aim of that play. And the next performance we did, since there was some demand for it, we tried consciously to project the fact that the play is fictional, that its not really about Einstein and his daughter. It didn't work. People still thought we were talking about Einstein and his daughter. People's emotional response could not go beyond the fact that we were just projecting a completely fake story. What is it in theatre that allows us to go beyond this projection of fakeness, into believing that there is some essential core about reality? We invoke the idea of live performance and its power, and so on. But there is one aspect of it which captures in a sense the essential heart of theatre. And that is the expression that theatre is the art of faking it.

This is so obvious that it should not surprise **anyone**. Theatre is not just the art of faking, but it's a self conscious art of continuous faking. I'm invoking the notion of art of faking, because theatre is an art which distinguishes it from the notions of fake that we keep seeing. And the reason why I think this is of great significance, to our understanding of what theatre is, is because we access the real. We can access the real cognitively only through our interaction with the fake. I think this has a very significant relation to the question of violence. Because if our understanding of the real is through the understanding of the fake, then there is a very interesting relation between violence and theatre.

And I just very quickly, want to draw our attention to yesterday's street theatre, a very powerful performance.<sup>1</sup> Let me just look at the character of Bahubali. We were laughing at his antics, we were saying "Thank you, Guruji" instead of him, and so on. Whom were we responding to? It's obvious we are not responding to Bahubali. What we are laughing at and enjoying is the fake presence of Bahubali in the embodiment of Sudhanva. But it's very important that there is no access to Bahubali for me, other than through Sudhanva. If that real Bahubali comes with that club, we'll all be running from here. We'll not be clapping and laughing with him. Theatre allows us that mediation to touch what we cannot touch.

What is it that you want us to engage with, why? What is the presentation mode of this whole sequence on the stage? This comes finally to connect to what Shiv was asking. This is an important point. When we understand that I cannot engage with Bahubali other than through Sudhanva and my repeated engagement is what allows me a glimpse into what Bahubali could be, what the nature of that atrocity could be, then we understand why among all things in theatre, the strongest point of resistance is through faking violence.

Violence, and atrocities perpetrated by violence, are seen as something profound, something disturbing to us. Therefore there is a great guilt about faking it on stage, in a very fundamental sense. There's a difficulty which the director and the actors have to grasp when they take something which is so profoundly disturbing as violence and fake it, knowing well that they are faking it.

And what that does is that it problematizes the representation of violence on stage. Therefore, the liberation from this problem comes when you realize theatre is self-conscious faking and that you actually have to self-consciously fake violence repeatedly. And in a sense it comes back to what Shiv was reminding us about, the inability to create drama around Bhopal and Orissa and so on.

There is so much guilt about the violence involved. And there is this resistance to fake it in very profound terms, which theatre can do. And that, that resistance, makes it very difficult to actually thematize and perform very specific characters of violence on stage. I think it's part of the larger problem of theatre's relationship with violence and the relationship with the fake which actually in a sense explains the whole question about the inability to dramatize Bhopal and Orissa.

I conclude therefore by saying, now we know why Shiv and Sainath were not acting. Because they were not self-consciously faking anything. They were presenting themselves as who they are. To me, a very important liberation of theatre is its conscious acceptance of this importance of faking, and engaging with conscious faking in very different ways.

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<sup>1</sup> *Yeh Dil Mange More, Guruji* by Jana Natya Manch, a play originally produced in response to the pogrom in Gujarat in 2002.