Epic Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India | Manohar Khushalani

Event: A Talk by Prof. Paula Richman
Learning from Performance: Epic Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India
Venue: Seminar Rooms I & II, Kamaladevi Complex at IIC
Date: Sept. 7 2013
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Paula Richman, Danforth Professor of South Asian Religions at Oberlin
College in Ohio, USA, gave a talk on Learning from Performance using Epic
Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India. Supporting her as
the moderator was Prof. Rustom Bharucha, from the School of Arts and
Aesthetics, JNU, where Paula is also doing a short term Fellowship.
Richman's passion for Ramayana is well known, so much so, that her name
has become synonymous with the topic. Paula has travelled to many parts of
the world in hot pursuit of the 'Many Ramayanas ', which is

also the title of
one of her books. According to her, people for whom Ramayana is central
now live throughout the globe in countries as diverse as South Africa,
Trinidad, Surinam United Kingdom, Australia, USA, Canada, parts of Europe,
besides South East Asia, “it has indeed become a global text as well as a
global piece of theatre” she added. But the subject of her current research
was South India.

She began her talk with a Tamil ‘Morning Sickness Song’, relating to Queen
Kausalya’s condition when she was pregnant with her son Rama. The song
describes rituals that King Dasharatha and other women performed to
support her during her pregnancy, and her food cravings too. One day she
wants murukku, then idli, as another woman wants dosas! Idlis in Ayodhya?
Sounds weird, but, Tamilians can relate more easily to pregnant women who
crave for local dishes. Indian folklore believes in anthropomorphism. It bring
Gods closer by imagining that they behave like humans.

Paula also discussed a Kattaikkuttu play called RamaRavana. It expressed
the yearning for virtuous governance. One of its songs talks about how
people are still waiting to have an ideal, fair, and compassionate leader rule
– somewhat reminiscent of Ram Rajya.

Richman hopped from one topic to another as she gushed about

Yakshagana
dance-dramas of coastal Karnataka and finally, about how the legendary
actress Usha Nangiar enacted the role of Mandodari in one of her
performances.

Her underlining thrust was that live performances offer new ways of
understanding the experiences of Ramayana characters.

A New Paradigm of Development

TALK: *Sustainable Development – Imperatives for India*
Speaker: Dr. R.K. Pachauri
Chair : Professor P.S. Ramakrishnan
October 30

The developmental model of advanced nations based upon technological innovations that provided goods and services at less cost had resulted in the over-exploitation of natural resources, thus endangering the eco-system and supplanting human values by emphasising consumption and possession. The finiteness of resources, projected by the Club of Rome study, remained unacknowledged. The hazard of seeking infinite growth led to climatic change which would grow worse if ignored. Dr. Pachauri, chairman of the Inter-Government Group on Climate Change, is uniquely qualified to raise an alarm caused by the reduction of Arctic sea ice, thus raising the sea level by almost one metre, a threat to the island nations of the Maldives and Kiribati.

In order to deal with threats, he proposed a change in paradigm, out-of-the-box thinking, and solutions that cause less strain on natural resources. Since resources are not available for power plants and transmission losses make technology unaffordable for the poor, he opts for micro-grids that would provide lighting, perfect combustion with a blower that increases the efficiency of cooking with improved stoves, and the churning of milk with solar devices. He bids for public transport that would reduce the demand for fossil fuels and strain upon imports.

Whereas there are diverse agents of change at multiple layers in society, the government must take the initiative in creating healthy competition among innovators by assuring the demand of substantial quantities to encourage entrepreneurs to invest in technologies. The state pollution control boards ought to be accountable to people and not the government alone. A different kind of leadership that is visionary, responsible, and dedicated to humanitarian impulses is required for creating public awareness of hazards, dissemination of success stories, encouraging public transport, and water harvesting. India can surely show the way.

• P.S. BAWA

Epics and Theatre Traditions

TALK: *Learning from Performance – Epic Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India*
Speaker: Professor Paula Richman
Chair: Professor Rustom Bharucha
Collaboration: Lila Foundation, September 7

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