AIKYAM 2025 Concludes at Ajanta–Ellora with a Vibrant Tribute to UN@80

By Kanika Bansal

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Artists, scholars and delegates from over 30 countries convened over three days to celebrate India’s heritage and shared global values

India’s tourism sector is witnessing strong growth, with 20.57 million international arrivals and over 2.94 billion domestic tourist visits in 2024, reinforcing the country’s global cultural influence

In 2024, Maharashtra recorded the highest foreign tourist inflow among all Indian states, receiving 3.71 million

international visitors

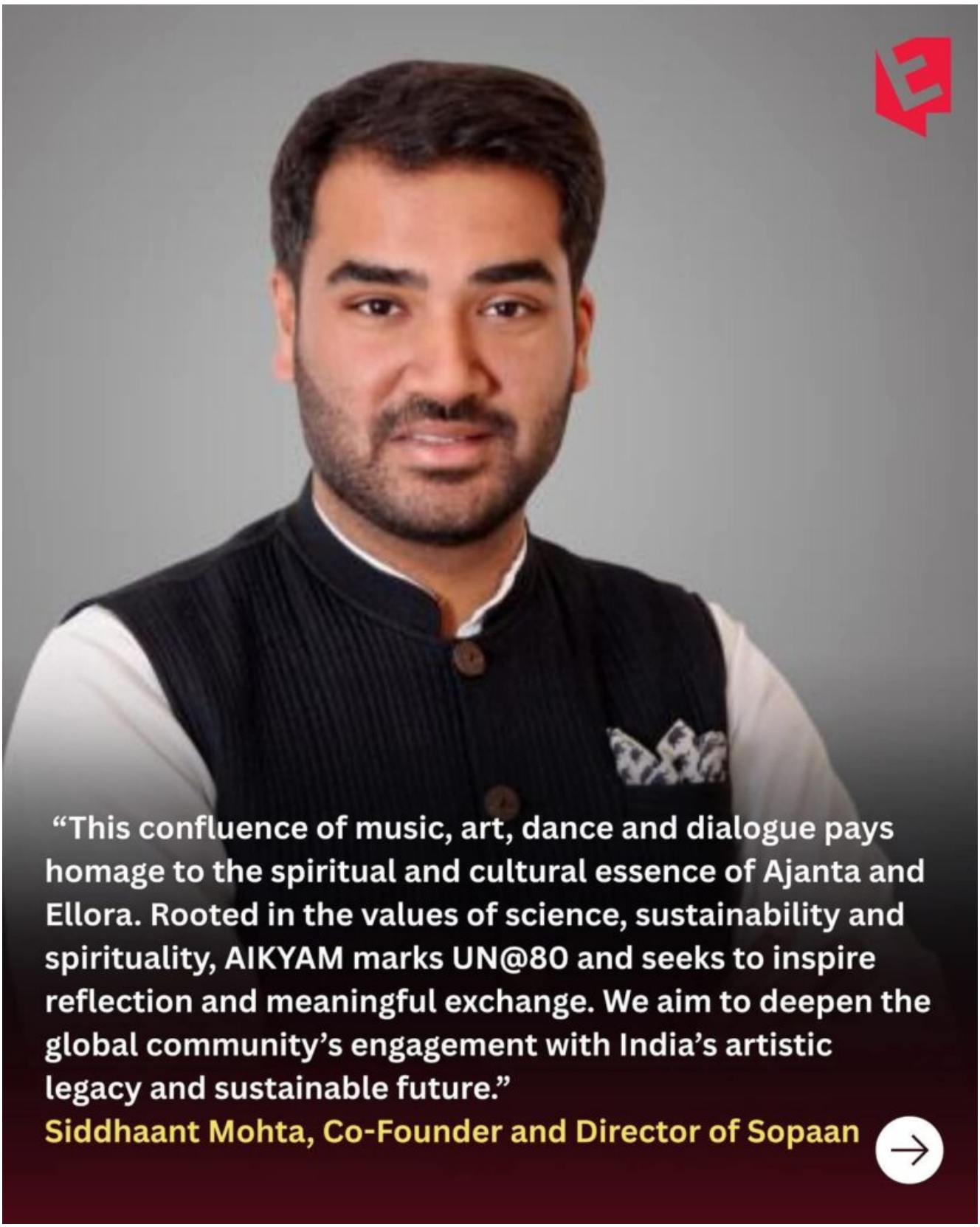
Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (Aurangabad), Maharashtra, November 22, 2025: Sopaan’s flagship cultural initiative, AIKYAM 2025, successfully concluded its three-day celebration (November 21-23, 2025) today at the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Ajanta and Ellora. The event marked the 80th anniversary of the United Nations through an immersive convergence of art, heritage, diplomacy and sustainability. Set amid the breathtaking rock-cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora, AIKYAM 2025 brought together global cultural practitioners, historians, artists and diplomats for a rare celebration of India’s timeless wisdom and living traditions.

The event witnessed the presence of key dignitaries from UNESCO, Maharashtra Tourism and the Municipal Corporation of Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, alongside ambassadors, diplomats and

Cultural Ambassadors from over 30 countries were amongst the

attendees
cultural representatives from over 30 countries. Among the distinguished attendees were Shri Sanjay Khandare, Principal Secretary, Maharashtra Tourism, Dr. Timothy Curtis, Director, UNESCO Regional Office in India, and Shri G. Sreekanth, Municipal Commissioner of Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar. Their participation reinforced AIKYAM's core message of global unity, responsible cultural tourism and the harmonious blending of tradition with modern innovation. Several senior diplomats, including the High Commissioners of the United Kingdom and New Zealand; the Ambassadors of France, China, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain and Thailand; and the Country Head of UNDP, also graced the festival.

Shri Sanjay Khandare, Principal Secretary, Maharashtra Tourism, said, "Maharashtra stands at the forefront of India's tourism landscape, committed to becoming a premier global cultural destination, with the Ajanta and Ellora caves serving as living expressions of our civilisational depth and artistic brilliance. As we commemorate 80 years of the United Nations, we gather for AIKYAM, a celebration rooted in the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, reminding us that the world is one family and reflecting Maharashtra's legacy of bridging faiths, fostering art and inspiring unity across centuries. In 2024, the state recorded India's highest foreign tourist inflow with 3.71 million international visitors. Our outlook remains strong as we continue to enhance infrastructure, visitor services and opportunities across key destinations. It is our goal that every traveller leaves with an experience that is enriching, memorable and deeply connected to our cultural soul. In the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, we hope Maharashtra's cultural richness inspires harmony across nations and strengthens unity in diversity."



Siddhaant Mohta, Co-Founder and Director of Sopaan, said, “AIKYAM is a strategic initiative that reimagines how heritage, performance and dialogue can come together to build global understanding. Conceived as an immersive three-day journey, it transforms the sacred cave complexes of Ajanta and Ellora into living stages for unity and exchange. Drawing from

Sopaan’s experience curating cross-cultural programmes with the royal families of Jaisalmer and Gwalior, and with the Delhi Government at Purana Qila, AIKYAM marks 80 years of the United Nations. We stand

at a global pedestal where we amalgamate a unique confluence of art, culture and spirituality to echo the United Nations’ founding ideals of peace, cooperation and a shared global future.”

Dr. Timothy Curtis, Director, UNESCO Regional Office in India, remarked, “Ajanta and Ellora, among the earliest Indian sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, stand as dynamic Indian repositories of philosophy, creativity, and shared human endeavor. Their legacy, rooted in artistic excellence, scientific prowess and in the coexistence of diverse traditions, reminds us of what humanity can achieve together. In a rapidly changing world, these sites call on us to renew our commitment to dialogue, cooperation and collective action. AIKYAM 2025 brings this spirit to life, demonstrating how cultural heritage is not just a record of human achievement but a roadmap for building dialogue, understanding, and collective action in the spirit of UN@80 and our shared future.”

Extending his welcome, Shri G. Sreekanth, Municipal Commissioner of Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, noted, “Celebrated amid the timeless grandeur of our UNESCO World Heritage Sites, AIKYAM beautifully bridges our cultural heritage with innovation. As we commemorate UN@80, this event highlights Maharashtra’s commitment to honouring tradition while embracing the future.”

AIKYAM 2025, celebrating oneness, was a vibrant convergence of culture, heritage and global dialogue centred at the Ajanta and Ellora caves. As dusk gathered, the forecourt of the monolithic Kailasa Temple, Ellora, carved from a single rock to honour Lord Shiva, became an open-air amphitheatre. The evening opened with a Shiva Invocation by HH Maharani Raseshwari Rajya Laxmi of Jaisalmer and Nick Booker, whose

Sanskrit chants and interpretations evoked the cosmic principle of Aikyam. This was followed by AIKYAM Omkara, choreographed by Gauri Sharma Tripathi and performed by international artists using Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Odissi, to embody the universal rhythm of creation, continuum and dissolution. Intellectually, the event featured a major lecture by historian William Dalrymple, “The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World,” which connected India’s civilisational ethos to the UN’s global vision, alongside talks by other thought leaders, including Dr. Timothy Curtis and Booker.

Complementing the performances and talks, the festival featured significant artistic and historical recreations, underscoring its theme of global cultural dialogue. A highlight was the musical recreation of the historic 1967 UN General Assembly concert by Pandit Ravi Shankar and Yehudi Menuhin, expertly performed by Pandit Shubhendra Rao and Dutch cellist Saskia Rao-de Haas, emphasising dialogue as audible harmony. Brazilian artist Sergio Cordeiro also contributed with a live mural reinterpreting the Ajanta murals in a contemporary idiom. The overall experience was enriched by curated heritage tours to sites like the Daulatabad Fort and Bibi ka Maqbara, textile showcases of Paithani and Himroo, and a celebration of Maharashtrian cuisine, culminating in contemplative visits to the Ajanta caves on the final day.

Cultural tourism accounts for nearly 40% of tourist arrivals in India, and the country’s heritage tourism market, valued at USD 19.9 billion in 2024, is projected to reach USD 27.1 billion by 2033. AIKYAM 2025 positioned heritage as a powerful tool for cultural exchange, sustainability and global connection, further strengthening India’s soft power footprint. Anchored in the philosophy of oneness of science and spirituality, humanity and nature, AIKYAM 2025 showcased India’s alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals while celebrating the artistic and spiritual genius of ancient civilisations.

Founded by Ambassador Monika Kapil Mohta and Siddhaant Mohta,

Sopaan continues to build immersive cultural journeys that honour India’s heritage while fostering meaningful global dialogue.

As AIKYAM 2025 drew to a close, the resonance of its message remained clear, that culture, when shared, becomes a bridge between people, nations and the collective future of humanity. The success of the festival was supported by its key partners and sponsors, including Endurance Technologies, Trident Group, JSW, RMZ Corp, VFS Global, TVS Motors, Bharat Forge, SPP Pumps, Volvo, Kalpataru Projects, CBSL Group, ZF Group and IndiGo.

About Sopaan

Sopaan crafts rich, bespoke events that represent Indian cultural heritage on the world stage, bringing historical sites alive in a contemporary context and creating meaningful cross-cultural connections. By blending music, dance, fashion, painting, sculpture, textiles, cinema, architecture and cuisine, Sopaan creates enriching sensory experiences that celebrate India’s living culture with ancient roots and an exciting future. With a mission to craft the world’s cultural connections with India, Sopaan has partnered with state governments, royal families and renowned curators to showcase the country’s incredible history and extraordinary people against the backdrop of its timeless heritage.

About Maharashtra Tourism

The Government of Maharashtra is committed to promoting the state’s diverse tourism offerings, spanning heritage, culture, nature and adventure. With world-renowned destinations such as the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Ajanta and Ellora, the vibrant cities of Mumbai and Pune and serene hill stations like Mahabaleshwar and Lonavala, Maharashtra offers a rich tapestry of experiences. Through initiatives that enhance infrastructure, promote sustainable and eco-tourism and celebrate cultural festivals such as the Ganesh Festival and Hindavi Swarajya Mahotsav, Maharashtra Tourism continues to highlight the state’s unique heritage and vibrant spirit while

ensuring memorable and responsible travel for all visitors.
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From Gita to Natyashastra: Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi Illuminates India's Cultural Legacy

New Delhi – The monthly symposium held at *Kala Sankul*, the central office of Sanskar Bharati, became a resplendent celebration of Indian classical heritage and cultural contemplation. Designed to merge the profound legacy of

India’s traditional arts with contemporary discourse, the event stood as a testament to the enduring relevance of our civilizational ethos.

At the core of the symposium was an enchanting performance of *Sattriya*—the classical dance form rooted in the 15th-century Vaishnavite devotional movement of Assam, pioneered by the great saint Srimanta Sankardev through his *Ankiya Naat*. In a performance that stirred both the senses and the spirit, dancers Sukanya Barua and Sumanya Kashyap brought the divine art form to life. Their presentation, steeped in rigorous training, aesthetic sensitivity, and rhythmic precision, unveiled the spiritual depth and narrative beauty intrinsic to Sattriya.

Complementing the artistic experience was an intellectually enriching keynote address by **Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi**, Member Secretary of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), Delhi. In his address, he eloquently advocated for the inclusion of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Natyashastra* in UNESCO’s World Heritage List. “The Gita is not merely a religious scripture,” he emphasized, “but a timeless philosophy of life; and the Natyashastra, the scientific foundation of Indian artistic consciousness.” His words resonated deeply, drawing attention to the unfortunate irony that many of India’s priceless spiritual texts remain better preserved abroad than within our own institutions.

Shri Joshi also raised a critical concern regarding the preservation of India’s manuscript wealth—while India houses the largest number of ancient manuscripts globally, the number of scholars actively studying and interpreting them remains alarmingly low. His reflections served not just as commentary, but as a call to action—urging institutions, artists, and scholars toward research and revival.

The symposium saw the gracious presence of distinguished personalities from the cultural and academic domains. Among

them were **Dr. Vinod Narayan Indurkar**, Chairman of CCRT; **Sh. Rahul Kumar**, Deputy Director, CCRT; renowned Odissi exponent **Kasturi Patnaik**; **Sh. Jitendra Kumar**, Convenor of the Visual Arts Department, Sanskar Bharati Delhi; **Shri Raj Upadhyay**, Performing Arts Convenor; playwright **Sh. Alok Shukla**; art critic **Shashi Prabha Tiwari**, along with many other senior artists, scholars, and cultural connoisseurs.

A large team of dedicated volunteers played an integral role in the successful execution of the event. Key contributors included Convenor **Garima Rani**, Co-convenor **Vishwadeep**, **Sneha Mukherjee**, Eminent Theatre Director **Shyam Kumar**, **Shraboni Saha**, **Saurabh Triathi**, **Harshit Goyal**, **Pradeep Pathak**, **Muskan**, **Khushi**, **Kriti**, **Sakshi Sharma**, and **Tarushi**, whose behind-the-scenes efforts were deeply appreciated.

The proceedings were elegantly compered by senior anchor **Bharati Dang**, whose poise and eloquence added grace to the evening. The formal vote of thanks was delivered by **Sh. Kuldeep Sharma**, convenor of the theatrical wing, and the event concluded on a tranquil note with the chanting of the *Shanti Mantra*.

More than just a cultural evening, this symposium served as a meaningful reminder of India’s vast artistic and philosophical legacy. It illustrated how, even in an age of rapid modernization, there remains a deep well of tradition from which we continue to draw inspiration. It reaffirmed that tradition and progress are not opposing forces—but vital companions on the journey of cultural continuity.

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Raja Bundela – From Reel Life to Real Life

Raja Bundela – From Reel Life to Real Life

–Manohar Khushalani

The Indian democracy is replete with examples of film actors and actresses making it big in politics. Shatrughan Sinha, Vinod Khanna, Rajesh Khanna, Shabana Azmi, M.G. Ramachandran, M. Karunanidhi, Jaya Pradha, N.T. Rama Rao, Nargis and Sunil Dutt are just a few examples. The ready-made vehicle of mass media gives them instant visibility. The attributes that the performers recreate, for the characters they represent on stage or screen are taken to be their own rather than of the person they portray. This also gives them a popularity that a politician would take ears to garner. The latest to cross the threshold from theatrics to politics is NSD pass-out Raja Bundela, actor, director, producer of the small screen and recently of the big screen as well. **Bundela is now contesting the Lok Sabha elections on a Congress ticket from Jhansi.**

The two films that Bundela has produced, Pratha and Kisne Bharmaya Mere Lakhan Ko, were shot in an area of UP/MP known as Bundelkhand – even the stories were of this land. The fifty episode TV serial, Mujhe Chand Chahiye, which he made for Zee TV, was also made totally in the same belt – Jhansi, Lalitpur, Urjha. Although his name is Raja he is not the Raja of Bundelkhand as some people confuse him to be. However he derives his name from the region that he hails from. The fact that he chooses themes of this region demonstrate his love for his roots, despite the fact that he left for Mumbai years ago. Bundela was recently also elected the president of **Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha**, a post he took over from Shanker Lal Mehrotra. The main grouse of the Morcha is that even though a State reorganisation committee, constituted in 1955 recommended the formation of an Independent Bundelkhand State it was never formed due to electoral calculations of the then ruling party. If constituted the state would have an area of 1,60,000 square kilometres and would boast of a population of over three crores. According to Bundela both UP and MP admit that the region is most backward but because the linguistic region has been broken up between two states, insufficient funds were being invested in the region.Raja denies that he has political aspirations. It was Shanker Lal Mehrotra who asked him to visit Bundelkhand and see what they were doing. He went for fun sake, out of curiosity. But after reaching there he realised that there was a need to create awareness amongst people. He claims that he was very reluctant to take on a post but told them that he was willing to do any work assigned to

him. His commitment was for the cause, not for any organization. In any case he had been going there every month over the last seven to eight years. But the Morcha felt that he would be even more involved if he took on some responsibility. That made sense to him. Back in Mumbai he has been garnering support from other artists such as Ashutosh Rana and Jaininder Jain who hail from the region. According to him even Amitabh Bachhan belongs to Bundelkhand. The Republic Day parade held just two days ago, perhaps for the first time, showed young dancers and danseuses in red green dhotis and lahengas pirouetting to the beats of mridang and manjira, demonstrating the steps of the vibrant Raee dance, a folk form of Bundelkhand. An acknowledgement of the fact that the region is coming into focus and the hoarse cries of the people of that belt are perhaps getting noticed.

Acoustic spaces of a Delhi Neighborhood

Acoustic spaces of a Delhi Neighborhood
by
Joya John

When we think of solitude we associate it with silence. It is

in the sounds that we generate that our sociability is located. Voices, speech and other sounds linked with living indicate so much about people. Generating sound is an extension of our socially constituted selves. Luxury is the ability to choose the kind and extent of sounds we hear. It is however a luxury few can exercise in a metropolis. For some the cacophony of other sounds is comforting, the confirmation of community. For others sounds can be 'invasive', 'crude' or just simply 'noise'. Sounds demarcate the public from the private spaces.

My neighborhood is a plethora of sounds and voices. Its middle class status effortlessly strides the uncomfortable gap between the westernized university student tenant and the more conservative Punjabi families, who lease out houses for rent. Houses climb up to four storeys and sounds carry easily from one home to the other. Brawls break out between families over parking place, children's fights taken up by over anxious parents and the highly contentious issue of where garbage gets thrown. Late evenings are often marred by violence behind closed doors. High pitched voices and shrill screams indicate a marital dispute that assumes catastrophic proportions, sometimes in full view of neighbors. Fake walkouts are staged, while neighbors intervene piously and send women back into the same hell. Loud crying often gives a moral vantage point to the battered wife and generates some embarrassment for the erring husband. The violence abates for sometime until one day- the shrill cry of the woman -and the same cycle begins again.

Indra Vihar also has pretensions to religious fervor. The temple priest commands respect. In the festive season families compete with each other to organize bhajans that can be heard on loudspeakers. Intra familial rivalries are temporarily put aside and the dholak takes precedence. Sound functions to establish a community of listeners all governed by the nucleus of the temple. Religious ceremonies blend into

political affiliations, when the local magnates organize a charity function with loud music. For the elderly woman, early evenings are spent in the temple, singing songs of the licentious frolicking of Krishna- A contradiction that nobody seems to notice or mind. Outside the temple, groups of young men listen to music loudly on their cell phones, furtively eyeing young women students, like modern day avatars of Krishna. Bollywood kitsch competes with Enrique singing mournfully somewhere close by.

On Saturdays a wandering ascetic winds way his through the neighborhood, asking for alms to propitiate the vengeful god Shani. Added to this is the plaintive sound of the beggar woman, who pretends to be blind but can be seen counting her earnings in the neighborhood park later in the day. Vegetable vendors have each cultivated a distinct sound to alert potential buyers of their arrival. Hard bargains are driven over the prices of each item between them and the women of the colony. Both lambaste the government and the escalating prices.

Morning is the time for women. Relatively free from the demands of children and husbands, they chat loudly, cajole babies to eat and gossip. As evening approaches they are heard less. The sounds of the returning male folk takes precedence. Ribald jokes along with a generous splattering of swear words can be heard. Words are said with abandon, in front of women or total strangers.

On the other side of noise are those who are the ‘outsiders’.

Qualises drive in nosily honking to alert young college students call centre employees, of their arrival. A boisterous party, with drunken students, invites censure from the neighborhood. People gather outside, tempers flare up and often someone has the sense to call the police. Racist undercurrents come out in the open. Loud pronouncements are made on “chinky” students and their rampant immorality.

Assumptions about their wealth however make them the most profitable tenants.

This neighborhood has drawn a sharp line between sanctioned and unsanctioned noise. The decision of who makes noise and who doesn't is sometimes challenged however most of the time it is let be. In the meanwhile people get on with the daily processes of living, talking behind paper thin walls, while others listen in, voluntarily or involuntarily.

Joya John is a lecturer in the English department, Gargi College.

The Role of MEDIA in Prejudicing Fair Trial (Manohar Khushalani)

EDITORIAL

Arushi – Hemraj Murder Case

The Role of Media in Prejudicing Fair Trial – A case study

(L to R) Arushi – Victim | Hemraj – Victim| Nupur – Mother | Dr.Talwar – Father | Krishna – Compounder

Please Note the Title of this piece has the names of both victims. Most media have called it the Arushi Murder case – as if the life of a domestic help is of little consequence. In some (rare) cases words such as murderer had been appended to the suspects. We are not a News Magazine so the merits of the case are not part of our purview but Media is definitely one of our concerns. The Sensationalisation of the unfortunate murder of Arushi and Hemraj has raised certain issues on Media's role in encroaching upon the rights of the individuals to receive fair treatment. On their rights to privacy – and the right of every accused to be considered innocent until he/she is conclusively proved to be guilty.

While the media is also a watchdog for ensuring fair trial and justice, must it not exercise self control and self censorship to ensure the dignity of the affected persons? Of course there are legal provisions when it comes to contempt. A Court report prejudicing fair trial may be of various forms. It is contempt if a newspaper report deters a person from giving witness in a court; if the report offers threats or is written in abusive language compelling a party to discontinue the court proceedings; and if the report discusses the merits of a case pending in court.

At present the case is not subjudice and therefore no such laws inhibit the media, that is why one feels some self

censorship is required.

Most court journalism students must have studied the Dr. Samuel Sheppard case. By coincidence that gentleman too was a doctor. In the United States, in the famous Sheppard Case (1966) the judgment pronounced by a court was reversed twelve years later on the ground of prejudicial publicity.

Facts of the case were that Dr. Samuel Sheppard had served nearly ten years on his conviction of a charge of murdering his wife. Later in 1966 the court held that due to virulent publicity and a "carnival atmosphere" a fair trial was not possible. The US media persons were warned that trials were were not like elections, to be won through public meetings radio, and newspapers. The media was also asked to show the increasingly prevalent

habit of making unfair and prejudicial comments on pending trials.

Dr. Samuel Sheppard case, as reported in Plain Dealer, Cleveland, U.S.A. (17th November, 1966) gives an account of the reporter's experience of the proceedings in the courtroom:

Dr. Samuel Sheppard was found not guilty last night. in the 1954 slaying of his first wife MariiIyn.

Sheppard gleefully slammed his hand down on the trial table after Common Pleas Judge Russel J. Talty read the verdict

Sheppard had to be restrained in his joy by Defence Counsel F. Lee Bailey and co-Defence ~ Russel A. Seeman.

"""Sit down!" ordered Bailey, Sheppard sat down and burst into tears. A woman in the back — screamed, "Thank God"!

0ther women could be heard screaming in the corridor outside the second-floor courtroom •• the Cuyahoga County Criminal Courts Building.

Sheppard ‘ s second wife, Aiane, covered her face and sobbed..softly. She was sitting in the Second row of the seats in the smaIl courtroom jammed with nearly 60 spectators, 27 of them reporters.

As the jury was dismissed, Sheppard broke for the. rear of the courtroom, thrusting a sheriff’s deputy aside ”I’m going to see my wife”, he said.

He leaned off the bar rail and embraced his wife, she threw her arms around him. “Oh, baby”, he sobbed. “Oh, baby”.

Leaping and pushing his way through the crowd that had amassed in the corridor, the former osteopathic neurosurgeon shouted, “He’s my man!” and clasped the stocky Bailey around !he neck.

Bailey, who had worked to have Sheppard freed in 1964 on a writ of habeas corpus, looked on and beamed. This was the moment he had waited for — for 1,827 days, he had told the jury, ever since he became interested in the celebrated Sheppard case in 1961

Marilyn Sheppard, 31, died with more than 25 bone deep wounds in her head. She was four months pregnant with her second child.

Asleep in the next room was the Sheppard’s 7-year-old son, Chip, now a 19-year old freshman at Boston University. He testified in the current trial that he never awakened the night or morning of the murder.

Sheppard told authorities in 1954 that he was attacked and knocked out twice by one or more unknown assailants when he rushed to the rescue of his wife and later when he pursued a shadowy form to the beach behind the Lake Road home.

Sheppard was found guilty of second degree murder in 1954 after a 65-days trial, Sheppard served nearly ten years before he was released from prison on $10,000 bail by a U.S. district

court in 1964.

The United States Supreme Court’s attack on prejudicial publicity has had its effect on the coverage of the mass media in most cases, since.

In Britain in the Michael Fagan case (1983), The Sunday Times was fined by the court because the paper published certain particulars about the accused when the trial was pending. The case was related to Michael Fagan who was alleged to have. intruded into the Queen’s bedroom.

In another English case, R.V.S. Thomson Newspapers (1968) it was held that to publish a criminals antecedents, during the pendency court proceedings, against him; is contempt. There are definite reasons why trial by newspaper is prohibited: A trial by newspapers may influence the minds of witnesses. It may also compel a party to withdraw the suit It may prejudice public mind against somebody who might later turn out to be innocent.

Let us not forget that in the present case a small girl has lost her right to live – a father has lost his daughter – a mother has lost her daughter – a father is accused of killing his own progeny – a domestic help who has lost his life also must have a family in Nepal – an employee is accused of killing his employers daughter – so many others are alleged to be involved. In the eyes of law all are innocent until proved guilty.

The media’s role is of course to ensure that investigations remain on course to the extent that it does not prejudice public mind. But questions one must ask: Is it fair for a TV soap to use the story as fodder for its script writers? Does it prejudice public mind even if the producer claims that all characters are fictitious and any resemblance to a real person a figment of viewer’s imagination? Has our reporting been fair to people affected by the tragedy? Has it ensured the personal

dignity of the innocent? Because we still don't know who is guilty and who is innocent.

Manohar Khushalani

27th June, 2008

Footnote: Opinion makers and decision makers read StageBuzz. One day after the above editorial was published some newspapers changed the nomenclature of their headline by calling it an Arushi-Hemraj case in place of Arushi only Murder Case. Hemraj's existence was recognised as a victim. Also atleast one major National newspaper brought out an empathy article for the accused. Finally the dentist has been allowed to mourn his daughter as an aggrieved father and not as a killer.

Film festival – to be or not to be

Culture Cocktail (from Mid-Day, Delhi every Wednesday)
Manohar Khushalani

Film festival – to be or not to be

As the 34th International Film Festival of India drew to a close it continued to be in a debacle, thanks to the continuous indecisiveness about its character. From a fairly prestigious beginning it has been brought down to shambles because of the lack of empowerment of the people running it, starving the festival of funds and changing its location every

time. Why shift the national festival to Goa? Why mix tourism with serious cinema? Why spend millions of rupees to develop infrastructure and then invest all over again in another city. These are some important questions which will have to be answered before the venue is shifted again. As far as the films are concerned it was a mixed bag as always. There is space enough only to discuss some of the films which I liked.

Pajn-e-Asr was an Iranian film based in post Taliban Afghanistan. It was about innocence and ambition in a country ravaged by its earlier rulers and how a young woman, Agheleh (Noqleh), tries to find a future for herself and maybe even become the President of her nation. No harm in dreaming. Her admirer, a poet and a fellow refugee, in the war torn land, puts up her portraits in an abandoned palace. The film ends in a desolate landscape where she and her father have to burn the horse-cart, which once transported them, just to keep warm at night. The conservatively religious father loses his son, his grandchild, and his horse in the land which according to him was becoming increasingly blasphemous. They meet another old man in the desert who was going to Kandahar to re-elect Moola Omar. “Too late,” he is informed, “the Americans have already overthrown him.” The film is directed by Samira Makhmalbus, who became the world’s youngest director to participate in the official section at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival.

Undoubtedly the most talked about film in the festival, *Dogville,* directed by Lors Von Tries, is a highly stylised film, more theatre than film. The entire film is shot on a set representing a small town, Dogville, in which most of the set is drawn on the studio floor, which looks like an architectural drawing, complete with labels. Only the dimensions are missing. The central character is an exasperatingly self suffering and a stubbornly stoic woman, Grace, whose role has been played with a remarkable intensity by Nicole Kidman. Grace is on the run from Gangsters and the town shelters her at a price which goes on rising. The film is

an interesting study about how seemingly respectable and apparently well meaning individuals become more and more savage. Just when the audience has had enough of the citizen's sadism, Grace gets her sweet revenge. The Head Gangster turns out to be her own father. In the entire film you never get to see the open sky, except once, when a window curtain is drawn away. This adds to the claustrophobic nature of the story.

Yes Nurse, No Nurse, Directed by Peter Kramer, is a delirious, all-singing, all-dancing romantic comedy revolves around the eccentric denizens of an Amsterdam rest home and the killjoy neighbour who wants the whole lot of them evicted. Chock full of over-the-top*1960s* set design, tinted postcard tableaux and lush, split-screen visuals, the film's cheerfully rude musical numbers would have the audience tapping its feet. Based on a Dutch television show from the *1960s, Yes Nurse, No Nurse is* the musical tale of Nurse Klivia (Loes Luca), who runs a rest home populated by a gang of lovable nutcases next door to the cranky Mr. Boordevol, who is constantly looking for a way to get Nurse Klivia and her rowdy "patients" evicted, and may finally have found a way when a young, hunky burglar with a heart of gold (Waldernar Torenstra) moves in with them. The film ends endearingly with a change of heart of the nosy neighbour.

At the age of 84, Sri Lanka's leading director Lester James Peries returns to the international stage after an absence of almost 20 years with *Mansion by the Like.* With 18 features to date this classic veteran filmmaker has not only brought his country to the forefront of Asian cinema, but also inspired a whole generation of Sri-Lankan film makers. The film is inspired by Anton Chekhov's Cherry orchard, and although it has been adapted to the local milieu the characters drawn from the play are mostly true to the original. The film has been shot in visually pleasing locale- in a dak bungalow next to a reservoir. The direction is tight and conservatively

classical. All the emotions are neither over stated nor under stated by the actors and actresses who have given taught and controlled performances.

Keval Arora’s Kolumn

For Whom Nobel’s Toll

Harold Pinter passed away on 24 December 2008. He was 78 and had been undergoing treatment for liver cancer. Like most Nobel prizes for Literature, the choice of the British playwright Harold Pinter has also had its share of detractors. There have been all kinds of murmurings against Pinter getting the big prize, ranging from doubts about his literary worth to snide remarks about extraneous considerations having played a role in the selection. The prize for the slyest reaction – assuming that it wasn’t the ghastly mistake it was made out to be – goes of course to the Sky Television newscaster who assumed that the breaking news about Pinter must have been to announce his demise (Pinter had taken a bad fall some days earlier) and therefore led off with an announcement that Pinter had died, before hesitating and then correcting herself to say that he had been awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature instead.

Well, to be honest, I’m not sure the word ‘instead’ was

actually used, but given the bad grace with which his award has been received in some quarters, I wouldn't be surprised if it was. It's not difficult to figure out why Pinter's selection has been met with churlishness. On the one hand, a body of mainstream taste has tended to deride Pinter's theatre as just so much fluff. Pinter's departures from staple theatrical modes have often been seen as a thinning out of the fundamentals of theatre, and even as evidence of his inability to get the basics right – much in the manner of the standard joke that Picasso's cubism springs from his lack of talent at drawing like everyone else. Pinter's technique of conjuring up dramatic tension and menace out of thin air, so to speak, has often provoked the incredulous suspicion that is bestowed upon all innovations and departures from the mainstream.

In recent years, Pinter's political activism has provoked another kind of ire. The ill-tempered outburst of John Simon, an old Pinter baiter, on learning of Pinter's Nobel prize, is interesting for the disarmingly guileless manner in which it reveals the prejudice that feeds its indignation. When Simon says, "I would have gladly accorded him the Nobel for Arrogance, the Nobel for Self-Promotion, or the Nobel for Hypocrisy – spewing venom at the United States while basking in our dollars – if such Nobels existed. But the Nobel for Literature? I think not", he exposes the burr that's actually prickling his behind.

Evidently, what has got Simon's goat is not Pinter's literary worthlessness, but the fact that the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to someone who has indefatigably campaigned against American and British adventurism in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, and has therefore shown himself to be of the 'enemy camp'. Evidently, Simon's tirade typifies the brand of opinion which wants artists to confine themselves to their work and desist from engaging in any form of activism, especially that which pits them against the weight of majoritarian opinion. (Perhaps this is why Arundhati Roy

continues to raise the hackles of professional dabblers in that hallowed literary form, the Letters to the Editor.) And, evidently, Simon believes that he who pays pipers has the moral, nay spiritual, sanction to call the shots along with the tunes.

Nah, I shouldn't trash letters to editors. For, how else could I have gleaned that lovely nugget of information, contributed by a reader to the *Guardian*, concerning "the sullen, deafening silence from Downing Street about the new British Nobel Laureate, Harold Pinter?" The British government's wariness in celebrating the achievement of a countryman simply because of his vocal (and forgivably intemperate) criticism of state policy is just the kind of silence that would be familiar to Pinter, given the evocative treatment of silence in his plays. Of a piece with such silencing is an article lauding Pinter's Nobel achievement that has been carried in the latest issue of *Britain Today*, a news magazine produced by the British High Commission in India. Unsurprisingly, it makes absolutely no mention of Pinter's outspoken criticism of British foreign policy, a criticism that he has stuck to despite constant mockery and ridicule. How else can one read the title of that article, "Master of Silence", except as a desperate act of wish-fulfilment!

Is one over-emphasising Pinter's political stance as a factor in his getting the award and in the reactions to it? I don't think so – and not simply because others have commented that the Swedish Nobel committee may have been inclined to favour a writer who has voiced his anti-war sentiments in no uncertain terms (Pinter has famously denounced Bush as a "mass murderer" and dismissed Blair as "that deluded idiot"), given the fact that the Swedish people too were extremely vocal in their anti-Iraq war protests. If this sounds like a slur on the literary credentials of Harold Pinter, it is interesting to see him make the same connection, albeit in a less whining tone: "Why they've given me this prize I don't know. … But I

suspect that they must have taken my political activities into consideration since my political engagement is very much part of my work. It's interwoven into many of my plays." That this is a man speaking with a modesty characteristic of the greatest writers is par for the course. But, it is unusual to find a writer who values his political conscience as much if not more than his writing, especially as even readers are often uncomfortable with such privileging.

It's not as if Pinter needed the sympathy of political fraction. His credentials as a writer are justification enough for the Nobel award. He isn't the writer of whom no one's heard, as some previous Nobel awardees have been. Not when his plays are widely translated and performed in other languages; not when they pop up regularly in drama syllabi of Literature Departments; and certainly not when 'Pinteresque' is now staple lit-crit jargon for a patented blend of mundane but oblique dialogue, brooding silences and ineffable unease, all floating gingerly on a bed of sudden incongruity. (Anyway, what does the label "unheard-of author" mean? Surely, nothing more than the writer's works having not been translated (yet) into English, and therefore being unfamiliar to the international publishing scene….)

Pinter is now 75 years old, with a long writing and performance career of considerable range and distinction. He has acted on stage, film, television and radio. He has written nearly thirty plays since 1957, and has innumerable drama sketches, poems and prose published in several volumes. He has directed over 25 productions of his own and others' plays, adapted novels for the stage (notably Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*) and for film (for instance, Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Kafka's *The Trial*), adapted his plays for radio and television, written over 20 screenplays (*The Servant* and *The Go-Between*, both directed by Joseph Losey, being two delightful instances), and is now so immersed in speaking out on political matters that earlier this year he

spoke of not writing any more plays in order to focus his energy on such issues.

Initially, things didn't look promising; Pinter didn't burst in on the scene in the manner of other path-breaking dramatists. The 1956 commercial and critical success of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, notwithstanding its combative indecorum, had suggested that British audiences were tiring of conventional fare, but Pinter's first plays in 1957-58 (*The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*) were received with bewilderment and hostility. (That this could happen despite the praise showered on the English premiere of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 is curious, given the several affinities that have subsequently been noted between Beckett's and Pinter's theatrical worlds.) It wasn't until 1960 that Pinter had his first success with *The Caretaker*. From then on, plays such as *The Homecoming* (1964),*Landscape* and *Silence* (1967 & 1968), *No Man's Land* (1974) and *Betrayal* (1978)established Pinter's reputation as a unique voice in contemporary theatre. To such an extent that *The Dumb Waiter*, along with Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, soon became an absolute must-do for budding thespians in college theatre societies.

Pinter's plays revolve typically around contestations for territory. Conflicts, sparked off by intrusions into a closed space by an outside force, are conducted with a strange mix of ferocity and dulled detachment. His characters and their dialogues are rarely explicated through conventional excavations of motivation and memory, and often viciousness and pain lurk submerged beneath an evasive surface composed of guilt, uncertainty, everyday phrases and restless silences. The 'facts' on which these contestations are pegged are usually unreliable, for there is little that is either 'true or false' in Pinteresque space.

The unnamed tension of these plays are located in such a claustrophobic, inter-personal space that Pinter's writing has

been criticized for turning its back upon the political, an impression that was confirmed when Martin Esslin included Pinter in his seminal study, *The Theatre of the Absurd.* However, the later plays – such as *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language*(1988) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) – are more distinctly political. But, here too authoritarian structures of repression and torture are evoked rather than articulated, and filter through spare exchanges between oppressor and victim, and the slippages of memory and knowledge. Perhaps, this phase of Pinter's writing is less a 'shift' from his early work than an extension of earlier preoccupations into a wider territory.

Though the Nobel citation – Pinter's plays "uncover the precipice under everyday prattle and*force entry into oppression's closed rooms*" (my italics) – celebrates the dramatist as much as it does the political activist, the writer himself draws sufficient distinction between his preoccupations as an artist and as a "political intelligence" to not let the achievements of one absolve him of the responsibility enjoined upon the other. He recently had this to say of the road he's travelled: "In 1958, I wrote, 'there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal…. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.' I believe that these assertions . . . do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?"

In an interview some years ago, Pinter had rued the bane of British intellectual life being the mockery directed at artists who take a stand on political issues, and had warned, "Well, I don't intend to simply go away and write my plays and be a good boy. I intend to remain an independent and political intelligence in my own right." What lovelier spectacle can there be than this – of a dramatist, who goes on to win the Nobel Prize, acknowledging that conscientious citizenship is a

more urgent cry than any artistic calling?

This article was published earlier in FIRST CITY (Dec 2006) after Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature

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HOLLYWOOD DIARY – Sydney Pollack

HOLLYWOOD DIARY

In Memoriam-Sydney Pollack

An Insight on his Life by Naveen Gupta

Sydney Irwin Pollack**(1934-2008)'**

Sydney Irwin Pollack was born to a family of Jewish immigrants from Russia, to an alcoholic mother and a professional boxer and pharmacist father. His parents separated when he was very young, in fact his mother died at the age of 37.

He began as an actor studying under Sanford Meisner at New York's

Neighbourhood Playhouse and stayed back as acting coach on his mentor's request. He continued to appear on Broadway and TV. It was this experience gathered as an actor that made Sydney Pollack the director elicit powerhouse performances from Robert Redford, Jane Fonda, Dustin Hoffman, Barbara Streisand, Paul Newman and Burt Lancaster. He directed more than 21 films and 10 TV serials, acted in over 30 films and produced over 44 films.

His first break came on TV, while working for John Frankenheimer; he met Burt Lancaster, who got him into directing TV shows. Pollack directed over 80 shows including the 15 episodes of highly popular TV show, 'Ben Casey,' His first feature, 'The Slender Thread',(1965) with Anne Bancroft and Sidney Poitier was taut black and white thriller, that opened with an aerial shot, something which was to become one of his trademarks, and in full flow in such films as 'Three days of the Condor'(1975) and 'Out of Africa'(1985). His next three ventures were all bummers: 'The Property is condemned' (1966), 'The Scalp hunters"(1968) and 'Castle Keep' all bombed at the box-office. He silenced his critics the very next year, when he pulled a coup of sorts by helming a deliberately toned down adaptation of Horace McCoy's novel, 'They shoot horses don't they', (1969). The film garnered 9 Oscar nominations, with Gig Young getting the sole statuette as best supporting actor for his portrayal of a sleazy emcee.

The public and critics both appreciated 'The way we were', (1973) for sizzling chemistry between Streisand and Redford, Out of 6 Oscar nominations, the film got for original dramatic score and best song. His next venture,' The Electric Horseman,'(1979) with his favourite Redford was a rip-off of the cult classic' Lonely are the brave' and was a dud at the box-office and with critics for being a sappy love story. Pollack bounced back to his form in 1982 with 'Tootsie', the biggest commercial and critical success of his career so far, with Hoffman and Jessica Lange. The film nominated for 10 Oscars was decimated at the ceremony by 'Gandhi', with Jessica Lange picking the sole Oscar for best supporting actress. Pollack acted as Hoffman's agent in the film as response to the gauntlet thrown to him by his

lead actor, who was getting on his nerves, picking fights with the director on the sets. Hoffman could afford to mess with Nichols or a Levinson, but Pollack was an accomplished actor, who could hold his own even in front of camera.

His swansong was the biopic on Danish writer Isak Dinesen or Karen Blixen, 'Out of Africa', (1985). The film bagged 7 Oscars out of 11 nominations, with Pollack getting his long due double whammy, as producer and director. In his later years, Pollack turned to an active role as a producer of films like 'Major League' (1989)'The Fabulous Baker Boys' (1989), 'Presumed innocent' (1990), the compelling 'Searching for Bobby Fischer,'(1993). During this period he helmed only 'Havana' (1990) with his favourite Redford and 'The Firm' with Tom Cruise. He kept on acting till the very last with a quirkish charm that was on display in 'The Interpreter' (2005) 'Eyes Wide Shut' (1999), 'Husbands and Wives' (1992), 'The Player' (1992) and sitcoms like 'Will & Grace', 'The Sopranos' and 'Entourage'.

In 2007, he appeared opposite George Clooney in 'Michael Clayton', a film that he also co-produced. His death of Cancer on May 26,2008 at the age of 73, at his home with his wife of 50 years, Claire Griswold, at his side was nine months after he had been diagnosed with the disease.

Mr. Sydney Pollack, they don't make men like you with that rare ability to juggle various hats while producing and directing masterpieces. You shall be missed, dear sir.

1. **I have a way of wriggling out of my friend Manohar Khushalani's deadlines for this piece! I'd also gone half way through my eulogy for John Wayne on his 101st birthday on 26th May, but the great Sydney Pollack chose to depart on the very day. Ed sent me a sms asking for a brief obituary for Sydney Pollack. I hope this fits the bill for a man who was an untiring, innovative and intuitive filmmaker**.

'Naveen K. Gupta

Some of the films and roles of Sydney Pollack.

As a Director:

“The Interpreter” (2005)

“Random Hearts” (1999)

“The Firm” (1993)

“Havana” (1990)

“Out of Africa” (1985, Oscar win)

“Tootsie” (1982, Oscar nomination)

“Absence of Malice” (1981)

“Three Days of the Condor” (1975)

“The Way We Were” (1973)

“Jeremiah Johnson” (1972)

“They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?” (1969, Oscar nomination

As an Actor:

“Made of Honor” (2008)

“Michael Clayton” (2007)

“Will & Grace” (TV, 2000-2006)

“The Interpreter” (2005)

“Changing Lanes” (2002)

“Random Hearts” (1999)

“Eyes Wide Shut” (1999)

“A Civil Action” (1998)

“Husbands and Wives” (1992)

“The Player” (1992)

“Tootsie” (1982)

PRODUCER:

“Recount” (TV, 2008)

“Leatherheads” (2008)

“Michael Clayton” (2007, Oscar nomination for best picture)

“The Interpreter” (2005)

“Cold Mountain” (2003)

“The Quiet American” (2002)

“The Talented Mr. Ripley” (1999)

“Random Hearts” (1999)

“Sliding Doors” (1998)

“Sense and Sensibility” (1995)

“Sabrina” (1995)

“Havana” (1990)

“Presumed Innocent” (1990)

“The Fabulous Baker Boys” (1989)

“Bright Lights, Big City” (1988)

“Out of Africa” (1985, best picture Oscar win)

“Tootsie” (1982, best picture Oscar nomination)

“Absence of Malice” (1981)

Source: The Associated Press

Keval Arora’s Kolumn- Admission Time Blues

Keval Arora’s Kolumn

Come admission time in Delhi University, a strange ritual involving drama is enacted every June and July in several colleges. This ritual concerns admissions where the minimum marks required for entry into various courses are lowered for candidates with a demonstrable talent in theatre. Well, not

just theatre: other Extra-Curricular Activities (generally described as ECA) such as music, debating, dance, the fine arts and photography also qualify. I'll confine my comments to the situation concerning theatre, though much of what happens here is broadly true of the other activities as well.

The ritual is interesting for several reasons, not the least of which is the keen interest shown in it by those members of the University community who do not subscribe to either its aims or its methods. For those who do, it's a gratifying time because artistic activity is now granted however grudgingly some place in the sun. For the greater majority of those who don't, it's gratification time when non-academic achievement becomes the means by which academic under-achievement can be given the go-by. And, at a time when eligibility criteria and admission irregularities are being closely monitored by the media and sometimes even mediated by the courts, the little 'discretion' that ECA admissions allow seems to go a long way indeed!

As for the candidates, it goes without saying that this opportunity is embraced gladly by those who stand to benefit, without any grumbling of the kind that 'reservation quotas' inspire from those who don't. It must be remembered though that ECA admissions have always been used by candidates as an insurance against their not getting admission into the course/college of their choice rather than as a first-choice option. In fact, if one were to go by the quality of most of the applicants, being unable to secure an admission through the general channel appears to be the main eligibility criterion! Yet, listening to these applicants introduce themselves as being driven by a great thirst for theatre, one can see that the *natak* begins well before they have mounted the stage!

That's the questionable underside of such admissions; but there are other questions, more legitimate and no less problematic for all that.

For instance, these admissions bring to a head the difficulty of evaluation and ranking. A prickly procedure at the best of times, acts of ranking becomes decidedly iffy when it involves no more than a one-off stab at serialising creative achievement and potential. Moreover, with subjectivity being both dominant practice and cognitive tool in art appreciation, how does this intermesh with a policy of ranking which necessarily invokes the application of some kind of objective or at least commonly acceptable criteria? Also, is it possible to set up a grid of checks and balances to shape and circumscribe such evaluation?

Of course, art activity is judged one way or another all the time, by way of reviews and commentaries in the media, or through selections for scholarships, grants and festivals. But rarely do such judgements, upsetting as these are sometimes, stamp actors or grade performances with the kind of hierarchical finality that is found in the admissions process. ECA committees are known to blithely wield axes that even the most rabid of reviewers would flinch from using.

After all, the one thing that loosens a reviewer’s tongue is the comforting lack of tangible consequence. The knowledge that reviews (often published after the event and therefore having a negligible impact on ticket sales, as in Delhi) are primarily cud for discussion enables reviewers to offer free and easy critical response. In contrast, the hardening of subjective opinion into summary judgements that slam the door shut on young hopefuls cannot but be a frightening responsibility. Sadly, it is rare to see this responsibility being judiciously exercised. All too often, ECA committees make their choices, unperturbed by the insufficient evidence on which these are based.

Another interesting aspect of this admission policy lies in what it reveals of attitudes towards and the space given to cultural activity within our educational institutions. (There is surprisingly little difference between schools and colleges

in this regard.) At first glance, the fact that provision is made for such admissions appears an enlightened measure, for it implicitly acknowledges that artistic achievements can be factored into determining the worth of a candidate. The obsessive pursuit of better and better marks in the Board examinations has made most schools downgrade non-academic creative activity as a secondary and even irrelevant practice. Students who spend time nurturing diverse interests and talents do, in all probability, end up with lesser marks than single-minded swotters, but they are not poorer students for that. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be true. So, what's the harm if extra-curricular talent is used, in a little reverse flow, to enhance the candidate's chances of admission, right?

No harm at all, especially as you can't remember the last time when you saw cultural practice command a premium in the marketplace. Yet, things aren't quite hunky-dory. A second glance reveals that this 'enlightened measure' is riddled with contradictions that float around unacknowledged as institutions blunder on with quaint notions of the education process. Why, I sometimes wonder, do colleges embark on these valuations of artistic worth if nothing changes down the line? It is the rare college that takes theatre activity seriously enough to offer realistic support in terms of scheduling, administrative support, budgetary grants and end-of-term honours. When institutional calendars designate cultural activity as mere recreation, it is understandable why admission processes too value and evaluate creativity in confusing terms.

The real problem, therefore, with this process is not, as is commonly argued, chicanery or the underhand attempts to buck the system – great Indian malady that: "have system, will buck!" – but that it lacks clarity of purpose. It is far easier to tackle the depredations of corruption or nepotism than it is to tackle the mess created by a muddle-headed

approach to sports and cultural activity.

An instance of this mess is the divergence in the methods employed by different colleges to select candidates. The fact that there are no University guidelines for such admissions doesn't help because it leaves college administrations free to flounder. In the absence of tested procedures, the time spent on evaluating an applicant's artistic ability varies enormously. At some colleges, theatre candidates are disposed of with brutal efficiency in a flat 10-15 minutes each: 5 minutes for a brief performance of a prepared piece and the balance for displaying their general knowledge ('name three Indian dramatists') and their certificates to an interview panel. On the other hand, at another college that I shall leave unnamed, some 40 candidates are processed through several elimination rounds (comprising prepared pieces, extempore performances, text-analyses, solo and group improvisations, and interviews) that add up close to 30 hours over 2 days.

Unlike a casting audition where the playscript provides some framework for selection, general testing for talent in drama is fraught because of the absence of clear-sighted goals, the procedures by which these can be sought, and a level playing field where applicants from different backgrounds and schools are played off against one another. For instance, does one or does one not distinguish between applicants who have studied in schools that possess a reasonable equipped auditorium, employ a drama teacher and place theatrical activity in the weekly timetable and those whose schools have no time or money for such things? This is probably why admission committees rely on applicants' certificates and brief presentations as a safe option. This procedure has the merit of appearing so objectively quantifiable that its inadequacy never ever comes to the fore.

Relying on certificates merely transfers the problem elsewhere, for then how does one assess the worth of such

certification? In the absence of recognised inter-school drama festivals or training institutes, the drama certificates that most applicants produce relate to internal school activity, often indicating no more than the school's initiative in matters cultural. This is a far cry from the creditworthiness of certificates produced by sportspersons to gain concessional admissions into colleges. With several tournaments organised for different age and proficiency levels in which students of different schools compete on relatively more level playing fields, sports certificates are fairly reliable indicators of achievement and potential – reliable enough, in fact, for forgery to have become a regular proposition!

It is equally risky to judge these young candidates by their prepared pieces alone, for it may be someone else's ability – an adult teacher/director through whose hands the candidates have passed – that gets judged. (Of course, this cuts both ways when you consider the quality of drama instruction available in even our best schools.) Another problem is that these presentations often drip with mechanically heightened emotion – in the mistaken but understandable conviction, given the all-pervasive television soaps in which whole generations are being rinsed, that powerful acting is always exhibitionistic in intent. Finally, the 'prepared piece and certificates' formula is inadequate because it merely ascertains, however dubiously, the candidate's past achievement without assessing her future potential. Admissions determined through these criteria end up looking like rewards for work already done, like certificates of merit that conclude rather than initiate a new activity. Surely the purpose of special admissions is the benefit that the college aims to derive from the student's stay at the institution. What is therefore needed is a selection process that offers a more accurate picture of the candidate's potential to work in the college – a process that tries, in a manner of speaking, to get beneath the skin, with the aim of observing individuals at work rather than superficially evaluating the packaged

product that they make of themselves.

Such a process will still acknowledge past achievement, but only to the extent that it throws light upon the candidate's potential. It will focus on assessing individual creativity by challenging it through the unpredictable structure of solo and group improvisation exercises. Apart from checking the candidate's ability to work within a group, to accept direction and to critically analyse his own creative choices, the fact that all this takes an enormous amount of time will also make this process a test of stamina. The pressure to be creative under conditions of tension and fatigue is arguably the best test of performance ability, though one has to be careful not to overdo such terms of endurance.

Finally, the efficacy of any selection procedure, even the most enabling one, depends upon its rationale being understood and its implications worked out. The selection process's emphasis on 'potential' and 'usefulness' rather than past achievement' means that in the case of over-qualified candidates, some hard decisions have to be taken. Some years ago, the son of a renowned violinist, a budding violinist himself, was granted an ECA admission at the college where I teach. But, between his classes and his tours with his father, he had no time left for playing in or for his college, and finally graduated from the institution having graced it with his instrument just a couple of times during that period. In drama too, many applicants today pop up with some experience of having acted for television. That sounds impressive alright, but this can be a real pain in the neck. For, not only are such candidates infected by the work ethic of the television studio, their commitments to the small screen leave them with little time for participating in college drama activity. Only colleges which bask in the reflected glory of their alumni welcome such stars. Others, with work goals defined in the present, continue their work with ordinary mortals and realisable potential.

Potential for what, is another question altogether. The academic year begins well with ECA admissions, but a couple of months down the line cultural activities get treated like the proverbial stepchild. For sports, there is a hectic University calendar; culture gets left to college students and their fizz-drink sponsors for whom culture is confined within Ramp Displays (ubiquitously christened Fashion Shows') and Rock Shows. (The University does have a Culture Council in place but that is badly in need of some counsel and resuscitation.) Sports budgets are large and inviolate; ECA budgets are less than a tenth and constantly eaten into. Sports activities are run by faculty members appointed for the purpose; cultural activities are supervised, if at all, by regular teachers on a voluntary basis.

It is therefore not unusual to find that the categories under which the ECA admissions are made have precious little to show by the end of the year. Lack of accountability is in fact built into the system with teachers not being directly responsible for ensuring that the ECA students work, in the same manner in which they are accountable for taking classes or finishing their courses. In such a context, it is not out of place to wonder why colleges go through the trouble of having these admissions in the first place. The answer, I'm afraid, is not flattering at all.

If this is an unrelievedly depressing picture, let me point out that all cultural initiatives in the University have not collapsed. It is merely the system of the ECA admissions that has not delivered, not because it has been hijacked by vested interests but because the anxiety to *appear* just (more than the desire to *be* just) has led to the selections being carried out in thoroughly unimaginative fashions. Meanwhile, plays have been staged, instruments played, sketches made and photographs displayed, often on the strength of students who have not had to declare their artistic talents in order to gain admission.

Interestingly, the ECA admissions have worked when college administrations have not shied away from acknowledging the subjectivity of the selection process, and have insisted merely on it being an informed, committed and transparent subjectivity. In that lies the only insurance against possible abuse of such ‘licence’. Testing has to be entrusted to those teachers and senior students (and alumni) who have formulated projects for the year and will be responsible for carrying them out. An audit of each year’s activities will also prove useful. Finally, as in so much else, the viability of the system boils down to the integrity and commitment of the persons involved. There is no getting beyond this basic fact. At any rate, are these not crucial ingredients in any form of cultural practice?