Dabbling In Babble / Keval Arora

Tim Supple's Production of Shakespeare's *Mid Summer Nights Dream* is currently touring India. Keval Arora takes on Supple for his comments (made earlier) on Indian Theatre and *multicultural collaboration.*

What is it about multilingualism that draws so many theatre practitioners to dabble in it, much like moths being drawn to a flame? And, what is it about multilingualism that makes many of them end up getting burnt by the encounter? Why is it that Tim Supple, who brought to India a perfectly competent production of *The Comedy of Errors* with the Royal Shakespeare Company some years ago, has ended up this time offering a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that makes all the right noises but falls woefully short of making sense?

Well, actually, not all these noises were politically

correct. . Supple's comments on intercultural collaboration (carried in the brochure that accompanied the premiere production in 2006) may have been a shade too driven by the enthusiasm of a 'been-there-seen-that' cultural traveller, but did he really think he would win friends and influence people by his description of Indian theatre as "less tangible, less modern, less structured than ours and often fashioned with basic design and rough execution"? However, win friends he did, as can be gauged from Ananda Lal's comments (in that same brochure) about Supple's work. Says Lal, "Knowing the debates [revolving around issues of 'neo-colonial exploitation' in 'inter-cultural theatre'], observing him direct at close range and having asked members of the team, I can vouch for the fact that he is sensitive to the issue and its dangers. As corroborated by the performers…no appropriation occurred." (Lal also goes on to claim that Supple as "a foreign director has achieved national integration for Indian theatre before any Indian could", but I think we could let that pass as an instance of our Indian habit of being hospitable to the point of embarrassing everybody around!) The first statement is by itself a great Certificate of Merit, though it is difficult to fathom the authority with which assurances such as "no appropriation occurred" can ever be offered. Besides, the prospect of a post-colonial watchdog snooping around for evidence of appropriation during rehearsals can hardly be the kind of thing that leads to intercultural bonhomie let alone transparency!

Cordial and collaborative dealings in work processes don't guarantee that the art thus produced will be free of appropriative relations. Plays aren't exactly processed on a shop-floor where one presumes hygienic procedures will result in non-contaminated products. Nor are 'appropriations' tangible actions that can be detected in the making, like embezzlements or fraud. You can monitor rehearsals all you want on CCTV, interview as many employees (read 'actors, technicians, etc') as you like, and still discover outcomes

that are suspect in their negotiation of social and cultural identity. In other words, 'appropriations' don't have to be rooted in malicious intent: often, the best-intentioned at heart still end up stepping into shit.

Take, for instance, Supple's decision to go multilingual when asked by the British Council to create a production in India and Sri Lanka. He writes, "To restrict ourselves to performers who worked in English would be to miss out on a wealth of different ways of making theatre…. It would also be a lie." How can one not approve of such sensitivity towards our situation in the subcontinent where – and we can speak more freely than Supple feels he can – the best way of making theatre is not to be found in our English language stage. So, his decision to grant performers the comfort of working in their own languages led inevitably to *Midsummer* being conceived as a multilingual production. Though Lal is right in noting that "in the West, multilingual theatre has become fairly common, particularly in international projects", it is important to recognise that Supple's decision to go multilingual has been prompted less by the project's 'international' status than by his wish to make it accessible to the broadest swathe of performers. Not to mention his need to give the Shakespearean text its due: as he says, "whatever else a Shakespeare production might do, it should seek to reflect the time and place in which it is made with vivid honesty."

Laudable as this may sound, how true is it of Supple's own work with *Midsummer*? Does its multilingualism, which lies at the heart of this intercultural project, reflect anything at all, let alone with vivid honesty? *Midsummer* has several languages – English, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil and Sinhalese – operate indiscriminately in performance, cropping up and dropping out without evident purpose or necessity. With some characters speaking primarily in one language and others switching between languages for no

apparent cause; with no patterns being discernible in the connections drawn between situation, character and the language/s used, Supple's multilingualism add up to little more than a noble-hearted linguistic egalitarianism.

Egalitarian motivations of this sort can't take you far, especially if none of these languages is textured as a living, cohabited entity. The idea that languages are grounded in socio-cultural spaces and are imbricated in personal identity, that they shape memories of shared pasts and imagined futures, that they are as much bones of contention as means of contestations – none of these, on the evidence of the performance, seems part of Supple's plan. His production sails through the melange of tongues without once indicating that the bewildering mix of words and accents amount to anything more than a log of semantic equivalences. As a result, *Midsummer's* characters are reduced to merely speakers of many tongues, and its text flattened to opaque displays of 'otherness', which lack even the resonance and difficulty that negotiating the 'other' brings in its wake.

Surely, a multilingual theatre has to foreground language as vital to its meaning, else why should any theatre strive to move outside the confines of its single, original language? An advantage with monolingual theatre is that when all characters speak the same tongue, it is possible, as writer Manjula Padmanabhan has averred in relation to her play *Harvest*, for the language to be divested of social and geographical referents and to that extent become 'invisible'. (Writers then turn to vocabulary and intonation to bring in the desired social textures.) It is when two languages are made to coexist in the same text that questions arise as to why a character speaks in one and not the other language; questions that need to be answered even more urgently when the same character is seen to shift from one language to another.

Thus, multilingual productions pose issues of naturalness and probability in a deeper vein, and in the process demonstrate

their potential to handle richer representations. But for that to happen, their discrete languages need to be tagged for difference and located in a socio-cultural hierarchy, in the same manner as these operate off-stage. If, as in *Midsummer*, the various languages on show are offered in a non-problematised, unified terrain, then I'm afraid this ends up as an aestheticised unity of the most banal kind.

Moreover, there seems to be some confusion here. Sure, Indian theatre is multilingual, as Supple claims – but only to the extent that India, by virtue of being a multilingual nation, has theatres in many languages. Texts, however, continue to be written and played mainly in a single language (including regional variations and dialects does not a multilingual theatre make!). Few theatre pieces shoulder on their back a hold-all of many languages for the simple reason that audiences aren't multilingual – at any rate, not in the broad range that *Midsummer* imagines. How does a multilingual theatre work then for audiences when its text is segmented into distinct clumps of speech which are alternatingly inaccessible to spectators (as they surely also were to the other actors on stage)? It's ironical that Supple's inclusivist gesture towards the individual actor ends up as an exclusionary experience for his spectators.

Not that the production is scrupulously caring about its actors either. For a project that kicked off with a view to enabling the non-English speaking performer, it is strange to see almost every actor in *Midsummer* speak in English at some point, regardless of that actor's comfort with the language. I have no clue as to why this happened or what it is meant to achieve. All I do know is that the thick, regional intonation of English speech in such cases showed up speakers in a poor light, and left one silently willing the actor to retreat into the comfort zone of his native tongue!

As for the claim that multilingual theatre is the theatre of the future, let me point out two small cheat codes embedded in

the zone of the multilingual. One, most multilingual theatre tends to remain closeted with the classics. In other words, with such plays where spectators' familiarity with the text functions like an insurance policy because it neutralises the risk of incomprehensibility that is inevitable when languages are used in a manner that makes them only selectively comprehensible to audiences. Two, most multilingual theatres tend to favour designs that have strong visual components and a physicalised performance style as staple features of its performance grammar, as if this is one way of working around the fact that large portions of the text may remain unintelligible to audiences. Compensations of this kind clearly signal that multilingualism of the kind favoured in international projects today is primarily a gesture towards inclusiveness and tolerance. And, like most gestures, it is unfortunately little more than that.

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The Competition Virus / Keval Arora

Who Wins ?

As one bleakly contemplates the prospect of yet another theatre season at the university getting under way with the IIT Delhi festival in a couple of weeks, two comments heard some time ago come back to mind. One was at a press conference several years ago when Mahindra & Mahindra was the main sponsor of the Old World Theatre festival at the India Habitat Centre, and the other had cropped up at a seminar organised during the Sangeet Natak Akademi Golden Jubilee Theatre Festival.

At the seminar where several speakers had bemoaned the absence of a comprehensive theatre policy for young performers and audiences, a delegate had contested the pessimism by praising the vibrant theatre culture in Maharashtra, and had offered an annual, popular theatre competition as evidence of the same. Regardless of the kind of theatre that could be on offer here – which I'm willing to assume, for argument's sake, is of the best quality – I found it curious that this otherwise insightful theatre person had no qualms in advocating a competition as proof that the young have a vibrant theatre culture of their own. In a similar vein, a happily earnest representative of the Mahindra & Mahindra group had sought to impress journalists and participants alike about his company's commitment to supporting youth theatre by declaring that the collegiate section of the Old World Theatre festival would henceforth be run as a competition and the best college play

would be awarded a very large sum of money. In other words, college teams congregating at a theatre festival would suddenly find themselves pitched into competing against one another!

Both comments were striking for their facile assumption that competitions are places where theatre can be expected to thrive. On the contrary: competitions are the most unlikely of places for a culture of performance to take root. Competitions stifle: locking us into exclusionary zones, they cajole even those charitably inclined into antagonistic mindsets. They spawn argument rather than analysis, sniping rather than sharing, sniggers rather than joy, and putting down rather than pulling together. If we're all willing to sing happy hosannas of theatre as a collaborative activity, why then do we blithely accept the antipathy that competitions generate? Sure, there is something called 'healthy competition', that gloriously (oxy)moronic phrase in which an all-knowing apprehension lurks unsaid beneath the thin disguise of amiability. Sure, many of us have fond memories of the fun there is to be had at theatre competitions during cultural festivals. But, pray tell, are these memories of togetherness, of the sweat and joy of a common triumph, even remotely dependent on the besting of an opponent? Our abiding memories of pleasure come from the collaborative project called theatre, from the thrill of a job well done rather than from the petty triumph of being designated lord of the little heap of the day.

What's worse is that such faith in the salutary benefits of competition is often directed exclusively at young performers and audiences, and rarely extended to all theatre activity. Take, for instance, the Old World Theatre festival. One of the nicest things about this festival is the space it allots to college theatre. In fact, this annual festival which is now all of 6 years old is unique in being the only mainstream theatre festival in Delhithat showcases youth theatre

alongside the regular kind. But, the manner in which the festival sponsor put pressure on the organisers to run the youth festival as a competition suggests that our general regard for youth theatre is more well-intentioned than well thought out. It's sad enough that most colleges, in the absence of alternatives, end up channelling their theatre activities into and through competitive face-offs. It's sadder still to see festival organisers gratuitously inject competitive tension into a festive occasion, and rob the event of that very quality that makes it precious to college theatre groups.

That the man from Mahindra & Mahindra was probably convinced that he was only doing college kids a favour goes to show how habituated we are to seeing children as racehorses meant to do us proud. It's interesting that the sponsor didn't extend the same favour to the amateur/professional theatre groups from Mumbai and Delhi invited for the festival. Obviously, he didn't think what's good for young performers is a good idea for those who have already 'arrived'. Why? Probably because most of our theatre worthies (performers and critics alike) would justifiably balk at the prospect of being ranked alongside their fellow professionals. It's another matter that many of these worthies would, at the same time, have no compunction in blooding new talent in this very manner. Why is it that we look upon the young as a sub-species of ourselves, like us and not quite like us, people who have to be taught the value of our rules even as they are controlled and manipulated by different ones?

Why do we assume that the right way to motivate young people towards the theatre is through the blandishment of competitions, prizes and the 'glamour' of winning? A theatre programme organised by Katha in 2001 as a tribute to Vijay Tendulkar is a classic instance of how infectious this virus called 'competition' can be. Last-minute nervousness about whether enough colleges would respond to their invitation

prompted Katha into adding a competition element – with prizes, judges and all – into their programme that had originally been conceived on the lines of 'Forum Theatre'! Katha's transformation of even the Forum Theatre – a model of critical interchange and collaborative responsibility – into a race for marks and prizes continues to be for me the final obscenity in our blind regard for the inspirational virtues of 'competition'.

Lest I be charged with whitewashing the young as angelic innocents smarting under the yoke of an inhospitable system, let me quickly declare that I have seen enough malice and viciousness amongst young performers to last me a lifetime. But that is precisely my point, for it is in the nature of competitions to breed bloody-mindedness, not to mention mediocrity (more of that later). Yet, it seems that competitions are here to stay. They're here to stay as far as college organisations are concerned because they are the easiest option. A one-off theatre event is so much easier to manage than sustained year-round activity, plus you get more mileage out of it. They're here to stay as far as college drama societies are concerned because competitions provide the only opportunity for students to circulate their work without the massive expenditures they would have to incur were they to take their play out on their own. Many college auditoriums – where colleges do have one – are not geared to host theatre performances; many drama societies do not have the finance to attempt full-scale productions. The short play drama competition has therefore over the years become the definitive opportunity for college students to showcase their theatre skills.

How much of an 'incentive' is the money doled out as prizes in these competitions? It's difficult to speak with finality but I am aware that college drama enthusiasts rate inter-college competitions by the quality (attentiveness, knowledge, discipline) of host audiences, as also the quality of the

competition. The money offered is surely a factor, but it's never an over-riding one. The primary motivation is always that of 'putting up a good show', of earning the respect of the peer group, and of receiving critical feedback from knowledgeable spectators. There is obviously a thrill in coming 'First', in being adjudged the 'Best', but it's obvious that such rankings are valuable only insofar as they accurately record the considerations cited mentioned above.

It is not true that these motivations can be addressed solely through a competition format. The fact that many of these competitions are mismanaged adds to the frustration of performers, but that is not my concern here. This piece is about the idea of Competition – competitions as they come off that great mould (rather, mold) in the sky, perfect forms in a perfect world – rather than the hijacking of existing competitions through ego, nepotism and cupidity. A festival shorn of the competitive element does in fact offer a more suitable opportunity in these very areas. Take, for instance, the common rationale for a system of competitions: they are supposed to be good because they spur you on to greater heights by giving you an incentive to do better. Better than what, I ask. Better than your neighbour? That's no mountain to climb. How does it matter that I'm better than my neighbour if I'm still a shit? Better than what you did before, is the much greater challenge. Besting one's neighbour, fellow participant or pet enemy can often end up rewarding only mediocrity. Competitions can leave you content with being just that one rung above your neighbour. There is no learning curve here: only a complacent, gloating one. Surely, your best competitor is yourself, just as your fiercest critic is that voice within you that leaves you in a state of constant dissatisfaction.

As one who interacts closely with college students, I'm aware that their biggest grouse is the lack of critical feedback, the sense of a vacuum in which they grapple with questions concerning their theatre. In dealing with this issue, it is as

important to enable their engagement with professionals in the field as between themselves. A festival that encourages all participants to sit down together to discuss their work, to bounce their questions and comments off an expert in the field, a festival that judges each production separately in terms of its own merit instead of lumping them together in some order of relative worth, is a festival worth emulating. Given the general gloom that permeates most discussions of the future of urban Indian theatre, it is important that we teach tomorrow's generation of theatre workers respect for others' work as well as their own, and encourage them to practice critical plain-speaking regardless of whose work it is. We've been running a theatre festival of this kind at Kirori Mal college where I teach for some years now. Believe me, it works.

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For Whom Nobels Toll / Keval Arora

Harold Pinter

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 criticised 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

A Matter of Applause / Keval Arora

Suspense! – Will They or Won’t They?

A critical difference between live and recorded performances (those in cinema or television) can be seen in the way we respond to them. Namely, in the matter of applause. When it comes to other kinds of reaction – laughing, being moved, being irritated, etc – it seems to not matter whether the performer stands before us in the flesh or as a projected image or digitised signal. (Well, some of us may fight our tears and laughter in the public space of the cinema hall, while comfortably letting go within the privacy of television viewing. But, that difference is a only a matter of public rectitude; and, in any case, it makes no distinction between live and recorded performance.) Applause, on the other hand, is a category of response that is found almost exclusively within live performance.

When a show is over, you clap. Duration, intensity and manner (seated or standing ovation) provide some variation; with

whistling being reserved for in-house audiences of friends and colleagues. The end result is pretty much always the same: as the house lights go up, you clap. The applause may well be tepid and mechanical; it may even be somewhat forced when performances are of indifferent quality, but you still clap. On the other hand, we rarely do that for films or television programmes – even when we have been deeply moved. The reason for this strange gap between our private response and our public gesture is obvious. Applauding a recorded performance is pointless because there's no one there to receive the appreciation, whereas live performances exert a kind of pressure on spectators when artistes return to the stage for a curtain call. Similarly, it's only at those screenings where someone connected with the film is present that applause is sometimes heard. Or, and this has been happening of late, when the film comes with a reputation for being 'controversial' or even 'alternative' – the applause that is then offered is usually a gesture of solidarity intended for others in the audience.

It's obvious then that applause, as compared to reactions such as laughter and tears, is not so much a private response as it is a social gesture, a protocol of communication with those around you. At the risk of schematising the division, one can perhaps argue that laughter and tears express us as individuals or as a group, and to that extent possess the authenticity of a self-authored monologue; whereas, applause, to extend the metaphor, has more the contextual push and pull of dialogue. The fact that, barring the case of a few theatrical modes, performers and their fictions tend to carry on regardless of what spectators vocalise during the performance, indicates the unidirectional nature of spectator response. Addressed to no one in particular and in no expectation of any kind of counter-response, 'laughter and tears' (I'm sorry, but you'll have to lump the phrase as a shorthand for some time) can be seen as self-articulations of the purest kind. Applause, on the other hand, occurs outside

rather than within the performance, when the actor has shed his character's clothes and comes before us as s/he is. That maybe a reason why, when viewing a performance with strangers, we hold back from what we perceive as 'excessive' private response and yet do not feel similarly vulnerable when we willingly demonstrate personal appreciation in the form of applause.

Applause is a socialised response in another sense as well. For, this is what you're obliged to do for these actors who have striven to give you, if one may invert that venerable line in *Waiting for Godot*, 'such a fine, fine time'. Isn't that why many of us clap automatically at the end of a performance, even when we haven't particularly enjoyed it? It's what is expected of you, it's your part of the bargain, and to not offer it at the end of a performance seems churlish. After all, 'putting up a play is no joke, 'we must applaud the effort and intention if not the achievement', 'it's the least we can do to encourage the few who keep the flag flying' and all that, are no doubt powerful arguments that only the culturally insensate can ignore. Such is the momentum of this socialised action that it actually takes willed premeditation on one's part to refuse even token applause.

Though much of what I've been saying relates mainly to the applause that greets performances at their end, it is possible to find a similar geniality at work at other moments as well. Especially in this terrible habit of spectators clapping in the middle of a performance. Applauding during a performance is certainly not as distracting in the theatre as it is in the case of a Western classical music – remember the bemused horror that Delhi audiences had evoked during the Zubin Mehta concert several years ago? – but it is violative nevertheless. And dangerous too, for, before you know it, such interruptive appreciation becomes the norm, for performers and spectators alike. I've heard it said so often that Western classical

music performances brook no interruption, even appreciative ones, that the implication these are acceptable within Hindustani and Carnatic music traditions has become something of a truism. However, it is equally intrusive in the latter case, especially when mid-performance applause comes to be regarded as more ‘authentic’ (it’s ‘spontaneous’, you see) than its automatic, polite cousin that shows up at the end. For, then, performers are persuaded to play to the gallery, to chop their own creation into a series of effects, and to lose a sense of the whole.

One of the problems with applause – arguably the most insidious one, for this is seen equally in its ‘authentic’ and its ‘polite’ manifestations – relates to this problem of ‘losing a sense of the whole’. What is it that we appreciate, and I’m now speaking of the theatre, when we offer applause to a performance? The text, the play, the analysis, the experience? Perhaps, sometimes; but only rarely so. More often than not, we offer applause to the performers rather than the performance, the skills on display and the effort that went into the making of the show. On the face of it, this appears consistent with the socialised aspect of applause I’ve mentioned earlier, but it is more than that. For, it is equally true of the cinema. There too we respond primarily to the actors’ performances, and only secondarily to the argument the film may be offering (unless, of course, we are students of the cinema – in which case, it is the camera-work that sets our hearts pounding!). This aspect of applause is violative in fundamental ways because it compromises the integrity and cohesion of the work itself. Applause of this kind signals the constant deflection through which performances are received, through which texts are constantly reduced into an assembly of enactments, and plays into their playing.

It is difficult for most plays to survive the corrosive influence of such appreciation. Especially such plays which are not celebratory or light in tone. If they do survive, it

is because of the raw power of their texts, which not even the most enthusiastic appreciation can completely swamp. I remember one such play and one such audience when *Women Can't Wait*, a solo show by the US actress Sarah Jones, was staged in the open at the IHC amphitheatre. *Women Can't Wait* was originally commissioned by *Equality Now!* for performance before government delegates to the UN Global Conference on Women's Rights held in New York. It toured Indiacourtesy *Crea* and *Tarshi*, NGOs working in the area of women's rights.

The play comprised a series of narrations by different women, addressed to an imagined assembly of government officials, as a reminder to governments and the people manning them that "they have promises to keep". The women, eight in all (from India, Japan, Uruguay, France, USA, Jordan, Israel and N igeria) spoke of brutalising aspects of their lives, made doubly intolerable by the fact of their countries' laws providing no recourse. The fiction within which these monologues were couched was that of a rehearsal: the women were rehearsing their speeches for presentation before delegates, and in so doing, the actress presented them directly to the audience. One of the women played the role of coach and moderator, offering tips on presentation ("Speak with conviction because your audience is generally unsympathetic"; and "Smile at them. The UN people like that"), monitoring vocabulary and tone ("No, dear, I don't think you can use that word"), and generally boosting the morale of the nervous speakers.

These monologues had interesting layers worked into them, but I won't speak of that now because this is not intended as a review of the play. In fact, what I'm driving at is that *Women Can't Wait* is perhaps not even a play. Certainly, to equate it with what goes on regularly in the name of evening entertainments does it grave injustice. *Women Can't Wait* is more than a play: it is an intervention in civil space, and

therefore ‘culture’ in the best sense of the word.

Author-director-actress Sarah Jones played all the women, using nothing but phenomenal shifts in voice, accent and rhythm to mesmerise us with the sensation of there being actually eight different women on stage before us. Oh yes, much has been made of a scarf that she used in different ways to contribute some visual variety, but I’m sure that had there been no scarf, it would have taken little away from the convincing textures of her performance.

Jones’ skill at bringing to life eight different speech, gestural, social, professional and economic profiles, and binding all of them into a common articulation of indignation and protest, was clearly a major strength of *Women Can’t Wait*. Yet, it was also a profound handicap. Jones had the audience so eating out of her hand that, in the course of the performance, it became unclear what the spectators were looking at. Take the instance of the honour killing that Hala of Jordan narrated. Her story was raw and bloody, and the silence in that packed amphitheatre deepened with horror at the calm brutality of familial honour. Yet, as the character’s voice trailed away, unable to complete her story, there was only the briefest of pauses before applause broke out and swelled – for what? The juxtaposition of the two moments – the character’s yielding to silence and the spectators’ applause – was obscene. (In hard, perhaps pedantic, terms, it was even undesirable.) But that is what Jones’ ability to present yet another character movingly and “with conviction” achieved. Hala’s story was picked clean of its emotional gore (mind you, these monologues were constructed from documented, real-life instances), and sanitised through our appreciation of a marvellous actress’ command over voice and speech.

Instances of this kind make me sometimes wonder why so much time is spent in discussing the success/failure of performances even as we ignore the equally vital question of the success and the failure of audiences.

An earlier version of this article was first published in FIRST CITY (January 2002)

Parable of the Ten Virgins: Play Scripted for Nilakantan Gauri by Prema Sastri

(For permission to perform this play read the note at the bottom)

(Left)Virgins in Waiting
(Right)The Wedding

CAST OF CHARACTERS.

VIRGINS.10.

TOWN CRIERS 2

CROWD.

FRUIT SELLER.1

BEGGARS 2.

SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

SHOEMAKER.1

POLICEMEN.3.

STREET SINGERS 5

OLD LADIES. 2

OLD MEN 2

THE KING. 1

The KING`S ATTENDANTS. SEVERAL.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE QUEEN.1

THE QUEEN`S ATTENDANTS.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE KING`S SON. 1

35 speaking roles.

SCENE ONE.

PLACE. THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE TIME OF JESUS.

TIME.LATE AFTERNOON.

SCENE. A BUSY STREET IN THE CAPITAL.

AT RISE. STREET SCENE. PEOPLE ON STAGE.

ENTER FRUIT SELLER.

FRUIT SELLER. Fresh fruit.Bananas, pomegranates, grapes. I also have olives, and dates.(Arranges his baskets, and goes around soliciting)

ENTER SHOEMAKER.(He is holding a string of shoes(.Addresses. Fruit seller) I hope you have some extra fruit for me.

FRUIT SELLER. I have fruit for anyone who will pay.

SHOEMAKER. You have not yet paid me for the repairs I did to your shoe.

FRUIT SELLER. You just put in a couple of stitches.

SHOEMAKER. Without that your shoe would have come apart.

FRUIT SELLER. Allright, here is a pomegranite for you

ENTER SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

(Children run around)

FIRST CHILD. It is good not to be in school.

SECOND CHILD. The classroom was stuffy.

THIRD CHILD. The thatch on the roof was coming apart.Let`s have fun. No one knows where we are

.ENTER. OLD MEN. (They stare at the children, and shake their heads)

ENTER TWO OLD LADIES.(They look around.)

FIRST OLD MAN;(To schoolchildren)
Why are you on the street?
SECOND OLD MAN> You should be in school.

FIRST CHILD. It is a holiday today.

FIRST OLD LADY. What nonsense. My grandchild went to school today

SECOND OLD LADY. So did mine.

THE OLD MEN AND THE LADIES SHAKE THEIR HEADS IN DISAPPROVAL.

ENTER STREET SINGERS.

FIRST SINGER. This looks a merry place.

SECOND SINGER SINGER. So it is.

THIRD SINGER.Let us look around.

FOURTH SINGER. I am sure the people will love our song

.FIFTH SINGER. . Don`t be so sure about it. In the last town they chased us out.

FIRST SINGER We will sing our latest song;the one we made up in the desert.

SECOND SINGER. First let s eat something.(They go to the fruit seller,and buy fruit)

ENTER THE TEN VIRGINS.

FIRST VIRGIN. This is where we were told to come by the temple priest

.SECOND VIRGIN. It is too crowded here.

THIRD VIRGIN. We will stand to one side, and see what happens.

(The virgins form a group)

ENTER BEGGARS.

FIRST BEGGAR. This is a good place for our trade.

SECOND BEGGAR. Ladies and gentlemen. We are hungry. Give us something.(People move away from them, as they go round.).

ENTER POLICEMEN.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Why are you people making such a noise.? You are crowding the street.

SECOND POLICEMAN. Get out of the way.(raises baton)

FRUIT SELLER. It is market day today.

THIRD POLICEMAN. .Sell your wares in the market, not here.

FRUIT VENDOR. This is my market.(Laughs)Come buy grapes, oranges bananas

SECOND POLICEMAN. I`ll give you oranges.(Snatches an orange from the basket)

FRUIT SELLER.Hey give it back.

SECOND POLICEMAN. I`ll give you this.(Raises baton, and gives a blow

The crowd disperses to a side.The two beggars are in front).

FIRST POLICEMAN. What are you doing.?

FIRST BEGGAR. Begging sir. Have you something to give me?.

FIRST POLICEMAN(Raises baton) Yes I have.

SECOND BEGGAR. Have pity on us.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Why should I/ The king will be furious to see the street so crowded. His carriage is due any moment.

SCHOOLCHILD 1 Do we really get to see the king?

POLICEMAN. What are you doing here. ?You should be in school.

SCHOOLCHILD 2. I have to get some things for my mother.(Joins his friend.)

SCHOOLCHILD 3. We will stand in the shade..(They move to a side, trying to look inconspicuous)

OLD LADY 1. What are children coming to these days.

OLD LADY 2 They don`t care about anything.

OLD MAN1.Very true.

OLD MAN2 Not like they were in our day.

STREET SINGERS. Did you say the king was coming this way.?

FIRST POLICEMAN. I did.

SHOEMAKER. Perhaps he may buy some shoes from me.

SECOND POLICEMAN. The king buy shoes from you. That is a joke.(Laughs)

STREET SINGERS. The king is coming. Let us dance and sing.

SINGERS SING. THE CROWD DANCES.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Enough(Turns to virgins)Who are you.? VIRGINS.(Together) We are the keepers of the flame.We bring light.

SECOND POLICEMAN. Stay together then. Let us see the light.(Laughs)

ENTER TOWN CRIERS with a roll of drums

TOWN CRIER.Listen to me all you people. (The mob is silent and looks at him)

I have great and important news for you..

CROWD. Tell us. Tell us.

TOWN CRIER. The king`s son Liam is going to get married.

THE CROWD CLAPS, WAVES ITS HANDS AND DANCES AROUND THE STAGE.

SECOND TOWN CRIER. Wait. There are some special invitees. (He goes to the virgins)You ladies. You have been invited to the wedding feast to light the courtyard. Be sure that your lamps are burning bright.

VIRGINS. We will.

FIRST TOWN CRIER . The prince is going to marry the fair Sara.There will be a great feast. Liam and Sara are a fairy tale couple.

FIRST VIRGIN. Will the queen be coming now.?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. Yes she will.

SECOND VIRGIN.Are we invited to the feast?

FIRST TOWN CRIER. You are.The king and his company will get down near the statue, and walk this way.

THIRD VIRGIN. Is the prince as handsome as they say.?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. He is.

FOURTH VIRGIN. Will the prince`s friends attend the wedding?.

FIRST TOWN CRIER. He has many friends. They will come.

FIFTH VIRGIN. Are they also princes?.

FIRST TOWN CRIER. A prince`s friends can only be of his rank. They are all princes from various countries.

SIXTH VIRGIN. Will there be music? 2

SECOND TOWN CRIER. The best in the land.

SEVENTH VIRGIN.Are there any dancers?

FIRST TOWN CRIER. There will be dancing till dawn.

EIGHTH VIRGIN. Oh how lovely.(Claps her hands.)

NINTH VIRGIN> We are so fortunate.

TENTH VIRGIN. We will have a wonderful time..

SECOND TOWN CRIER Be ready with your lamps. The prince comes to the palace hall at midnight.

EXIT TOWN CRIERS. WITH ROLL OF DRUMS

FIRST POLICEMAN. The king and his court are coming.Stand back. (The crowd moves back.)

THE KING, THE QUEEN,AND THEIR ATTENDANTS CROSS THE STAGE. THEY GREET THE CROWD. THE CROWD IS RAPTUROUS.EXIT KING AND ENTOURAGE

FIRST POLICEMAN. Now all you people clear the street.

FRUIT SELLER. But I haven`t sold any fruit.

SECOND POLICEMAN. That`s your bad luck.

BEGGARS. You did not let us go near the king.

THIRD POLICEMAN. It is our job to keep the likes of you away.

STREET SINGERS. We wanted to sing, but we gazed in wonder instead.

SCHOOLCHILDREN. We will say we were invited to the wedding, and could not attend school

.OLD GENTLEMAN. Oh what it was like to be young.The young prince will be getting a beautiful bride.(Starts singing. The other old people join in.)

FIRST POLICEMAN. Off with you. All of you.

(They herd out all the people..The stage empties.)

FADE OUT

. FADE IN.

It is late at night in the outer chambers of the king`s palace. The ten virgins are on stage.,in two groups.They are carrying lighted lamps.

BRIDAL MUSIC. THE VIRGINS SING.AND DANCE

FIRST VIRGIN.I never dreamed I would be given such a great honour.

SECOND VIRGIN. To be invited to a prince`s wedding.

THIRD VIRGIN. We are truly chosen.

FOURTH VIRGIN.God has blessed us.

FIFTH VIRGIN. Let us be ready for the prince.We will trim our lamps.

THE FIVE VIRGINS TEND JARS OF OIL AND THEIR LAMPS.

SIXTH VIRGIN. I feel as if I could dance.(Dances a few steps)

SEVENTH VIRGIN. I long to sing.(Sings a few bars.)

EIGHT VIRGIN. The queen will be wearing a beautiful gown.(Walks a few steps as if trailing a gown.)

NINTH VIRGIN.There will be pearls and gems sewn on to it. (mimes studying the gems on her gown.)

TENTH VIRGIN. I bet the prince will look handsome, and have handsome friends.(Looks into space, dreamimg.)

(the wise virgins attend to their lamps:the foolish virgins laugh and chatter among themselves)

FIRST VIRGIN.It is past midnight. I can see the lights have gone out in the city’

SECOND VIRGIN. Look, the people In the courtyard are sleeping.(Light on stage shows slumbering people.

THIRD VIRGIN. We dare not sleep.

FOURTH VIRGIN. We will walk and keep awake.

FIFTH VIRGIN. We must be ready when the time comes

THE VIRGINS ON THE OTHER SIDE ARE LYING DOWN HALF ASLEEP. SUDDENLY ONE OF THEM WAKES UP.

VIRGIN SIX. Look, our lamps have gone out.

VIRGIN SEVEN. What shall we do?

VIRGIN EIGHT.Look inside the jars.There may be some oil in them.I forgot. We did not bring extra jars.

VIRGIN NINE. The other group seem to have their jars full.

VIRGIN TEN. Let us ask them to give us some oil.

THEY APPROACH THE OTHER VIRGINS

VIRGIN TEN. Dear sisters, our lamps have gone out. Can you give us some from your jars?

VIRGIN ONE. Sorry dear sisters. We do not know when the prince will come. We have hardly enough oil for our own jars.

VIRGIN NINE. Please do help us.

VIRGIN TWO. We would like to, but we are helpless.

VIRGIN.EIGHT. Don`t be so cruel.

VIRGIN THREE. We don`t mean to be, but we have to first do our own duties.

VIRGIN SEVEN. Give us just a little.

VIRGIN TWO. We cannot. The prince may come any time. Go

quickly to the market place, and get more oil.

VIRGIN SEVEN. You are being mean. You can spare each of us a little oil, just a little.

THIRD VIRGIN. We cannot.

(The foolish virgins weep and wail, and get into a frenzy.They turn on the wise virgins)

NINTH VIRGIN. We will take it from you..

(There is a scuffle. The wise virgins hold on to their jars)

VIRGIN SIX. We will have to get some oil.How foolish we were not to bring extra jars of oil.

VIRGIN SEVEN Let. us go quickly, before the prince comes.

EXIT FOOLISH VIRGINS.THERE IS A SOUND OF REVELRY. ENTER THE KING, QUEEN, ATTENDANTS AND PRINCE

KING. It is dark, on one side of the courtyard. Luckily, There is light on the other. We will go that way.

VIRGINS TOGETHER. Welcome your majesties.

KING. Come with us.

THE VIRGINS FOLLOW THEM. THE PRINCE GOES OFFSTAGE. PREPARATIONS ARE MADE FOR THE WEDDING.GARLANDS ARRANGED, CHAIRS DRAPED WITH SILKS ETC.

ENTER FOOLISH VIRGINS, THEIR LAMPS BLAZING BRIGHTLY. THEY SEEK ADMITTANCE.THE KING SENDS AN ATTENDANT,

ATTENDANT. What do you want?. The King is busy.

SEVENTH VIRGIN. We were asked to attend him.(The attendant goes to the King,and whispers to him. The king comes to the door.)

KING. Who are you?

VIRGIN SIX. We are the virgins sent to light your way.

KING. I did not see any light. Did you O queen?

QUEEN. I did not. The ladies with the lamps are already with us. The rest of the hall was dark.(Turns to her attendant) Is that not so.

QUEEN`S ATTENDANT. Yes, your majesty. It was so dark on one side,we nearly tripped on our gowns.

KING. Where were you.?

VIRGIN TEN. We had gone to fill our laps with oil

.KING> You made your king wait, while you went to fill your lamps You should have brought oil with you.. You lazy, stupid creatures, I do not know you. I do not want you here. Go from hence,You should have been prepared for me like your sisters. They will be richly rewarded. (To Attendants) Send them out.

ATTENDANT. You heard what the king said. Go from here.

ATTENDANTS HUSTLE OUT THE FOOLISH VIRGINS.

The KING TURNS .THE PRINCE HAS ENTERED WITH HIS BRIDE.

MUSIC.KING GESTURES TO THE WISE VIRGINS.)

You waited for me, prepared your lamps for me, and lit my way. Come now and join in the ceremony..(MUSIC….FESTIVITY…..BLACK OUT) END OF PLAY

PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS.

A note on production.

The script should run to ten to twelve minutes, or more.

There are song and dance sequences,a scuffle and other forms of action, which would altogether take about six minutes.Action has been mixed with dialogue to prevent a young audience from getting bored and restless..

This parable could easily be put in modern times. It depends on the production requirements, and the producer.

There are thirty five speaking parts, with a possibility of adding as many players as required on the stage in the crowd scene.

In the courtyard sequence,it is possible to use figures moving upstage, people waiting for the king, people in various stages of slumber. The prime action could be by the virgins own stage, possibly even using the apron.

The script leaves room for innovation. Finally, the presentation is up to the interpretation of the director.

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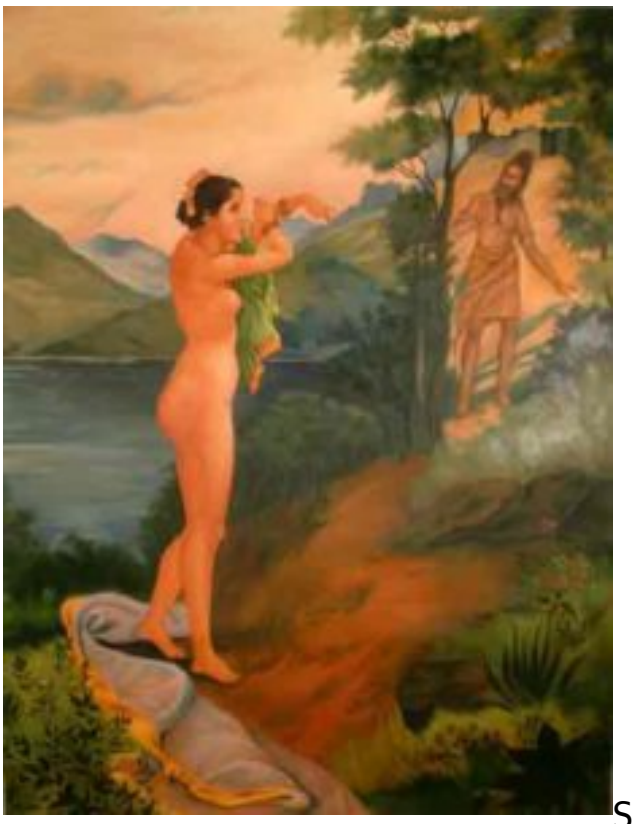
Gender Contexts in Folk Performances: A Study of the Female Performers of Nautanki / Gauri Nilakantan Mehta



Sage Viswamitra succumbs to the charms of Menaka

Source: Exotic India Art

Any context that involves control and exclusion, of the master subject, or the dominant individual or group of the situation, manifests itself through its exclusive performance or by

giving high status to them. This can be seen in artistic folk theatre genres. In most situations of aesthetic authority, we can see that the exclusion or low status of one gender, mostly of females, is to establish a total power of the males. My paper will attempt to illustrate this sometimes exclusion and low status of the female performers in folk theatre genres of North India and Pakistan. It proposes to study and analyze the gender contexts of female performers in *Nautanki* within Uttar Pradesh andPunjab with a special reference to her status in society. Women have been performers since antiquity and many gender stereotypes have been attributed to her. Before we analyze the gender contexts in *Nautanki* let us briefly elaborate on the historical and social conditions of female performers in folk theatrical forms in India & Pakistan.

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Historical and Social Conditions of Female Performers

Women have always been performers in India and Pakistan since the ancient times. The antecedents to dancing girls and courtesans go back to early ages. Statues of theIndus Valley civilization (3000-1500 B.C.) show strong associations with music and dance. A bronze figurine of a dancing girl was unearthed in the ruins of Mohenjadaro, inPakistan, that shows the popularity of performing arts in the Indus Valley amongst females. The figurine has been found in association with a large number of statues of goddesses that indicates that dancing and music must have had close associations with worship and therefore making it popular among women. Although, female worship was considered pure and divine during the Indus Valley Civilization, we have to keep in mind the paradoxical situation of female performers in later ages from fifth or sixth century B.C. onwards.

Women became the sites of orthodoxy as they were seen to be the essential carriers of tradition. According to Mandakranta Bose,

The burden of maintaining order within a family and within society as a whole fell on women…But this was a responsibility within which women quickly became imprisoned by the needs of conserving tradition. Instead of embodying positions of decision -making power and defining order, women became vehicles of orthodoxy. (Bose 4)

By looking at archeological evidences as in sculptural depictions in temples, paintings and early dramatic literature like the *Kamasutra* (800 A.D.), a treatise on the art of love and lovemaking, many scholars tend to believe that the female performers had a high social standing in ancient Indian society (3000 B.C. to 1200 A.D.). Many literary texts make references to *Apasaras* or heavenly maidens, also accomplished performers and dancers. They lured heroes and sages from their path of duty, for eg. Sage Viswamitra succumbed to the charms of Menaka. Seduction and allurement hence is an essential characteristic of these courtesans. Dancing and performing hence had strong sensual connotations. Many of the courtesans such as Rambha, Tillotama and Manorama were widely respected and had a high social standing.

However, the relation between these respectable representations and its extension to "real" women can be argued. For e.g. the famous *Khajurao* caves of Orissa of Eastern India (800 A.D. to 1200 A. D.) depict females playing percussive instruments that later remained in the exclusive domains of the men. We can argue that perhaps these female performers (as shown in the statues) were courtesans, and it was their profession that allowed them to have access to display certain creative skills. The *Kamasutra*, written by Vatsayana, describes the skills of the courtesan, who was to be well versed in the act of love making but also needed to be equally well versed in music, dance, drama, and painting besides giving them sexual pleasure, in order to please her patrons. Respect given to these courtesans hence had sexual connotations. The paradoxes that are created between real and

representations of women has been understood and defined by Dhruvrajan. According to him,

The female principle is worshipped, yet in daily life flesh and blood females are secondary citizens, humiliated depersonalized. The more a woman lowers herself the more she is praised. (Dhruvrajan 100)

This paradox can be seen in other areas of worship as well, despite the fact that female worship is an essential part of the religion of India; females are still in some isolated cases "dedicated to temples" that are called the *devdasis*. These *devdasis*traditionally were the courtesans and the dancing girls. These women had a low social status and became victims of prostitution. *Devadasis*, or servant of god, are ceremoniously married to the gods by the symbolic tying of the necklace around their necks. As they are "married to the gods" they have a social sanction to keep sexual contact with men. The honor of helping with temple shrines such as cleaning devotional vessels and decorating shrines belonged to the *devdasis*. More significantly, following the heavenly nymph prototype, they worshiped, propitiated and entertained the deities (embodied in images) with dancing. Hueing Tsang, a Chinese visitor to India in the 8thcentury testifies to this well established institution of temple dancers, an Arabian traveler, Al Beruni remarked that about 500 dancers were dedicated in the Somanth temple.

Stigmas have been associated with female performers both historically and socially. For example, as discussed earlier female performers in the past belonged to a set class, the *devdasis* who were married to the gods. The *devdasis* who often had to "entertain" men through music and dance and sex thus had some sort of socio- religious- legal sanction because of this "marriage" to the gods. The links between marriage and performance also takes on different levels of meanings as many women performers in India also discontinue their

profession after their marriages to men. As tradition places high emphasis on modesty and virtue, many women do not continue with public performances after their marriages, since they would come under the public view and scrutiny. This shows the ambivalence that is maintained towards the female performers in society. Many female performers of N*autanki* are married but they belong to certain sects & caste that allows them to perform. They primarily belong to lower caste or lower strata of the society. Thus, there is direct connection between economic status, lower position, marriage & profession that women choose.

With the advent of the Mughals in India we can see the tradition of dancing girls in courts. Performance reached the courts from the sacred shrines of temples. Amir Khusrau, a famous writer in the 12th century A.D. recorded his praise for dancing girls. He also invited them to dance and sing in the marriage of his son. The professional performers were called nutwah, bhugleye, anjari, nat. The actors in *Nautanki* are also called the *nats* and the female performers are the *natis*. Traditionally the only women who acted and performed along with the male counterparts in *Nautanki* were these *devdasis*.

The connections between the royalty and performing arts are also a part ofIndia's cultural history. Often in the past, the court dancers were considered the courtesans, or the *nautch* girls, and sometimes the performances were performed in the brothels, which were frequented by high-ranking officers of the court and warriors. Wade points to this and argues that the courtesan dancers were considered *nautch* girls when these performances were relegated to the brothels[1] (126).

A few more examples can make the connections between the royalty and the female performers clear. Grace Thompson Seton, a British woman, who traveled in Indiaduring the early 19th century remarks on the life of "*natuch*" girls,

I entered the dancing girl quarter, which looked like any other middle class street and good fortune! One of the dancing girls was standing in a doorway, arrayed in white trousers and long yellow diaphanous sari. Her middle and feet and arms were bare. She was not young, nor to my mind, good looking, but she had well developed muscles and supported the entire family on her earnings.

I was told that if I would stay a few days longer, H.H. would arrange a *Nautch*, but that his best dancer, Moti Jan, was away, having been loaned to a neighboring Raja for a wedding festivity. The maharaja subsides all the dancing girls and therefore controls their actions. (Seton 67)

Written in the early 19th century, this quote shows that dancing was relegated to low class women, wearing "diaphanous clothes", supporting their families through their incomes from prostitution or "entertaining" the high ranking officials of the court, their actions being controlled by the kings (Maharaja). The king clearly treated the women as possessions since these women were "loaned". The connection between royalty and dramatic forms therefore seems to have had a long historical connection.

Amorous songs and dances were rendered by these *nautch* girls. The Calcutta Gazette, a newspaper of 9th June1808 carries one version,

O says what present from your hand

Has reached me save caresses bland

And oh! Was present e'er so dear

As love soft whispers to my ear

Mar in affliction's sad decay

How this poor frame wastes fast away

I languish, faint from eve to morn

Nor taste of food one barley corn (Paul, 85).

However, some low class women traditionally performed classical theatrical forms, for example *Bhartanatyam* and *Kuchipudi*, two major southern Indian dance dramas. Their primary duty was to perform in the temples as dancing girls, but they could also supplement their family income by serving as prostitutes. Many folk dramatic forms have had the traditional exclusion of females, and only few forms like the *Lavan*i and *Tamasha* of Western India have included women. These dramatic forms often use camaraderie and sexual innuendoes; therefore, the female performers of such forms do not have high social standing. Therefore, these performances are often "popular entertainment" and quite often-religious themes are not depicted.

Thus, with very few exceptions women were effectively banned from theatrical stage, whether rural or urban, folk or classical. A striking instance of the extensiveness of this ban can be seen in *Kathakali*, an all male form folk dance drama of south India. Wade observes,

Kathakali was developed in Kerala, on the southwestern edges of the subcontinent, in a region that is traditionally matriarchal and in which women have influential in public affairs and have a reputation for considerable degrees of freedom in society in general. Yet even in this area, so deeply had the ban on women penetrated that *Kathakali* had been, and remains, an all male form.

(Wade 129)

But, historically & by large it is the female performers who have always dominated the performing art tradition in India and one such form is the *Nautanki*. Females play a very important role in the *Nautanki* performances. The next section will analyze the tradition of *Nautanki* in

northern India & Pakistan with detailed references to its gender contexts.

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Gender Contexts in Nautanki

Nautanki, a secular semi operatic folk theatrical form of Northern India (Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan) and Pakistan (Punjab region) developed from *swang*and *naqqal*. Performed in large open spaces and erected platforms, the performance starts with an invocation to the gods or the *mangalcharan*, accompanied by beating of the drums or the *nagaras*. The acts have strong and powerful story lines with tales are taken from epics, legends, and important events. The languages employed are common spoken language of the people and the texts are written in Urdu, Braj, Punjabi and Rajasthani. Dances, songs and comic acts make the routine. In the early ages most of the men acted as women in *Nautanki*, however from the 1930s we see that females performing.

Nau*tanki* is a folk form that has several hidden gender contexts within it. The role of the females, both as an actor and within in the script is intricately weaved in relations to the set historical and social conditions of women. According to Katherine Hansen,

Nautanki theatre as well as myth, epic and popular cinema do not reflect actual social relations, gender differences, and power alignments but rather produce and perpetuate them. They frame paradigms of gendered conduct that assist both women and men in defining their identities, inculcating values to the young, and judging the action of others. (7)

Thus, N*autanki* is not only a result but a cause of a particular social gender formation and vice versa. *Nautanki* plays a very important role in understanding the cultural and social formations of India and helps us to

establish the notions of womanhood, & further elaborate gender relations between men and women. Gender roles are also conditioned by the cultural, psychological and social correlates of a society and it clearly defines the rules and expectations to being male or female. Gender roles are thus environmentally conditioned and theatre can play an important part in creation and maintenance of such cultural stereotypes.

The very origin of *Nautanki* has strong gender connotations. *Nautanki*, originated in the theatrical play about *Shahzadi Nautanki*, depicting a woman who was flower light weighing only about 36 gms. Both fair and lovely she was the beloved of Phul Singh. The name of the play is associated with a desirable woman whose hands one could not win. Phul Singh is rebuked by his sister- in- law and he decides to win his pure love despite reproaches. Finally with the help of garderener or malin he gets disguised as his daughter- in- law and he meets his beloved Nautanki and unites with her. The princess here is desirable, bewitching, and a physical need and love for the man. Gender stereotypes can be clearly seen in this play as princess Nautanki is a light weighed virgin woman, untouched and a delicate beauty and Phul Singh`s manhood is rebuked. Heterosexual love between man and woman on both literal and metaphorical levels are emphasized and opposing characteristics between men and woman are thus exalted.

Sexuality is one of the dominant themes that occur in most Sangit texts or the dramatic texts. According to Hansen, incidents (ibid within the performance), images, and characters repeatedly focus awareness on the pleasures and pitfalls of sexuality. (27) The recent sangit text *Udal ka Byah* (the marriage of Udal), the hero Udal meets his beloved Phulva and wants to marry her and his attempts are thwarted by Narpati Singh and his son, who are Phulva‘s father and brother. Phulva is described to be a lissome, beautiful

princess.

The *Sangit* texts or the play scripts of *Nautanki* are replete with the female stereotypes. Women in the *Sangit* texts range from seductresses to honorable virtuous women upholding their womanhood and marriages. In the text *Lucknow Ka Lootera* (The Dacoits of Lucknow) the protagonist Hamid goes to plunder a rich merchant, whose wife falls at his feet and begs for his life to be spared and when Hamid makes overtures at her, she describes herself as a '*pativrata*' one who is vowed to her husband. She remarks at his attempts,

Door se baat kar paas mere na aa, yesi kalma mujhe mat sunao. Shok se loot dhan mera le jaiye, ek pativrata ka sat digao nahi

(Talk to me from afar, and don't say such things to me. You are free to plunder but do not let me break my vow of marriage Akeel, 6)

The female character is rarely seen alone and she is always in connection with the man. The patriarchal society of northern India and Pakistan defines this position of the woman in the texts. At the same time we also see Hamid frequenting a prostitute's, Chameli Jaan's "*Kotha*" or house, who is clearly a seductress and vamp. According to Hansen,

Nautanki poets delight in describing women as murderers, lustful vamps, warring goddesses, and potent sorceresses. Yet they expound an ideology of female chastity and subservience that belies the powerful posture of so many women in their stories. (171, Hansen)

Love, romance, wooing and winning are some of the common themes in the *Sangit* texts. In the play *Siyah Posh*, the

daughter of the Wazir of Syria falls in love with Gabru. One day while trying to meet Jamal his lover he gets caught and his execution is ordered. The king in his daily rounds hears their love for each other and forgives Gabru who is united with Jamal.

The men in the *sangit* texts have an exalted position for example in *RajaHarischandra*, the king bequeaths everything and has to leave the kingdom. He has to earn his living by working in the crematoriums while his wife works as a servant. One day his son dies while playing and Harischandra refuses to cremate his own son as his wife cannot afford the fees. While his unrighteousness is upheld while his queen Taramati often breaks into seductive gestures like swaying her hips and kicking her heels. Hence there are different value additions for males and females.

Many of the acts of the female performers are seductive and amorous songs dances and comic routines make the story go further along. In the play, *Lucknow keLootera*, a song and dance sequence is enacted between the dacoit Hamid and the seductress and prostitute Chameli. Chameli Jaan sings out loud,

Kya haalat banayi mere gulhjaara

Kyu utra hai chera batao tumhara

Hamid

Na khuch haal pooch meri maahepaara

Is wakt aaya musibat ka maara

(Oh my beloved why do you look so unhappy, don’t ask me why my sweet heart I am in trouble, 15)

Since the performance takes place at 11 pm and continues

till the wee hours of the morning, sex and sexuality are recurrent themes. Women performers are often seen in their erotic persona, clearly to please the men and allure their audiences. They hence create as well as fulfill the need "to be looked at." Mulvey describes this "looked at ness" as seen in many traditional performances,

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can connote to be looked at ness. (145)

It is this "looked at ness" of the female performers in *Nautanki* that delegates to her an inferior position as compared to men. Irigaray, the leading French feminist comments on this fact,

Investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men. More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains that distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body looses its materiality.[2] (70)

In modern days, *Nautanki* is characterized by lusty singing, dancing and women often performing to the tunes of popular film songs and mimic erotic dances. The main objective of the performance is to entertain and delight their audiences. A kind of liaison is thus created and developed. There is hence an exchange of desire, a kind of courtship between the audiences and the performer that is born. The dancing and singing of submissive females appeal to the masculinity of the audiences. Therefore the performances of Nautanki, creates an imbalance for the female performer, negating her position and demeaning her persona and establishing the total power nexus of the males.

To conclude, the *Nautanki* performance creates different values for men and women, and makes a comment on existing socio-economic & political situation of female performers. Nautanki thus creates many contradictions and conflicts for the female performer however one cannot negate or undermine its creative values and inputs into the rich cultural tradition of India and Pakistan. *Nautanki* despite its strong gender biases is one of the leading folk theatrical forms that have lent its hand into many other popular mediums of communication such as films and songs. This form thus needs to be studied and understood in all aspects of its rich diversity in terms of its acting style, rich *sangit* texts, music and costume.

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[1] The British described these courtesans or the dancing girls as natuch or dancing girls. Nautch is derived from the hindi word Natch.

[2] Irigaray cited from I C Owens Feminist and Postmodernism. Pluto press: London 1985

Let your child be what he wants to be this summer / Gouri Nilakantan

Platform for Action in Creative Theatre(PACT) and KINDERPLUME has initiated a new summer theatre workshop, Abhivyakti in the regions of Delhi and NCR. It is uniquely designed theatre workshop as it involves all the aspects of theatre namely creative writing, puppetry, face painting, theatre craft acting and improvisation and poetry reading and recitation. According to Neeraj Kumar Mehta, the business head of PACT, a child becomes truly empowered through theatre as Abhivyakti is not a forced activity by parents who just want to get rid of their children during summer. Abhivyakti truly believes in free expression and that is being done through the powerful medium of theatre.

Many theatre workshops are going on in the capital but Abhivyakti does not believe in flocking the children like sheep in a class so the class sizes are not more than 13 children in each batch. Many parents of the Abhivyakti children are well informed and wish to continue with these classes beyond the summer which is a heartening start. No activity is repeated more than thrice and the children's consent is taken by instructors from time to time. Sheel Kalia a regular instructor at Abhivyakti has himself undergone an intensive theatre workshop and certification program. Pact

believes that all instructors teaching the skill of theatre need to be not only well equipped but equipped way beyond ordinary expectations. As the children have a strong voice they should be heard by the teacher who should be capable of making quick changes in his approach if his activity is not liked for any reason.

The course has been designed in two folds, namely both the process and the product of theatre are given equal importance. Many theatre companies emphasize only on the product or the final performance is given upmost importance while others totally neglect the product and only pay attention to the process. Here at Abhivyakti both the process and the product are given significant amount of attention. Out of the 24 sessions 12 sessions involve the process while the rest of the 12 pay attention to the product.

By the end of the workshop a feeling of comradeship, confidence and enhancement of the communication skill is hoped to be achieved in the children. The program has been designed in such manner that the age difference between the children does not impede the classes in any manner. A child as small as 4 fit in well with a 12 year old! It is surprising to see how well a small kindergarten child enjoys himself along with a 12 year old. PACT and KINDERPLUME has truly designed an innovative and path changing program in the area of theatre workshops. One hopes to continue with such further activities in the times to come.

Theatre Review: Pagla Ghoda

by Gouri Nilakantan

A scene from the play

Pagla Ghoda of Badal Sircar was performed by a newly formed amateur group of Gurgaon AAKUTAM directed by Mahesh Prasad at Epicenter on the 17th of April 2011. Pagla Ghoda cleverly uses contemporary situations and social problems to life in death attitude of modern life. The play sees four drunk young men in the cremation grounds talking about the love in their lives. They keep themelves entertained through stories about these women that they have loved and lost in their own manner. The anguish in the characters has been beautifully crafted by Badal Sircar that has strong social moorings. While the play at one level speaks on psychological and social problems with the images of a badly bruised Malati or a crying Laxmi it also speaks of the four men and their deep relationship with the women.

While Mahesh Prasad has clearly made an honest interpretation

of the play the hidden problems lying within the play and subtext could not reach out to the audiences. The actors were too deeply involved in speaking their lines with clarity and focus loosing sight of their characterization. The female actors struggled to keep pace with the better counterparts, the men. The female actors often broke into hysteria, sobs and tears and thus giving a single dimension to their acting style. At one level the play is also about the residue of the middle class to have failed to adjust and align and ceases to aspire amongst the intellectually alive urban middle class. These social adjustments were lacking in the play as the acting appeared tired and fatigue seems to have hit both the audiences and the actors as the play over ran its time limit by a good half an hour.

The lighting of the play was extremely well designed and significantly added value to the mood of the play. The quiet introspection and the inner contemplation of the characters were used imaginatively by the choice of dim lights and blue overtones. The set design also needs special mention as was well crafted and the use of the space provided was covered excellently with good preferences of fabric material and wood.

Pagla Ghoda is about the guilt of men in personal and social relations with a continuation of the conventional mode of living. The acting of the character Laxmi must be mentioned as it was genuine and spoke well. Perhaps Sircar wants each of his characters to suffer from the awareness of their social responsibility. It is important for the director to read that sense of guilt, responsibility and social problems so that it can further enhance the acting style, convention and speech patterns used in the production.

As the body of the actor and its relation on stage is one of the immediate concerns of Badal Sircar the director has correctly used breakdown of the conventions of theatrical time and space. The production would have been even more interesting if the simultaneous action of the play had been

broken down by using the female actors as the focal points of entry an exit and also if non sequential modes of narration had been used more often. Overall the play could not speak well enough despite the technical excellence as it requires more dramaturgical analysis and theatrical inputs.

Final Solutions: Untold Stories of Religious Freedom and Resentment from the Eyes of a Female / Gouri Nilakantan

Above: A poster of Dattani’s play

A paper read by **Gouri Nilakantan Mehta** at the North American Conference of Social Philosophy at Marquette University, USA

Nothing can be more painful than carrying an unseen tale desiring religious freedom within one self. Often we come across extreme situations in our lives whereby these concealed stories expressing both religious freedom and resentment expression. Often a paradox, such occurrences while rekindling our tolerance exposes hidden resentments and bitterness towards religion that lie dormant within us. Mahesh Dattani, one of India's leading playwrights, cleverly portrays these strong emotions by using the lens of his characters, particularly females in his play Final Solutions. Dattani uses the eyes of his female characters to display their inner secretive narratives of freedom at the same time rendering the religious antipathy held by them.

Mahesh Dattani was born on 7th August 1958, eleven years after the independence of India in 1947, and studied in the elite St. Joseph's college at Bangalore. He worked primarily as a copywriter and formed his theatre *Playpen* in 1984. In 1986, he wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's a Will,* and in 1986 and he won the Sahitya award from the Government of India, for his book *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. He presently resides in Bangalore, a large metropolitan, popularly called the Silicon Valley of the East, with its "high tech, state of the art" buildings and it having own popular culture. The plays of Mahesh Dattani, hence are largely seen as being "elitist" and is often met with open hostilities in parochial universities. As Final Solutions primarily focuses on religious relationships between both the Hindus and Muslims it challenged by many.

Dattani himself declares,

I love it when I am confronted with remarks such as 'Your

plays are preaching to the converted. You should do final solutions in the villages.' Such prejudice! How can anyone be blind to their own remarks? Assumptions galore that citified English-speaking people are all liberal minded and villagers are communal and bigoted.

(Dattani, Collected Plays, xi)

Dattani is thus well aware about the repercussions that his plays carry. He has displayed his immense dramatic vision and skill in his play Final Solutions. This play centrally focuses on communal tensions particularly religious anxiety set within complex human relationships and emotions. The hidden religious anger in the characters are exposed through unknown stories expressing intense freedom.

Right in the onset of the play Dattani makes a comment of freedom as expressed by Daksha, one of the central female characters. We see young Daksha, a newly married girl of fifteen writing her dairy reflecting her yearning of self will. She writes, "Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages (Dattani, 165). Daksha is thus aware that these feelings of independence might cause anxiety as she declares that 'maybe it isn't fair to trouble you with my sadness.' (166) Dattani hence propels the audiences to ponder and reflect on her condition of limited sovereignty. The fact that she can no longer sing and is married to Hari at such a young age denies her existence of freedom so much so that that Daksha's being is merged into that of Hari's as the newly born Hardika and she is rechristened.

While Daksha subsumes in her apparent reality, she emerges

time to time again in the play, not forgetting her free will, confronting Hardika and wanting her self to rise like a phoenix from the ashes. We see this especially in times of crisis; when Hardika is confronted with apparent fear and danger from the malicious and dangerous mob outside her house, Daksha comes forward from her soul. It is cleverly written by Dattani as questions of Hardika which Daksha answers.

HARDIKA. Why did he do it?

DAKSHA. Oh God! Why do I have to suffer?

HARDIKA. Didn't he have any feelings for me?

DAKSHA. I just wanted them to be my friends!

HARDIKA. How could be let these people into my house?

DAKSHA. Oh! I hate this world!

HARDIKA. They killed his grandfather! (Dattani, 179)

Religion plays a central role in the play and Hardika's position as a Hindu woman is constantly reiterated. Thus in one way her "class consciousness" is maintained throughout the play as being a "chaste Hindu woman. Her husband, Hari and Father in law, Wagh, the family, whom she must respect and obey impose these conditions on her and any disobedience to them is met with severely. Female freedom is thus being thwarted by so called religious sanction. According to Lyn Spillman,

Closer to a class unconscious than to a " class consciousness" in the marxist sense, the sense of the position one occupies in the social space (what goffman calls the 'sense of ones place) is the practical mastery of the social structure as a

whole which reveals itself through the sense of the position occupied in that structure. The categories of perception of the social world are essentially the product of the incorporation of the objective structures of the social space. Consequently they incline agents to accept the social world as it is, to take for granted, rather than to rebel against it, to put forward opposed and even antagonistic possibilities. The sense of one s place, as the sense of what one can or cannot 'allow oneself', implies a tacit acceptance of one' s position, a sense of limits (" that's not meant for us) or what amounts the same thing- sense of distances, to be marked and maintained, respected, and expected of others. (Spillman,70)

Daksha'/Hardika's religious and gender position is strictly maintained and her limit as a female is demarcated by the men of her household. This is further seen when she questions Hari about his reluctance in offering a job to Zarine's father (her Muslim friend's father) he gets angry with her.

The reason why Hari was looking at me so strangely was because I just asked him why we couldn't give Zarune's father a loan or something to start his business again…Then why did he come to our mill I questioned Hari. This is when for the first time Hari became angry with me. I never expected him so. He shouted so loudly, he sounded just like Wagh. And he called me names. Names that are too shameful to mention to you. My cheeks went red. (Dattani, 216)

Her resentment towards her husband and her agony becomes well known to the audiences as she unburdens her feelings. "He beckoned me to lie with him on the bed. And I did. And my cheeks went red again. Not with shame but with anger at

myself.” Mahesh Dattani frequently takes as his subjects, within the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness, under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desire. His dramas are often played out on multi level-layers where interior and exterior identities of human subjects, especially the females, sometimes become one to defy and challenge cultural locations of India, typically seen through the collapse of religious structures.

In the play Final Solutions Dattani is challenging the construction of religion and its inner tension. He is questioning the fundamentals of religion and he uses the female protagonists of the play Smita and Daksha as the focal points. Both Smita and Daksha in their way challenge the overriding authority of religion and create a new dimension to being female and give a new meaning to female autonomy. The actions of Daksha visiting the house of Zarine or Smita questioning her mother’s religious beliefs can be seen as creating a new aspect of tolerance. Smita while confronting and challenging her mother asks her,

SMITA. How can you expect me to be proud of something which stifles everything around it? It stifles me! Yes! Maybe I am prejudiced because I do not belong. But not belonging makes things so clear. I can see so clearly how wrong you are. You accuse me of running away from my religion. Maybe I am …embarrassed mummy. Yes maybe I shouldn’t be. What if I did what you do? Praying and fasting and…purifying myself all day. Would you have listened to me if I told you were wrong? You will say yes, because you are certain I wouldn’t say that then. All right both are prejudiced, so what do you want to do? Shall we go back to sleep?

ARUNA. You said it stifles you?

SMITA. What?

ARUNA. Does being a Hindu stifle you?

SMITA. No living with one does. (Dattani, 211)

Dattani, through Smita creates a new category of being female and its autonomy, one who defies and tries to understand traditions in her own context. She is one way refusing to accept a category, of being woman that her mother wants her to fit into. Smita thus creates a new identity for herself that expresses strong freedom. This female freedom has been well explained by Judith Butler creating new identity politics.

The premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from "women" whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics.

(Butler 1990: 4)

Aruna, Smita's mother projects the other end of the spectrum as she laments this condition of her daughter and blurts out,

ARUNA. I never felt like that. I have always taken pride in my religion. I never felt my mother was stifling me. I was so happy knowing that I was protected. I grew up listening

to the stories of our gods and how they slew the demons to protect the good people of their land. And I was thankful to my mother for showing me the path of truth. I was happy. (Dattani, 211)

Anita thus represents the other spectrum of religious tolerance. Dattani clearly shows some condescension in the representation of this character. She is seen picking up the glasses of water cautiously drunk by Javed and Bobby , the two Muslim boys who have taken refuge in her house against the marauding mob, keeping them far away from her “pure” glasses. Dattani is well aware of the religious implications such acts carry and he declares,

It’s to do with my perceptions. I don’t mean to say that this is a definitive view of life. But several of the images that we carry around in our minds are politically generated images and we accept them to be as true. However I don’t think so and my characters are simply a personification of my perceptions.

(Nair, The Invisible Observer)

Each character in the play Final Solutions carries a hidden tale within their heart that carries their religious prejudices or tolerance forward. Ramnik, the father, of Smita, in his tolerance and sympathy for the two Muslim men wants in one way to amend his hidden past. This concealed history of religious intolerance and violence is hoped to be altered in the present by Ramnik He also seeks freedom from his guilt and he finally tells his mother Hardika,

RAMNIK (*looks at her with pity*) It's their shop. It's the same burnt- up shop we bought from them, at half its value.

(*Pause*.) And we burnt it. Your husband. My father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred, because we wanted a shop. Also they learnt that…those people were planning to start a mill like our own. I can't take it any longer. I don't think I will be able to step into that shop again…when those boys came here, I thought I would…I hoped I would be able to…set things right. I-I wanted to tell them that they are not the only ones who have destroyed. I just couldn't. I don't think I have the face to tell anyone.

(*Pause.*) So, it wasn't that those people hated you. It wasn't false arrogance. (*A Noor Jehan song can be heard very faintly.*) It was anger. (Dattani, 226)

Ramnik clearly seeks atonement to his guilty past and his tolerance of the two intruders is an amendment to the faults of his forefathers. He hence carries this untold burdening story yearning freedom from guilt and hoping to find relief in his actions. He thus offers Javed a job in the very shop that his father had burnt- "It will be my pleasure to give you that job. That shop, it used to be (pause.) Take that job please."

Smita the daughter on the other hand can't cope with her hidden love for Babban or Bobby. Smita by this further strengthens her religious sympathies and tolerance.

JAVED. So, I just wanted to ask you whether there is anything between you and Bobby –still.

SMITA. No. I am not making any sacrifices. There's nothing between us anymore. It was just a…There wasn't much between us.

(ibid)

SMITA. Oh no! Please. Don't say that, I won't be able to take that kind of guilt. But…just now you said that you loved her too.

BOBBY. Yes, I do. But I would be lying if…I said I had completely forgotten you. (Dattani, 217)

Even though Smita suppresses her own desires one realizes that she does carry the hidden feelings of love that emerge in her interaction with Babban. One wonders whether her tolerance and her resentment to her mother religious views stems out of this hidden love.

As a paradox to Daksha, Hardika's violent bitterness to the outsiders residing in her house, encounters with her childhood friend Zarine. As the young Daksha writes in her dairy that her visit to Zarine's house made her anger grow towards her. She writes,

Later I learnt from Kanta that Wagh and Hari had felt sorry for them and had even offered to help them by buying their burnt up little shop. Zarine's father wanted much more so the resentment. What wretched people. All this fuss over such a small matter. I hate people with false pride. As if it is their birthright to ask for more than they deserve. Such wretched people! Horrible people!

Little does Daksha know the whole truth? When the reality about the fact that the shop was burnt by her father in law and husband is dawned on her, all her concealed rage is nullified. She knows that she will live in the same guilt and shame as Ramnik's. This silent story that she carries hence will burden her forever, finding no release.

Dattani uses the female characters to emphasize the prejudice (as shown in the anger of Hardika) and the tolerance (as shown in the love of Smita) that leads to religious resentment. He uses the female protagonists to mirror the views of society and uses their feelings and yearnings of religious freedom to reflect upon the issues of communal hatred and violence. One is forced to ponder whether such religious resentments are baseless and whether they have any validity. Dattani hence realizes his audiences well and establishes the whole concern of communalism in a unique way by ingeniously using the eyes of the female protagonists.

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A Comparative Study of Chhau Masks of Eastern India and Ancient Greek Masks / Gouri Nilakantan

Purulia Chhau Mask **Greek Theatre mask**

Saraikela Chhau Mask

pics courtesy : 4to40.com / classicalwainui.wordpress.com

Theatre is a powerful means of communication; it essentially is a transformation that allows both the spectators and performers to come into contact with one another. The actors are thus able to play the role of another fictional persona. This is created with the aid of theatrical devices and objects. The mask is one such tool that helps the performer to alter his personality and thus recreate a totally new one. Most theatrical traditions of the East, in particularly, India, employ the powerful use of masks and they are essential to many ritual customs. Chhau, a major theatrical folk form of easternIndia namely Purulia (Bengal state) and Seraikela (Jharkhand) makes use of highly stylized masks to dramatize narratives. The antecedents of this masked folk form resound with ancient theatrical practices of the west. Chhau bears close semblance to the ancient Greek theatre and its origins may lie in the ancient tradition of Greece. My paper will closely examine these cross connections between Chhau and Greek theatre with special reference to the usage of masks.

Both Chhau and the Dionysiac religion were from the beginning

inclined towards transformation. The individual persona in Chhau and Greek drama alters into a higher human being. According to Rajkumar Suvendra, an ace Chhau performer,

When I put on the mask I become impersonal. It is easier to slip into the body of another character. It passes its function to the body. Expression does not follow from my face to my body, but is transmitted from my body to my face. (53, Deo)

The best aid in both the theatrical forms would be hence costume and the masks. The generic words of both Chhau and tragedy in Greek drama give us important clues to this alteration of character. The Greek word *tragos*, from which tragedy is arrived also, means one who dresses up and performs. Tragedy is song in honor of the Greek gods. *Komos* the word from which comedy is arrived is where the members of the Greek drama when dressed up as animals take part in a happy parade. Thus this cult contains all the elements which are necessary for the development of a serious drama or gay comedy by disguised human beings.

Greek drama essentially developed as a mark to celebrate the god Dionysus. This fertility god is associated with both birth and death. He is the only god whose parents were not divine. He was twice born, his mother Semele died before he was born and his father Zeus removed him and deposited him in his thigh allowing the development of the offspring to emerge and develop later. Dithyramb (double birth) is a religious hymn that is sung and danced by a chorus to honor the god, a precursor to tragic drama.

Double-ness plays an important role here that emphasizes the imagery and myth. Dionysus was also the god of wine that elevated the followers into an ecstatic religious rapture. This gives them an exalted condition and the singing and dancing changed them into satyrs or sacrificial

goat. They in the bliss is said to have direct effect and union with the gods. Humans therefore could become god like. Tragedy as mentioned before is also derived from the word tragoidia or goat song. The tragedy drama developed out of the Dithyramb which was a song of rejoicing and the chorus led the dance in honor of the Dionysus. This was originally performed by men in disguise of the demonic followers of god; they were the satyrs who had equine ears and tails as depicted in the vases. It was from this satyr the final form of drama developed.

The transformed individual thus required some façade or disguise. The significance thus of masking arises. The very act of wearing a mask and transformation into another character is a form of worship in itself. This double-ness, masked transformed individual in worship can be seen in the origin of Chhau. Scholars are divided in their opinion about the etymology of the word Chhau. Some researchers say that the word chhau is derived from the word Chhauni that means military camp. As this form involves the use of vigorous martial art techniques the form is said to have militaristic fervor. However one can also opine that the word Chhau is derived from the Sanskrit word Chhadma (Shadow) or hindi word Chhaya. This word clearly resounds to the mask or the disguise which is a sort of shadow that is created. In the eastern state of Assam masks are also called Chhon that bear a close resemblance to Chhau.

Both Chhau and the Greek theatre are closely related to ritual festivals. Greek theatre developed when the city of Dionysia celebrated the worshipping of the fertility God Dionysus. The city Dionysia lasted for about week not only celebrated the religious and the artistic achievements but display of wealth, power and public spirit. The tragedies were the center piece of the festival. They were performed on the fourth, fifth and sixth day of the festival week, each day devoted to a single playwright.

It is interesting to observe that Chhau is celebrated during the spring festival or the Chaitra parva in March- April. The festival lasts for about 13 days and Chhau is also the focal point of the festival. Chhau folk dance drama, similar to the Greek counterpart is not a part of the religious festivity but is purely for the entertainment of the people. This dance drama is also not performed everyday but is performed on the first, third and forth day.

While the rituals of the Chaitra Parva take place every year, the dances take place for a few days. 13 days of the rituals are performed by 13 people of different castes, who perform the customs daily. These people are called the bhagats who perform the ceremonies. Quite similar to the Greek festivals in which the people are transformed into satyrs the Bhagats also are transformed to gods during the festival. They gather around the Shiva temple and are given a sacred thread. By wearing that they hence become shiva gotra, belonging to the same caste as Shiva and they alter their caste and thus getting some socio-legal sanction to perform the rituals.

The bhaghats start the procession from the majna ghat or the bathing ghat with the accompaniment of music and dance. A flag staff is held by the man who is leading the festival called the Jarjar. They have a dip in the river and proceed to the temple and to the palace where the flag is kept all the time. On the first day they also visit the performance area to purify it. This ceremony is called the Akhada mada. The next day the jatra ghata takes place that is followed by the Chhau. The following evening is a ceremony called Brindabani in which god hanuman, the monkey god is prayed to. On the third night takes place the Garai bhar in which an episode relating to Krishna and the milkmaids is depicted. The god Krisna is depicted as stealing the clothes of the milkmaids who have gone to take a bath in the pond. A Chhau performance takes place in the evening. Chhau is not performed on the

fifth night and it can be done only if a small fee is paid to the Shiva temple in the form of a fine.

The dances that take place are uniquely artistic and not ritualistic. There are no direct links between the festival and the dances and they provide entertainment for the people. The complex relationships developed among mythological narratives, social circumstances and theatrical displays are evident in the masked variants of Chhau. This grew out of tributes to Shakti or the primordial energy associated with exorcist practices developed during the Chaitra parva under different systems of patronage. Interestingly, Shakti like the god Dionysus is also worshipped widely as goddess of fertility in many parts of India.

In India many fertility festivals are often associated with wine and dance. During the spring time another major festival takes place in India called the Holi where by merry making, wine drinking and playing with colors is popular. Incidentally the God Shiva, who is worshipped in Chhau is also said to be fond of wine or Bhang, a heady drink made of milk, almonds and cannabis, which bears close resemblance to Dionysus the god of wine. During the Siva Ratri or the festival that honors the god Shiva many devotees indulge in drinking of Bhang.

Both Chhau and the Greek theatre have a participatory flavor. In Greece it was said to be the civic duty to perform in the festival, and nearly 500 citizens performed. Chhau too is based on cooperation amongst the people and it is also considered to be a public participation. The mask hence gives both Chhau and Greek theatre a corporate personality. It gives the actor the actor contact with god and removes him from everyday mundane existence.

Both chhau and Greek theatre developed under royal patronage. The wealthy Athenian citizens were obliged among

their aristocratic duties to sponsor a play. This way they made their way to public education. The Athenian government officially sanctioned and gave support to a theatre festival for the best tragedy written. The government has made a record of these events. The dramatic festivals took place once a year and three writers were presented to for three continuous days. A separate day five comical writers were also presented.

Both in Seraikela and Purulia Chhau was fostered under royal patronage. In Seraikela the kings were not only patrons but are dancers as well, both Aditya Pratap Deo and princes Suvendra and Brojendra are quite famous and well known. Similar to the Greek theatre an annual competition is held between the various dancing groups. The maharaja or the king gives the annual prize. The whole town is divided into groups or akharas in which the dramatic form is developed. The town is divided into eight akharas the Bajar Sahi, Mera khodara Sahi, Brahman sahi, hunja sahi, kansari sahi, khodara sahi beribahu, uttar sahi and dakshin sahi. Chhau in Purulia is supported through households and there are also active competitions supported by rival political parties.

In Greece, famed actors were held in great honor and were even selected for diplomatic embassies. They were granted special privileges and received help and protection of sovereigns and leading personalities of the state. Aristodemus was invited to the court of Philip of Macedon and Thettalus to the court of Alexander the great, they were sent on important political missions. They belonged to certain guilds along with the stage managers, costumers, dancers and musicians. They produced epic, dramatic and lyrical plays old as well as new tragedies and comedies.

Chhau on the other hand is also organized into troupes that are under a leader or a guru. Instrumentalists, stage managers, directors and actors all form the essential part of

the troupe. Chhau artists are given much social respect and honor. Many Chhau performances were taken abroad and Haren Ghosh, a troupe leader took Chhau toEurope as early as 1937-38.

Unlike Greek theatre there is no spoken word in Chhau and there are no dialogues. Conflicting emotions are concealed and they mainly focus on the mood or the theme of the drama. The whole body therefore has to give totality to expression and hence the actor liberates himself from the body through masks. By Angikabhinaya or expression through body the actor explores the dominant bhava or emotions.

Mask helps to express the bhava or the mood and the aesthetic sentiment or the rasa. This helps the shirobheda, the head movements and the girvabhed the neck movements, as it emits glances. Skill becomes the only determining factor as the age and the sex of the dancer is concealed through masks. It resounds to the lord of the world Shiva as the cosmic lord is Shiva and the whole universe is nothing but postures and postures and Shiva both sustains the life force as well as destroys it. Masks hence become the main aspect of this life force and it helps in the open acceptance of all and is in unison with nature and the universe.

Harmonies, movements and rhythms express the basic ideas of Chhau narratives. The basic movements are based on the parikhanda or the exercise of the shield and sword; they are a set of Chalis or movements that are performed from back to front in single duple and quadruple tempo. The movements are based on the daily activities and are therefore close to nature. For example gaits of animals are incorporated like bagh chali crane walk, goumutra chali the walk of a cow after passing urine and harin dain the jumping of deer. The activities of human beings, animals and birds are the inspiration behind the movements.

In Greek theatre it is said that Thespis or the first actor stepped away from the chorus and began to speak his own dialogue. He invented the first actor as he is said to have put a hypocrites, i.e. an answer and response giver, the opposite being exarchos. The leader and the chorus wore different costumes. Thepsis is said to have treated the face of his actors with white lead, then covered with cinnabar and rubbed it with wine lees and finally introduced masks of unpainted linen. Choerilus the successor of Thepsis made further experiments with masks and Phrynichus introduced the woman's masks. Aeschylus introduced the second actor; dialogue thus could develop more freely and had greater dramatic significance. Aeschylus introduced new things to improve the fixed conventions in theatre. He introduced novelty in costume by giving the players sleeves, increased their height and introduced dignified masks. Greek tragedy was always a sacred ceremony in honor of the god and therefore the sacred robe, masks stayed as a symbol of god. In the later periods masks became larger and had more exaggerated features, but in the 5th century, as told by scholars, neither size nor shaper were overtly large and that the mask covered the entire head, included the appropriate hairstyle, beard, ornaments and other features as well.

Quite similar to Chhau, in the given structure of Greek theater, acting was close to dancing in which broad gestures and body posture and movements were very important. And of course the actors had to have excellent voices, with clear articulation and good breath control. Although much of the actor's performance was spoken dialogue, he sometimes sung lyric solos. The mask served as a device to help make the actors voice be heard and it is said that something was constructed in the mouth of the mask so that the voice could be raised and heard. The mask made the actions more clear and the spectators would therefore be able to pay more attention to the actor's movements rather then his appearances.

Both Chhau and Greek theatre's performance space is outdoors. In Chhau, the acting area is circular and a wooden platform is erected to one side. The musicians sit on one side of the open area of about 20 feet. Performances take place in the night at about 10p.m. and goes on till sunrise. Drummers prelude the performances and display their talent. The show starts with the entry of the elephant god Ganesha and dramatic access of new characters. The audience yells intermittently and gives encouragement to the presentation. Initially lighting was with kerosene oil and now electrical lights are used for illumination. The mask thus provides the audiences with the much needed relief and help in the total involvement of the display.

In Greek theatres the performance took place outdoors in large amphitheatres. The city was well evolved and developed and nearly about 5000-20,000 people were participants. Therefore a large open space was needed for viewing, thus the amphitheatre developed by the end of the 5the century B.C. Audiences were seated in a semi circle and there were wooden bleachers for them to sit on. The enlarged and exaggerated expressions of the masks made it possible for the audiences to see the faces of the actors. The movements and gestures of the actors were very expressive and physical movements enabled the audiences to view them and these complementing the large masked face.

In Chhau each character is studied well and represented. Chhau masks can be divided into five categories, gods, goddesses, kings and queens, common men, demons and animals. The mask had both the facial portion and the head region. The demons had the extended eye, big lips, prominent chin shapely ears, moustaches, whiskers and eyebrows. They are painted in rich vibrant colors such as green, brown or deep purple. The gods are in softer pastel colors and the images are in the classical style so that they do not hurt the sentiment of the people. The head portion of the mask is highly decorated with golden and silvery paper, flowers, glass

beads and nylon strings are used for hair.

Similarly masks of the Greek world were portrait masks as they depicted a particular character. The birds, frogs and the clouds the chorus represents the titles of the comedy masks. These masks had exaggerated features long beards, baldness or ugly noses. Comic masks less morphological elements and are asymmetrical features they also express strong emotion such as weeping, anger and acquiescence, agreement. Characters were easily identifiable and from every day life, they could be easily satire Socrates in Aristophanes Clouds and God Dionysus in the frogs they resembled the main characteristics and helped in creating a humorous ambience.

The masks covered the entire head and depicted hairstyle, facial features, beard and decorations. They were made up of perishable material and specific masks were created for each character. For instance, the chorus members in the tragedyl wore same masks so that one could clearly identify them as a group. The chorus in the Agamemnon was old men, too old to take part in the Trojan War. They would have hence been probably been bearded old and shriveled. The chorus would all thus appear to be similar, a notion widely held, if they all wore the same mask. The idea of having a group of individuals appear the same would be very hard unless masks were used.

The masks worn had the same effect as the costumes as they were personalized for each character. Special emotions were expressed on the mask, so the audience knew if a character was happy, upset, tired, or scared. Since the masks could be seen even in the last rows, the audience could hence tell how the character was feeling. For instance, Oedipus, or other royal figures, might have a higher forehead or crown on his head to signify his rank, whereas a comic slave might have large eyes and a huge mouth to show that he is observant and not unwilling to gossip. These physical characteristics of the mask made it easier to tell who was who onstage. The masks had to represent the outstanding features of the personality

of the character.

Mask was a representation of the dramatist's vision. Many Princes in Chhau wee also skilled mask makers and Rajkumar Aditya Pratap Deo personally supervised the making of masks. There are some special masks that represent two characters both in Chhau and Greek theatre. In Greek theatre it is believed that different masks were used for a powerful king who became blind. Helen was also represented in two different ways as she cut her hair and had a different spectacle. Each half of the mask represents a different expression and the performer performs laterally and suddenly turns showing the different face. Versatility of the actor was thus possible and it was easy for him to switch roles.

In Chhau the two faces of Shiva or the Ardhanariswara is represented in a unique way. It is shown in one mask itself and not by the usual division of the mask. The half male and female energy is shown by a three pronged mark on the forehead that shows the male energy and the lips curl into a small pout expressing affection. By thus tilting the mask one can get a different perspective and each half character is well studied and represented.

It is interesting to note that in both Chhau and Greek theatre women did not participate. Actor did not have specific characters but archetypes to represent them. The personality of the actors is hence lost and the main characteristic of the theatrical role is bought into prominence. The actor also has to perform many roles the mask helps him take up different personae and also in impersonating the female roles. The actor could be adaptable and change his personality and mood of the different characters that he was playing and his mask helps him make the transition into female parts.

In Greek theatre theatrical masks were constructed by linen cloth and then fortified by plaster by flour glue and fish glue and then it was painted. Male masks were more intense

and female paler. They also covered the head with hair and the head was covered with a helmet and wool was attached to the head and then styled as hair. The mouth was left open in the tragedy masks and as the expressions showed more perturbation and passion and the opening became bigger.

The history of masks in India dates back t the Mesolithic periods. Excavations have revealed small hollow masks in the Indus Valley Civilization (2500 B.C. – 1200 B.C. At Chirand in Bihar, a northern state of India, a terracotta mask belonging to the fourth century was unearthed. The Natyasastra (8^{th} century B.C.), a treatise on music and drama mentions masks or Partishirsa which seems to be very similar to the Greek counterparts. According to the text,

Different masks (pratshirsa) are to be used for men and gods according to their habitation, birth age…ashes or husks of paddy mixed with the paste of leaves of the bilva tree. This should be applied on the cloth. After the cloth dries one should pierce holes in it. These holes should be made after dividing the cloth into two equal halves.

Initial masks of Chhau were made of wood and earth that was heavy and made breathing very difficult. It passed down from cruder forms and became slowly sophisticated. Many techniques were introduced in the mask making process. The chhau mask is first made up of the clay that is found on the banks of the KharakeiRiver. The artist fixes the clay and lets it cool down to harden on a plank. This process is called the Mati gada or making of the clay. Then muslin gauze is pasted on it with two or three players giving it thick coating or paper, which is called kagaz chitano. The mask is then scrubbed off with the help of a sharp instrument called karni and it is polished. It is then painted in flat pastel colors the stylization being given on the eyebrows and mouth. This process is called Kabij lepa or painting. The flat pastel colors give it frankness, simplicity and boldness. The mask

maker avoids realistic identification and the Mask of birds and animals such as deer (harin) or the prajapati (butterfly) is well stylized.

Mask making is a traditional occupation passed from father to son. The mask makers of Chhau live in Chorida village in Bengal and come from a set class and they bear the surname of Sutradhar or Das. The mask is made from February to June as it does not rain and in other seasons the artisans are engaged in carpentry and image making. Masks are rather frail they cannot stand the stress and strain of the performance. As it does not last for more than a year, it is always in high demand.

Masks therefore have been a part of the integral world of theatre rituals both in the eastern and western parts. The use and meaning behind the masks has evolved in many ways since the 5th century B.C. The dramatized rituals of India are very close in their resemblance to the ancient Greek ones. As correctly pointed out by Turner, rituals often use symbols such as objects, words relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units (19). *Chhau* is one such popular ritual folk drama of Eastern India (Mayurbhanj, Seraikela and Purulia) that uses such symbols i.e. elaborate and highly decorated masks. The masks used in the *Chhau* folk drama not only reveal crucial social and religious values that transform human attitude and behavior but also disclose influences of other ancient civilizations. Mask are thus a signifying object, it provided the much needed experience to both the actor and the spectators. Chhau masks hold our fascination and we can say that so much its history has its roots in ancient Greece that is evident in it.

This article was a paper that Gouri had read in a conference held at Waseda University in Japan, 2008 on Masks.