Chapter V

Performing Shakespeare in Post-Independence India

This chapter looks at Shakespeare productions in post-Independence India. As discussed in the previous chapters, the number of Shakespeare productions, translations and adaptations decreased considerably in the post-1920s India. An important reason for this decline between the 1920s and 1940s was the emergence and growth of IPTA. The IPTA shifted the focus of theatre which had hitherto been primarily entertainment to voicing social and political issues of the time. During this time Shakespeare seems to have lost his appeal. It was only in post-Independence India that Shakespeare’s plays found favour again on the stage. It is in the post-Independence period that one can locate some of the more significant Shakespeare productions in India.

The chapter is divided into two sections. Section I discusses the issues involved in the post-Independence Indian theatre and the subsequent rise of “theatre of roots” movement. Locating the selected Shakespeare performances in the post-colonial discourse in general and the emergence of post-Independence Indian theatre in particular is significant because “history does not just provide a background to the study of texts, but forms an essential part of textual meaning; conversely, texts or representations are seen as fundamental to the creation of history and culture” (Loomba and Orkin 3). Thus, the post-Independence discourse on Indian theatre presents a context to these productions and also operates as a co-text to be read along to understand the complexity of Shakespeare appropriation an indigenization. Section II discusses several Shakespeare productions in folk and traditional idioms in post-Independence India. Christy Desmet in *Shakespeare and Appropriation* describes the process of post-colonial appropriations of Shakespeare as the one “in which post-
colonial societies take over those aspects of imperial culture … that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities” (19). In this context, Utpal Dutt’s *Macbeth* (1954) and *Bhuli Nai Priya* (*Romeo Juliet*, 1970), B. V. Karanth’s *Barnam Van* (1989), Habib Tanveer’s *Kamdev ka Apna Vasantritu ka Sapna* (*A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*, 1993), Lokendra Arambam’s *Macbeth: Stage of Blood* (1997) and M. K. Raina’s *Badshah Pather* (*King Lear*, 2009) illustrate practical applications of this process. These productions cannot claim to be truly ‘folk’ but they definitely comprise a blend of ‘folk’ and ‘modern’ theatres. The ingenious use of folk and traditional idioms peculiar to Indian performance traditions sets them apart from other Shakespeare productions from anywhere in the world.

Before proceeding with the analyses of such Shakespeare productions which have incorporated elements from traditional forms of performance, let me explain a point of caution. Shakespeare has not been produced using only folk and traditional idiom (a case of ‘exoticising’ and ‘Orientalising’ Indian Shakespeare as seen from the Western perspective) in post-Independence India; there are equally important Shakespeare productions besides the ‘traditional/folk’ experiments. However, my interest on certain selected Shakespeare productions arises from the fact that these productions cast Shakespeare into typically Indian folk and traditional idioms. The cultural alterity of these productions distinguish them from other Shakespeare productions. Also, these productions reflect upon the larger discourse on post-colonial culture in India because, as Raymond Williams says, “the most fundamental cultural history is always a history of forms” (84).
I. ‘Decolonizing’ Indian Theatre

After Independence, one of the major concerns for India was to ‘decolonize’ the minds of the people. The colonists had gone but colonialism remained as an insidious and perpetuating influence. After political Independence, Indians had to ‘decolonize’ aspects of life to make ‘freedom from foreign control’ meaningful. This would mean the creation of a cultural community distinct from other such nations/communities. Thus during the first decades of the post-Independence era the ‘makers of culture’ were faced with the task of reshaping a culture that would be ‘authentically’ Indian. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the Kenyan playwright and the most vociferous proponent of ‘decolonization’, has argued for “decolonizing the mind” to defeat colonialism in the African context. According to him,

… the most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. […] To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involve two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized (16).

Ngugi was in fact echoing the sentiments of eminent anti-colonization leaders like Aime Cesare, Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe – to name a few.
Theatre was a part of cultural deliberations in post-Independence India. The search for indigenous idioms for Indian theatre was motivated by the need to decolonize ‘modern’ Indian theatre from the way it was being done in the urban centres during the colonial period. The contact with the west had brought about transformation in almost every sphere of Indian life — social, economic, political and cultural — during the colonial rule. Theatre too had experienced change. The theatrical modernity brought by the West had introduced a new kind of theatre quite different from the traditional performances. Some of the important features that differentiated the two theatrical traditions were the use of fixed proscenium stage replacing open air performances of folk theatre; western realism and naturalism in the place of inherent symbolism in Indian traditional forms; western commercial theatre instead of Indian theatrical tradition based on patronage. The ‘new’ theatre introduced by the English was taken up by the educated Indian elite as ‘gentlemanly’ activity. Gradually this kind of theatre was assimilated into the indigenous performance traditions and a distinct theatre emerged during the colonial period that subtly blended the two traditions. In post-Independence India, there was opposition to this kind of theatre which seemed ‘derivative, ‘imitative’ and ‘colonial’ to many. It was argued that theatre need to be decolonised for it to flourish in India. The collective support was for a theatre inspired equally by the classical Sanskrit tradition as well as ‘folk’ theatres of India or in other words, merging elements from both the ‘great’ and the ‘little’ traditions.

It was with this idea that Sangeet Natak Akademi was established in Delhi in 1953 as the national institution for performing arts to monitor and guide, provide patronage and conserve Indian traditions of performance:

The idea of establishing an organization to coordinate all the activities in the sphere of dance, drama and music came to the forefront and
assumed a new urgency and importance in independent India… The necessity of such an organization was all the more compelling in view of the fact that all of a sudden the erstwhile princely patronage of the arts had ceased to function or was fast ceasing. In the void thus created, the art traditions were faced with the grave risk of breaking down in an atmosphere of general decline in our cultural and artistic values (SNA Report cited in Dalmia 169).

The akademi intended to organize a seminar every four years for each of the arts – dance, drama, music, and film. The first drama seminar was organized in 1956 and inaugurated by S Radhakrishnan, the then Vice-President of India. Aparna Dharwadkar refers to this seminar as “the first sustained exercise in historical self-positioning — an early postcolonial reflection on the singular problematic of a multilingual theatre tradition that had classical and pre-modern as well as colonial antecedents, the emergent modernity of which was synchronous with colonialism” (37). The objective of the seminar was to conceive the future of Indian theatre as it should develop in independent India. It was formally recommended in the seminar that,

… the regeneration of the Indian theatre can only be possible by revitalizing the traditional folk forms so as to narrow the gulf between the dramatic forms that have developed during the last hundred years and the survivals from the past. The Seminar recommends that adequate steps be taken not only for the careful and scientific study of the folk drama in different parts of India but also for preventing their decay and disappearance and for giving them recognition and new life (Sangeet Natak 2004, 128).
Thus, the major concern for theatre practitioners was to ‘decolonize’ Indian theatre in terms of — form, content, conventions, and so on.

The most important and visible colonial metaphor in modern Indian theatre was ‘Western naturalism’ manifest in the form of the proscenium stage. The discussion regarding the proscenium was based on the assumption that this Western convention along with naturalism had disturbed the traditional styles of performance. The subject generated interesting discussions. Almost all of the participants of the above-mentioned seminar agreed that the urban proscenium was an alien imposition on Indian theatre that destroyed the elasticity of spatial use in traditional performances by creating fixed and enclosed theatre space. The proscenium created an unwanted divide between the performer and the audience. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand argued that,

we cannot follow the Western system of founding a chain of grandiose closed theatres in India, in blind imitation of the West and merely mount plays in those theatres according to the commercial techniques already discarded by the most advanced experts of Europe (Sangeet Natak 2004, 16).

But such criticism of the proscenium does appear to be a little too harsh because proscenium stage could not have harmed traditional theatres that much since the former was urban-centric while traditional performances were majorly rural. There does not seem to be much interaction between the two which existed independent of each other. Anand himself commented on the already decaying status of Indian traditional forms before the arrival of the British:

The decay of ritual through rigid ill-understood forms, and the whole tradition, which was becoming increasingly more conventional through
formalism, was degraded by the low position to which actors and dancers were reduced in the cast hierarchy that bound Hindu society into a compact but corrupt social organism. The puritanism of the Muslim invaders made the situation in the arts more difficult still, because Hindu religious practices were often an exposition of their sense of value (*Sangeet Natak* 2004, 8).

Thus, it seems that the traditional forms were already in decay by the 18th century before Indians were introduced to the Western proscenium theatre. As Anand observes, “old folk and classical theatre had begun to lose its hold on the fringes of the urban areas long before the European-style theatre came to the middle sections” (10). Moreover, in the 19th century, indigenous forms came under severe criticism “because of the self-critical thrust of social reform movements, the emergence of middle-class culture in cities, and the commitment of such major authors as Bhartendu Harishchandra, D. L. Roy and Rabindranath Tagore to the literary and cultural possibilities of the new aesthetic” (Dharwadker 141). It is ironical that after the discussion on proscenium theatre as a colonial and alien import the seminar resolved,

\[ \ldots \text{to build at the Capital a theatre hall worthy of our national status,} \]

but it is strongly of the opinion that at the same time, as this project is launched, a number of suitable theatres, both covered and open-air, should be constructed by the State [governments], the municipal authorities and other such bodies. Without the construction of such theatres in the main towns and the countryside, the existence of the national theatre at the capital will lose much of its significance. The plans for such theatres should be drawn up in consultation with experts in theatrical technique (*Sangeet Natak* 2004, 126-7).
The important consequence was that the issue of ‘decolonizing’ Indian theatre gained official and popular sanction of the intelligentsia in the 1956 seminar. Nemichandra Jain’s argument for ‘decolonizing’ Indian theatre is representative of the kind of discourse that was emerging in post-Independence India. Jain observed,

It is generally believed that drama and theatre like many other things are a Western gift to India. We may have had some popular entertainments like the Nautanki or the Jatra but these had little to do with drama to which we were introduced by the British through our contact with English literature, particularly Shakespeare. It is also said that the Sanskrit drama was more of dramatic poetry than drama proper, and even that had become extinct and was rediscovered for India by the Western scholars. In a sense, this unfortunate impression was confirmed by the readiness with which we adopted and have been almost slavishly imitating, the Western models of dramatic writing and theatrical presentation for the last 200 years. As a result, our theatre people, until very recently, knew Shakespeare, Moliere, Ibsen, Aristotle’s *Poetics* or even *Commedia dell’arte* but almost nothing of Kalidasa, Shudraka, and the *Natya Shastra*, or the Kuttiyatam, Yakshagana, Bhavai or Swang (1995/1971, 9-10)

Consequently there were attempts to revive Sanskrit drama as an “ingredient of national theatre for restoring an “authentic” Indian tradition, which, in the nationalistic post-colonial imagination, had been interrupted by colonialism” (Bhatia xiv). The revival of Sanskrit theatre led to contemporary productions of Sanskrit drama by almost every notable theatre director for the next 30 years or so, aided by centrally-funded festivals like the *Kalidasa Festival* and *Nehru Shatabadi Natya Samaroh*. In addition to Sanskrit
theatre, “the traditional and folk theatre surviving in different forms and languages all over the country” found favour in the task of establishing cultural alterity of Indian theatre (Jain 2003, ix). The National School of Drama (NSD) was established in 1959 to realize the aim of developing a ‘national theatre’ based on the rich cultural heritage of India.

The issue gained further impetus with Suresh Awasthi becoming the secretary of Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1965. Awasthi’s role in ‘decolonizing’ Indian theatre is clear in his comments,

As part of the great cultural renaissance generated during the post-independence period, there has occurred a most meaningful encounter with tradition in various fields of creative activity. The return to and discovery of tradition was inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This was part of a whole process of decolonization of our lifestyle, values, social institutions, creative forms and cultural modes. The modern Indian theatre, product of a colonial theatrical culture, felt the need to search for roots most intensely to match its violent dislocation from the traditional course (1989, 48; italics mine).

Efforts were made to establish Awasthi’s “theatre of roots” as national movement in theatre of India through SNA’s policies and the state-sponsored conferences, seminars and festivals such as The ‘First Drama Seminar’ (1956), seminar on ‘Contemporary Playwrighting and Play Production (1961), ‘Roundtable on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre’ (1971), and Conference on ‘Emergence of the National Theatre’ (1972). The ‘Scheme of Assistance to Young Theatre Workers’ especially promoted the creation of indigenous theatre. Theatre festivals like Kalidasa Festival and Nehru Shatabadi Natya Samaroh helped in strengthening the status of “theatre of roots”. Erin
Mee argues that the “theatre of roots really went national” during the 1970s by carefully projecting a constructed image of Indian theatre (200). Such a policy left theatre workers in search for grants, with no other option but to take up traditional forms sometimes without adequate knowledge of these forms. Soon “theatre of roots” came under severe criticism from theatre persons for promoting a particular kind of theatre. Satish Alekar, a major Marathi playwrights, objected against the ‘Scheme of Assistance to Young Theatre Workers’ which laid down the mandatory condition that,

… for the play to be performed in the scheme [it] should have [some] bearing on the folk theatre traditions of India. Due [to] this condition all the directors who had no knowledge of folk theatre traditions were made to use these forms in order to be in the scheme and as a result a lot of substandard plays were produced (cited in Mee 200).

International theatre festivals furthered the projection of the ‘Immortal India’ image. Initiated in the 1980s, the Festival of India was to play a major role in the “marketing drive to introduce India to the highly industrialized G7 countries as a viable locale for investment” (Dutta 122). Thus, the Festivals projected a carefully constructed image of ‘Indian’ for an economic end. The economic gain for the government through these festivals becomes the clearly-stated official intention:

S.K.Mishra, director-general of the Festival of India, and an ex-tourism top official from the state of Haryana, explained the Festivals in terms of the following: ‘... it’s a perfect moment for India to cash in, to change existing prejudices about India in the western world and to signal a new era of Indo-American cooperation.’ And Niranjan Desai, the Washington-based minister counsellor for culture, talking about economic potentials in the field of tourism, books, movies, investment
and trade: ‘These are things we want but cannot get until we alter our image. We are still trapped in the Heat and Dust and Indiana Jones syndrome. We have to show that India is not only exotic but contemporaneously exotic as well as modern and competent’ (Dutta 122).

To meet the aim of the Festivals, it was required to feature only those productions that cast in typically traditional and folk idioms. Productions like Tanvir’s Charandas Chor, Panikkar’s Karanbharam and Madhyam Vyayogam, M. K. Raina’s Andha Yug and Thiyam’s Chakravyuha which incorporated elements from traditional Indian forms, were clear choices for the Festivals. Projecting such a constructed image of Indian culture at international fora has led Rustom Bharucha to argue that,

At the international level, we have projected a most cosmetic and superficial image of ‘Indian culture’… At home, these festivals have merely mechanised and commodified our rural and tribal cultural resources, apart from making showpieces of our ‘classical art’. They have disrupted social relationships by creating false hierarchies within the communities of performers. They have increased the role of impresarios and cultural dalals, intensifying deference’s to power structures rather than facilitating a critique of their role (1992, 1676).

Another source that helped to crystallize the indigenizing trends in post-Independence Indian theatre was Bertolt Brecht. Theatre practitioners found in Brecht’s theatre characterized by its rejection of Western theatrical traditions, anti-realism, epic theatre mode, a performative style which would accommodate traditional forms of India, China and Japan. Nissar Allana, one of the leading designers of Indian theatre, observes that the elements used by Brecht were already present in folk theatre and therefore
“brought about a wider awareness of the possibility that such elements could become a part of the modern idiom in the Indian context […] In India there was already an awareness of the importance of discovering a link with the tradition, and Brecht’s theatre soon became exceedingly relevant” (2-3). In the 1960s, Brecht was taken as the model for developing a ‘modern’ theatre based on indigenous traditions of performance. Also, the sponsorship provided by the German Democratic Republic in the 1960s provided the opportunity to Indian directors like M. S. Sathyu and Shama Zaidi to visit the Berliner Ensemble. Later Ebrahim Alakzi’s participation in the ‘Brecht Dialog 1968’ in East Berlin and Fritz Bennweit’s collaboration with National School of Drama in the early 1970s affirmed Brecht’s place in Indian theatre (Dalmia 189). The period that followed witnessed Brecht being produced by eminent directors around India. Some of the major productions include Fritz Bennweit’s The Threepenny Opera in the swang style of Uttar Pradesh (1970); Vijaya Mehta’s adaptations of The Good Woman of Setzuan and The Caucasian Chalk Circle in the tamasha and dashavtar styles (1972 and 1974); M. K. Raina’s Punjabi folk version of The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1976); Habib Tanvir’s Chhattisgarhi folk version of The Good Woman of Setzuan (1978); and B. V. Karanth’s Bundelkhandi folk version of The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1983). All of these productions attempted to indigenize Brecht within the performatve styles of different traditional forms.

Thus, the period from the 1960s onwards was engaged with the search for “roots”, initially at an individual level and later at the national level after the official diktat on policies to be regulated by Sangeet Natak Akademi. There is no denying the fact that the “theatre of roots” gave direction to Indian theatre, especially at a time when directors and playwrights were struggling to find suitable idioms that could be described as ‘Indian’. However, excesses started bothering directors and playwrights when it
seemed that ‘folk’ was the only ‘genuine’ expression of Indian theatre, thwarting the development of any other form of expression. “Theatre of root” was critiqued not only by those who did not practice it but also from the directors engaged with it. Shanta Gandhi who played a major role in revitalizing traditional theatre observed,

> It has become the fashion to incorporate in one’s productions some of the features of traditional theatre which the actors can learn without much strain. […] With rare exceptions, these forms are used without an adequate understanding of their basic nature and without sensitive apprehension of the inherent relationship that exists between the forms and their content (14).

Similar arguments were echoed by Rajinder Nath:

> When an idea degenerates into a slogan the consequences can be disastrous. Something similar has happened or is happening to a very creative idea: using our folk and traditional theatre forms in contemporary theatre. […] If we take a very brief look at some of the plays which have used traditional or folk forms two conclusions emerge clearly. In all those plays where the playwrights have been able to achieve a complete fusion between form and content the results have been very satisfying; whenever the form has been imposed on a particular play the result has been disastrous. Whereas in the second category there have been umpteen plays, one can recall only a few in the former category (26).
Polemical arguments were voiced by scholars like G. P. Deshpande who equated this with the West’s enthusiasm for ‘ethnic’ and ‘exotic’ India. According to Deshpande, such an approach, was nothing but ‘Orientalism in reverse’ which dismisses nearly two hundred years of modern proscenium theatre in India. It rule out contemporary experience and therefore contemporary sensibility. All this has political meanings. Quite often they are unintended but their impact cannot be avoided. Modern Indian Theatre is a victim of a particular kind of politics—the politics of cultural nationalism which is monolithic, blind and anti-creative (96).

Despite these debates on “theatre of roots”, it cannot be denied that it was an influential movement that marked the dominant style of post-Independence Indian theatre. “Theatre of roots” may no be an explicit movement today but theatre directors continue to produce plays in traditional and folk idioms. Section II deals with some productions of Shakespeare in post-Independence India which exemplify the traces of the early style and draw upon various traditional and folk forms of performance.

II. Shakespeare Performances in ‘Urban-folk’ Theatre

I. Utpal Dutt’s Productions of Shakespeare

Utpal Dutt’s (1929-1993) initiation into theatre dates back to his school and college days where he acted in various Shakespeare plays directed by the Jesuit Fathers. Dutt remembers playing the second grave-digger in the 1943 Hamlet production at St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata, the production which “created a sensation […] with its striking sets, costumes and lighting” (Bandopadhyay 9). As a student at St. Xavier’s College, Dutt played various roles in Shakespeare plays. His induction into professional
theatre was by Geoffrey Kendall who toured India with his English theatre troupe Shakespearana during the 1950s, performing Shakespeare plays in schools and colleges. Kendall invited Dutt to act in his plays. Subsequently, Dutt formed his own The Amateur Shakespeareans group that staged Shakespeare plays in English. The group was later renamed Little Theatre Group (LTG). Dutt also joined the IPTA for a brief period but was “thrown out” on charges of being a Trotskyite (Bandopadhyay 12). When the Kendalls returned for an India-Pakistan tour, Dutt rejoined them. As Tapati Gupta writes that Dutt acted as “Antonio in The Merchant of Venice, Horatio in Hamlet, Brutus in Julius Caesar, Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet, Ross in Macbeth, and Roderigo in Othello” (158). It was from Kendall that Dutt learnt the nuances of theatre and discipline in acting. Dutt recalls an anecdote when he was beaten up by Kendall in Allahabad after a performance of Romeo and Juliet:

I had Mercutio’s part, I died in the middle of the play. Having finished my part, I went back to the hotel. Around midnight, Kendall entered my room with a pair of heavy boots in his hand and, before uttering a single word, he beat me mercilessly. Then I remembered that I was supposed to conduct the music in the last scene. As there were only fourteen of us in the group, we had to do practically everything ourselves. As I had neglected my duty for various personal reasons, Kendall became furious and constantly repeated the words: “Shame on you, you don’t belong”. You don’t belong – you are not one of theater. You are not a man of this profession. The Guru’s reprimands hurt me more than the boots. That night I learned a lot.

Kendall was an old type of British professional, who had learned by being beaten up and who used to teach by beating (1983, 242).
The tour with the Kendals and his brief involvement with IPTA brought about a major change in the Dutt’s philosophy of theatre. Dutt and his group LTG had hitherto produced Shakespeare exclusively in English for select audiences which comprised either a few Englishmen in Calcutta or a “few Bengo-Anglians who had to be where the British were” (Bandopadhyay 12). Dutt remembers the diminishing audience for English theatre in Calcutta who “sat there with clenched fists – pretending to enjoy it” (1972, 68-9). Later Dutt regretted doing Shakespeare in English and observed, “[T]hose years were wasted performing Shakespeare before an intellectual audience” (Gunawardana 235). After the tour with the Kendalls, Dutt decided that LTG would stage plays in Bengali for a wider and more inclusive audience. Himani Bannerji notes,

No matter how political a play may be – the very fact that it is in English, he [Dutt] felt, kills the politics of the play, since it must be played to an audience which is upper class and generally right-wing. Utpal therefore looked to Bengali and European classics and sought out primarily a Bengali speaking audience (11).

The first play to be produced was Jatindranath Sengupta’s translation of *Macbeth* (1954). Dutt toured with the play, surely influenced by Kendal’s touring company, and performed hundred shows in the villages of West Bengal. Dutt noted in an interview:

Shakespeare must be done, but he must be done for the common people. We did *Macbeth* in Bengali, and in one season we did ninety-seven performances in the villages. The people took to Shakespeare enthusiastically. To them Shakespeare was in the proper *Jatra* style –
the action, the violence, the robustness charmed them (Gunawardana 235).

In another interview on “Taking Shakespeare to the Common Man,” he elaborated:

A play like Macbeth or Othello with its emotional emphasis is extremely popular with … people in the rural areas. That’s possibly because of the jatra-background of the audiences. Jatras are full of blood and thunder and high-flown prose which make the jatra-goers receptive to Shakespeare’s plays (cited in Trivedi 2005a, 159).

Dutt did not believe in taking liberties with Shakespeare plays. In Bengali Macbeth, Dutt retained the original names of places and characters and Western costumes. He remained as close as possible to the original text despite some minor alterations. The rural audience could not understand various references pertaining to Scotland and England but the production was a huge success since human elements such as “ambition and kingship, loyalties and morality, emotions, poetry, passion and human weakness” were well understood (Gupta 166).

Various arguments have been put forward by theatre scholars regarding Dutt’s production of Macbeth. Some of them equate the production to jatra. Rustom Bharucha describes Dutt’s production of Macbeth as jatra. According to him, “[I]t was only by immersing Macbeth in the ritual world of jatra and by transforming Shakespeare’s language into a bold, declamatory form of incantation that the Little Theater Group could reach a Bengali working-class audience with an Elizabethan classic” (Bharucha 1983, 62). Similarly, Jyotsna Singh observes that Dutt drew on the conventions of jatra “to create the spectacle that he believes is an essential aspect of a non-elitist revolutionary theatre.” However, this production does not belong to Dutt’s famed
revolutionary phase. Dutt himself admits about the production, “[B]ut this Macbeth was not revolutionary theatre” (Gunawardana 235). Following Bharucha’s argument, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins observe:

In an attempt to undermine both the elitism and the Anglocentrism associated with the Shakespearian theatre of the time, Dutt took translations of such plays as Macbeth to the rural masses, dispensing with the conventions of the proscenium stage and infusing his productions with the ritual traditions of jatra, the folk theatre of Bengal. By using Shakespearian texts in this manner, Dutt’s work presented a way not only of indigenizing the imperial canon but also of disrupting its cultural clout (21).

Although Dutt took Macbeth to villages away from the fixed proscenium, but he did not use a jatra stage. Tapati Gupta argues that the stage for Macbeth was “a temporary proscenium – a boxlike, three-walled platform, winged and curtained – with the audience sitting in front” (166). The arguments put forward by Bharucha, Singh and Gilbert considering Dutt’s Macbeth as jatra seem to be based on the assumption that the Dutt had used a bold and declamatory style. Gupta disagrees and maintains that “[S]ince Dutt did not believe in hyper-emotional postures, he explored the natural potentialities of Shakespeare to captivate the imagination of the masses” (177). Whether it was Macbeth in jatra or jatra in Macbeth, it can be safely said that the production was the first Shakespearean performance in the post-Independence India to be take away from elite circuits into the masses staging 97 shows in one season (Gunawardana 235). Dutt had observed elsewhere that “the classics were not a prerogative of an elite. They would cease to exist unless they were brought to the people” (cited in Bhattacharya 5). Bharucha states, “Dutt’s conception of staging Shakespeare for the masses may have
been crude but it was, in all probability, closer to the guts of the Elizabethan theater than most European revivals of Shakespeare’s plays in recent years” (1983, 62). The play was later mounted in a Calcutta proscenium but could not achieve the earlier impact. According to Bharucha, the faults lay in the production being “blatantly operatic” (1983, 62). Bharucha elaborates, “the production exemplified some of the worst excesses of the nineteenth-century theatre – melodramatic acting and posturing, a pretentious delivery of lines, and a fundamental lack of belief in the social and political resonance of the play. It was one of Dutt’s most pointless productions” (1983, 62).

Much later in 1970, Dutt produced his first Shakespeare play as jatra. This was *Bhuli Nai Priya* (I Have Not Forgotten, My Love), a radical transformation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Tapati Gupta finds it strange that this play does not feature in any list of Dutt’s plays and has been overshadowed by his political plays (161). For the first time Dutt reworked a Shakespeare text in the jatra form for the jatra audience. The play was staged by professional jatra actors with the spatial arrangement of a traditional jatra. Minimum props were used and the audience sat all around, unlike in the case of the earlier *Macbeth*. However, Dutt had to introduce some changes to the traditional jatra format. For instance, he reduced the time to two to three hours whereas traditional jatra is usually ten to twelve hours long. Also, the traditional jatra had innumerable songs. He also cut down the number of songs to four or five. In his own words,

Originally I think (there’s a controversy as to whether the songs or the dialogue came first), it was all sung. But we can understand why during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Jatra had to rely mostly on songs. It is much easier to project song than speech. And continuous acting would be very strenuous in a play lasting from early afternoon until midnight. So the actors would act a little, and then
various kinds of singers would come on. There was a character called Vivek (“Conscience”) who would enter at particularly dramatic moments and sing a song about what was to be learned from the incident. There was another conventional device – the *juri* – a group of singers sitting on the edge of the arena throughout the performance. In the middle of a scene they would suddenly stand up and start singing in chorus. The action would resume after they finished their song and sat down. That’s how the form used to be … Today the main audience comes from the working class and not the peasants – tea garden workers, railway workers in Assam, coal and steel workers in Bengal. They pay well and the *Jatra* is now oriented towards them. They won’t sit and listen to a *Jatra* for twelve hours – they have a work shift the next day – so the plays must be shortened. Naturally the songs are the first to go out, and now instead of thirty, there are never more than five or six, usually only three. Also, *Vivek* is no longer used. We are trying to reintroduce these elements but the paying audience is already conditioned (Gunawardana 230).

Traditional *jatra*, like other folk forms, is declamatory, melodramatic and has exaggerated expressions. According to Gupta, in *Bhuli Nai Priya*

Dutt naturalized the action and expression, introducing subtlety, racy conversation, natural intonation, and restrained body language. He carefully trained veteran *jatra* actors, whom he admired greatly, and ultimately they discarded their mannerisms and adopted such a finesse that the *jatra* acquired a modernity that was not at odds with the
indigenous flavour that Dutt was careful to retain. … The didactic element of jatra was retained (165-6).

As far as the narrative is concerned, Dutt’s play follows the original story but localizes it. Verona is transformed to Murshidabad and Mantau to Calcutta. Escalus becomes Nawab Sirajuddaula. The Montague-Capulet families are changed into Hindu-Muslim families. As Gupta observes, “[B]y making the two families Hindu and Muslim, the historical and post-Partition significance was enhanced” (169). As the play was thoroughly indigenised for the jatra audience, it was natural that the costumes too would be Indian, unlike Dutt’s previous productions of Shakespeare where costumes were Western even if the play was in Bengali. Thus, the bright and colourful costumes of jatra were used. The music composed by Pancham Mitra composed used a mixture of Indian classical and western instruments like harmonium, nakkara, dholki, saxophone, clarinet and violin and also incorporated baul, kirtan, folk tunes and north Indian classical music (169).

The play Bhuli Nai Priya was probably the only play of Shakespeare to be performed in jatra by Dutt. By then his theatre had become more revolutionary and Dutt produced Rifle (1968), Jallianwala Bag (1969), Delhi Chalo (1970), Samudra Shasan (1970), Jai Bangla (1971), Sannyasir Tarabari (1972), Jhad (1973), Mao Tse Tung (1974), Seemanta (1975), Turuper Tash (1976), Mukti Deeksha (1977), Shada Poshak (1979), Kuthar (1980), Swadhinatar Phanki (1981), Bibighar (1982) and Damama Oi Baje (1988) – all for professional jatra companies. Bhuli Nai Priya was among the earliest attempts in post-colonial India to decolonise a Shakespeare play from the conventional proscenium and perform it in the idiom of an indigenous folk performance.
II. B. V. Karanth’s *Barnam Van*

B. V. Karanth (1928-2002) was one of the most innovative theatre directors of post-Independence Indian theatre. Born in Manchi village in Karnataka, he was trained as a child actor in theatre by Gubbi Veeranna Company, the most famous theatre company in Karnataka. Gubbi Veeranna later sent Karanth to Banaras Hindu University to do an M. A. in Hindi where he was also trained in Hindustani classical music by Pandit Omkarnath Thakur. Karanth then graduated from National School of Drama (New Delhi) and later became its director (1977-1981). He also served as Director, Rangmandal Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal (1981-1986) and then at Rangayana, Mysore (1989-1995).

The two major influences on Karanth that get reflected in his work are his deep involvement with folk and traditional performances since his childhood and his training in classical music. Many theatre persons including Vijay Tendulakar and G. P. Deshpande considered Karanth more of a music person than of theatre. Folk music had always captivated Karanth and he made use of folk and traditional music not only of Karnataka but from other parts of the country in his plays. Although trained in classical music he did not mind adjusting the rules of classical music to suit the musical needs of theatre. He could create music from stones, wood pieces, chairs or scrap. This was a characteristic feature of many of his productions. Karanth used music not only as an ornament for embellishment but for interpreting a play. Similarly, he used performance traditions of Karnataka and of various other regions. Deeply rooted in traditional and folk forms of performance, Karanth created individualistic forms for his theatre deriving from these conventions. In his own words,
Our folk theatre is extremely pliant, but we have completely lost sight of its immense potential. So whenever we look for our own identity or legacy, our quest automatically ends at the same emotional destination ... there ... at folk theatre. However modern and urbanized we think we may have become, our roots still lie somewhere in the villages. It is in the rural countryside that our ‘instincts’ are essentially grounded. So, it is right to associate ourselves with the folk theatre, while exploring the spirit of the Indian theatre. Whenever we discuss the Indian theatre in the same way as discuss Indian music and drama, which other forms can we speak about except Tamasha, Yakshagan, Bhavai and so on? (Taneja n.d., 14).

As the Director of National School of Drama (1977-1981), Karanth made it mandatory for students to undergo a month-long workshop in folk forms for which he was criticized for fostering a unidirectional trend in theatre. Reeta Sondhi observes,

With Karanth’s background of folk and traditional theatre it seems as though he has shifted the emphasis in the training programme ... it appears as though it has become a messy splash of colour, comedy and caricature. Credit is to the consummate artistes who have managed to sustain interest in their new productions! (cited in Dalmia 199).

This might be true to some extent. But Karanth had the ability to blend the traditional with modern to create the contemporary which was the hallmark of his theatre. Karanth directed Hayvadana, Ghasiram Kotwal and Jokumaraswamy in which folk elements were embedded in the structure of the play. But Karanth did adapt Shakespeare’s plays in indigenous performance idioms.
Karanth produced *Barnam Van* for the National School for Drama Repertory in 1979. He cast the play in a non-realistic and stylized form. He decided to use elements from *yakshagana* for the play. In his own words,

I do not find myself capable of producing Shakespeare the way he is produced in his own country. Were I to do so, it would be false of me. Therefore my use of the Yakshagana form is not for my own sake, but because it is a part of my awareness and expression (‘Director’s Note’).

The choice of *yakshgana* was determined by the fact that Karanth found *Macbeth* “overflow[ing] with rasas, such as valour, wrath, terror and wonder, and the characters and situations have a universality and larger-than life quality which can be well expressed in the *yakshagan* style” (‘Director’s Note’).

*Macbeth* had been translated into Hindi by Rangeya Raghava and Harivansh Rai Bachchan, among others. Also, the National School of Drama had produced two plays of Shakespeare – *King Lear* (1964) and *Othello* (1969) under the direction of Ebrahim Alkazi. These productions had used the existing translations. Karanth commissioned Raghuvir Sahay, the well-known Hindi poet, for his production. But even before the translation of the play had begun, the format was decided. Thus, it was for the translator to present the play to fit the form. Unlike Bachchan who had used the *rola* metre for his translation, Sahay chose to translate the play using the “*kavitta* metre whose subtle rhythm gives infinite freedom for creative vocal expression and lends itself to the entire spectrum of moods” (‘A Word from the Translator’). Although much of the translation follows the original verse pattern a scene or two have been rendered
into prose. For example, Lady Macbeth’s speech in Act I, sc. vii, which is in prose has been rendered into verse by Sahay (Act I, sc. 7, 37):

Lady Macbeth: I have given suck, and know

How tender ‘tis to love the baby that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you

Have done to this.

Macbeth: If we should fail,

Lady Macbeth: We fail!

But screw your courage to the sticking-place,

And we’ll not fail.

In Sahay’s translation the prose becomes verse as follows:

*Lady Macbeth: Main pila chuki hun doodh*

*Aur jaanti hun pyaar aanchal mein kaise umadta hai*

*par godi mein pade iktak niharte*

*dudhmunhe ke munh se main chhuda leti stan*

*patak kar kapaar phod daalti*

*agar kai pran aisa kiye hue hoti teri tarah*
Macbeth: Yadi asaphal hum rahe?

Lady Macbeth: Asaphal hum?

Apne saahas ko tu chaanpe reh usi thor

to hum honge na viphal.

Instead of translating the original in a literal manner, Sahay concentrated ‘on capturing the sound patterns of sentences as they occur in the original so as to recreate the resonance of the language that was heard on the Elizabethan stage’ (‘A Word from the Translator’). Although the names of the characters and places have been retained, topical references to Scotland and England were dispensed away with. For instance, in Act 1, sc. ii when a soldier talks with Duncan he addresses him as Mark, King of Scotland. However, in the translation Sahay omits the reference of Scotland and the soldier addresses Duncan as raja (king). As Sahay explains, “[D]espite being burdened by the ostentatious verbosity of its times, Shakespeare’s language at places glows with quiet simplicity, wherein rests his genius and which I have found essential to my translation (‘A Word from the Translator’). An example of this simplicity of language may be found at the outset of the play where Sahay translates the dialogues of the witches in a very simple and rustic language (Act I, sc. I):

Daayan 1: Aaj mile hain hamm

pher milenge kabb?

Daiv garjai bijuri chamkai meha barse tabb

Daayan 2: Hum milenge jabb

kattajhujh hui le
Finally, Sahay left the play to the director to edit it to suit the form.

*Baranam Van* was first staged at the open-air stage of National School of Drama in 1979. The huge banyan tree with its branches coming on to the stage cast a maze of shadows on the stage. Jaidev Taneja observes, “With the leaves stirring in the air, lights seemed to be creating waves; they created a scene of a jungle where the witches dance in fearful gestures and demonic faces” (105). The powerful visual symbolizes the theme of *Macbeth*: “the labyrinthine jungle of ambition, which ensnares and destroys man” (Karanth, ‘Director’s Note’). The witches are a creation of Macbeth’s own mind and are “imaged as creatures of the forest, emerging from the entrails of the tree, covered with drapes painted over with emblematic branchlike shapes” (Trivedi 2005a, 163). As mentioned earlier, Karanth made use of elements from *yakshagan* especially for characters’ entry and exit, battle scenes, and the expression of emotional tensions through the rhythm of body movements (‘Director’s Note’). In *yakshagan*, as in other traditional forms of India, a lot of emphasis is given to the entry and exit of characters. These are highly stylized movements that become a performance in their own right. In *Baranam Van*, characters enter and exit with dance steps taken from *yakshagan*. Unlike *kathakali*, *yakshagan* relies on the movements of the whole body and not just face and hands. Karanth does not always use conventional *yakshagan* movements but allows leaps and pirouettes leaving out the movement of shoulders and hands. In traditional *yakshagan* characters usually enter from behind a half-curtain called *tere* held by two stagehands. In *Baranam Van*, Karanth uses the half-curtain for the entry of characters and for more dramatic purposes to conceal the witches’ entry by shaking the curtains and making circular dance movements, draping the curtains around their bodies and suddenly removing them (Awasthi 1979, 41). Such creative use of the conventional half-curtain makes the scene dramatically effective and also enhances the suspense. The
last scene showing the moving Birnam Wood has always been challenging for directors. Karanth makes ingenious use of half-curtains to meet the challenge. Malcolm’s army enter the stage draped in half-curtains having branches painted on them around their bodies. This gives the impression of the Birnam Wood proceeding towards Macbeth.

The three witches in *Barnam Van* (1979), dir. B. V. Karanth (Source: NSD).
Music plays the central role in yakshagan. A traditional yakshagan troupe has one or two singers and at least three instrumentalists – a maddale drummer, one for chende, and one to provide the drone on a harmonium. (Akshara 526) Karanth, himself a trained classical singer, makes music integral in all his productions. Barnam Vana is no exception, especially when he borrows so much from the yakshagan form for the production. Although the music in Barnam Van is of yakshagan style because Karanth found the rhythm of the kavitta metre quite close to the beat of chenda, Karanth makes certain alterations. As he explains in the ‘Director’s Note’, “[S]ince pure Yakshagan music can prove to be obscure and incomprehensible, I have introduced other Asian musical instruments such as bells and gongs”. The beat of chende and nakkara is used to emphasize the stylized movements of entry and exit of characters. Awasthi comments on Karanth’s use of music in following words:
The play begins with the music of *chenda* and *nakkara*, just like in the performance of *yakshagan* and *kathakali*. After that, the witches enter with a short sad alaap. Alaaps in male and female voices have been used quite effectively. When Macbeth decides to kill Duncan the *nakkara* underlines each line of his dialogue and the humming goes on in the background … In the sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth’s dialogues are supported by the beats of *nakkara* and *chende* coupled with the shrilling voices which gives the whole scene a ritualistic setting (1979, 41; trans. mine).

Besides musical instruments, Karanth also creates music out of wood pieces as is done in Japanese *kabuki*.

Costume is an elaborate affair in *yakshagan*. Characters in traditional *yakshagan* can be identified by the costumes typical to particular characters. Karanth does not entirely replicate yakshagan costumes for *Barnam Van’s* characters but with other traditional theatres like that of Cambodia, Bali, Japan, Burma and Indonesia (‘Director’s Note’). With such strong similarity with *yakshagan* for the production, one may be tempted to think that it is *Macbeth* in *yakshagan* form. As Karanth himself clarifies, it is in fact the other way round. Karanth has not cast the play rigidly in a traditional form nor surrenders to the form. A deliberate defamiliarisation with *yakshagan* is achieved by incorporating elements from other traditional forms and by modifying some of the conventions of *yakshagan*. Only those *yakshagan* elements have been incorporated which seem suitable for the visual presentation. Hence, it is *yakshagan* in *Macbeth* and not *Macbeth* in *yakshagan*.
III. Habib Tanvir’s Kamdeo ka Apna Vasantritu ka Sapna

Habib Tanvir (1923-2009) belonged to the elder generation of theatre directors in post-Independence India. Tanvir’s form of theatre drew a lot from various folk forms of India, especially the traditional performative styles of Chattisgarh. Tanvir was one of the first theatre directors to introduce folk forms into modern theatre. There were several influences that brought Tanvir closer to the traditional forms of performance which he incorporated into his style of theatre. As a child, Tanvir would often visit his uncles who were landowners in the villages of Raipur. There he got the chance to listen to folk music and songs. Tanvir was attracted to these songs and even memorized some of them (Website 2). The second important influence in Tanvir’s initiation into folk forms was his brief involvement with IPTA in the 1940s. He says,

I think I must have got the inspiration from my IPTA background in Bombay. I worked in the Hindi group but we were also surrounded by the Gujarati, Marathi and Konkani groups. Each group had a music squad. These were strong music squads and some of the great figures in the world of music were associated with them. For example, the Marathi squad included stalwarts like Annabhau Sathe and Amar Sheikh. They drew upon the folk traditions like burrakatha and pawara (cited in Malik 103).

The third and probably the strongest influence on Tanvir that gave him the direction to work in theatre with a strong base in folk and traditional elements, was his travel across Europe, especially the eight months he spent in Berlin in 1956 watching Brecht’s productions. It is interesting to note that Tanvir sustained himself in Europe by singing Chhattisgarhi folk songs in pubs and nightclubs (Malik 103). Brecht had died the same
year and his recent productions were being staged. Having seen Brecht’s theatre which made us of various folk forms, some of which were Eastern too, Tanvir realized that

… it is only if one works with one’s own cultural traditions and ethos that one can achieve something more durable, more innovative, and artistically more interesting. Although a lot is made out of Brecht’s indebtedness to the Eastern theatres, the medieval and the Elizabethan traditions of Europe, the American jazz and so on, he remains at the core very German. The innovativeness of Brecht and his collaborators in music, Eisler and Kurt Weil, could only be achieved when one has a very very established native tradition in music to draw upon. Likewise, in the matter of language, the innovations of Brecht were based on German colloquialisms, on his own creative adaptations of the local dialects and colloquial phrases to make new compounds out of them. So, these were the lessons I had learnt from my European travel. I thought you can do nothing worthwhile unless you went to your roots and tried to reinterpret traditions and used traditions as a vehicle for transmitting the most modern and contemporary messages (Tanvir cited in Malik 103-4).

Once Tanvir returned to Delhi, he directed Sudraka’s Mricchkatika in 1958 in which he introduced some folk performers from Chhatisgarh. He left Delhi to form his own theatre group called Naya Theatre in 1959. For Tanvir Naya Theatre “stands for Indianness in theatre. It believes in an aesthetic blend of the folk and urban theatre techniques in order to interpret contemporary life in a manner at once Indian and universal” (cited in Mee 84). During this first phase (1958-70) in Tanvir’s theatre career, he directed plays like Saat Paise (1959), Jalidar Parde (1959), Phansi (1960),
Rustam-o-Sohrab (1961) and Shatranj ke Mohre (1969). Later, Tanvir called these plays “failures” and he says that it took him years to realize that.

... I was trying to apply my English training on the village actors – move diagonally, stand, speak, take this position. I had to unlearn it all. I saw that they couldn’t even tell right from left on the stage and had no line sense. And I’d go on shouting: ‘Don’t you know the difference between the hand you eat with and the one you wash with?’ ... I realized that those who were for years responding to an audience like this [without bothering about whether the audience was on one side, or three, or four, or whether some of them were sitting on the stage] could never try to unlearn all this and rigidly follow the rules of movement and that was one reason why Thakur Ram, a great actor ... wasn’t able to be natural. Another reason was the matrubhasha – he wasn’t speaking his mother tongue, so it jarred on my ears, because he was speaking bad Hindi and not Chhattisgarhi, in which he was fluent, which was so sweet. This realization took me years – naïve of me, but still it took me years. Once I realized it I used Chhattisgarhi and I improvised, allowed them the freedom and then came pouncing down upon them to crystallize the movement – there you stay. And they began to learn. That quite simply was the method I learnt (Tanvir cited in Deshpande 2009, 112).

With this realization began the second phase (1970-1973) in Tanvir’s career when he worked with folk performers and their repertoire in their dialects. His role was rather like editing and structuring their plays for the stage. Folk plays like Arjun ka Sarthi and Gauri Gaura were staged in 1972 as the Chhattisgarhi versions of the Mahabharata.
The third and the most significant phase (1973-2008) in Tanvir’s theatre career came after he held a month-long *nacha* workshop with about a hundred participants in Raipur in 1973. Among the participants, thirty were folk actors and others were urban and rural artists and intellectuals as observers. The workshop became the turning point in Tanvir’s theatre as it culminated in the much-acclaimed production titled *Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad*. The play blended three folk comedies from the *nacha* repertoire. Thus began the most productive phase of Tanvir’s theatre when he staged productions like *Uttam Ram Charit* (1974-75), *Charandas Chor* (1975-76), *Mitti ki Gadi* (1977-78). Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* adapted as *Kamdeo ka Apna Vasantritu ka Sapna* (1993) marked a high point of his achievement with this kind of theatre.

*Kamdeo ka Apna* was Tanvir’s first attempt at producing a Shakespeare play. In fact, Tanvir had always wanted to do a Shakespeare play but as he admits, “I never liked the translations in Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani. I also did not fancy translating for I found it intimidating” (cited in Padmanabhan). It so happened that the English Shakespeare Company offered Tanvir a project to direct a Shakespeare play in collaboration with the English actors of the company and his own folk performers. According to Tanvir,

The English Shakespeare Company which has an educational wing attached to it, had been feeling for a long time that the Indian community in Britain shied away from theatre, especially Shakespeare, and were worried about the effects the double alienation – from Indian culture back home and English culture – on the community (cited in Padmanabhan).
Tanvir first thought of producing a Shakespearean tragedy but realized that a tragedy may not work in a bilingual production. He turned to comedies and found *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to be tailor-made for a bilingual production. Tanvir saw the possibility of different languages being spoken by different characters in the play. The strategy that Tanvir devised was simple: the royalty would speak English, the inhabitants of the forest and fairies would speak Urdu, while the mechanicals would converse in their dialect. Once Tanvir was sure about the languages to be used, he started translating the play. Tanvir focused on only one plot and tried to be close to the original text. However, the translation posed several problems. The English title, for instance, was problematic for literal translation. As he comments, the title “itself resists a literal translation – midsummer day and midsummer night being specific occasions for festivity for Britain and elsewhere in the West. Midsummer itself, particularly in tropical countries, does not exactly stand for convivial occasions. Even the meaning of autumn differs in East and West. Spring (*Vasant*) alone can perhaps be considered conducive to feelings of love all over the world. Hence, the change in the play’s title” (*The Economic Times*, 8 March 1994). Similarly, Cupid is unknown to Indians. The nearest equivalent is *Kamdev* from Hindu mythology. So Cupid is replaced with *Kamdev*. Tanvir decided to retain the original names of the characters and places but changed the names of the flora and fauna, the fairies and the gods. The fairies are referred to as *pari* (fairy). The Indian substitutes for gods seem awkward sometimes. For instance, though the play is set in Athens, Bottom says, “I am Lord Shankar’s devotee, Sun is my carriage” (Act I. sc. ii; tr. mine). Tanvir’s translation is among the very few versions of Shakespeare in Indian languages that translates blank verse into blank verse, rhymed verse into rhymed verse, and prose into prose. Songs based on *ghazals* and *thumris* of the *nautanki* tradition have been incorporated “due to the demands made by the Arabic and Hindi metres, and the
Hindustani vocabulary used” (The Economic Times, 8 March 1994). Some modifications are necessary for translating from one culture. Tanvir believes that “[I]n spirit, however, the play in translation hopefully remains Shakespearean, if only because of the love of nature and of life in general, including little creatures such as spiders, beetles, snails, blind-worms and snakes” (The Economic Times, 8 March 1994).

The project proposed by the English company got postponed due to financial constraints. Tanvir, however, decided to carry on with the play with some modifications. He now concentrated only on one of the plots — the rustic mechanicals planning to stage a play on the occasion of the royal wedding of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, with Hippolyta, the queen of Amazons. The denizens of the fairy world were to be played by urban actors and the mechanicals by the folk artiste of Tanvir’s group. Although Tanvir had already worked out the problem of language to be used by the two sets of actors, urban and the folk, he found it difficult, at least initially, to make the actors grasp the rhythm of dialogue delivery: “The proper way to go about it is not to give in to the lilt of poetry; to keep the beat under and bring out the emotion, unlike in Parsi theatre. You have to know how to stretch a word so that the listener hears the beat but goes straight to the dramatic position” (cited in Padmanabhan). He further observes that the folk artistes had better understanding the song beats but found it difficult to manage the beat of the conversations; for the urban actors both were challenging, especially for the actors playing Puck, Oberon and Titania (cited in Padmanabhan).
Bottom’s entry concealed behind the conventional *rang-patti* (hand-held curtain) in *Kamdeo ka Apna Vasantritu ka Sapna* (Act III, sc.i).

Tanvir’s theatre has always been one of austerity. Under the influence of the folk forms, it is no surprise that Tanvir’s theatre acquired the simplicity and lucidity of folk theatre. His much-acclaimed plays like *Charandas Chor*, *Gaon ka Naam Sasural* or *Mitti ki Gadi* are played on a bare stage with minimal props and sets. The same holds true for *Kamdeo ka Apna* where a hand-held half-curtain is the only element of the set. A reviewer of *The Statesman* observed, “[T]he minimal use of stage props enables the play to proceed without interruptions for changes of scene and the open stage is well-utilized by the tribal dancers of Bastar, who while far removed from the Shakespearean ethos, are not an incongruity considering the particular orientation Habib Tanvir has given the Bard in *Kamdeo ka Apna Basantritu ka Sapna*” (18 Feb. 1994). Sudhanva Deshpande remarks, “[W]ith its simplicity, its directness and minimalism, Habib
Tanvir’s theatre would have been considered avant-garde had it not been so popular, and so funny” (112).

**IV. Lokendra Arambam’s *Macbeth: Stage of Blood***

Manipur has a rich performance tradition which includes *thang-ta, lai-haraoba, ras-lila, nat sankreetan* and *wari liba*. Some of the Meitei ritualistic traditional performances date back to the 12th century and are generally associated with the fertility rituals and ancestral worship (Arambam 2004, 233). *Lai-haraoba*, for instance, is a traditional fertility ritual. Nongmaithem Premchand describes *lai-haraoba* as a celebration of divinity that “enacts the Meitei myth of creation of the universe, making of human being and giving birth and creation or invention of most important things of civilization like boat, making of cloth, construction of a house, engaging in agricultural activities etc” (11).

Manipur’s history has played an important role in shaping its performance tradition. Till the 18th century, Manipur was an independent kingdom ruled by kings. Various performance forms like *lai-haraoba* and *wari liba* or the art of storytelling were patronized by the kings. With the coming of Vaishnavite Hinduism in Manipur in the 18th century, many natives converted into Hinduism. The performance traditions were also influenced by the Hindu performance traditions. New forms like *ras-lila* emerged that assimilated the two cultures especially due to the efforts of the Vaishnava king Bhagyachandra (1763-98) who “effected a compromise between the dissenting faiths, manifested theatrically in the harmonious assimilation of both cultures in Manipuri *Ras Lila*” (Arambam 2004, 252). The 1891 defeat of Manipur in the Anglo-Manipuri war brought Manipur under the colonial control. The prosenium theatre made inroads into Manipur during this time via Bengal. As Arambam observes, “While Calcuttans looked
forward toward Victorian London for artistic leadership, Imphal looked to the nearest imperial metropolis” (2004, 252-3). The early plays staged in Manipur were mostly Bengali plays. It was only in 1925 that the first Manipuri drama *Narasingh* written by Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh in 1922, was staged at the Palace compound of Maharaja Churchand Singh (Somorendra 178). During the 1930s dramatic clubs were founded like Meiti Dramatic Union (1931), Aryan Theatre (1935), Chitrangada Natya Mandir (1936), Society Theatre (1937), Rupmahal (1942). The theatre of this time was dominated by plays written on the Western models. These plays were largely romantic plots celebrating the “folklore and the native vernacular, narrating the experiences of the semi-urban agricultural communities” (Arambam 1997, 17). According to Somorendra Arambam the well-known dramatists like Lamabam Komol, Sorokhaibam Lalit, Arambam Dorendrajit and Ashangbam Minaketan wrote plays which “held a strong sense of good, evil and piety” (178). In *Bhagyachandra* (1930) a Manipuri adaptation of *Macbeth* by Arambam Dorendrajit, Lokendra’s father, the usurper and not the king is killed thereby making the play “a eulogy to good rule” (Trivedi 51). One exception during this period was G. C. Tongbra who, influenced by G.B. Shaw, wrote social drama. Most of his plays mocked the hypocrisy of the society and social evils.

The post-Independence theatre in Manipur has witnessed various experiments by young directors and actors. The 1960s and 70s witnessed, as Arambam observes, “a growth of youth power, youth influence, along with an increasing awareness by the people of their own identity, in the entire northeastern region” (1997a, 16). It was the time when young directors like H. Kanhaiyalal and Ratan Thiyam were trying to structure indigenous idioms to create a theatre that could express their distinct identity. Ratan Thiyam introduced ritualistic element in his theatre while Kanhaiyalal engaged himself with Badal Sircar’s style of intimate theatre. Thiyam’s theatre which draws heavily
upon the ritualistic traditions of Manipur is less verbal and more spectacular because according to him “the word cannot travel properly and reach the inner eye” (cited in Dharwadker 105). His productions are fairly well-known as they travel across the world. Kanhailal, once a student of Badal Sircar, is also ‘inspired’ by Meitei ritualistic traditions. But his approach to ‘roots’ is different from Thiyam. His theatre is not spectacular but psycho-physical. Kanhailal is also a well-known figure in Manipuri theatre. Rustom Bharucha has dedicated a complete book to Kanhailal and his theatre. A talented director who has somehow not figured prominently in the Manipuri theatre is Lokendra Arambam. Although he has committed himself to give expression to reflect upon the political and social situation of Manipur in his productions he never received much attention of the central funding agencies till recent when his *Macbeth: Stage of Blood* was sent to London in 1997 to commemorate 50 years of Indian Independence. Hence, I chose to discuss Arambam’s theatre in reference to the production of *Macbeth: Stage of Blood*.

Arambam has deeply been involved in political theatre since the 1970s. Since then this quest has been dominated by desire to express the pre-Vashnavaite Meitei culture and identity. The 1980s brought more political tension as a result of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Arambam observes,

We were no longer as free as we were in the 70s. In the 80s things were more critical, there were a lot of tensions, CRPF firing innocent people, women being raped, armed insurgents in open confrontation with the army – violence became a feature of the 80s (1997b, 34).

Arambam had to tone down the political content of his theatre during the 1980s. In his own words,
By the 80s we had to change our strategies. It was in this period that we became internalized – myself, Kanhailal – all of us were no longer direct in our expression of political tensions, feelings, etc. … We changed our genre of expression. We completely forsook what we were doing before. Our plays incorporated folklore, nuances which were gradually integrated through a kind of internalized research into aspects of culture. … I was not political anymore (1997b, 36).

Arambam’s theatre since the 80s has been less overtly political. However, he has been exploring various ritual practices of Meitei culture as the mode of presentation and reflection upon the contemporary situation of Manipur. It is the continuation of his urge “to do politically sensitive plays in which [I] reflect on [our] situation” coupled with his exploration into the Meitei ritual practices that finds manifestation in *Macbeth: Stage of Blood* in 1997 (1997b, 36).

*Macbeth: Stage of Blood* premiered on the Loktak lake stage in 1995. It was performed again on the floating stage at the Ningthem Pukhri reservoir in 1997 and then in England in 1997 to commemorate 50 years of Indian Independence. The play was directed by Arambam for his theatre group ‘The Forum for the Laboratory Theatre of Manipur’. The play situated Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* amid the contemporary political and social milieu of Manipur. Arambam’s Stage of Blood is “*Macbeth* wrenched, twisted and subverted into a metaphor of the anarchy in Manipur” (Arambam cited in Trivedi 2005b, 51). Along with the violence that Manipur has witnessed in the post-insurgency period of the 1990s, the issue of identity which has been so central to Arambam’s expressivity gets reflected in the play. Arambam admits that he wanted to do *Macbeth* because it dealt with “the issues of violence, murder and violence” and that he “wanted to interpret Shakespeare from [my] own tribal tradition” (1997b, 36). He
states that “the symbology of *Macbeth* powerfully expresses the tragedy of Manipur and the crisis of identity in the Manipur psyche – at once gentle, dynamic and receptive but with a deeper inner turmoil which finds extreme expression in the conflicts of today” (Website 3).

The play is quite complex for someone uninitiated into the Meitei culture because it incorporates various rituals and myths belonging to the pre-Vaishnavite Meitei culture. Also, the language used is the archaic Manipuri, parts of which are not comprehensible by even the young Manipuri speakers. The environmental staging of the play on the floating stage instead of the proscenium enhances the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions. Water has a deep spiritual meaning in Meitei culture representing “the universe along with fire, earth, wind and sky, driving the dynamics of life and the cosmos. Water represents the source of life and nourishment of the spirit” (Addezio 39). Meiteis believe in living in communion with nature and the failure of which causes suffering and disaster. Arambam himself explained that the stage was “Mother Earth, isolated, naked, and a site of the relentless struggle for domination. The surrounding Water was not just the seed of life but also the tomb where the spirits of the dead were subsumed” (Cited in Trivedi 2005b, 52).

The play was translated by Somorendra Arambam, Lokendra’s elder brother who inverted the sequential order of the play. The play opens with *Macbeth’s* end with soldiers bringing the dead Macbeth to the stage. He wakes up to re-enact his story. The play ends coda-like with Macbeth dead and soldiers taking him away for burial. The play moves backwards making the end both the beginning and the end. This has isgnificance in the context of post-insurgency Manipur when violence and killings have become the cyclic order. The structure of the play reflects the vicious circle of violence the state is witnessing. The play is a prose translation of the original and has 17 scenes.
When the play was staged at the Thames in London, the drama critic of *The Independent* observed that the iambic pentameter has been “abandoned in favour of the Manipuri martial art *Thang Ta* as Macbeth’s inner turmoil is expressed purely through visual imagery and haunting live music” (Website 4). Another deviation from the original text is the number of witches in *Stage of Blood* is seven. The seven weird sisters derive from Meitei mythology and represent the seven ‘virgin goddesses’ known as *heloy* who have power to prophesy. They are both benevolent and malevolent forces of Nature. Also known as *lay cakhetpi* (the destroyer) and *thaway lakpi* (one who snatches the soul), the seven sisters in the play snatch Macbeth’s soul and lead him towards his destruction (Website 5). A very important change in Arambam’s play is the melding of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth into one character. Arambam interprets Lady Macbeth as Macbeth’s alter-ego. Both the roles are played by a single actor who uses his body and a red shawl to demarcate the two aspects of the character.

![The weird sisters in *Macbeth: Stage of Blood*.](image)
As mentioned earlier, Arambam interprets the play according to the Meitei culture. According to the programme note Macbeth ‘is representative of a repressive state that has lost its soul … Malcolm and Macduff are not individual representatives of the righteous, but part of the unnamed unknown forces of the oppressed’ (cited in Trivedi 2005b, 51). Macbeth becomes evil is not of his own will but because of the forces beyond his control. Arambam wanted to reflect upon the way

… a murder is committed not because it becomes an obsession, but because one has to; one has to continue murdering one person after another; and it ends up in one being murdered. The tremendous political crisis in our state at present, where murder, violence and state terrorism are so widespread, finds an echo in my production.

According to this argument, Macbeth is a victim rather than a villain. This point becomes clearer when one locates Macbeth’s claim to the land within the discourse of ‘motherland’ as against the state/nation. Bipin Thongam observes that Macbeth, calls the land he overtook as his motherland despite being an illegal inheritor of the land and a traitor. He does not only worry about his kingship but also for the land which Duncan’s son Malcolm will inherit eventually. Macbeth calls Malcolm an outsider. This is important because he is questioning the established rules. Malcolm even asks his mother if his father was a traitor. This subverts the idea of the inheritor or the rightful owner of a kingdom. It could be a direct representation of Manipur and the Naga dispute over the land as to who owns the state of Manipur? Is it the Manipuri-Nagas who want to join in the formation of greater ‘Nagalim’ or the Meiteis who object?
At another level, the play deploys the political metaphors of Manipur vis-à-vis India (50).

The play ends when Malcolm’s army wrapped in reed-mats and giving the impression of the Birnam Wood advancing as if it were the elemental forces of nature, encircle Macbeth and finally kill him. The dead body is taken away for burial by the soldiers who had brought it on the stage in the beginning. The play thus ends where it had started.

Malcolm’s army wrapped in reed-mats giving the impression of Birnam Wood approaching Macbeth.

Just like the use of Meitei rituals to express the distinct identity, the costumes too are tribal as are the headgears and ornaments. The production has live music using traditional musical instruments like bells, cymbals and drums which augment the creation of the haunting and eerie atmosphere. When staged in Imphal, the play was witnessed by some 2000-odd people. The play may seem to belong to the ‘theatre of
roots’ movement like Ratan Thiyam’s theatre. However, there is an important difference between Thiyam’s and Arambam’s approach towards ‘roots’. While Thiyam’s work can be seen as belonging to the ‘theatre of roots’ movement looking towards ‘Vaishnavite Hindu modes and conservative Sanskrit influences’, Arambam’s theatre looks to the the pre-Vaishnavite Meitei culture (Arambam 1997b, 31). The politicization of Macbeth within the larger framework of Meitei identity, ethnicity and culture which has been haunting the people of Manipur in addition to the aesthetics evolved out of the traditional performance forms make his play complex.

V. M. K. Raina’s Badshah Pather

One of the latest Shakespeare productions in India that needs mention is M. K. Raina’s adaptation of King Lear as Badshah Pather (2009) in Kashmiri. The production is significant because of two reasons: first, Raina’s choice of working in the Valley which has witnessed violence since 1989 and still experiences sporadic encounters between the militants and the army. The impact of such bloodshed is clearly reflected in the pain and sorrow of the people of the Valley. Raina states that when working with young boys at Akingham, a small village in Kashmir where Badshah Pather was rehearsed and performed, he found that

… their bodies were not in the right proportion. There was a stiffness, a distortion, a lack of grace. I started asking myself whether these problems were due to the stresses and tensions that their mothers had gone through before the children were born or if they were a result of the atmosphere they had grown up in (Website 6).

Second, Raina’s choice to cast the play in the Kashmiri folk form which has been opposed by the militant groups is equally important. The 1990s was a difficult decade
for the *bhands* in the Valley. The extremist groups targeted the performers and the performances as un-Islamic. The traditional musical instruments of the *bhands* like *swarnai, dhol* and *nagara* were destroyed and costumes torn away. Not only this, Raina informs that “Mohammad Subhan Bhagat, the guru of the folk form who was put under house arrest later succumbed to the humiliation and shock” (‘Personal Correspondence’). This was a major loss for the indigenous theatre of Kashmir when the *bhands* stopped their practice. Raina a Kashmiri Pandit whose family fled from their hometown Srinagar in 1990s due to ethnic cleansing made efforts to revive the indigenous theatre of Kashmir. Raina worked constantly with the *bhands* and has been instrumental in its revivalis and in making this form known nationally.

The origins of *bhand pather* date back to the 11th century. The name is made up of two words: *bhand* means ‘actor’ and *pather* is the play. As Raina says,

The plays of the *bhands* are called *pather*, a word that seems to have derived from *patra*, dramatic character. *Bhand* comes from the *bhaana*, a satirical and realist drama, generally a monologue that is mentioned in Bharata’s *Natya Shastra*. The *Bhand Pather* though is not a monologue but a social drama incorporating mythological legends and contemporary social satire (Website 7).

Balwant Gargi observes that *pather* seems to have come from *patra* meaning a scroll and *bhand* is a local variant of the classical *bhandika* or the clown (186). Whatever might be the etymology of these terms, *bhand pather* is indigenous theatre of Kashmir that includes all the components of folk theatre like dancing, singing, clowning, satire and humour. An important difference between *bhand pather* and other Indian folk forms like *jatra* is that the former is secular and does not have any religious framework primarily because, as Ghulam Bhagat, a *bhand*, explains, “Islam does not associate with
theatre’ (Website 8). Even today a ritual dance called chhok is performed at the temple of Goddess Shiva Bhagvati in Akingham. Traditionally, both Muslims and Hindus performed bhand pather in Kashmir. Till the 1990s, there were Hindu bhand groups in Kashmir before they moved out of the Valley due to the communal violence.

Bhands tour the countryside and perform plays from their repertoire. A bhand pather, like other folk performances, is performed in open air. The performance starts with the sound of swarnai, a wind instrument. The narrative is usually formulaic, consisting of a cruel king who is corrected by the clown or the jester called maskhara. There can be any number of maskharas in a performance. The king usually is an allegory for the outsider or the ‘other’, while the maskhara is the native ‘self’ who wins over the former. In a traditional pather, the ‘otherness’ of the king is established through his speech. He usually speaks in a language not understood by the natives, like Persian, English, Punjabi or gibberish (Website 9). The ‘self’ in the form of maskhara speaks the native dialects. The most famous traditional bhand pathers are Darza pather and Gosain pather. Like other folk forms, bhand pather incorporates music using traditional instruments like swarnai, dhol, nagara or thalej. There are set musical compositions called mukams to which the bhands dance. As Kashmir has a strong tradition of sufi poetry, it is also incorporated into the bhand pather. As far as props are concerned, bhand pather uses very few, the mandatory props being a whip and a short bamboo stick. The whip is not simply a prop but represents authority:

During the performance a character can be whipped a hundred times without being hurt because this property does not have the impact associated with a whip, it just looks deadly. It is used to transform all the elements that represent oppression into strong dramatic images. In sharp contrast the bans [the bamboo stick] are used by the jester or
*maskhara*. These are split bamboo sticks that make a sharp sound. In his pantomime, the *maskhara* uses the *bans* emerges as the total opposite of the oppressor’s whip (Website 7).

*Bhands* are trained by traditional *gurus* known as *maguns* who teach various skills like acting, dancing, music and acrobatics.

Raina held five workshops in Kashmir as part of National School of Drama’s extension programme since 2001 and mounted 14 productions mostly based on the works of Kashmiri writers (Website 10). In 2009, with the help of traditional *ustads* of *bhand*, Raina organised a workshop at Akingham to train the local children and youth in this form. Raina chose Akingham because it is here that the Kashmir Bhagat Theatre, one of the oldest *bhand* companies, is based. Raina explains, “I went to the houses of Bhand performers in three or four villages and told them – look you have to send your kids for this workshop. They sent them gladly. These elders themselves visited the workshop and performed too – we had a week which was like a little folk festival” (Website 9). The workshop culminated in the production of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* adapted as *Badshah Pather*.

Regarding the choice of the play, Raina explains, “The number of plays in *bhand pather*’s repertoire has diminished to just 7 or 8. We wanted to evolve a new play for performance. As *King Lear* is a play about a foolish king, it fits well in the schemata of *bhand pather*. Moreover, I knew that doing Shakespeare would be helpful in getting the marginalised form and performers recognition in urban centers” (‘Personal Correspondence’). Doing a Shakespeare play with the *bhands* in a folk form was a challenging task for Raina, at least initially, due to several reasons. In the first place, a tragedy does not exist as a form in the *bhand pather* repertoire as in other folk and classical forms. The players agreed to enact the tragedy of Lear as it was the story of a
foolish king. The inclusion of a new form like tragedy into bhand pather is significant because it underlines the openness of the performers to innovations which prevents the form from being ‘preserved’ in the sense of being frozen in history like a museum piece. Another challenge for Raina was to work with a set of actors most of whom were illiterate and could not read the script. Lastly, Raina had to rework his formal training in theatre, as he says, “[Y]ou can’t use techniques you have learnt. There are no auditoriums, you have to tell stories in an empty space” (The Hindu, 30 Jan. 2010). Also, performing in open air in the broad daylight meant that Raina could not use any kind of technology – lights, mikes, projectors and so on. In the end, it all came down to acting and Raina believed in his actors, “[P]erformance is in their blood after all” (Website 9).

The first problem was to get a performable translation. Initially Raina had brought with him Harivansh Rai Bachhan’s well-known Hindi translation of King Lear to be translated into Kashmiri. However, the Kashmiri translation could not make an impact on the actors as the language was quite literary. As Ghulam Bhagat, one of the actors said, “[I]n the beginning we followed nothing but didn’t have the courage to challenge our guru. Slowly the story, simple at heart, began to make sense to us” (Website 11). It did not take long for Raina to realize the futility of his efforts. He was trying to give these actors a pre-written text of Shakespeare which is not a convention in pather bhand. A traditional bhand pather does not have a written script but develops the plot through improvisations. Thus Raina adopted the strategy of evolving a performance text of King Lear which would come from the actors themselves, rather than depending upon a ready-made script. The story of Lear was told to the actors and Raina worked in sequences with the actors. This worked very well as Raina observes,
Once the sequence was explained to the actors they came up with their own dialogues in everyday speech. This was important because a folk form needs to have a language of the folk, a language that can be understood by the actor and the audience alike (‘Personal Correspondence’).

It was then through ensemble work that a performance script called Badshah Lear evolved. The scenes were formally ‘blocked’ by Raina which is not done in traditional bhand pather.

The performance text that evolved in the workshop concentrated on the main plot of the original play, that is, the story of an idiosyncratic king planning to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. Badshah Pather follows the main plot of the original play quite closely with slight change. The daughters become sons primarily because women are not allowed to perform. Moreover, in most of the traditional Indian societies a woman is not entitled to a share in her parents’ property. Having declared his intentions to divide his kingdom among his sons, the Badshah asks the sons to express their love for him. The two elder sons, like Goneril and Regan in the original, pass the love-test by replying in the superlatives. The youngest one replies like Cordelia that he loves the Badshah as much as a son should love his father. Hearing this, the Badshah banishes the youngest son and divides his kingdom between the elder sons. However, he soon realizes his mistake when the elder sons throw him out and the youngest one comes for his rescue. All the sons die in the wars being fought. Finally Lear too succumbs after the death of his youngest son.

The play was performed at Akingham village in open air in broad daylight, surrounded by the audience on all sides like the traditional bhand pather. The staging of the performance was not an easy task. The separatists had called for a bandh on the day
of performance and the director was cautioned against staging the play (Website 12). The director however decided to proceed with the show as planned. What was heartening was the large number of spectators who turned up to watch the performance disregarding of the bandh. Raina observes in an interview,

I am certain that this was the first time in 19 years that such a large crowd has gathered together for a cultural event in Kashmir. Some of our friends from Srinagar who had come for the performance could not believe that such a gathering was possible without government support and without any security or police (Website 9).

The play ends with the Kashmiri folk dance where all the actors join in.

Through these productions we see that in post-Independence India Shakespeare has been produced in traditional and folk idioms to express a sense of alterity that makes them different from Shakespeare productions in the rest of the world. The important point to be noted here is the difference between pre-Independence and post-Independence Shakespeare productions which too incorporated folk and traditional elements. For instance, as discussed in Chapter III, when Parsi theatre staged plays in a ‘proscenium’ set-up it still drew upon elements from various traditional and folk performances like bhavai, yakshgan, lavani as well as Urdu, Gujarati or Persian ghazals, and thumris. Hence, an important difference between the the two periods is more about attitude than technique. When Shakespeare productions in pre-Independence India drew upon folk and traditional forms, it was more a matter of reaching out to the masses for these these forms were popular among them. The their choice was governed by the commercial imperatives that demanded Shakespeare plays to be understood by the masses in a familiar idiom. In post-Independence Shakespeare productions incorporate folk and traditional forms of performance are used consciously
with contemporary awareness that expresses the post-colonial sensibility by foregrounding its alterity from other Shakespeares around the world. The difference becomes manifest in Poonam Trivedi’s words, “[I]f earlier the adaptive process was more a matter of a free-wheeling localization to make Shakespeare more accessible to a broad-based audience, the contemporary postcolonial adaptations attempt to reinterpret Shakespeare by submitting the plays to the distinct conventions and performative codes of individual folk forms” (154).

There is always a danger of labelling the use of folk and traditional forms by Indian directors as ‘revivalist’. However, one should not take these productions as authentically ‘folk’ performances. Even folk and traditional performances underwent changes during the colonial period. Given the various social, cultural and economic mediations aspirations about ‘authenticity’ and ‘purity’ of a form become untenable. Neither Tanvir nor Karanth tried to ‘revive’ any folk form even though they incorporated such elements in their productions. Tanvir made judicious use of naach and freely mixed it with other folk traditions like nautanki. Tanvir never had an agenda of reviving a folk form. Similarly, Karanth uses elements from yakshgana but mixes them with other traditions. Interestingly, neither Tanvir nor Karanth project their productions as cast in a particular form. In this regard Tanvir has clearly stated that,

I was not running after folk forms, I was running after the folk actors. There is a class of difference here because when I used the folk actors, they brought the folk forms with them. I did not have to academically impose upon them. And I did not really think a lot about the forms as such. I was freely using my imagination to interpret a play and these actors had the form. … The very fact that there is a restriction of number of actors in the traditional naacha group sets it apart from my
work. The former is usually limited to ten persons, most of whom are musicians, singers and dancers, whose performances fill up the gaps between skits. Only two or three are actors. Most of the drama part is a dialogue (or duologue) between two with an occasional intervention by a third actor. Thus naacha is theatre in its most primitive form. My theatre is obviously different. However, the way my actors move, dance, speak and sing, if that is the form, then my theatre has it (108).

Karanth too in his production of Barnam Van uses elements from yakshgan but does not cast the play as yakshgan. To ensure that his audience does not confuse the theatrical production of Barnam Ban with yakshgana, Karanth mixes yakshgan music with instruments like bells and gongs conventionally not used in the form. Also, the defamiliarization of Barnam Van from yakshgan is achieved through the use of costumes. Yakshgan has typical costumes and characters are identified by their costumes. Karanth used costumes from traditional theatres of Bali, Indonesia, Japan and Cambodia. Karanth observes very aptly that “it is not Macbeth in yakshagan, but yakshgan in Macbeth” (40). M. K. Raina’s aim may have been to ‘preserve’ the Kashmiri folk form of bhand pather through workshops and his production of Badshah Pather (King Lear). But he does not treat the folk form as frozen in time with no scope for change. He works with the folk artists within the contemporary context and makes deliberate changes in the traditional form. His Badshah Pather, for instance, is a tragedy which is not a genre in traditional bhand pather. Also, Raina’s production has well defined entries and exits to the bhand actors who go ‘off-stage’ unlike the traditional bhand pather where the actors are always ‘on-stage’. Similarly, Arambam makes use of myths, rituals and shamanistic traditions of Meitei culture but with a contemporary awareness. The staging of his Macbeth: Stage of Blood in international theatre festivals
may seem to project an ‘exotic Indian’ image in the international market but his weaving of the social and political situation of Manipur into the Shakespeare text makes the production contemporary relevant.
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