Chapter 4
The Aesthetics of Enactment

The chapter explores the various elements that go into the making of an aesthetically satisfying and cost effective theatre idiom, which has the power to appeal to viewers across regional and cultural differences. It attempts a structural and performance analysis of the plays to highlight the significance of the principles of aucitya and dhvani, and how these features contribute to the generation of rasa which transforms the spectator into a sahrdaya. The advantage of employing indigenous performance practices is that they have an emotive significance to the spectator to which s/he responds instinctively. However, India’s regional, linguistic and cultural diversity as well as the strong link that exists between the people and their socio-cultural moorings, make the performance practices that characterize each region equally diverse. Therefore it is important that the performance technique adopted for a play should be accessible, visually effective as well as have the power to highlight the thematic concerns. A feature common to indigenous performance practices is that they originate as sense related experiences, their roots being inextricably intertwined with the ritualistic tradition of the land of their origin, to the belief system and culture-scape of that people. For instance, the origin of Kerala’s pictorial and performance art forms can be traced to ancient folk rituals like Dholi chitram, Kalamezhuthu, Mudiyettu and Theyyam, all of which have their origin in ritualistic enactments. Over a period of time the tenuous link between the performance practice and its religious content slackens and the aesthetic function comes to the fore. Rules evolve at a later stage, but once they are propounded and codified and an art form submits to the rules it becomes refined, classical. The characteristics that define classical and folk approaches reveal that the gain in perfection which hallmarks the classical, is accompanied by an inevitable loss in emotive power and spontaneity. Classical stresses the importance of rigid adherence to prescribed performance norms, and virtuosity is judged accordingly. While the range, variety and complexity of classical art is something that folk art can never achieve, comprehensive appreciation of the former requires prior orientation. It cannot therefore communicate easily across differences.

My interaction with theatre, familiarity with classical art forms like Koodiattam and Kathakali as well as folk forms like Mudiyettu and Theyyam enabled me to recognize the
advantages and disadvantages of codification and rigid structuring. Apart from their obvious visual appeal, the ritualistic aura that characterizes folk performance practices performs the same distancing function that the historical/mythological subjects of the selected plays perform. Another distinctive feature of folk art forms is their minimalistic setting. For instance many folk performances take place in open spaces which ensure the presence and at times, active participation of the spectators. Performance practices like Kalamezhuthu and Mudiyettu illustrate how venue, figure, colour, movement and music coalesce to create a sublime visual and aural experience. Two other defining features of folk art forms are their vitality and the strong ethical base that they reflect; of good and evil, right and wrong. As Alan Read rightly observes: “The only thing that can distinguish theatre now is an ethical stance. An ethics of performance is an essential feature of any philosophy and practice of theatre” (6). The underlying ritualistic strain of folk performance practices have the power to exude a strong ethical sense, which is a central concern of the kind of theatre envisaged in the study.

A text once written acquires a signification of its own, independent of authorial intent. The range and depth of signification varies from reader to reader, depending on the degree of engagement on her/his part. In the case of a play text, the inputs of the director, the performer/s, the enactment, the manifold perspectives that it generates among the viewers, all combine to create a unified experience. The theatre idiom conceptualized in the study does not restrict itself to the performance techniques of any one art form. This facilitates the director and actor/s to choose those techniques that are most appropriate to the play text. However, aucitya is intrinsic to the selection and adaptation of performance devices, as well as every other aspect of enactment. The performance technique discussed in the study is one that combines a minimalistic setting with realistic depiction of emotion, appropriate use of stylization, colour and music, to create visually powerful theatre. The dominant visual features of performance art are colour, form and light. Indigenous pictorial and performance art forms reveal the tremendous significance of colour. Colour symbolism is to some extent region and culture specific. For instance pictorial depiction in ancient Kerala confined itself to the use of five colors- yellow, red, green, black and white. This predilection is not based on random choice; rather it is strongly rooted in material reality. Though the psychology of viewing involves certain features that are common to all people, the dynamics of form and colour manifests itself in a manner that is rooted in regional and cultural specificity. A fundamental feature that
informs everyday life is the temporal reality of the twenty-four hour day, made up of
darkness and light. In the language of visual representation, it can be interpreted as black
and white. The transitional process from night to day is marked by the appearance of
tones of red and yellow. When day gradually moves towards night, tones of red, black
and yellow suffuse the sky in the twilight hour. To use the language of colour, when
black, white, red and yellow come together a day happens. Region-based variations
influence colour sensibility and certain colours dominate in certain regions. Visual
dynamics performs a major role in generating aesthetic appreciation in the spectator. For
instance, black/night negates the power of sight, and is therefore most suitable for the
imagination to assume control of the senses. The use of black also helps create an
atmosphere of mystery. While black renders everything invisible, white makes them
visible. The dualities of the imaginary and the real, the visible and the non-visible, can
thus be colour-coded as black and white. Black may also be used to depict various moods
—feelings of anxiety, despair, pity and grief. According to the psychology of visual
representation red and yellow are warm colors. The same yardstick demands that these
should be balanced by a cool colour, for example, green. In the Indian context red (the
colour of blood), is also the colour of creation and destruction. Birth which is nature in its
essence and death/destruction with the additional connotations of valour and anger, can
be codified through red. Lighting too has tremendous psychological significance. An
emotively suggestive and visually effective atmosphere can be produced in theatre
through the creative use of traditional torches and floor lamps during performance.
Traditional torches and lamps do not produce white light. The flame is a combination of
yellow and red tones. Again, the flickering flame does not exude a uniform, steady light.
Its undulating motion renders spaces/performers visible or invisible, thereby creating an
intensely evocative visual experience which makes the spectator feel as though he has
been transported to a different world. A colour-scripted theatre
idiom can thus be evolved through the use of black, red, yellow and green, with
restrained use of white, copper and gold. Such a theatre is intensely sensual. Since
performances take place at night, the impact on the audience is that of witnessing a
collective communal experience.

Aucitya implies sensitivity and restraint, which are intrinsic to effective visual and
aural representation in theatre. For instance the recurring motif that connects the selected
plays is the destructive nature of hegemonic structures of power, manipulation of
religion and caste identities, and gender discrimination, all of which are issues that are central to the contemporary socio-political scene, where identity politics based on religion, region language, caste and gender assumes aggressive stances. A realistic depiction of these issues could prove highly volatile. The distancing narratives based on history, myth and folklore, enable the plays to address these issues obliquely. The parallel narratives and framing structures perform a similar function, simultaneously alerting the spectator to the reflexive nature of what is being performed. Therefore, the performance technique adopted should perform a similar function of reflecting contemporary issues in a non-contentious manner. Since such an enactment enables the spectator to view the performance without experiencing the pressure to adopt a specific ideological stance, it does not provoke negative responses. The use of restraint is not a choice based on expediency. Rather it is an instance of aucitya, a deliberate strategy to lower the spectator’s defenses and persuade her/him to view the performance without bias. Interestingly, the subversive potential of such a structural approach is much more powerful than a realistic depiction of contemporary reality. The absence of a one to one correspondence with contemporary reality, enables the oblique reflection of problematic issues to acquire tremendous suggestive potential, without any overt challenge to the status-quo. Theatre’s greatest strength is its power to present events and issues from multiple perspectives in a manner that does not privilege any particular viewpoint. This, when combined with non-realistic structuring, enhances the suggestive richness—dhvani—of the play, which in its turn facilitates the spectator to make connections and draw inferences instinctively.

The fact that an appropriate performance technique is as important for a play’s success as its thematic content, is borne out by Karnad’s first play, *Yayati*. In spite of its mythic structure, the play is rarely performed. Two possible reasons might be the dialogue-centric nature of the play and the absence of dramatic action. The lengthy dialogues when combined with realistic enactment, not only limit performance choices, but render the critique of caste-based discrimination and oppression, too strident for comfort. Since a play truly comes alive only when it is performed, it is imperative that it should be carefully conceived and enacted. The chapter therefore examines various performance practices and their power to reflect the thematic concerns of the selected plays. In the process, it refers to specific performances by way of illustration. *Tughlaq* for instance has seen several productions. Two productions that have won critical acclaim are B.V.
Karanth's Kannada production and Ebrahim Alkazi's Hindi production. The setting of Alkazi's Tughlaq (1974) was the Purana Quila, the Old Fort in Delhi. Referring to the production, Dharwadker observes that it “...combined quality, accessibility and historical importance in a way that became a turning point in the experience of spectatorship in Delhi” (98). The ruined fort was the most appropriate setting for the play. The almost intact domed main structure of the fort, with steps leading down to the performance space, and the ruined ramparts that extend from it conferred an extraordinary ambience to the play. The grandeur of the setting made the audience feel as though it had been transported to a different age.

A torch-lit stage with a backdrop that has a game of chess embossed on it can create an equally powerful, symbolically charged setting for the play. The game of chess is after all a visual metaphor for the play itself, as it underscores the manipulative game of religious and political ‘power politics’ that Tughlaq plays. References to chess come up several times in the play. In scene 2 Tughlaq dramatically exclaims: “History is ours to play with...” (10). His description of Barani and Najeeb are equally significant: “Barani is a historian- he’s only interested in playing chess with the shadows of the dead...Najib’s a politician- he wants pawns of flesh and blood” (12). The game of chess is also a visual symbol of the contingent nature of Tughlaq's actions, which are totally at variance with his idealistic claims. He kills his father and brother in an ‘accident’ to get the throne, then exclaims with horror about patricide and fratricide: “Do you really think patricide is a little thing? And fratricide? . . . It’s not what people say, Barani, it’s their crooked minds that horrify me” (13). The audacity of such an exclamation is baffling. Again, after the treacherous killing of Sheik Imam-ud-din he exclaims: “When men like him die, it’s a sin to be alive” (28). After butchering Shihab-ud-din he declares: “Make a public announcement that there was a rebellion in the palace and that the nobles of the court 'tried to assassinate the Sultan during prayer. Say that the Sultan was saved by Shihab-ud-din who died a martyr’s death defending him. The funeral will be held in Delhi and will be a grand affair. Invite his father to it and see that he is treated with the respect due to the father of a loyal nobleman” (43-44). Each decision that Tughlaq makes is an unscrupulous, and brilliantly conceived strategic move that annihilates his opponent/s; but the inherent tragedy is that they destroy the victor as well. A backdrop depicting the game of chess, along with medium and low-pitched renderings of the muezzin’s call for prayer,
soft notes played on the flute or the santoor, and imaginative use of darkness and light can create a highly dramatic setting for the play.

While economics is a key factor for the kind of theatre proposed in the study, a minimalistic setting has certain definite advantages. A stage with minimal props offers greater space for the action to take place. Another advantage is that the spectator’s attention is not distracted by extraneous elements and is concentrated on the enactment. For instance, the rose garden which becomes the dumping ground for the counterfeit copper currency is a powerful visual symbol that projects the disparity between Tughlaq’s idealistic reforms and their implementation. This is a scene where sensitive enactment and imaginative use of gestures as in Kathakali would be more effective than a grand and expensive setting. The advantage of such a depiction is that it draws upon the spectator’s imagination and aesthetic sensibility, thereby making her/him a part of the signification process. The spectator’s imaginative input heightens her/his sensitivity. According to U.R. Ananthamurthy the single most powerful symbol that connects the various scenes in the play is that of prayer, which he calls the ‘the leitmotiv of the play’ (Introduction, N. pag.). Tughlaq is a devout Muslim who makes it obligatory for the Muslim citizen to pray five times a day. He wants his reign to be like a prayer; yet he violates its sanctity by killing his father and brother during prayer time; and after the assassination attempt made on him, he bans it. Prayer thus becomes an ironic symbol of the manipulation of religion and religious rituals. Sheik Shams-ud-din’s horrified response to Ratan Singh’s suggestion that they assassinate Tughlaq during prayer and the response it elicits are significant in this context:

Sheikh: You can’t pollute the time of prayer. It’s a sacred time. We can’t stain it with the blood of a Mussulman.

Amir II: Of (sic) come, we can always make up later. Do penance for it.

Sheikh: But prayer isn’t penance. Remember we are here to save Islam, not to insult it . . .

Shihab-Ud-Din: …I’m sure the Lord will not mind an interrupted prayer (36).
The exchange makes the spectator intensely conscious of contemporary instances of religion and religious practices being manipulated for selfish hegemonic purposes. The horrible farce at the end of the play where Tughlaq is forced to accept Aziz as Ghiyas-uddin, the descendent of Khalif Abbasid, to reinstate prayer in the kingdom, underscores the irony of the manipulation. The final scene—where Tughlaq, unaware of the muezzin’s call for prayer, succumbs to a death-like sleep, and the servant who seeing him asleep, goes out to re-enter and wrap a shawl over the sleeping Sultan—is a poignant visual symbol of a broken and lonely man. The scene has a depth and intensity that makes the spectator intensely conscious of the tragedy. It is the sense of futility, the aching sense of loss that the spectator experiences that evokes santa rasa, the peace that comes from insightful understanding.

The destructive nature of hegemonic structures of power and the manipulation of religion and caste based difference form the core of the two history plays, Tughlaq and Talé-Danda. The opening street scene in Tughlaq is of special significance for two reasons; firstly it focuses attention on the ordinary citizen and his response to Tughlaq’s progressive reforms. The scene is also important as it directs the spectator’s attention to the interaction between the two major communities, Hindus and Muslims. Unlike the idealistic young man, the rest of the crowd—Hindus as well as Muslims—view Tughlaq’s abolition of jiziya, the compulsory tax that Hindus have to pay, with suspicion and resentment. The exchange between citizens belonging to the two communities is significant:

Hindu: …We didn’t want an exemption! Look, when a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, ‘Pay up, you Hindu dog’, I’m happy. I know I’m safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, ‘I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being’—well, that makes me nervous.

Young Man: Ungrateful wretch!

Old Man: But this wretch is our best friend, Jamal. Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he’ll turn Islam into another caste and call the Prophet an incarnation of his god . . . (2).
The exchange that follows is significant because it simultaneously provides multiple perspectives—the protean nature of the Hindu faith, the perceived difference between the two communities; more importantly, the fact that the perceived difference is not a hindrance to everyday living and societal interaction. The same scene refers to Sheik Imam-ud-din’s speech in Kanpur, where he criticized the Sultan: “What a man! What a voice! The audience was spell-bound. And he said the Sultan’s guilty of killing his father and brother... He said so many other things too—about Islam and what’s happening to it. It was the most inspiring speech I’ve heard. The audience went wild and burnt down half of Kanpur” (5). The ironic juxtaposition of ‘inspiring’ with violence highlights the repercussions of inflammatory rhetoric and its contemporary resonances, in a manner the spectator cannot miss. The riot that breaks out at the end of scene eleven depicts how despair born of hunger gradually changes to irritability, then anger as the confused crowd reacts to the Hindu woman’s cry of recognition as she sees Aziz. The cry is like a spark that ignites their pent-up frustration; a sudden flaring up of despair into violence, and thus different from the deliberately instigated state-sponsored riot at the end of Talé-Danda. Together the outbreaks of violence in the two plays provide the anatomy of a riot.

Tughlaq the character, emerges as a complex and enigmatic figure in performance—intelligent, sensitive, idealistic, a scholar and a believer. But none of these qualities can act as a buffer against the all-encompassing egotism which prevents him from making informed decisions, which prompts him to obsessively pursue his goals, unmindful of the means he employs to achieve them, which in turn makes each decision a reactive response to an immediate reality. The actor who plays Tughlaq has to bring out these aspects of Tughlaq’s personality. One of the most visually dramatic scenes in the play is where one moment he goes down on his knees before the Amirs, and minutes later, stabs Shihab-ud-din, and continues to stab in a mad frenzy, then turning towards Barani cries out in anguish, “Tell me, Barani, will my reign be nothing more than a tortured scream which will stab the night and melt away in the silence?” (43). Depicting Tughlaq is a formidable test of the actor’s caliber because of the swift changes of mood that need to be depicted—the histrionics of the idealistic declamations, the affection and understanding that comes through in the responses to Barani’s idealism and Najib’s caution, the brutality of his vindictive anger, the kindness towards the young soldier in Daulatabad fort—Dharwadker’s comment, that in Tughlaq, Kamad makes a complex ideological and intertextual connection between “… history, historiography and his own fiction” (250), is apt.
U.R. Ananthamurthy’s comparison of Aziz and Aazam to Akara and Makara, the comic pair in the conventional Natak tradition (Introduction, N. pag.) is too limiting an analogy. To present Aziz as a source of comic relief is a disastrous depiction of a highly significant character. Aazam, Ratan Singh and Aziz illustrate the various degrees of the rank growth of corruption, deceit and cynical indifference. Aazam is the simplest and most human of the three, a thief who steals for a living and who pays with his life for not being ruthless like Aziz. Though Ratan Singh plots Shihab-ud-din’s downfall, the treacherous act could be interpreted as revenge. But Aziz who successfully sabotages each one of Tughlaq’s schemes, is Tughlaq’s alter-ego and his nemesis. He is Tughlaq, sans the idealism. Tughlaq’s moves are directed by egotism but he is capable of regret and affection, whereas Aziz foregrounds emotionless cynicism. Dharwadker shrewdly observes: “In the character of Aziz the will to power is unhampered by any moral or psychological complexity, and the play’s absolutist discourse of power comes appropriately from him, not from Tughlaq. Power for Aziz is a kind of licensed evil that need not be naturalized through discourse” (254). Aziz’s comments –that to rape a woman, “…one must have power –the authority to rape!” (57), and to be a king is to “…rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed” (58), are chilling in their cynicism. Dharwadker comments: “Tughlaq’s self-reflexivity never produced this ironic clarity . . . while Tughlaq is lost in epoch-making gestures, Aziz conducts his own micropolitics with singular success” (254). Tughlaq recognizes the twisted, grotesque reflection of himself in Aziz, and that is partly the reason he lets him go, though there is also the fact that his egotism cannot allow him to expose Aziz. He cannot expose Aziz without exposing himself. “…I will have to admit I’ve been wrong all these years” (56).

The creation of Aziz is truly inspired and gains multiple nuances in contemporary performance. To the contemporary spectator Aziz epitomizes the average modern day politician – sharp, manipulative, cynical and totally ruthless. Tughlaq’s crimes – his grand stances, cunning, even his vicious anger –appear almost juvenile beside Aziz’ ruthless opportunism. The latter’s chameleon-like shift from one role to another, and his amoral assessment of each transition, becomes the grotesque background that underscores the tragedy of Tughlaq. The play’s deft structuring where each act of Tughlaq’s is underscored by an even more subversive act by Aziz, makes enactment a magnificent visual experience. Effective play of light and shadow, and inspired acting can leave an indelible mark on the spectator’s consciousness.
The minimum setting that *Talé-Danda* requires is a semi-circular platform with a pillar or an arch towards the back centre of the stage, which could serve alternatively as the Queen’s chamber or the veranda of Basavanna’s house. Music, interspersed with rhythmic beats of the mridangam or tabla, and muted chanting of the vacanas, offsets the minimalistic setting. *Talé-Danda* is thematically similar to *Tughlaq* and requires realistic acting. Lighting is an important element that can make or mar the visual effectiveness of the play. Bijjala’s character calls for forceful, energetic and passionate acting. The play depicts him as a shrewd administrator and an enlightened king who recognizes the contribution of the sharanas to Kalyan’s economic prosperity. Manchanna Kramita represents a diametrically opposite stance. His inflexible determination to maintain the status-quo, which results in the destruction of Kalyan, emblematizes religious and caste-based orthodoxy. It is significant that Kramita’s presence is inconspicuous throughout the play; after a brief appearance in the third scene of the first act, he reappears in scene eleven of the final act to tie up the loose ends of the successful palace coup that he has brought about. While both Kramita and Damodara Bhatta represent upper caste hegemony, the two characters are distinctly etched to reflect different levels of politicking. Kramita is the perfect manipulator—cynical, coldly-calculating and totally ruthless. While the weaker Damodara Bhatta is content to complain, “The wedding is over. And not a dog has barked” (57), Kramita has no doubts about the course of action to be adopted to eliminate the sharanas: “...King Mihirakula of Kashmir took care of the Buddhist menace by decimating sixteen hundred viharas. Our Pandya neighbor impaled eight thousand Jain scoundrels...So why are we being so circumspect?” (79). Bijjala’s dramatic stances and loud threats are reduced to pathetic blustering beside Kramita’s quiet inflexibility.

The plot is tightly wrought, so that no dialogue or exchange is superfluous. A major structural distinction between the history plays and the social plays is the Shakespearean quality that characterizes the opening scenes of the former. The opening scene in *Talé-Danda*, like the one in *Tughlaq*, projects the effect of the sharana movement on the lives of ordinary people, and their response to it. Afraid of death, Samba Shiva Shastri keeps calling for his son; finally he becomes delusional, imagines himself as a corpse, and tells his son Jagadeva (whom he does not recognize), to tell his son that his father is dead and that the corpse is beginning to stink. The scene powerfully highlights the personal and inter-personal dimensions and repercussions of Basavanna’s revolutionary movement.
The scenes that follow deftly link the high and the low. Powerful dialogic exchanges add to the communicative effectiveness of the play. For instance, the exchange between Bijjala and Basavanna which includes hard hitting phrases, does not undermine the significance of Basavanna’s advice to Bijjala: “I know why Prince Sovideva tried to set a trap for me. Because he hungers for your attention...Seat him next to you, talk to him...” (21) Unfortunately, Bijjala dismisses the advice as irrelevant, and thereby paves the way for his own tragedy. The spectator who sees Bijjala exult in his physical prowess, and initiate the kicking game which ends in Sovideva being kicked by the attendant, who hears the frustrated outburst, “... see how I am treated in my own home-like a toothless hound?” (10), as well as Queen Rambhavati’s plea, “...I beg of you. He’s a grown-up man. Don’t humiliate him like this” (11), realizes that it is inevitable that Sovideva should become a willing tool for Manchanna Kramita to employ against the king. The scene where Bijjala bears Mariappa on his shoulder to look out of the window, as well as the scene where he desperately clings to the linga in the queen’s chamber are powerful visual symbols that underscore not just his helplessness, but also the ease with which his control over the political system is sabotaged and he himself rendered helpless.

Basavanna is best depicted as calm, dignified, clear-sighted and practical. The two occasions in which Basavanna shows emotion are when he hears the rumour of the miracle, and when he reacts instinctively to the news of the inter-caste marriage. The rumoured miracle bewilders and shocks him. More importantly, it forces him to recognize the flimsy base of the revolution he has brought about. The vacana that follows, “Showing off my eighty-eight miracles/ my bhakti has become /a carnival wardrobe”/ (25), reflects disillusionment and bitterness. The intrinsic democracy of performance gives each character her/his space to evolve and become memorable for the spectator. Act 2, Scene 5 simultaneously reveals mob psychology as well as Basavanna’s ephemeral hold over his followers—the underlying caste-based mistrust among the sharanas that has not been erased, and which does not spare even Basavanna. The short scene 15, which begins with what is presumably the conclusion of a narration of the riot in Kalyan, and Bijjala’s death, and ends with Basavanna submitting his self to the Lord of the Meeting Rivers, problematizes Basavanna’s act of creating a metaphysical distance between reality and his quest of the divine. This is followed by the scene where two messengers inform Sovideva about the riot, which is chilling in its contemporaneity. Equally frightening is the regressive declaration that follows Sovideva’s coronation. A dark and
bare stage can make the depiction memorable. The ensuing silence, followed by a
rendering of the following vacana proves to be a powerful visual experience.

I call out to you, Father

I cry out to you, Father.

Will you not reply?

Yet I keep on calling to you.

Lord of the meeting rivers,

Why this silence? (69).

Significantly all the vacanas employed in the play are Ramanujan’s translations of the
original. The vacana chanted at the end of the play encapsulates the visual and verbal
dynamics of viewing by becoming a metaphor for the tragedy. Though the spectator
keenly experiences a sense of loss, the feeling is cathartic in the sense that it evokes an
affirmation of belief in the spiritual and the ethical, and leads to enhanced understanding,
the generation of rasa, and the transformation of the spectator into a sahrdaya.

*Hayavadana* makes creative use of several features of the Yakshagana style of
performance. Non-realistic devices like masks, the horse-head, the sleepy Goddess and
talking dolls, combine with the use of curtain, mime and dance to create a vibrant theatre
experience. The Ganapati idol that is placed at the back centre or side of the performance
space performs multiple functions. Apart from performing the traditional ritualistic
function of seeking the god’s blessing, the invocation visually and aurally states the
theme of the play. ‘Vakratunda Mahakaya’- the incongruous combination of elephant
head with broken tusk, human body and cracked belly, is a tacit acknowledgement of
imperfection as the quintessential reality, as far as human perception is concerned.
Significantly, even as the play presents the irony that marks futile human efforts to
overcome that reality, it subtly incorporates the issue of patriarchal denial of female
sexuality. The mythical narrative and abundant use of spectacle enables the provocative
issue to remain at the sub-textual level, gradually filtering into the spectator’s
consciousness.
Another device from traditional theatre that Hayavadana employs is the Bhagavata, whose presence acknowledges the fictionality of the performance. The Bhagavata performs several functions – addresses the audience, introduces characters, comments on their actions, interacts with them, mediating, advising, consoling or chiding, according to the demands of the situation. The main narrative of Hayavadana is based on a story that appears in Katha Sarita Sagara and Thomas Mann’s reworking of it in The Transposed Heads. The original story occurs as a problem posed by the vetal to King Vikramaditya where the King categorically establishes the supremacy of the head over the rest of the body. This is in synchrony with the Sastras that categorically state the supremacy of the head, and the brahminical claim of being born from the head of God Brahma. Mann’s novel challenges the claim. Karnad’s play echoes Mann by underscoring the complex link between mind and body, and how one influences and is influenced by the other. But the play takes the narrative a step further by linking the human quest for perfection with patriarchal denial of female sexuality. While the mind stands for intellect, learning, refinement and culture, the body is earthy, natural, unrestrained, and physical. Devadatta realizes Padmini’s attraction towards Kapila’s manliness, and despair drives him to commit suicide. Therefore the accidental transposition of heads is welcome to both Devadatta and Padmini as the ‘Devadatta’ head acquires the ‘Kapila’ body, that Padmini covets. Padmini on her part, exults in getting the perfect mate. Only Kapila, burdened with the worthless effeminate body of Devadatta- significantly a body that feels the loss of Padmini- is the loser. Interestingly, while both heads gain mastery over their new bodies, they cannot control the cravings of the body even when they despise those cravings. The non-realistic setting – rendered mysterious through the use of traditional torches and the predominance of red and ochre – along with masks, mimed actions, stylized movements, talking dolls and songs, creates a striking spectacle. Even as the spectator succumbs to the visual spell, the message at the sub-textual level filters into her/his subconscious mind.

The dual plot structure of the earlier plays undergoes a divergence in Hayavadana, to include two framing narratives that situate the central mythical narrative. Commenting on the structural deviance Dharwadker observes that both “...belonging to the historical present...intersect unpredictably with each other and with the action of the inner play.” (336). The first frame consists of Bhagavata who personifies theatre’s self-reflexivity. The second frame is the story of Hayavadana. The presence of the second frame
facilitates the play to simultaneously challenge and submit, albeit in an ironic and highly insidious manner, to patriarchal norms. The subversion lies in the manner of submission, even as the overtly non-realistic presentational techniques deflect attention from the challenge posed to patriarchal suppression of female sexuality. The two songs sung by the female chorus form the leitmotif of the play which surfaces in both the sub plot and the main plot. Together they challenge patriarchy’s silencing of female sexuality.

Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower? . . . A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame (11).

As discussed in the earlier chapter, patriarchy confines women to certain predetermined positions- mother, sister, wife, daughter- each of these roles defines her duties clearly. Her needs and desires are subordinated to those of the male and her position in the marital relationship is that of the acquiescing partner who passively submits to male dictates. A woman’s duty as wife is to satisfy the husband’s sexual desires, suppressing her own. The double standards that underlie these norms which are legitimized and upheld with the support of religious, social and cultural codes, ensure that the subject of female sexual autonomy never comes up for discussion. The nonrealistic mythic setting helps the play to challenge the negation of female sexuality through the choral song. Hayavadana’s mother flouts the norm when she declares her preference for the Arab stallion and not the prince. Significantly the stallion represents vigour and male sexuality. The horse turning out to be a celestial being, a gandharva, is a familiar twist that occurs in non-realistic narratives, but the ‘they lived happily ever after’ ending is subverted when the Princess continues to prefer the equine form and impervious to the curse, gallops off into the forest, leaving the son born of the union to bear the burden of the curse. His human body and horse’s head make Hayavadana a misfit everywhere.

Like the sub-plot in Tughlaq and Talé-Danda, the second framing structure underscores the significance of the action that take place in the main narrative. The nonrealistic narrative enables Padmini to be depicted as the dominant partner in the Devadatta-Padmini relationship. However unlike the Princess, she cannot opt for an either-or solution. She stifles the attraction she feels for Kapila, and submits to societal and patriarchal dictates by marrying the upper-caste, intellectual, Devadatta. The
depiction of Goddess Kali in the play, performs an important structural and thematic function. As stated earlier, the transposing of heads could be construed as accidental, but for the Goddess’ ironic comment. The decision to commit sati, which follows the failure of the attempt to have both men, is in itself a highly insidious act. Padmini’s sati subverts all ideals of virtue, devotion, and loyalty that patriarchy confers on the act. For her it is an act of expediency, shorn of the aura of lofty ideals; a subversive submission to the norms of patriarchy. Her attempt to ensure a perfect upbringing for her son—life among the forest people to gain a powerful physique, and then return to Devadatta’s home to claim the upper caste heritage—highlights the dual strains of craving for perfection, and deeply ingrained patriarchal conditioning. Unlike Tughlaq and Tale-Danda where the subplot runs parallel to the main plot, in Hayavadana the two strains intersect at the end of the play when the sight of the talking horse causes Padmini’s son—who neither speaks nor smiles—to laugh. The child’s empathy evokes a positive response in the horse. As Hayavadana prances around with the child on its back, both laughing merrily, the horse’s laugh turns into a neigh. It is significant that it is the child’s acceptance of Hayavadana, and the latter’s acceptance of its own oddity that brings liberation. It is equally significant that Bhagavata’s admission of his inability to unravel the mystery, underscores the non-realism that makes subversion possible: “Unfathomable indeed is the mercy of the Elephant-headed Ganesa. He fulfils the desires of all—a grandson to a grandfather, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse. How indeed can one describe his glory in our poor, disabled words?” (71).

*Hayavadana* is a highly cerebral play that reflects several perspectives that have immense socio-psychological relevance—the complex link between mind and body, the human obsession with perfection, patriarchy’s suppression of female sexuality, even the philosophical question as to what constitutes happiness. The play therefore demands insightful and nuanced presentation. Though there have been several memorable productions of the play, B.V. Karanth’s Kannada production is often viewed as “...easily the best: simple, heartfelt and poignant” (Tanvir, 134). Referring to the catchy and infectious music that marked Karanth’s production Chandrashekar observes that the song ‘Bandano Banda Savvara’ “…captured Padmini’s yearning better than any piece of dialogue could ever hope to do”(121). Stylization is intrinsic to the play. The conventions and props of folk theatre enable the play to be performed in a highly condensed and stylized manner that is visually effective and economically viable. The play makes
effective use of curtains—first to hide the Idol of Ganesh and present the image of the Goddess, and later to depict Padmini’s sati. A half curtain unfurled from the floor upward, with a burning pyre embossed on it, is visually effective and underscores the stylization. Various shades of humour—comic, ironic, intellectual, as well as physical clowning and farce can be successfully employed to address the intricately structured concerns that surface in the play.

_Naga-Mandala_ is perhaps the most visually evocative of Kamad’s plays. It is also the play which has been most subjected to directorial voyeurism, which is unfortunate since insightful production can easily make the play an instance of visual poetry. A platform with one or two pillars, can represent the ruined temple. A bare stage and a dark backdrop with a tree of life painted in the madhubani style can be equally effective, as one production proved. However the fact that the play can be performed with nothing more than a couple of lighted torches, reveals its intrinsic visual and evocative power. _Naga-Mandala_ like _Hayavadana_, includes multiple narratives, which fit into one another like a set of Chinese boxes. The first framing narrative is that of the man, a writer who has been cursed to stay awake a whole night. The second frame—a piquantly attractive one—is of flames that gather in a ruined temple every night. The third frame is that of the Story, personified as a woman. The Story’s need to be narrated and transmitted, and the writer’s need to stay awake, become the causal factors for narrating Rani’s story. The Story performs a role similar to that of a Sutradhar or Bhagavata, as she narrates, comments, and interacts with the writer, the flames and even with the heroine Rani. When the play begins, the stage is dark. The man is seated, talking to himself. One by one, the flames appear, as they are blown out in the village homes. Girls dressed in black and flaming orange to represent flames, their hair adorned with orange and white flowers, in the manner of an odissi danseuse, is powerful visual theatre. The fact that the gorgeously dressed Story, the writer and the flames remain on stage throughout the play, reacting to the enactment through facial and hand gestures and body movement, not only underscores the non-realistic setting, but enhances the poetic quality of the play. The real, fictional and supernatural worlds coalesce with music, dance and stylized movements to create a powerful viewing experience.

The tale narrated by the story contains a main plot and a sub plot, that run parallel to one another, intersecting at times, to carry the narrative further. If Nagas love for Rani
brings the human and non-human worlds together, Kappanna’s love for the supernatural being brings the human and supernatural worlds together. The coming together of the human, non-human and supernatural worlds is deftly juxtaposed with the realistic socio-cultural setting and lifestyle of a typical village. Kurudavva, the typical village crone, blind yet full of zest for life, is the structural link that connects the three worlds. Here it should be mentioned that to dismiss her as a “comic muff” (Crow, 157), is to diminish her functional and social relevance. She performs the functional role of giving Rani the magical root to win Appanna’s love. Again, Kurudavva’s words about her missing son and the unknown being whose presence she sensed, enables Rani to intuitively, if uncomprehendingly, take the oath of virtue, holding the cobra: “Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two...My husband and...And this Cobra” (39). Socially Kurudavva represents the actively interacting rural community. The scene that ends in the deification of Rani is one that has tremendous visual potential. Here again, mime as used in Kathakali can be evocatively employed to depict Rani taking the cobra out of the anthill, while one of the flames assumes the stance- mudra- of a hooded cobra, as Rani takes the oath. Such a depiction has more than one advantage. Props inhibit the spectator’s imagination and even distract her/his attention from the action. Mime on the other hand provides scope for the spectator to imaginatively conceive the action. It ensures that the spectator’s attention is fully focused on the actor. It also makes cost-effective theatre.

In most productions the same actor plays the role of Appanna and Naga, using a mask when enacting Appanna. The difference is further enhanced through enactment. Appanna is cold and indifferent. Rani is just a commodity that he owns, uses and guards, first by keeping a dog and later a mongoose. Naga on the other hand is tender, loving, sensitive, everything that the human Appanna is not. The play provides ample scope for music and dance, and these can be skillfully employed to depict the stark contrast between the blissful nights with Naga and the loveless loneliness of the day. Rani’s character- her loneliness and despair, which prompt her to stifle her vague doubts about Naga’s identity for a few hours of love and companionship has great potential for memorable enactment. While taut, crisp, powerful dialogue is a trait common to Karnad’s plays, some of the most memorable and evocative lines appear in Naga-Mandala:
All these days I was never sure I didn't just dream up these nightly visits of yours. You don't know how I have suffered. When I saw your scowling face in the mornings, I would be certain everything was a fantasy and almost want to cry. But my real anxiety began as the evening approached. I would merely lie here, my eyes shut tight. What is there to see after all? The same walls. The same roof. As the afternoon passed my whole being got focused in my ears. The bells of cattle returning home—that means it is late afternoon. The cacophony of birds in a far away tree—it is sunset. The chorus of crickets spreading from one grove to another—it is night. Now he will come. Suppose he doesn't tonight? Suppose the nightqueen bush does not blossom? Suppose it is all a dream? Every night the same anxiety. The same old feeling deep within me!" (30-31).

Anguished by Naga's reaction to the news of her pregnancy, Rani cries out:

"Just feel! Feel! Our baby is crouching in there, in the darkness, listening to the sounds from the world outside—as I do all day long. . . You don't want the child, do you? If I had remained barren, I could have spent my whole life happily trying to work out whether all this was real or a dream. But this is no dream. . . Dreams remain in heads. This one has sent roots deep down into my womb" (31-32).

The final scene of Rani, her eyes brimming with unshed tears, miming the act of pressing the dead Naga to her cheek is extremely poignant. The emotion that is evoked in the spectator is one of tenderness and poignancy. The ensuing sense of contentment comes from the sensitization to the human need for love and companionship.

*The Fire and the Rain* is a play where light and colour can be used not only to enhance visual effectiveness but also to reinforce the thematic concerns. Yagna, or ritual sacrifice and its interface with dogma and goodness form the core concerns of the play. Accordingly the characters are dramatically counterpointed—Raibhya, Yavakri and Paravasu represent the hegemony of orthodoxy, projected through rigorous penance and the performance of rituals, while Vishakha, Nittilai and Arvasu represent love, sensitivity and generosity. The play addresses the issues of religion and caste based differences, and the manner in which they impinge upon an individual's autonomy. The fire sacrifice is the single most powerful symbol employed in the play. It projects the irony of the manner in which the fire sacrifice—intended to please the gods and bring rain to the draught
stricken land, and should therefore evoke feelings of piety and selflessness—becomes a symbol of power and unleashes negative emotions of anger, bitterness, jealousy, and revenge. Raibhya bitterly resents the fact that his son and not himself, has been chosen as the chief priest to conduct the fire sacrifice. He vents his anger on the sole available scapegoat—his daughter-in-law, Vishakha. His lewd, vituperative, and dismissive remarks to Vishakha reflect not just anger but the emptiness of his claims to spirituality. Except for the first and last scene which present the venue of the fire sacrifice, the rest of the play can be enacted on a bare stage, the bareness suggesting the terrible drought that has turned the land into a wasteland, as well as the spiritual barrenness of Raibhya, Paravasu and Yavakri. As for the first and last scenes, one production employed brightly coloured tent material, flower garlands, torches and burning camphor to create a cost effective setting for the sacrificial space.

Interestingly the sub-plot of the play which is Karnad’s fictional intervention, provides the not often depicted reality of tribal life and customs. While the tribals who live in the hills do not form part of the caste hierarchy, they are viewed as uncivilized. The tribals on their part, view the upper castes with suspicion as evidenced in the hasty manner in which Nittilai’s marriage is fixed. Through the characters of Vishakha and Nittilai the play highlights the denial of voice and autonomy to women. Nittilai seems to enjoy greater autonomy than Vishakha but the flimsiness of the same is revealed the moment she defies the norms of the community. Their experiences vary, but patriarchal perception of female sexuality is the common denominator that they both confront. If Vishakha is exploited by Paravasu, Raibhya and Yavakri, Nittilai is hunted down and killed like an animal, for transgressing the tribe’s norms. The play does not challenge societal norms, rather it highlights their insensitive and mindless implementation. Fire and water are two immensely powerful symbols employed in the play. Fire represents purification through annihilation of the self. Water is used in its literal sense (water/rain) and the symbolic sense as a life sustaining force. Water is precious in the drought stricken land and Vishakha miming the act of scooping up water, the anxious darting glances towards the pot, even when she meets Yavakri are visual affirmations of it. The manner in which the play ends is vital to the signification process and therefore calls for restraint in depiction and avoidance of all elements that could distract attention from the enactment. Only then will the spectator grasp the suggestive and symbolic richness of the scene. Sensitive and cautious depiction is important for two reasons. Firstly, the scene demands that several
people should be present in the performance space. The second reason is the quick succession of various actions: as he hears Paravasu’s voice, which is followed by the anguished cry of the actor playing Vishwanupa, the mask of Vritra takes over Arvasu, and he rushes screaming towards the sacrificial enclosure, followed by the guards. In the ensuing confusion Paravasu walks into the blazing enclosure. Simultaneously Indra appears before Arvasu, and the latter has to make a choice—whether he wants Nittilai, rain, or the Brahma Rakshasa’s release. The Rakshasa’s words: “...You are a human being. You are capable of mercy. You can understand pain and suffering as the gods can’t...Nittilai...would have cared for me...You are asking Indra to condemn Nittilai to a hell-hole much worse than the one I’m in” (61), prompt Arvasu to ask for the Rakshasa’s release. It is Arvasu’s sacrifice of his own intense desire, and not the ritualistic sacrifice, that brings rain; yet the fact that Paravasu enters the fire at the same time, enhances the suggestive and interpretive possibilities of the act. The final scene that has Arvasu kneeling, holding Nittilai in his arms as the crowd unheedingly celebrates the downpour, is intensely poignant, and one that enriches the spectator’s sensitivity and understanding.

Structurally, The Fire and the Rain occupies a unique position among Kamad’s plays. On one level the story of Vishakha, Paravasu and Yavakri is counterpointed by the story of Nittilai and Arvasu. Yet the scenes that depict the latter, are intricately linked with the rest of the play in a manner that prevents their story from being a clearly defined subplot. Interestingly the framing narrative of the play—the enactment of Vishwarupa’s death—provides the parallel action, since Indra’s treacherous killing of Vishwarupa is re-enacted when Paravasu treacherously shifts the crime of killing his father on to the unsuspecting Arvasu.

It is interesting that Tipu Sultan (1750-1799), who spent half of his life time on horseback, found time to carefully record and preserve his fragile world of dreams” (Bageshree, 3). Significantly it was A.K. Ramanujan who alerted Kamad to the existence of Tipu’s diary. The Dreams of Tipu Sultan was conceived and presented as a radio play in which Saeed Jaffrey lent his voice for Tipu. Kamad later rewrote the play for stage in Kannada and English. Writing the play was an act of paying homage to “…Tipu’s sense of nation-building” (Kiran, 25). Kamad describes Tipu as “…one of the most politically perceptive and tragic figures in modern Indian history” (Bageshree, 3). Here again Kamad employs a framing narrative which begins and ends with historian Kirmani’s recollection of the day Tipu was killed. The enactment of the life and dreams of Tipu
Sultan appears within the framing narrative, the dreams alternatively reflecting Tipu’s ambitions, his fears and his unfulfilled hope of a united resistance against the British. The major wars and treaties that marked Tipu’s reign are narrated by Kirmani and Mackenzie, thus enabling taut and compact presentation. Their choric interventions add to the dramatic effectiveness of the play by sensitizing the spectator to the finality of the past, the realization that one cannot undo the past. But the past can acquire symbolic significance if one has the will to learn from it, and that is what the play attempts to perform. It sensitizes the spectator to the need to overcome ideological biases, particularly the danger of applying the value system of a specific ideology to events and characters of the past. The play can be performed with minimal props. Muted lighting, a plain backdrop, and appropriate use of colour and music can create an ambience, as effective as an opulent setting.

The play demands sensitive, realistic acting. The dialogue, particularly the comments about the English are incisive. Some of the most powerful sentences in the play are uttered after Tipu’s court accepts his decision to give away two of his sons as hostage to the British: “They’ll not harm my children… The danger is they’ll teach my children their language, English. The language in which it is possible to think of children as hostages” (43). He then announces the death of his wife. As the courtiers react Tipu says: “I waited till she breathed her last breath…She died without knowing I had bartered her sons for my kingdom” (44). He continues: “I didn’t want tears to blind the judgement of my advisers…The dead are happy. They go” (44). Later he makes arrangements for the princes’ departure: “…we’ll send them as heroes…In full splendour. A splendour that’ll put the foreigners to shame- and cover up my own sense of shame” (44). Inspired rendering can make these dialogues unforgettable for the spectator. It is true that there is a strong element of idealization in the portrayal of Tipu. Karnad excludes all historical material that does not support the thematic thrust of the play. However the play does not compromise the democracy of representation. The exchange between Nana Phadnavis and Charles Malet, proves this.

Selfish and egocentric politicking is highlighted in the exchange between Richard Wellesley and his brother, Arthur Wellesley: “I shall destroy Tipu. I shall decimate Seringapatam, within six months. If that’s not merit, I don’t know what public service is. Surely, it would entitle me to the same rank as Cornwallis’” (59). The words highlight the
former's contempt for his predecessor Lord Cornwallis, and his cynical exploitation of the powers of office. As the stage darkens at the end of the play, the postscript is read out aloud:

When India became independent in 1947, the families of maharajas who bowed and scraped before the British masters were granted sumptuous privy purses by the Government of India while the descendents of Tipu Sultan were left to rot in the slums of Calcutta. (65)

Dharwadker makes specific reference to the play's "...powerful elegiac quality, because Tipu's life is framed throughout by his death" (Collected Plays, xxvi). "The historical symbolism of the play was realized brilliantly in 1999 when C. Basavalingaiah staged it in the precincts of Tipu's summer palace, Daria Daulat in Seringapatnam..." (ibid, xxiii). The historical/architectural setting created the same ambience of grandeur that Alkazi's production of Tughlag in Purana Quila, produced. Commenting on N.S. Yamuna's English production of the play by the theatre group Madras Players, Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan writes about the many workshops that were conducted for the actors, to make them understand the play, its protagonist, and all the nuances to be depicted. As a result the actors "...not only empathised with their roles, but they looked like the characters they were depicting" (5). She makes special reference to the brilliant performance of Aseem Khan as Tipu, particularly his depiction of the restless and mercurial temperament of the character. The detailed description of the choreography of the final scene is interesting: "The stage was divided into two sides by an invisible diagonal keeping Tipu with his volatile movements on the right side and his four lieutenants on the left side, both not stepping into each other's space. The stillness of the lieutenants was a brilliant contrast to Tipu's constant movements. In the end, Poorniah and Mir Sadiq move closer and Nadim Khan and Kamaruddin join with each other indicating that they had joined together plotting against Tipu. As Tipu moves backstage through the two pairs, the distancing between him and his lieutenants becomes visually clear to the audience" (5). The pairing of the lieutenants is a powerful visual image of the degree to which they are implicated in the tragedy of Tipu. Sankaranarayan writes: The historian, the writer, the theatre lover, the critic and the human being in me...found fulfilment in this theatre production" (5). Paradoxically Rangayana's production of the play elicits a very different response. While acknowledging the grandeur of the
production, and Kattimani’s depiction of Tipu, Laxmi Chandrashekar observes that the Kannada production did not grip the audience. She cites the lack of conflict and structural tautness as possible reasons, describing it as “…more like a documentary which presented a series of episodes loosely strung together…” (119).

The divergent opinions highlight the importance of insightful and sensitive enactment. Extravagant settings, period costumes, and other props cannot compensate for impoverished imagination and lack of sensitivity, or directorial interventions that go against the thematic thrust of a play. For instance C. Basavalingaiah’s “…well-received Kannada production…” (Collected Plays, xv) of The Fire and the Rain concluded with the entrance of a pregnant Vishakha. Well-received or not, Vishakha’s appearance, or the fact that she is carrying Yavakri’s child has no thematic link with the ending of the play. In fact it diverts attention from the redemptive symbolism of Arvasu’s sacrifice of self. Prasanna’s Hindi production of the play “…eliminated the role of the Brahma Rakshasa entirely, thus creating unexplained gaps and inconsistencies in the action” (Collected Plays, xvi). Chandrashekar’s review of the 1999 week-long theatre festival that showcased Karnad’s plays in Bangalore, is significant in this context. Referring to R. Nagesh’s production of Yayati Chandrashekar writes: “…the attempt to clothe the women characters in period costumes…white blouses with the breast cloth over them were quite awful and distracting” (176). B. Jayashri’s production of Naga-Mandala is evaluated thus: “The interpretation was rather literal…The make-up made the snake look somewhat comic” (Chandrashekar, 177). The production of The Fire and the Rain is criticized for over-emphasizing the mythological element: “The externals- the forest, the saffron costumes and the heavy wigs- became so prominent that the debates and dialectics got relegated to the background” (ibid, 175). Rangayana’s production of Tale-Danda is described as being unable to “…generate and sustain the interest that the literary text does” (ibid, 175). The drawbacks of various productions as pointed out by critics emphasize the significance of the features that the chapter highlights as cardinal to aesthetically satisfying theatre. Contrary to expectations, rich costumes, elaborate sets and props are not essential for visually satisfying theatre. Again every enactment is unique to itself, even when the same group enacts a play. This is because enactment involves a complex interplay between manifest textual intent, presentational possibilities, the actors’ understanding of the play and the character each of them portrays, and the power of the text to acquire an autonomy unique to itself during performance. While venue, setting,
light, colour, music, all go into the making of memorable theatre, they cannot by themselves create a memorable production. The key factors that influence the success of a play are insightful understanding and depiction. When these two elements are present, everything else coalesces to produce an enriching theatre experience.
Works Cited


