Chapter 5
Conclusion

The thesis evolved from my conviction that a theatre that can perform the multiple functions of reassuring, satisfying, empowering, and sensitizing the spectator, can help generate an active theatre culture among the middle class. Such an arbitrary selection of audience might seem reductive, but certain specific factors influenced the choice. The middle class' strategic position in the contemporary socio-political order was the primary reason that led me to target the group. The second reason was the disconnect between the average middle class citizen and the performing art tradition of the country. Many of the finest examples of the land's folk performance tradition are either unknown or inaccessible to the average citizen, whose life is circumscribed by narrow personal concerns related to family, work place and socio-economic advancement. Interestingly the contradictory strain of an almost aggressive pursuit of culture and tradition is manifest among the non-resident Indians. While their professional and material ambitions prompt the latter to pursue careers outside the country, the consciousness of difference, and the resultant insecurity, as well as the fear that their offspring might follow the culture of the alien land, provoke them to restrict themselves to small ethnic groups, form societies that organize indigenous cultural programmes, and pressurize their offspring to study Indian classical music or dance, irrespective of whether the child has an aptitude for it or not. The characteristic common to both groups is their indifference to the contemporary socio-political reality in India. It is for these reasons that the study focuses on the need to sensitize the middle class Indian citizen to respond ethically to the world around her/him. The contemporary socio-political reality is one of increasing disenfranchisement and disempowerment of the majority of the population. Significantly, the middle class does not form a sizeable section of the population as far as numbers are concerned, but as Pavan Varma observes, the middle class signifies a social segment, that enjoys political and economic power and influence that is “...disproportionate to its size”(29). Globalization and Information Technology opened up a hitherto unattainable world of opportunities for the middle class. Notwithstanding the recent economic recession, the class has as a whole benefited from the new economic policies.
This is totally at variance with the lot of the majority of the population which has visibly deteriorated, post globalization. Displacement and natural calamities like drought and famine, have led to the translocation of thousands of people, and increased the number of poor and unemployed people. The growth of insurgency in various parts of the nation can be traced to the alienation of disenfranchised youth as well as tribal folk, who have lost their land in the name of development. Ignored by the general public and the media, these groups have been at the receiving end of exploitative politics and bureaucratic indifference for over fifty years. The spread of militant politics in the tribal areas has reduced the inhabitants to being hapless victims caught between extremists and an indifferent and inefficient bureaucratic system. Protective discrimination, more commonly known as reservation has not lead to better living conditions for the majority of Dalits, in urban as well as rural areas. In many parts of rural India Dalits continue to be subjected to caste based discrimination. They are not allowed to wear footwear, walk along roads in upper castes neighbourhoods, or drink from the same glass as others in tea stalls. Such practices are common even in towns, though in a less obvious manner. Unfortunately the political leadership as well as civic authorities, are indifferent to the needs of the economically disadvantaged sections of society, rural as well as urban.

The socio-political mindset of the average citizen in the sub continent in the past few decades has undergone a drastic ideological shift from the relatively ethical and idealistic stance of the post-Independence period to a narrowly self-centered, materialistic, and regressive one. Drastic changes in lifestyle have not just circumscribed the individual’s world of everyday interaction but created an increased sense of insecurity. Large-scale migrancy both within and outside the country prompts people even in urban areas, to locate their homes along religious/communal lines. The danger that underlies such homogenous structuring, is that it inhibits contact and interaction not only with other communities, but also with the disenfranchised and the dispossessed, which in turn leads to ghettoization of the mind as well as space. The tendency to exclude and ignore everything that does not relate to oneself, assumes serious overtones when viewed against the contemporary socio-cultural scene, where sectarian differences are being highlighted between and within groups, and regional, communal, and linguistic boundaries are being re-drawn and enforced with greater emphasis, than they were in the decades following independence. The corresponding growth in religious orthodoxy and prejudice is evidenced in the increased popularity of ritualistic practices of all religions,
all over the country. Exposure to alien lands and alien cultures, the feeling of being an outsider, the need to assert one’s distinctness, the pressure to follow the beaten track, all of which Kamad experienced at one point, are feelings that are being felt more and more by a growing number of people in today’s globalized world, where spatial boundaries are fast disappearing. Feelings of insecurity prompt people to build alternate boundaries, to wall in and wall out. Paradoxically, attempts to segregate oneself and draw boundaries to hold on to one’s identity, run parallel to equally determined efforts to deny the same to another. It is therefore imperative that the politically empowered middle class should respond ethically to the socio-political reality. Only then can a strong civic society come into being. The relevance of such an attempt cannot be underestimated when viewed against the growing tendency of hegemonic constructs, based on region, religion, caste and community, to claim centrality for themselves and to marginalize, even negate, the validity of those they perceive as the ‘other’. Transcendency is implicit in such attempts. It is in such a context that an active theatre culture gains significance.

The mixed-bag of programmes that appear on television, which is the staple form of middle-class entertainment—religious channels, the far from real reality shows, and subversive soap operas, simultaneously highlight the elite lifestyle that the middle class aspires to, even as they insidiously depict regressive practices like polygamy and child marriage, and legitimize patriarchal practices which limit female agency to the home, thereby denying autonomy to women. The portrayal of women in these serials ratifies the obsolete socio-cultural perception of women being physically and intellectually inferior to men. The fact that these serials are televised during prime time reveals that they have a sizeable viewership. It also indicates the deliberately amoral/confused mindset of the viewers who unproblematically accept the perpetuation of outdated hegemonies and pseudo culturalism reflected by them. Chitra Padmanabhan shrewdly observes that “... in an age of snowballing identity politics of various hues –as an avenue of vertical mobility or lateral regrouping to retain power –the attempt to control images of the constructed self-identity assume importance in a world governed largely by perception” (4). Ironically, in spite of its formidable reach cinema has not been able to achieve any notable change in mindset in its viewers. A significant number of good cinema which attempt to engage with contemporary socio-political issues have appeared in recent years, but their viewership is limited, as distributors are not willing to take the financial risk of
making the films accessible to a pan Indian viewership. Good quality regional films stand a better chance to be seen but again their reach is limited.

My interaction with theatre as well as familiarity with the performance practices of Kerala enabled me to recognize certain well-defined trends that shape the entertainment preference of the middle class. The class as a whole represents a social group resistant to change. The preference for myopic television serials and escapist cinema that caters to its fantasies of upward mobility is shaped as much by an obtuse absorption in its own world, as its refusal to engage meaningfully with the present. The enormous success of pseudo traditional blockbuster movies, their popularity not just among the middle class audience within the country, but also among the non-resident population spread across the world reveals this. Therefore the kind of theatre that can attract the middle class, is one that reassures and reinforces its belief in the power of culture and tradition. As Kershaw observes, the personal has become the political, and “... the political has found its way into almost every nook and crany of culture. ... the political is now ubiquitous ... Such promiscuity... breeds a new kind of uncertainty”(16). It is in such a context that the kind of theatre envisaged in the study becomes significant. The contemporary socio-political reality makes it imperative that theatre addresses the danger posed by blind unquestioning acceptance of received notions of homogeneity and difference, based on caste, community, and gender, that colour our perception of those we view as the ‘other’ and prevent meaningful interaction between people. It is of particular significance at a time when religious and communal groups force people to declare allegiance to majoritarian ideological and cultural systems of mores and practices, making it a pre-requisite for acceptance in the community. Attempts to address these issues provoke violent resistance. The aim of theatre is to provoke the spectator to react, but if the reaction is one of resistance, what follows is either a ban on the performance, or acts of violence which gain nothing but the spewing of hate. Interestingly, Karnad has several times referred to theatre’s potential for provoking violent reactions by calling attention to the two performances narrated in the Natyasastra. According to him the myth of the first performance points out that“... in theatre, the playwright, the performers and the audience form a continuum, but one which will always be unstable and therefore potentially explosive” (36).
My contention is that if the reaction takes the form of violent acts or else leads to a situation where the potential viewers close ranks against invasion of their cocooned existence, the attempt becomes a futile one. It is my belief that if theatre has to wean the targeted group from the deluding unrealistic world portrayed in television serials and movies, it has to hold specific attractions and perform certain specific functions. The average middleclass spectator is conservative, pragmatic and too fixed in her/his tastes and preferences to spend precious money to buy a ticket for a play s/he does not understand, if not disapproves. It is therefore not surprising that the spectators who turn up to view a performance are either the elite, or die-hard theatre buffs. If theatre is to become socially relevant, it should appeal to the middle class sensibility, it should be affordable, and should be performed in an accessible venue. Only then can it extend its reach and achieve the goal of creating a sensitive middle class citizenry that is willing to respond to social reality in an ethical manner. It is this realization that led me to explore the potential of a theatre practice that combined non-realistic mythical structure and indigenous performance practices to create aesthetically satisfying theatre that has the power to sensitize the spectator to the reflexive nature of the performance.

Theatre at its best is a complete kinaesthetic experience, which brings together imaginative and nuanced patterning of the various elements that constitute viewing – light, colour, figure, image, movements, setting, enactment, music, etc. Kershaw notes that the aesthetics of performance is always shaped by the culture of the audience community. Indian literary theory is significant for its emphasis on aesthetic enjoyment as the goal of performance, and the primacy that it accords to the spectator in the signification process. The Natyasastra identifies aesthetic enjoyment as the primary function of artistic creation. The rasa theory posits the relevance of art in its ability to generate joy in the spectator. Significantly the feeling of joy or bliss is intricately linked to the spectator's ability to empathize with what he sees. The emphasis laid on the coming together of joy, empathy and insightful understanding is of immense significance in understanding the pleasure-generation process. The origin of theatre in most societies and cultures can be traced to religious rituals. For instance, the Sanskrit word yg means fire and yagna means sacrifice. Burning, sustaining and purifying are some of the connotative meanings of the word fire. Fire sacrifices that are performed to appease a deity therefore symbolize ritual purification and submission to the divine. Fire is an important part of ritual acts that attend religious observances of many religions. When
viewed against the knowledge that Indian aesthetics identifies *Natyasastra* as the fifth veda, the word yagna, with its connotative significance of offering, surrendering, etc – acquires tremendous metaphysical significance. In *The Fire and the Rain*, it is Arvasu’s sacrifice of self – when he asks for the Brahma Rakshasa’ salvation, instead of Nittilai’s life – that brings rain to the land, not Paravasu’s ritual sacrifice which is intricately linked to his ego. Performance signifies a similar surrender of preoccupation with the self – on the part of the actor when s/he assumes a role, and the spectator when s/he sees the performance and empathizes with it. It is this philosophical understanding of the functions of enactment and participation that confers significance to the rasa-sahrdaya concepts.

Various elements contribute to the generation of rasa. Music performs the important functions of creating the appropriate mood, and enhancing and underscoring the mood of the play. Variations in tone and rhythm act as aural reinforcement of the event enacted. Evocative facial expressions and sensitive rendering of dialogue when combined with insightful use of gestures and figural movements from the rich and diverse indigenous performance tradition, can contribute greatly to the visual effectiveness of a play. When the various elements coalesce in an aesthetically satisfying manner, the result is a sublime theatre experience. Such a performance enhances theatre’s innate power to simultaneously project multiple perspectives. The flashes of recognition that the viewing produces in the spectator enters her/his subconscious mind. The signification process is a gradual one, whereby diverse images come together to reveal a pattern and facilitate an enhanced holistic understanding of what has been depicted. The sense of equipoise that the spectator experiences is identified as rasa. The generation of pleasure -rasolpati- is an epiphanic experience which transforms the spectator into a sahrdaya, one who can empathize with the characters and the enactment. Such a spectator is alive to every facial and tonal variation and every gesture and movement, however nuanced or fleeting it may be. Aesthetically appealing theatre induces a sense of well being in the spectator. Alan Read affirms this, when he comments that emotional response is after all, the most human and biological response to theatre (66). Feelings of good and bad precede signification. The multiple perspectives made available while viewing a play are similar to a ray of light that passes through a prism. Viewing stimulates flashes of recognition that get absorbed by the subconscious mind. The immediate response on watching a play should be one of joy, a sense of fulfilment, brought about by the aesthetic appeal of the
depiction. This in its turn leads to sensitization and a recognition of the need to respond
ethically to social reality.

The selection of plays was based on their potential to function as illustrative material
for the study. As has been asserted in the preceding chapters, locating the plays in the
historic and mythic past serves several purposes. The first is that the familiar plot
structure, comfortably located in the past, has a greater chance of attracting the average
middle class spectator to view the performance than an unknown play. The second and
equally important reason is that the spectator comes to view the play with a set of
expectations, the predominant one being a reinforcement of her/his socio-cultural
moorings. The cultural specificity of the historical and mythic material acts as a
psychological boost for the spectator, which helps lower her/his defences. Since the
spectator is familiar with the narrative, and possesses a set of assumptions regarding the
same, the subtly incorporated deviations act as blinding insights. Therefore while the
historic/mythic structure enhances theatre’s intrinsic power to project multiple
perspectives, to include and highlight alternate perspectives, the spatial and temporal
disjunct with the present, enable the plays to address problematic issues in a non-
contentious manner. As Sanders observes, the “essential abstraction from a specific
context” (84), makes myth and folklore particularly available for continuous re-creation
and rewriting. The stress on suggestive richness (dhvani) and restraint (aucitya), that
mark Indian aesthetics, are remarkable for their contemporaneity. The spatial and
temporal non-specificity enables the spectator to view the depiction without bias.
Structural devices like the two plot structure, multiple frames and fictional interpolations,
all of which reinforce the disjuncture with the present, simultaneously camouflage
and counterpoint the deviance that is carefully structured into the plays. The bringing together
of the familiar and the deviant, and the inherent sense of play, produced in part by
the activation of our informed sense of similarity and difference. . . and the connected
interplay of expectation and surprise. . . lies at the heart of the experience of adaptation
and appropriation” (Sanders 25). It performs the vital function of sensitizing the spectator
to alternate perspectives.

The study is rooted in the belief that the ultimate goal of theatre is an ethical one.
Some of the issues that vitiate the contemporary socio-political space are manipulation of
religious and communal difference, perpetuation of patriarchal and caste/community
based difference, resurfacing of old outdated practices in the name of culture, ghettoization of communities, and marginalization of those who are perceived as the other. These are contentious and highly emotive issues in contemporary Indian politics; more important, they divert attention from real issues that need to be addressed, like poverty, illiteracy, displacement, unemployment and female disenfranchisement. The ethics of representation demands that theatre address these issues. The observations of Alan Read and Joanna Zylinska are significant in this context. Read observes that the claim for an ethical stance has nothing to do with a "...religious morality of dogmatic 'oughts' but is derived from a reconsideration of the 'ethical' as a means to locate and interrogate the social determinants of cultural theory and practice" (6). Zylinska’s observation is equally pertinent. According to her, "...ethics, defined as a second reflection on moral values, beliefs and practices, does not contain a set of prescriptions for what to do. Rather...ethical reflection is enabled by an openness to the infinite alterity of the other..." (79). The plays analyzed in the study were selected on the basis of their power to address in an oblique non-contentious manner two recurrent strains in contemporary Indian politics- the manipulation of caste, community and religious identity for hegemonic purpose and refusal to address issues of caste, economic and gender-based marginalization and disempowered. In this context I wish to qualify Dharwadker’s view that Tughlaq "...grounds the problematic unity of the nation in historically inherited pluralities of religion and community that thwart the construction even of a national perspective" (251), which I feel is too limiting a viewpoint, particularly at a time when globalization is forcing more and more people to confront and come to terms with difference-cultural, regional, linguistic, and religious, not just in India but all over the world.

* Tughlaq and *Talé-Danda* are structured in a manner that sensitizes the spectator to the complex links between the private and public domains. The dual claims of idealism and social responsibility upon the individual, that surfaces in *Tughlaq* gets projected in *Talé-Danda* as well. Both plays reflect the evil inherent in egocentric posturing and regressive attempts to maintain the status quo. The sharana movement could very well have transformed the social structure of the land; yet history testifies to its violent and bloody end, which re-instated orthodoxy with a vengeance. *Talé-Danda* highlights the deep-rooted consciousness of caste-based difference that underlies the Indian psyche, which more than fifty years of independence has not been able to exorcise. At the same time
mindset by itself does not lead to riots, however regressive it may be. The cunningly master-minded violence at the end of the play reminds the spectator of similar state-sponsored acts of violence that have occurred in the past three decades. The caste, community and gender-based hegemonic practices depicted in *Tale-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain*, are issues that continue to inform the socio-political environment of the sub-continent, where many communities, particularly in rural areas, continue to engage in community specific occupations. While many rural folk are ignorant of their rights, others are unable to exercise their rights due to the prevalence of regressive caste-based norms. Taboos based on a mixture of pseudo-religious concepts, caste/community based customs and patriarchal expediency continue to control and direct individual autonomy in rural India, and ‘honour’ killings to avenge infringement of caste/community-based norms are on the rise. Apart from its oblique but powerful critique of upper caste hegemony of religious beliefs and ritualistic practices, *The Fire and the Rain* also highlights patriarchal denial and suppression of female agency, a subject that is central to *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*, both women-centric plays that portray the female psyche with depth and sensitivity. Padmini, Rani, Vishaka and Nittilai, represent varied facets of patriarchal suppression of women, which continue to be problematic issues in contemporary India.

*Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are interesting in their perception of the role of the historian as part of the history-making process. For instance, in *Tughlaq* Barani is an idealist and a philosopher who though intensely loyal, is a misfit in Tughlaq’s court as he cannot decipher the insidious political games that Tughlaq chooses to play. This is totally at variance with his historical prototype. Fourteenth-century court historian Zia-ud-din Barani was a virulent critic of Tughlaq’s policies, especially his abolition of jiziya, the compulsory tax that non-Muslims had to pay. For Barani, history was a form of knowledge “...essential for understanding the salient aspects of Islam and aims to educate Muslim Sultans in their duty towards their faith; in this framework Tughlaq becomes a repugnant subject because of his disregard for the Qur’an in dealing with both the faithful and the faithless, and his attempts to limit Islam’s influence in the political and judicial spheres...Barani therefore deliberately selects his material to portray Tughlaq as a foolish apostate who ruined his empire by pursuing the wrong beliefs...” (Dharwadker, 248). In Karnad’s *Tughlaq* however, Barani appears totally at a loss to understand the complex political game played out before him. At the end of the play he is
bewildered, aghast and broken by the violence and anarchy that surround him. While Karnad openly deviates from history in the depiction of Barani, his depiction of Kirmani, the court biographer who faithfully documented the reigns of both Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, is that of one who is obsessed with the manner in which Tipu was killed. While such a strategy enables the playwright to create an image of Tipu that defies biased misrepresentation, together the depictions project the role of the historian as that of a passive and subjective onlooker, who is unable to actively intervene in the process of making history. By highlighting the strain of subjectivity that underlies historical writing, the plays alert the spectator to a reality that is of great significance in the contemporary world; that subjectivity is intrinsic to representation, however objective and democratic it might claim to be. To the extent that narrating history involves privileging one point of view over another, history too is a construct.

The social concerns that form the subtext of the plays are too strident to be missed or ignored. Together, they reflect some of the major issues that dominate contemporary socio-political reality—the dangerous repercussions of refusal to acknowledge difference, the contradictory strains of resisting difference and underscoring it, claims of homogeneity, injustice of caste and gender based hegemony, the danger implicit in pursuing narrow political goals and most important blinkered representations of these evils. The departures and deviations from the root historic/mythic material make them all the more effective, and facilitate the spectator to draw inferences and make connections easily. For instance Tale-Danda reveals how ideologies envisioned to empower people, end up destroying what little autonomy they have. The kind of theatre conceptualized in the study, focuses on a performance idiom that combines stylized and realistic character delineation with space, light, colour and music to create a nuanced and symbolically charged theatre experience. The stylization innate to indigenous performance practices not only makes them aesthetically appealing but enable the plays to maintain a deliberately oblique, inferential angle of vision, which allows the alternative points of view to remain implicit and nonintrusive, and enables the inferences drawn from the political subtext to gradually percolate into the spectator’s consciousness. Such a theatre idiom has the power to depict complex socio-cultural issues in a manner that does not compromise its primary function of providing aesthetic pleasure. Here it needs to be remembered that while indigenous performance practices are remarkable for their visual and symbolic potential, these very qualities make them particularly vulnerable to
excessive and inappropriate use. Therefore restraint and sensitivity should guide and
direct their appropriation, lacking which, they end up as visual curiosities and the
performance itself is reduced to uninhibited self-expression, lacking in insight. For
instance stylized performance techniques, including dance, work well in Hayavadana and
Naga-Mandala, but the other plays demand a performance approach that combines
realistic enactment with imaginative use of space, lighting, colour and music. Here it is
worth recalling Alan Read’s claim that “Theatre’s narratives, however disjunct through
aesthetic experiment, always offer alternative realities and insights...” (6), into everyday
reality. The subplots and frame narratives runs parallel to the main plot, connecting at
times, to reinforce underlying inferences. Such a structure enables the playwright to
emphasize recurring patterns and their significance, without discounting the relevance of
individual experiences and incidents. The mutually reinforcing narratives confer a
paradigmatic significance to the plays, as they enable the spectator to evaluate the
thematic concerns in a sensitive, non-judgmental manner. Theatre’s ability to project
multiple points of view, without overtly favouring any particular viewpoint, combines
with deft structuring to prevent the spectator from drawing easy facile conclusions. On
the contrary, it alerts the spectator to the inherent injustice of exclusionary ideology and
the danger of such self-annihilating trends and empowers her/him to rethink received
notions regarding identity and culture and to distinguish between real and pseudo issues.
Aesthetic pleasure thus arises from insightful understanding.

The contemporary socio-political scene is one where divisive feelings of parochialism,
regionalism and linguistic chauvinism continue to appear in the public space. Though
only a small percentage of the population actively subscribe to such ideologies, the
silence/indifference/refusal to intervene that defines the majority, make them complicit
through default. It is therefore crucial that we acquire a clear perception of what
motivates these drives and how to confront them. Assertion of one’s space should not
mean denying another’s right to the same. It is in this context that a sensitization to the
claims of others gains significance. In the kind of theatre conceptualized in the study
viewing and listening become a total kinaesthetic experience, and the starting point for
reiterating one’s humanity. The aim of such a theatre is to bring about a gradual change
of mindset, by sensitizing the spectator to the need to respond —actively and ethically—to
social reality. This is of vital importance at a time when “global hatreds” are being
“...translated into a willingness for self sacrifice on the part of small groups of
individuals who aim, by immolating themselves, to inflict unlimited violence upon an indiscriminate number of unknown others” (Ginsborg, 6). Such acts, intended to disempower and marginalize the other or avenge an injustice, end up destroying both the victim and the perpetrator. In fact the negative impact is more permanent for the perpetrator as it dehumanizes her/him.

A study of Kamad’s responses to early interviews and more recent ones reveals the manner in which his perception graduates from tentative suggestions to more assertive observations about the kind of theatre that he creates. The change suggests that a writer is very often, not the best critic of his own work. More important, it highlights the flashes of insight that mark the creative process and which are difficult to verbalize. A sensitive and aesthetically satisfying performance generates similar flashes of insight in the spectator. The change in perception that theatre can bring about is not a quantitative or measurable one. It is gradual and imperceptible, a slow osmotic reach but an enduring one since the power and relevance of theatre ultimately rests on its ability to move the spectator by creating powerful visual symbols.
Works Cited


