Preface

The study evolved from my preoccupations regarding the need for theatre to regain centrality in the socio-cultural domain as a sensitizing moral force which has the power to perform the two-fold function of alerting the spectator to the dangers inherent in hegemonic attempts to obliterate difference and enforce homogeneity, as well as stem the erosion of accountability and ethical commitment in the public sphere. The realization that affirmative socio-political change, in order to be self-sustaining, needs to be a cumulative process and should begin at the level of the individual, prompted me to target the urban, employed, economically secure and upwardly mobile middle class, as the socio-economic group which could facilitate change since it has both the numerical strength and political clout to initiate the process. This led me to explore the means of developing an active theatre culture among the middle class. The knowledge that across cultures and civilizations theatre has had its origin in ritual, and that the two features intrinsic to rituals are their communal participatory quality and the ability to soothe, empower and rejuvenate the spectator, led me to explore the possibility of a theatre that would employ the emotive potential of ritualistic, culture specific performance practices to provide aesthetic pleasure even as it performs the crucial mediatory function of sensitizing the spectator to the socio-cultural reality. The study is a record of my findings.

While all art is informed by the socio-cultural and material circumstances of its origin, theatre more than any other form, is tenuously linked to the social, historical and ideological contexts of its production. Unlike other forms of art where appreciation is more or less a private act, theatre demands active social engagement where simultaneous links are established at various levels – between the text and the performer, among the performers, between performers and audience, and among members of the audience. As a developing third world country burdened with unsustainable demographic growth, the major problems that India confronts are poverty, displacement, illiteracy, unemployment and lack of basic facilities which mark the rural and urban majority. In a country where three quarters of the population live in rural areas, the fundamental issues that need immediate and active intervention are non-availability of cultivable land, and a more equitable distribution of resources. While the majority of the population remains landless,
even those who own arable land cannot cultivate it due to lack of infrastructural assistance like seeds, fertilizers, irrigation facilities and other essentials. This not only prevents the farmer from cultivating enough grain to satisfy the needs of his family, but also denies labour to the landless majority. Debt-related suicides have become a frequent occurrence, post-globalization. Poverty and starvation prompt young men to migrate to urban areas in search of work. While many of these migrants manage to get work in sectors that do not require skilled-labour, they are forced to lead a life that is denied all dignity. They live in slums and on pavements, without access to basic facilities like potable water, sanitation, security and health care. The constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens but unplanned and haphazard growth of urban areas and inadequate housing facilities for the economically weaker sections, has led to the mushrooming of slums. It is in this context that Gunter Grass’ reference to the incongruity between technological progress and social reality in India becomes significant. Grass is openly critical as he speaks of the indifference of India’s burgeoning middle class to the millions of poor people around them. The educated classes want to distance themselves from the poor masses. Referring to the millions who live in the slums and the streets of cities like Calcutta, he contrasts their vitality with the overriding fear of poverty and anxiety that typifies the middle class. He also makes sarcastic reference to the Delhi administration’s move to push all slums to the outer edges of the city. “The centre was cleared of all slums, which is really worse. In a sense, Calcutta’s slums are more humane because even the wealthy areas cannot escape poverty” (37). Millions of people live in dehumanized conditions, plagued by the constant fear that even the kind of dwellings they do possess may be pulled down by bulldozers to build parks, walkways and express highways. The politician-land-developer nexus, apathy on the part of civic authorities to address the needs of the poor, etc are real problems that need to be addressed. Greed and lack of social commitment have so pervaded the social sphere that protective legislation alone cannot ensure social and economic security to the poor; neither can it safeguard the ordinary citizen from various kinds of exploitation and persecution in rural as well as urban areas.

The contemporary socio-political reality is one of increasing inequalities. “It is not just hunger and want that dim the sheen of resurgent India. It is also prejudice, fear and hate” (Mander, 1). Yet paradoxically these issues do not loom large in the public sphere; the issues that get highlighted, that trigger off riots and bomb blasts are ‘shadow conflicts,’
based on hegemonic constructs. Arpna Dharwadker describes the Indian society as one poised between secular and fundamentalist ideologies (251), where attempts to demarcate people along regional, communal, caste-drawn lines are increasingly being manifest. Manipulation of difference by vested interests – based on religion, region, caste and community, violent resistance of difference, hegemonic attempts to obliterate difference and enforce homogeneity, denial of legitimacy to those who do not conform, both within and outside a group, are dangerous trends that can be seen in all areas of social interaction. Intolerance of difference is by no means confined to the sub-continent and is increasingly making its presence felt in the global scene, but its prevalence across borders does not mitigate the danger it poses to the Indian nation, since the much celebrated diversity that distinguishes the nation makes it particularly vulnerable to divisive forces.

Three factors influenced my decision to base the study on a selection of plays by Girish Karnad. The first is that manipulation of difference for hegemonic purposes, based on religion, caste, community and gender is a recurring motif in Karnad’s plays. The second factor was the realization that the historical and mythical material employed in the plays was exceptionally suited for the kind of theatre conceptualized in the study. While the texts lend themselves to multiple interpretations and performance techniques, the ostensible spatial and temporal break with contemporary reality which characterizes the selected plays, enable them to reflect and resonate the implicit political sub-texts. The third reason was Karnad’s conscious decision to create the texts bilingually, in Kannada and in English, a proactive response to India’s multilingual reality. G.J.V. Prasad’s observation is relevant in this context: “... it was only because of translation that India was formed... India is multilingual by definition, even constitutionally” (11). The choice of plays- Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, Talé-Danda, The Fire and the Rain and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, was determined by, their ability to illustrate the potential efficacy of a theatre practice that alerts the spectator to the ideological concerns that surface in the plays, even as they foreground aesthetic pleasure as the primary aim of theatre. Though Yayati is Karnad’s first play it has been excluded from the study for this very reason. However, the study does include references to the play by way of illustration; in such instances the references appear as additional, corroborative evidence to prove a particular point. Three of the plays have their roots in history while the others are based on myths and folk tales. The narratives – historical as well as mythical – are
well known and have immense visual appeal; more important, the recurring strain that
connects the plays confers on them the power to generate multiple resonances.

The complex socio-political ramifications that underlie the issue of confronting willed
apathy are such that, any attempt to persuade the spectator to acknowledge the inherent
negativity of a mindset, that prompts her/him to remain silent or pretend ignorance of the
social reality, would provoke vehement refusal, resistance and even violent rejection. An
affirmative step towards addressing the ambivalence that underlies cynical and indifferent
responses to marginalization of the other, is to evolve a theatre idiom that sensitizes the
spectator and empowers her/him to respond affirmatively to the social reality. It is my
belief that the spatial and temporal distance from contemporary reality that characterizes
the selected plays and their immense performance potential are features that can be
creatively employed to lower audience’ defences, and affect subtle changes in the
spectator’s mindset, making her/him more receptive to alternate perspectives.

Indian literary theory is unique in its emphasis on the generation of rasa or aesthetic
pleasure as the primary aim of the creative process. The study conceptualizes a
performance practice which can generate a sense of equanimity, santa rasa in the
spectator. The sense of well being, of equipoise and heightened understanding that a good
performance generates in the spectator has nothing to do with the narrative having a tragic
or happy ending. Whatever may be the various events and situations that form the
narrative of the play, the emotion they evoke in the spectator should be a sense of calm,
brought about through insightful understanding. Such a response in its turn, generates the
power to empathize- sahrdayatvam, in the spectator. The realization that structurally and
thematically, the selected plays are particularly suited to indigenous performance
techniques which are noted for their communicative potential and that such an enactment
has the power to endorse and affirm the cultural ethos of the people, led me to adopt a
theoretical frame work based on the concepts of aucitya, dhvani, rasa and sahurdaya as
expounded in Indian aesthetics.

The study analyzes the selected plays in a manner that reveals their power to sensitize
the spectator to the socio-psychological basis of the growing prevalence of a mindset that
refuses to acknowledge and accept difference. I use the word accept in place of the more
commonly used word ‘tolerate’ because the terms ‘tolerate’ and ‘tolerance’ suggest a
certain degree of condescension, and imply necessity, instead of choice. They do not
suggest and their use does not facilitate meaningful interaction on equal terms. The middle-class with its ambitions and insecurities is most vulnerable to fascist forces, whether they are religious, cultural, regional or linguistic. The major socio-political events of the last two decades illustrate how various political and communal groups have manipulated middle-class insecurities to achieve their own selfish ends. As a social group the middle class has benefited most from the increased developmental and employment opportunities opened up by modernity, technological development, globalization and the neo-liberal economic policy. They are also the victims of its immediate and obvious repercussions — the malaise of insatiable materialism and insecurity. Desire for greater career opportunities and upward mobility has led to accelerated emigration among the middleclass. Consequently, they form the section that most keenly experiences the contradictory socio-psychological pressures, to conform on the one hand and assert difference on the other. The growing obsession with ethnicity, difference, the revival of out-dated customs and rituals and the corresponding regressive mindset are manifestations of their response to the exclusionism they encounter in an unfamiliar social terrain, a response that can assume complex, often morally ambivalent forms. Expatriate Indian novelist Chitra Divakarunni writes about the ‘othering’ experienced by Asians, post 9/11, particularly the irony of being expected to prove their loyalty to the land where they live and which they think of as home: “Be aware of my otherness, but don’t give it so much importance that you lose sight of what lies beneath” (90). Her passionate plea forcibly brings to mind similar, but not so well articulated, in fact mostly unspoken feelings of alienation experienced by Hindus in Kashmir and Muslims all over India, especially the plight of the latter in Gujarat, post Godhra. They prove that isolationist practices are by no means confined to the emigrant’s experience. While the more recent anti-Bihari violence in Maharashtra is yet another instance of the growing emphasis on drawing boundaries — in this context along regional lines — the events of the Mumbai blasts (26/11) reveal the hollowness of such notions. Exclusion of those who do not ‘belong’, denying them access to constitutionally guaranteed rights, prove that incidents of ‘othering’ based on caste, community, region and language are on the rise. Such incidents acquire complex overtones when they manifest themselves in subversive acts intended to isolate the other, to obliterate difference, enforce homogeneity, and deny another the right to be different. Political leadership, irrespective of ideological affiliations, refuses to address the socio-economic issues that underlie the insecurity. Instead they pursue the more rewarding strategy of projecting any one group as the
‘Other’ – based on regional, religious, caste-based, linguistic or racial difference. This ‘Other’ is then conferred a monolithic status and all problems are attributed to it, an effective strategy to divert attention from real issues. The dual strategies of insistence on homogeneity and demonization of difference are powerful divisive forces which have the capacity to generate tremendous emotional response. Intolerance of difference and the inevitable counter-strategy, namely assertion of difference have become highly volatile issues that could rend the nation apart. It is paradoxical that the spatial shrinking of distances and porous national boundaries brought about by globalization and the concept of global community have led to the re-surfacing of the primitive instinct of keeping out the other, leading to the ghettoization of the mind. In a fast-paced, success-oriented profit driven society, exclusionism has become a coping strategy, where everything except issues and relationships that concern one personally, are cordoned off.

Contemporary theatre needs to address this potentially dangerous trend, explore it and lay bare the socio-psychological issues that are at the root of such acts. Unfortunately, the only kind of theatre that continues to be a vibrant presence today is folk theatre which has the limitation of being region specific, often confined to villages and rural communities. Theatre activity in urban and metropolitan cities cannot make a similar claim. Though several committed theatre groups exist in various parts of the country, their activity is restricted to specific areas and therefore their reach is limited. Distance and economic constraints are two major factors that have made theatre inaccessible for the average city/town dweller. Describing Prithvi Theatre’s struggles in the seventies V. Gangadhar reminisces: “Often Thakur (Dinesh Thakur, Director) and members of his troupe were at traffic signals and bus stops cajoling people to buy tickets and watch plays” (1). Gangadhar also mentions that Waiting For Godot was performed for an audience of four or five people and describes how the performing groups passed around the hat among the audience for some extra cash and how thrilled they were “... when on a couple of occasions, Rs.20 notes were found in the collection” (1). Though recent times have witnessed a welcome change in the emergence of committed cinema, theatre and cinema are vastly divergent in reach and impact. Theatre of course does not have the reach of cinema, but its smaller audience creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy that no other media can provide.
Without discounting the material factors that discourage an active theatre culture among the middle class, we need to acknowledge the very real obstacle posed by the middle class mindset. Unlike the rich and the well to do sections of society, the urban middle class citizen cannot insulate herself/himself from confronting the harsh realities of poverty and deprivation. S/he might choose not to react to it, but it is a reality that s/he cannot ignore. That being so, it is natural to want to evade a situation that forces her/him to confront these on the stage as well, particularly when the option of watching the deluding amnesia offered by television serials and big-budget cinema is easily available. As a result, theatre viewing today – setting aside a few exceptions – is restricted to small socially committed groups or niche elite audiences. While the first does not have the numbers or the reach to initiate change, the second is not concerned enough to attempt it. It would be unrealistic to expect a small town middle class audience to sit through the disturbing scene of communal violence at the end of a play like Asghar Wajahat’s Jisse Lahore Nahin Dekhia (1989). The depiction which bears contemporary resonances of riots in Delhi, Mumbai and Gujarat does not provide “...easy images to sit through” (Dasgupta, 4). The middle class would shun the performance of such disturbing scenes on the stage; they might even react violently to the same.

That theatre can affect social change is an irrefutable fact. The theatre of Thoppil Bhasi, V.T. Bhattachiripad and Cherukad in Kerala, performed a crucial role in the fifties in popularizing the socialist communist ideology among the masses. This makes the violent reaction of the contemporary literate Malayalee audience to the staging of B. Sreeja’s realistic play Labour Room (2005), all the more telling; it reveals in more ways than one, the change that has taken place in the mind-set of the people. The middle-class in particular, is not receptive to new revolutionary ideas; even more disturbing is its negative attitude towards any kind of change -cultural, intellectual, or perceptual.

A commonality that the rich and the poor share is their response to reality, which is one of apathy. While wealth buffers and insulates the former from any real confrontation of deprivation and want, the latter are rendered apathetic by the daily grind of ‘living’. Their acceptance of their lot arises out of a sense of helplessness. The middle class has both knowledge and the political clout to affect change. The mob that kills, that commits arson and rape very rarely emerges from among the poor. The poor might add to the numbers but the ‘real’ mob is often made up of those who are economically better off.
The evil of exclusionism practiced on the basis of religion, caste, gender, region and language lies in the fact that it distracts the individual from these real issues by deliberately instilling negative feelings of anger, bitterness, hatred, fear and insecurity among people. It is this danger that theatre needs to address. It is my belief that the dialectic nature of theatre – both in the interaction between its constituent parts and in relation to the audience – has the potential to make it a dynamic moral force which could alert the spectator to devious, politically motivated attempts to de-sensitize her/him, and blur her/his ability to distinguish between right and wrong. In order to become an active social force, theatre needs to perform multiple functions – become accessible to the average middle class spectator, instil a sense of well-being, bolster ego-needs and a sense of autonomy, empower and sensitize her/him to the social reality, and facilitate her/him to respond to issues in an unbiased, ethical and pro-active manner. Equally important, all these goals need to be achieved without compromising theatre’s primary function of providing aesthetic pleasure. Contemporary socio-political reality demands such an intervention. Theatre today needs to perform a definitive role in creating a mindset that is receptive to ideas, that can react positively to issues of inclusion and exclusion, to notions of self and one’s own legitimacy in relation to another, and the general socio-cultural and political space one occupies. It is my belief that a theatre that performs all these functions can create an active theatre culture among the middle class.

Girish Karnad was born in 1938 in Matheran, Maharashtra. He grew up in Sirsi in Karnataka, a small town in the middle of the jungle. There was not much entertainment, "So all through the day one read stories, one told stories... because there was no electricity and there was a jungle behind our backdoor the world of our stories was ridden with ghosts and spirits and animals" (Karnad, 54). Early exposure to folk art forms like Yakshagana, known for the colourful costumes, stylized performance techniques, symbolic representations, and vibrant energy as well as the Parsi theatre shaped his dramatic sensibility. The Rhodes scholarship that enabled him to study in England, the erstwhile colonizer’s land exposed him to modern Western theatre, the theatre of Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Sartre and Pinter, and the attempts of those playwrights to create a theatre idiom to address contemporary reality. However the fact that Karnad wrote *Yayati* in 1961, before he left for England is significant, because it reveals that even at that early period, he was attracted by the tremendous dramatic potential of native myths. Coming into contact with A.K. Ramanujan was a milestone in Karnad’s evolution as a playwright.

The introductory chapter contextualizes the study by viewing it against the historical, political and socio-cultural background of the subcontinent. It proposes to focus on the concept of nation as an ideological construct, which helps us rethink notions of history, culture and tradition, objectively and without bias. Without undermining the significance of the cultural continuity that underlies the concept of nation, it reminds the reader that an individual’s identity is the product of the convergence of several overlapping identities. The chapter foregrounds the hidden political agenda behind socio-cultural and ideological appropriation of the concepts of nation and belonging. A brief history of existing theatre practices provides the background to examine the significance of the kind of theatre envisioned in the study. The chapter focuses on the need to develop a performance technique that can instil a sense of well being in the spectators and simultaneously sensitize them to the need for dynamic intervention in the social sphere. Since aesthetically satisfying theatre is an essential prerequisite to developing an active theatre culture, the study focuses on the concept of rasa (aesthetic enjoyment) and rasolpati (generation of aesthetic enjoyment in the spectator) which are seminal to Indian aesthetics, as conceptualized in Bharata’s *Natyasastra* (ca. 2nd century) and Abhinavagupta’s *Abhinavabharati* (ca. 11th century). The concept of dhvani or suggestive richness, elaborated by Anandavardhana in *Dhvanyaloka* (ca. 8th century) and referred to by Abhinavagupta in *Locana* (ca. 11th century) as well as the concept of aucitya (appropriateness), Ksemendra’s contribution to aesthetic theory in *Aucityavivaracarcarca* (ca. 11th century), are essential to the generation of rasa. Significantly, while these theories reflect the mutually enriching worldviews that shape Indian aesthetics, the theoreticians do not make any attempt to apply them to specific texts. The introductory chapter explores these core concepts in a manner that is predominantly functional. A certain degree of arbitrariness informs such a selection and application as the theories are examined and analyzed only to the extent that they reflect the thematic and performative
potential of the kind of theatre envisaged in the study. The concluding part of the chapter explains the rationale for selecting the plays of Girish Karnad. The chapter contends that the use of history and myth in the selected plays performs the dual functions of providing aesthetic satisfaction and sensitizing the spectator to contemporary reality. The chapters that follow explore the various aspects of the selected plays, in a manner that illustrates the structural, thematic and performative assumptions and premises that inform the study.

Chapter Two Mythicizing History, subjects the representation of history in *Tughlaq*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* to critical analysis. The chapter focuses on how writing history involves a constant re-situating process whereby events are looked at from a different perspective each time. Depending on the historian’s ideological moorings, the focus shifts from one aspect to another. Dramatizing history on the other hand enables the spectator to view events from multiple perspectives simultaneously. Various structural devices like parallel narratives, fictional interpolations, shifts in perspective, use of similarity and contrast etc confer a mythic status to the events portrayed. In the process, mythicizing history becomes meta-history, whereby specific historical events resonate contemporary socio-political issues in a manner that enables the spectator to acquire insightful understanding of not just the events, but the process of writing/interpreting history. The chapter highlights the epistemological, ontological and sociological dimensions of ideologies of difference as they are presented in the plays.

Chapter Three Fact and Fiction, explores the socio-cultural predilections and biases that get projected in the mythic/folk narratives of *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain*. The chapter attempts a critical analysis of the manipulation of religion, community, caste and gender to perpetuate existing hegemonic hierarchies, thereby highlighting the power exercised by caste and gender-based social norms on the life of the individual. Simultaneously it throws light on the power of mythic narratives to reflect both resistance and compliance. The chapter explores the scope and extent of the a/historical mythopoeic material to critique contemporary issues through resonances that are not overtly critical. The mythic narrative helps highlight inhuman socio-cultural practices and the mind-set that sustains them, in a subtle, oblique manner, sufficiently removed from contemporary reality to make their viewing uncontroversial. The chapter highlights the danger manifest in present-day revival of regressive cultural practices and the hegemonic manipulations that underlie such attempts.
Chapter Four The Aesthetics of Enactment, explores the dynamics of a cost effective and aesthetically satisfying performance technique, based on the concepts of aucitya, dhvani, rasa and sahrdaya. It examines the dramatic potential of various styles of representation, their ability to sensitize the spectator and generate aesthetic pleasure. The chapter will attempt a detailed performance analysis of each play, focusing on various aspects of performance – the use of dance, music, stylization, mime, colour, lighting etc, as well as the complex link between the thematic concern of a play and the enactment technique adopted. The suggestive richness of specific scenes and situations, the importance of the use of restraint and appropriate depiction, and their role in generating insightful understanding in the spectator, are some of the factors that will be analyzed. The relative merits of actual performances of the plays as well as the power of specific styles of representation to project the thematic content of each play will also be examined.

The concluding chapter evaluates the findings of the preceding chapters and sums up the underlying argument of the study. The historic/mythic context helps achieve temporal distancing from the contemporary, which when supported by appropriate performance techniques enables the plays to address contemporary issues in a manner that ensures the necessary objectivity for viewing the play. Effective structural and stylistic distancing devices help lower the spectator's defences and conditioned responses. This enables the enactment to weave the ideological concerns into the sub-text of the play in a manner that is unobtrusive, and does not arouse suspicion and hostility in the spectator. Theatre experience at its fullest, most enduring best, is intrinsically linked with the power to emote. A major hindrance that limits the reach of theatre is one of cost. The study explores the viability of a minimalist, visually appealing, cost-effective theatre idiom. The obvious advantages of such a theatre practice – visual appeal, accessibility, and affordability – can extend the reach of theatre among the targeted middle class audience. A theatre based on the concepts of rasa, dhvani, aucitya and sahrdaya, which emphasizes the importance of aesthetic enjoyment, and creates a heightened sense of understanding in the spectator has the potential to sensitize her/him to the need to react to the world and to contemporary reality in an ethical and committed manner.
Works Cited


