Chapter 1

Introduction

Any attempt at addressing an issue presupposes a thorough understanding of its manifold nuances. Therefore a brief overview of the subcontinent’s history is necessary to contextualize the link between the geographical terrain and the political and socio-cultural matrix that underlies the concept of nation. Such a preliminary step will enable us to understand the real and projected problematic areas that inform and influence our concept of nation. Readings of ancient Indian history reveal that the territorial domain of most of the major kingdoms of Northern India during that period comprised of the Indo-Gangetic plain and its surrounding regions; depending on particular dynasties this could extend up to the north western regions of Khandahar and Peshawar and/or the Brahmaputra in the east. The Deccan plateau marked the southern limit for all these kingdoms. Only three periods in Indian History –the Mauryan, Mughal and British –witnessed the southern boundary extend beyond the Deccan Plateau to include regions farther south. There has been no period when the whole of present day India was ruled by a single sovereign power.

Beginning with the coming of the Aryans and the disintegration of the earliest known civilization, namely the Indus Valley Civilization, the Indian heartland witnessed innumerable invasions and conquests. The history of Ancient India may well be called the chronological listing of mutually warring kingdoms. That the period was also one of constant assimilation and acculturation is proved by the cultural similarities that underlie the multi-leveled diversity and the commonalities that extend beyond geographical and linguistic boundaries. But the point that needs to be stressed is that while commonality of culture, shared experiences of colonial domination, as well as ideas of nation state imbibed through exposure to western education, thought and political culture facilitated the dissemination of the concept of a single united nation among the people, the geographical reality, the vast and diverse terrain that it encompasses, makes the appropriation of nationhood a construct necessitated by real concerns related to inter-territorial harmony and socio-economic interdependence. This is borne out by the fact that at the time when the idea of a free nation was being envisaged, many of the petty kingdoms that were not under the direct control of the British desired sovereign status and
had to be persuaded to join the Indian Union. The erstwhile state of Travancore which included only a part of present day Kerala is a case in point. The Diwan of Kerala Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer corresponded with Mohammad Ali Jinnah regarding the possibility of his becoming Travancore’s ambassador to Pakistan (Guha, 3). Travancore’s unproblematic acceptance of the partition, explodes the homogeneity myth and forces us to acknowledge the reality that India’s identity as a nation was the outcome of a necessary, conscious, and determined effort on the part of the political leadership and it is vital that it continues to be so.

The Muslim invasions and the almost continuous military onslaught which began as sporadic raids during 11 century A.D. is yet another significant factor that needs to be seen in proper perspective in order to understand the Hindu-Muslim relationship in India. The early raids led to the formation of various dynasties, all of which were short-lived and ended in bloody overthrows. This continued till the establishment of the Mughal Empire. Interaction between the two cultures and their respective languages did take place, as evidenced in the flowering of Urdu as well as the mutually beneficial and complementary effects seen in art, architecture and music. Nevertheless the rigid, monotheistic Islamic faith, which is totally at variance with the protean Hindu ethos is a significant factor that makes the Islamic invasions stand out from others that preceded and followed it. The fact that Muslim historiography is one of the major sources of information regarding medieval Indian history is a factor that can be projected as the cause for the virtual disappearance of Hindu presence in the public domain during the period. This in turn makes it possible to spread the notion that the two cultures represent disparate and irreconcilable ways of life and thought. Consciously and unconsciously, the British were to a large extent responsible for the spread of the feeling of irreconcilable cultural differences between the two communities. In his preface to the translation of the biographical account of the reign of Tipu Sultan, Colonel Miles writes: “By this and other instances in these volumes, it will be seen that Muhammadans seldom or ever keep faith with Idolators (among whom they reckon Christians,). . . it is clear that Hydar Ali, Tipu Sultan, the Afghan Prince at Kabul, Muhammad Akbar, indeed, the Musalmans in general, in all periods,(with some rare exceptions) have acted in strict conformity to this most villanous rule…” (N. pag.). No doubt the Nizam of Hyderabad must have been one of the ‘rare exceptions’, graciously acknowledged by Colonel Miles.
The culmination of the freedom struggle in the partitioning of the subcontinent encouraged the notion; it was strengthened further by the contesting claims over Kashmir. Such was the sense of vulnerability prevalent in the nineteen fifties that the linguistic redistribution of India advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress as early as the 1920s, was seen as a potentially dangerous situation that could tear the nation apart. Both Partition and Kashmir are issues that have the emotive potential to be capitalized by sectarian, divisive forces to further estrange the two communities, to whip up feelings of insecurity, antipathy and suspicion between the two communities. It is imperative that instead of conferring a monolithic status upon these issues we should view the demonizing of the other by both communities against similar instances of exclusion or 'othering', based on region (Maharashtra), ethnicity (Assam, Manipur), language (Maharashtra), religion (Gujarat, Orissa), caste (almost everywhere in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar), and gender (everywhere). Though the years that followed Indian independence continued to witness several minor and major political irritants, the post-independence euphoria of unity and oneness continued for almost two decades till divisionism surfaced once again in the eighties in overtly violent forms.

Defining boundaries—to keep a group’s identity intact, and the corresponding exclusion of those who do not share the commonalities that distinguish the group—is not confined to Homo sapiens. Three defining features of groups are conscious assertion of distinctness, homogeneity within the group and hierarchical power structure. A leader of a group is in power only as long as his/its authority remains absolute and unchallenged. In the animal kingdom the struggle for power is unambiguous as it takes the form of a physical fight between the existing leader and the rival and ends in the death of the one who is defeated. Human societies being more complex, the strategies evolved to seize and retain power are correspondingly more complex. Several hierarchical tiers of power and allegiance based on class, caste and gender, differences on the basis of region, ethnicity, culture and religion perform the dual functions of inclusion and exclusion. The sense of vulnerability that exclusion creates in the victim, may manifest itself in various overt and covert forms—sense of abandonment, fear, insecurity, anger, bitterness and/or violent anti-social behaviour. The fact that these feelings can be manipulated by vested interests to realize their selfish personal agendas, is a reality we cannot afford to ignore in the contemporary globalized world of ever shrinking spaces—geographical, occupational, social and familial. Revolutionary changes in communication and technology, and neo
liberal economic policies have increased the opportunities for greater interaction between
disparate societies and peoples. The material flip side of this exposure is that of
increasing contestation over depleting resources. This in turn increases the possibility of
conflict where inevitably the outsider, ‘the one who does not belong’ is targeted and
marginalized in various ways. Xenophobic fear and attempts to de-legitimize the other
acquire complex socio- psychological overtones because their effect is manifested both
on the perpetrator and the victim – on the one hand the dominant group’s success in its
efforts to marginalize, boosts its ego-needs; the sense of relevance thus acquired leads to
further such attempts. The victim/s may react either by attempting to gain acceptance and
legitimacy through desperate attempts to erase difference. S/he/they might also adopt the
diametrically opposite stance of highlighting the difference. While this is a problem that
is becoming increasingly visible globally, it can have disastrous effects on a country like
India. The renewed interest in religion and culture specific rituals, traditions and cultural
practices, attempts to resurrect and re-instate long forgotten ones etc, need to be viewed
against this background.

According to Ashis Nandy many social formations that look like rebellions against
secularism turn out to be, on closer scrutiny, the offspring of secularization. Willed
assertions of homogeneity provoke attempts that challenge its legitimacy. Disoriented by
a changing world, people desperately seek meaning in the packaged versions of faith
vended by charlatans, gurus, and bloodthirsty religious fanatics. Nandy rightly observes:
“Religious fanaticism now has little to do with faith, tradition or community. It is a
product of uprooting, breakdown of community ties and weakening of faith. Thus,
expatriate Indians in the First World reportedly financed – almost entirely – the Ram
Janmabhoomi movement that demolished the Babri mosque in India in 1992 and
triggered countrywide violence.” (14). Nandy stresses the need to re-examine
“... fanaticism as the pathology of a modern ideology rather than that of a faith” (14).
Partha Venkateshwar Rao Jr echoes the idea when he comments that the smugly
complacent advocates of secularism fail to take into account that “... fundamentalists
could well be the marginalized and the deprived people of the modern era” (17).

The real issues that need to be addressed in a vast, developing country like India are
poverty, displacement, growing demographic levels, economic inequality, illiteracy and
social backwardness, but these issues remain unaddressed. Instead, the issues that get
highlighted are hegemonic assertions based on region, religion, caste, language, etc. Apart from the inherent deviousness of such attempts, the danger posed by projecting shadow issues is that they divert attention from real issues which are left to fester and become malignant. The root cause of most projected ‘political’ issues, can be traced to an escapist refusal to address the real issues of poverty, displacement, unemployment and deprivation. It is imperative that the middle class which exercises substantial pressure on vote-bank politics, acknowledge this reality. As the most interactive form of art, theatre has the power and the responsibility to sensitize the literate, economically secure and influential middle class to the material basis of contentious issues and the need to resist the temptation of being sidetracked by pseudo-issues, so that they do not succumb to the vitiating effects of bitterness, anger or indifference. Unfortunately politicians and political groups aim at immediate short term goals, and are therefore unwilling to address real issues and find solutions for them. It is therefore imperative that change should take place at the level of the individual. At a time when issues that were once confined to tiny isolated pockets are being articulated and communicated vehemently in violent forms like bomb blasts and terrorist attacks, it is vital that theatre should sensitize people to acknowledge the real issues, and address them with honesty, sensitivity, and without bias, so that “... the micro-level of individual shows and the macro-level of the socio-political order might somehow productively interact” (Kershaw, 1).

There is ample evidence to prove that theatre can usher in dynamic change in politics and society. For instance the Malayalam play by Thoppil Bhasi, Ningalenne Communistakki (You made me a Communist, 1952), which was staged by the KPAC, an organization dedicated to bring about change at the socio-cultural and political level, transformed the socio-political scene of Kerala. The spread of leftist ideology and the fact that Kerala is the first state to elect a Communist government to power, are intrinsically linked to the impact of the play. Acknowledging the legitimacy of difference and ensuring social justice have become the major imperatives of our time. It is against such a background that theatre needs to take on the affirmative role of sensitizing the spectator to her/his social, moral and ethical obligations as a human being, to recognize the significance of individual acts of choice and responsibility and empower her/him to resist homogenizing attempts and react to issues in a proactive manner. The interactive nature of theatre equips it for the task. Equally important is the fact that its power to simultaneously project, multiple points of view enables it to exempt itself from
presenting arbitrary either/or, monistic solutions. Rather theatre confers on the spectator the power to choose. The study explores the conditions of performance that could produce an efficacious audience response. Kershaw’s comment regarding this need, is significant: “It follows that we must move beyond formalist analysis – which treats theatre as if it were independent of its social and political environment – and consider performance as a cultural construct and as a means of cultural production” (5). Only then can theatre mount an effective resistance against insidious hegemonic ideological formations.

Dharwadker’s comment on theatre activity in post-Independence India is relevant in this context: “Indian playwrights engage with a plurality of languages through original composition and translation, and their primary concern has been . . . to use all available resources for the creation of a theatre that is adequate to their complex historical and cultural positioning” (12-13). According to her, India’s political independence marked the beginning of a highly self-conscious, self-reflexive period in Indian theatre (13). Modern Indian theatre may be broadly classified into three groups: commercial/professional theatre, experimental theatre, which explores the performance potential of European as well as indigenous performance practices, and socially motivated, reform-oriented theatre. Very often experimental theatre ends up being just visual display - bizarre, curiosity pieces, expending a lot of physical energy, but the end product is nothing significant. If the goal of performance is to appeal directly to a large public and to shock this public into examining its own prejudices, the strategy will not work because the conservative conforming mindset of the average citizen is not easily aroused. The man in the street has no time for the many surprises the artists might devise, for those are things that are presumably happening in his own life or life around him. As for the influential middle class audience in urban and semi-urban areas, the attempt will only provoke them to reactionary responses.

Socially committed theatre which has a specific agenda includes a variety of forms - Marxist theatre, street theatre, feminist theatre, to name just a few. There are several committed theatre groups across the country that focus on specific socio-cultural issues. They actively engage in creating awareness among the people regarding an individual’s social responsibility for affirmative action. The medium they employ is Street theatre variously known as agit. prop theatre and Third Theatre. NGOs frequently employ street theatre as a tool to create socio-political change. Street Theatre’s targeted audience, the
people in the street, shapes its venue, structure and approach. It addresses – briefly and effectively – material problems like price-hike and unemployment, ethical issues like hypocrisy and corruption, and social evils like dowry, illiteracy, female foeticide and gender discrimination. Its goal is to alert people to issues and encourage them to react to these issues positively and dynamically. Safdar Hashmi’s martyrdom while enacting the politically relevant street play ‘Halla Bol’ (1 January, 1989) testifies to the genre’s effectiveness. But the middle class, obsessed with its ambitions, insecurities and fragile egos requires a different kind of theatre. Its disinclination to acknowledge its civic obligations and social responsibility is manifest in its preference for the gloss and sheen of television serials and blockbuster cinema. The violent reaction to Vijay Tendulkar’s Vultures and Sakharam Binder and the appreciation of Badal Sircar’s Evam Indrajit are significant pointers towards understanding the middle class mindset. While it is beyond the scope of the study to go into the relative merits of these plays, it is possible to claim that to a great extent the violent rejection of Tendulkar’s plays was prompted by the raw exhibition of aggression, sadism and cruelty inherent in human interaction that marked their representation. The reaction was a predictable manifestation of a major trait that characterizes the middle class mindset – the escapist refusal to acknowledge the link between art and life. Shanta Gokhale’s comment on the play Vultures is significant. She writes: “Here was a middle-class family behaving like vultures, out to grab property even if it meant murdering their father and kicking the foetus out of their pregnant sister’s womb... Even people who felt it was important to have their society vivisected in order to see how it worked, were horrified and repelled... those who believed there was nothing wrong with their society or themselves, accused Tendulkar of sensationalism and screamed loudly for a ban on the play.” (Gokhale, 3). Her comments on Sakharam Binder are equally significant: “... marriage, without which a woman’s life is supposed to be worthless... came in for the most unsettling treatment... [Sakharam’s] approach to the mutual needs of men and women was more honest than the regular husband’s. Husbands too extracted similar subservience and duties from wives but dressed the whole thing up with fancy ritual and ceremony” (Gokhale, 3). Dharwadker too comments on the hostility or outright rejection that marked the reception of the plays in the early 1970s, which were triggered by “... their ostensible obscenity, iconoclasm, and violence” (113). On the other hand Evam Indrajit, adaptations of which are frequently performed across the country, expresses existential angst, vague enough not to alarm the middle class, at the same time reflecting an aura of philosophical exploration that the spectator willingly
accepts as an affirmation of his own intellectual superiority. It is equally significant that Shivaprakash’s play *Mahachattra* (1980) which was written almost a decade before Kānndā’s *Talē-Danda* and which glorifies Basavanna’s Bhakti movement of the 12th century, “... was prescribed as a text for college students and then withdrawn... as it brought to foreground the political and religious institutional views over the role of religion in politics and ... [thereby] touched a raw nerve of the society...” (Swamy, 12). The refusal to confront issues in an ethical manner is a characteristic of the middle class mindset and is an important factor that needs to be kept in mind while conceptualizing a thematic and stylistic performance approach that would kindle its interest in theatre.

Pavan K. Varma comments on the middleclass’ refusal to adopt an inclusive vision, and its insular approach in its interface with society (xxv). It is in this context that indigenous performance techniques, noted for their stylization, visual effectiveness and culture specific resonances, gain significance. Indigenous performance practices have been used to great advantage by Ratan Thiym and Kavalam Narayana Panikker. Panikker’s impressive oeuvre is particularly noted for its moorings in the performance tradition and martial art forms native to Kerala. He draws inspiration from classical Sāṃskrit theatre, Koodiyattam, martial arts like kalaripayattu as well as folk art forms like Theyyam. The range and complexity of indigenous performance practices in the classical tradition are unparalleled. But the rigid codification of rules related to subject, enactment, costume, and even venue that bind them, prevent these art forms from experimenting or transgressing the boundaries of the prescribed narratives and accepted practices. For instance till the last decades of the twentieth century, when Painkulam Rama Chakyar took the revolutionary step of taking the art form out of its traditional setting, Koodiyattam performance was confined to the koothambalam, attached to prominent temples, and viewership was restricted to the upper castes. Its performance was caste-related; only members of the Chakyar caste could perform it. While the intent behind the rigid, conservative, adherence to traditional performance practices is to safeguard the purity of the art form, it unfortunately restricts the use of the tremendous performance potential of art forms like Koodiyattam and Kathakali. Significantly even today when gender sensitivity is so important an issue in the public domain, the Kerala Kalamandalam does not allow women to learn Kathakali. This, in spite of the fact that women have been performing Kathakali for more than three decades. The emphasis on
religious/ritualistic norms is so strictly advocated that very few artists dare to transgress those boundaries. Attempts to offer innovative perspectives have not found any significant acceptance and remain at best curiosity pieces. That the intricate hand gestures employed in Kathakali demand an informed audience is yet another factor that discourages experimentation and attempts to extend their application to new narratives. The rigid codification of performance techniques ensures perfection, but in the process, spontaneity, emotional intensity and scope for experimentation, are lost. The hidebound orthodox approach of practitioners as well as aficionados and their unwillingness to allow any deviation from the traditional practices, is responsible for the absence of initiative to employ classical indigenous performance practices to address contemporary issues. Attempts by artists like the late Chandralekha (1928-2006) who dared to deviate are viewed as aberrations by purists. There is also the ground reality that the ordinary citizen hardly ever gets the opportunity to view the innovative performances.

Stylization and ritualistic significance mark folk performance techniques as well. Folk art, alias the art of the folk, the common people, is the source from which the present day classical forms evolved. The source of folk art can be traced to the rituals that are intrinsically related to the belief system of the culture from which they evolve. Over a period of time, continuous enactment dilutes the power of the rituals to perpetuate the beliefs that their enactment represents. However even when the link between rituals and their intrinsic religious significance is weakened, they retain their symbolic quality. The loss suffered through the break with the religious link, gets transformed into the gain of wider application and recognition. The broader base thus acquired, has the same potential of folk performance techniques which are not bound by a rigid formalized structure, and therefore have greater innovative potential. Interestingly, folk performance practices evolve as part of the everyday life of the folk, therefore they have a vigour and spontaneity that are unparalleled. They also communicate with greater ease. This illustrates their advantage vis-à-vis classical performance forms.

Of course in a country as culturally and geographically diverse as India, the close link between folk performance forms and the life of the community in which it evolves, makes it inevitable that the range and diversity of performance techniques will be equally diverse. Even then a close study of the multiple performance practices reveals certain commonalities that can be culled to evolve a performance technique that has the dual
advantage of communicating as well as being aesthetically satisfying. The stylization intrinsic to these practices confers on them a visual appeal that attracts the spectator; simultaneously it underlines their distance from every day acts of living. Adopting accessible indigenous performance techniques for theatre has the added advantage of creating a culture-specific ambience that boosts the middle class spectator’s ego needs by arousing a sense of pride in her/his cultural richness. Consumerism, ambition, community/caste based prejudices, veneration of tradition, parochialism, conformity, suspicion of difference, patriarchal approach to gender-based issues, are some of the characteristics that mark the Indian middle-class. Its stubborn refusal to acknowledge realities beyond its own narrow concerns and its almost hysterical veneration of tradition and culture stems from an escapist disinclination to confront reality. Varma comments on its “... propensity to not see anything beyond its own interests, except to eye the perquisites of the very rich above” (xxv). But the increased employment opportunities that followed the economic reforms of 1991, the onslaught of globalization and the accelerated rate at which change is taking place in all areas of human activity have also created a sense of insecurity. “... the personal world of the middle class is in a phase of transition where the past and the present coalesce in strange and unpredictable ways” (Varma, xxxiii). Even as they enjoy the material gains brought about by the changes, the complexities and contradictions that underlie these changes bewilder them, prompting them to retreat into the safe haven offered by homogenizing attempts made by religion, community and caste-based ideologies/groups. The strategies reap high dividends as the groups manipulate the middle class’ vulnerability and need for self-assertion. This in turn leads to explosive situations as all sense of morality and ethics is subordinated to a single, limited and clearly defined objective, which is that of self-aggrandizement. The cynical indifference that characterizes the middle class’ response to degeneration of political accountability, and opportunistic politics is in inverse proportion to the magnitude of the criminality of the act. It therefore becomes inevitable that driven by hegemonic ambitions, proponents of religion/community-based politics sabotage the innate power of religious belief to address the moral and ethical needs of the community, and reduce religion to the mindless performance of ritual practices and assertion of power. This along with the commoditization of culture has led to an increase in the number of tradition and culture-based rituals, reinstatement of old forgotten ones, increased emphasis on their relevance, and dissemination of these practices to regions where they were not practiced earlier. It is therefore important that theatre, in order to establish
contact with the middle class and relate to it, must primarily address its psychological needs by creating a theatre idiom that instills a sense of relevance and well-being. It is my belief that the ritualistic, empowering potential of indigenous performance practices can be effectively employed in theatre to bring down the self protective defences of the middle class and sensitize it to the need to acknowledge its social responsibilities in an ethical manner.

The study explores the advantages of a theatre practice that employs the tremendous visual and emotive power of traditional performance techniques to generate aesthetic pleasure in the spectator. Such a theatre would perform the multiple functions of rejuvenating the spectator, alerting the senses, and creating a sense of heightened understanding. Since traditional performance practices have their origin in ritual, and stylization is inherent to rituals, the use of these practices in theatre confers on them a symbolic significance that ordinary every day gestures and actions do not possess. Myths and legends which are a complex combination of the real and the fictional, the familiar and the unknown, the graspable and the elusive, have a similar connotative, symbolic quality and therefore they too have the potential to grant "... stability and psychic assurance" (Day, 9). That being so, a theatre that combines the tremendous visual appeal and ritualistic aura of indigenous performance practices with the symbolic power of myth performs an osmotic function of transmitting the thematic and ideological subtext of the play to the spectator in a manner that penetrates her/his conscious defences and seeps into the subconscious to acquire multi-leveled significance. Such a theatre avoids a narrowly prescriptive approach; rather it employs the obliquely persuasive power of multiple perspectives to perform the moral and ethical function of sensitizing the spectator. The study employs the concepts of rasa, dhvani, aucitya and sahrdaya as a template for envisioning a theatre that can sensitize the spectator to underlying concerns and empower her/him to respond to contemporary reality in an ethical manner.

Apart from its historical significance, the relevance of Natyasastra (ca.2nd century) rests on the depth of its philosophical, almost metaphysical exploration of various aspects of performance, for which reason it has been called the fifth Veda. While the text deals with an exhaustive range of topics, its most significant contribution lies in its identifying rasa or aesthetic pleasure as the primary goal of literary composition. The manner in which Bharata expounds the key concept is tantalizingly terse, almost aphoristic. For
instance, the definition of rasa is given as ‘rasasutra vibhavanubhava vyabhicari samyogada rasanispatti’ (Natyasastra, 6.32). Rasa is a term that has connotative links to chemistry, cuisine, etc. Kapil Kapoor defines rasa as the “emotional effect of diverse human experience on man’s mind and heart.” (15). Bharata’s view of rasa as the core of aesthetic experience is intensely perceptive as it is rasolpati or generation of rasa that forms the kinaesthetic link between the performance and the spectator, transforming the latter from being a passive recipient to one who is dynamically involved in the significance-generating process. Bharata conceives rasa as a combination of vibhavas, anubhavas and vyabhicharibhavas. Abhinavagupta further enriches the theory, by “... elucidating its philosophic foundations and by analyzing in depth the aesthetic dimensions of the theory in terms of nature, cognition and effect of literary experience” (Kapoor, 16). The insight gained through art is very often not a conscious experience; it manifests itself as an intricately nuanced ‘ananāda’ - sublime joy, contentment, an almost transcendental calm, that generates a sense of equipoise. It is also culture specific. According to Bharata, rasolpati is the prime aim of performance because it is the generation of rasa in the spectator that transforms him into a sahrdaya. The significant role conferred on the sahrdaya is a unique contribution of Indian aesthetics. The prefix ‘sa’ meaning equipped with, when combined with ‘hrdaya’-heart, comes to signify the power to feel, that has a suggestive richness that exceeds the connotative significance of its equivalent in English, namely empathy. Western aestheticians past and present have not conferred such an active dynamic role to the spectator. A point of interest is that the emphasis on the emotive response aroused in the spectator is almost exclusively confined to natya, (dramatic performance). It is significant that a connoisseur of music or dance is called a rasika, not a sahrdaya. While knowledge, refined sensibility and taste, define a rasika, a sahrdaya is defined by the ability to feel and empathize with an experience that is not one’s own, which in its turn brings about subtle shifts in the viewer’s perspective. The present study focuses on the generation of santa rasa in the spectator. Significantly Bharata listed only eight rasas in the Natyasatra. The ninth, santa rasa, was Abhinavagupta’s contribution to the rasa theory. The rationale for foregrounding santa rasa is that while several emotions or rasas, are evoked during a performance through their corresponding sthayibhavas, the overall aim is the generation of santa rasa in the spectator, the sense of peace that emanates from an almost transcendental calm that heightens the spectator’s sensibilities and makes insightful understanding possible. The dynamic interaction between spectator and performer through visual, aural and...
performance modes leads to rasolpati in the sensitive spectator. Rasa, rasolpati and sahrdaya are interactive, interlinked and mutually dependent. This means that the generation of rasa in the spectator is the result of a complex interactive process, which can reach levels of perception and sublimity that are far beyond ordinary intellection. Here, it must be stated that it was “... Bhattanayaka who clearly asserted that rasa is experienced by the spectator, that it is the spectator’s aesthetic experience, that the enjoyment of rasa is a subjective experience” (Kapoor, 22). The emotive components in a performance can generate santa rasa even when the physical cause for it is painful and tragic. This is because the extra-sensory perception of the sublime nature of the situation enacted, its illuminating, enlightening, awareness-creating dimensions, make it a pleasurable experience. Sadanam K. Harikumar’s Karnasapatham Kathakali, is a case in point. Sahrdyatavam signifies more than a temporary or random emotional response. Significantly, sahrdayatvam need not be intrinsic to a person; sensitivity, intuitive understanding, the capacity to empathize, are qualities that can be nurtured in a human being and once that happens it influences her/his perceptions as well as mindset. A sahrdaya’s emotional response is intricately linked to the intuitive perception of truth. Therefore sahrdayatvam is a quality that needs to be nurtured. Ability to emphasize at the individual micro-level can gradually bring about change at the macro-level.

Next only to the rasa theory in importance, the dhvani theory of Anandavardhana considers suggestion, the indirectly evoked meaning, as the characteristic property of literary discourse. . . in Dhvanyaloka, dhvani becomes an all embracing principle that explains the structure and function of the other major elements of literature—the aesthetic effect (rasa), the figural mode and devices (alamkara), the stylistic values (riti) and excellences and defects/(guna-dosa)” . . . Dhvani theory is a theory of meaning, of symbolism, and this principle leads to the poetry of suggestion being accepted as the highest kind of poetry. Anandavardhana proposes three levels of meaning, viz., abhidha, laksana, vyanjana. This is Anandavardhana’s contribution, to add the third level—rather to split the indirectly expressed meaning into two.(20-21)

Meaning may be overt and easily communicable; it can also be subtle, something that might not be immediately identifiable. While the theory is linked to the examination of poetic compositions and the factors that heighten the suggestive richness of poetry, it is not limited to poetic expression alone. The fact that Anandavardhana observes that “...
vyanjana, the tertiary meaning may be communicated by words, sentences, discourse, contextual factors, intonation, gestures, and even sounds . . . " enables the extension of the theory to other forms of expression. Another term used for vyangyartha or suggested meaning is pratiyamanartha. According to Kapoor, "Aandavardhana integrates rasa theory with his dhvani theory. Dhvani is the method, the means, for achieving or evoking rasa, which is the effect of suggestion" (22).

The English equivalent for dhvani is suggestion. Dhvani goes beyond the traditional understanding of meaning as abhidha (primary meaning) and laksana (sign) by recognizing the reality that meaning can be conveyed through media other than words-vyangyartha or to use another term pratiyamanartha. Meaning can be conveyed through non-verbal means such as facial expressions, postures, gestures, a particular environment etc. It is for this reason that Kapoor observes that the “... dhvani theory has both elucidated and strengthened the rasa theory, and the two together constitute a powerful explanatory framework” (25). The present study employs the concept of dhvani to refer to the suggestive richness that exists at various levels in the plays- structural, thematic, narrative and performative. When the structural, visual and auditory experience of theatre is supplemented by the spectator’s input of felt experience, triggered by the suggestive richness of the play, it becomes richly layered with memories, allusions, inter-textual resonances and significances.

Aucitya or restraint is vital to all areas of drama, textual and performative. The theme of a play, the manner of presentation, emotions evoked, etc need to be governed by the concept of aucitya. Ksemendra made aucitya the central element of literariness. Apart from asserting the need for a one to one analogic appropriateness between signifier and signified, he identifies twenty-seven areas that require aucitya. The concept of decorum attributed to Longinus is similar to aucitya. Since aesthetic pleasure is the primary aim of performance, the subject and manner of presentation should be such that they facilitate the process. Aucitya stresses the need to depict a situation in a manner that evokes positive responses; more specifically it refers to the quality of restraint that prevents the artist from thematic and stylistic depictions that exaggerate or emphasize certain elements or features more than what is adequate, thereby provoking negative responses and reducing the aesthetic effectiveness of the depiction. It refers to the need for the use of restraint in the choice of thematic and stylistic techniques of presentation. Aucitya is of
great significance in the present study as it problematizes the manipulation of 'shadow
issues' of religion and community-based difference, by vested interests to dominate the
public consciousness for narrow self-serving goals. A critical/realistic depiction of the
causal factors, the hegemonic motives and the inevitable repercussions of such
manipulations would provoke defensive reactions that hinder receptivity. The
historical/mythical structure of the selected plays, which locates them in a spatial and
temporal reality that is distanced from the contemporary, is an instance of aucitya because
it enables the plays to address issues of contemporary relevance in a manner that does not
provoke negative responses in the spectator. This in turn enables the contemporary
resonances to acquire a suggestive richness which is all the more powerful as it is oblique.
For instance, depending on performance, a contemporary spectator who sees an
enactment of *Tughlaq* might gain insights that are much more complex and suggestive
than the one to one correspondence with the Nehruvian era that was identified as the
themetic concern of the play by the audiences of the sixties. Dharwadker’s observation
that Karnad and Kambar, both of whom employ indigenous subjects and performance
styles, “... disclaim any interest in ‘cultural purity’ and ‘authenticity’ ” (69) is significant
in this context.

In theatre aucitya and dhvani combine to transform viewing into a sublime experience
where the spectator will need no inducement to attend a performance. It is the
responsibility of the playwright and the director to create visually powerful theatre that
can perform the multiple functions of empowering the spectator, creating in her/him a
sense of wellbeing, and simultaneously performing the moral, ethical role of sensitizing
her/him to respond to social reality in an affirmative manner. This is of particular
importance in the contemporary socio-cultural space where organized religions are
involved in power games and religious rituals have degenerated into meaningless self-
deluding acts. Kavya - the term Bharata employs to refer to the imaginative quality of art,
is also called Veda which means, ‘to know’. Art involves the imaginative transmission of
knowledge. Therefore an aesthetic approach based on the above theories is particularly
suited to this study as the ideological premise underlying the theories synchronizes with
the central argument of the study. Ananda or sublime joy, informed by a transcendental
understanding and heightened sensibility is central to these theories. The study attempts
to explore the efficacy of a theatre idiom that can generate such a response. The
performance of a play should instill a sense of calm and equilibrium in the spectator. The
**Natyasastra** refers to rta, which is explained as order or balance. The use of myth in theatre rules out the possibility of an unfamiliar narrative; the focus is therefore on perspective and interpretation. While the playwright cannot be totally objective, the democracy of dramatic representation facilitates multiple ways of viewing and interpreting. Rasa and bhava are intricately interdependent. The word bhava originates from the Sanskrit root bhu, which means ‘to be’. Therefore, bhava refers to not just the emotions depicted in a play but also the state of being that contributes to the generation of rasa which is the goal of performance. Bharata stresses the importance of rasa when he declares ‘nahi rasadrte kascictartha pravartate’ which means that only a mental state that can view reality in its various manifestations in a balanced way can acquire a sensitive understanding of life. It is for this reason that **Natyasastra** stresses the role of the sahrdaya, the empathetic spectator who can achieve the tranquillity and sublime joy that come from true understanding and insight.

Certain biographical details related to Girish Karnad’s evolution as a playwright as well as the choice of historical and mythical material as subject matter for most of his plays, prompted me to employ a selection of his plays to elucidate the central premise of the study. Karnad belongs to the first generation of post-independence playwrights who were confronted by two contradictory demands; the need to react to the immediate material reality in a constructive manner and the psychological urge to evolve an identity and a voice which were free from the colonial past and three centuries of colonial domination. Dharwadker observes “... the event of political independence marks the beginning of a highly self-conscious, self-reflexive period in Indian theatre during which most practitioners are engaged in creating a ‘new’ theatre for the nation...” (13). It was impossible to wish away the past. It was equally impossible to deny all significance to that past since the past performs a definite role in shaping the present. The dual imperatives of evolving a distinct indigenous style and voice, as well as reflect social reality led the post-Independence writers to experiment with various stylistic devices that could satisfy these demands. Girish Karnad spent his childhood in Dharwad. As mentioned earlier exposure to native folk forms like Yakshagana – noted for its colourful costumes, stylized movements, music, symbolic depictions, and vibrant energy – must have made a great impression on the young boy’s mind. The Rhodes scholarship that enabled him to study in England, exposed him to modern European theatre, and the innovative attempts of the European playwrights - Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Ionesco and
Pinter, to create a new idiom for theatre that could effectively address contemporary issues. The problems that the Western playwrights attempted to address were those of existential angst and a sense of hopelessness, the inevitable aftermath of the world wars. Neither the realistic mode nor the ancient myths of Greece and Rome could provide correlates to address the meaninglessness, the loss of trust, the sense of hopelessness and resultant despair that seized post-war Europe. Therefore these playwrights attempted to devise diverse techniques to depict human reality as they saw it. Karnad's inter-face with Western thought and ideologies, particularly western theatre techniques, resulted in a heightened awareness of his own culture, its myths and stylized and evocative performance techniques.

As stated earlier coming into contact with A.K.Ramanujan was a milestone in Karnad's evolution as a playwright. Ramanujan was one of those rare geniuses whose keen intellect and wonderful scholarship were supplemented by an acutely sensitive and alert consciousness that could delve deep into the root of things. His pride in his cultural heritage never degenerated into blind veneration and valourization of the past. He was as keenly aware of the ethical superiority of the principle of Brahman, the oneness of all things, as much as he was critical of the meaningless performance of rituals and ceremonies. The influence of Ramanujan's keen sense of tradition is clearly identifiable in Karnad's theatre. Tughlaq and Hayavadana were creative responses to his exposure to western theatre, a response that was shaped and that benefitted greatly from the sensitive insightful guidance of Ramanujan. Ramanujan performed a definitive role in shaping Karnad's dramatic sensibility. Interaction with Ramanujan inspired Karnad to evolve a theatre idiom that tapped the rich resources of the nation's collective past without succumbing to blind veneration. The conscious and unconscious drives that prompted the selection and re-working of historical and mythical material for the plays illustrates this. It was Ramanujan who narrated to Karnad the folk tale that became Nāga-Mandala. Ramanujan's translation of Basavanna's vacanas must have influenced Karnad's choice of subject for Tolē-Danda. Again, it was Ramanujan who told Karnad about the existence of the diary in which Tipu Sultan recorded his dreams, a diary that now adorns India House Library in London. It is equally significant that "...Karnad has always resisted prescriptive and legislative approaches to playwriting, varied his own theatrical practices from one play to another to suit his material, and avoided claims of 'authenticity', 'purity', and 'Indianness' for his work" (Playwriting, 85). Another significant feature
that he shares with Ramanujan, is that he writes bilingually. He writes his plays in Kannada and later translates them into English himself. Till recently, the Kannada version always preceded the English, a fact that is akin to a statement of policy, an instance of post-colonial self-assertion. The act depicts a defiant refusal to forfeit his primary identity by succumbing to the lures of the colonizer’s language; as well as a tacit acceptance of the diversity of India which makes translation essential for a pan-Indian reach. The shared trait thus simultaneously signifies an assertion of identity and ethnicity, the manifestation of an equally powerful urge to reach out to people and regions that lie beyond the linguistic domain of one’s regional language and regional space, and an acknowledgment of the global reality.

The study aims to analyze the plays in a manner that explores their power to perform the crucial role of theatre to empower and sensitize the spectator to respond ethically to contemporary reality. For this purpose the structural, thematic and performative features are analyzed against a theoretical framework based on the concepts of rasa, dhvani, aucitya and sahrdaya, the underlying assumption being that, a play that is grounded on these theories triggers the dual responses of recognition and surprise in the spectator, which leads to a heightened awareness and understanding of the link between the past and the present as s/he identifies parallels and gains critical insight. Sahrdayatvam is the power of the spectator to empathize with the characters and situations in a play. The ability to respond to an enactment is not intrinsic to the spectator. The response itself is subject to variations in the level of intensity. An aesthetically satisfying play evokes a sense of joy, satisfaction and fulfilment in the spectator, although here too, there are degrees of intensity. Ideally sahrdayatvam is an interactive process where the spectator interprets what he sees from the knowledge and awareness gained from her/his own experiences. This leads to a sublimation of impressions creating a sense of balance and equipoise, namely, santa rasa in the spectator. Myths reflect reality, obliquely. In Many Meanings of Myth, Martin S. Day explores the why and the how of the origin of myths, the puzzling and strange characters and themes, and their role in human life and society. He observes: “Often the explicit content of a myth will give a broad hint as to how it might be interpreted. Myths must be interpreted within the context of the culture that created them” (viii). The basic narrative that underlies Hayavadana and The Fire and the Rain belong to the category that Day calls intermediate myths, myths which were skillfully shaped by highly conscious writers in a literary era. The story of Hayavadana is
from Vetalapanchavimsati which is a constituent of Somadeva’s 12 century Sanskrit collection Kathasaritsagāra, while The Fire and the Rain combines two separate sub-stories that occur in the Mahābhārata. Naga-Mandala is based on a pair of folk tales, one that illustrates that a story needs to be told if it is to survive, the other the story of a young bride. Non-realistic structure, the element of make-believe, non-realistic situations and characters, fantasy, and supernatural events, are some of the characteristic features of folk tales. According to Day a major difference between myth and folk tale lies in the mood. Day describes myths as “symbolically charged” (viii). He asserts that the reality they present is not everyday reality of the human world but psychic and spiritual reality. Karnad’s treatment of mythic subjects illustrates Malinowski’s functionalist emphasis on the anthropological, social, moral and psychological functions of myth. Both Hayavadana and The Fire and the Rain perform these functions, when they invest narratives that are a part of the evolution of the subcontinent’s cultural history, with the power to reflect hegemonic appropriations based on community, caste and gender.

Tughlaq, Talé-Danda and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan on the other hand mythicize history. Mythicization enables these plays to rise above spatial and temporal specificities to acquire symbolic socio-psychological resonances. The primary advantage of the use of myth or mythicization is that it establishes a clear-cut demarcation between the spectator and the narrative. Familiarity— the fact that the spectator knows the tale, helps emphasize similarities and underscore variations. Theatre’s intrinsic feature of presenting multiple voices and points of view ensures multiple perspectives, and negates the possibility of bias. Stylized performance practices, dual plot structure, rich symbolism, etc are some of the elements that confer a mythic aura to the plays. The sociology of performance which involves a complex interaction between representation and reception, enables the spectator to intuitively grasp the message that is reflected obliquely. The study explores the plays in a manner that pinpoints the characteristics that define the kind of theatre envisaged in the study. The emphasis is on how the historical, mythical and fictional material is employed to create aesthetically satisfying theatre, even as they empower the spectator to acquire a clear-sighted understanding of contemporary socio-political reality.

All the plays that have been selected for study bear the signature features of Karnad’s theatre. They are bi-lingual. Interestingly, Yayati occupies a crucial symbolic position in Karnad’s evolution as a playwright. While the play is based on a myth from the
Mahabharata, it is a dialogue-oriented play structured in the realistic mode, which makes the criticism of caste and patriarchy as well as the stress on the individual's social responsibility too strident to be missed or ignored. Perhaps that is the reason why it has not been performed as frequently as the other plays. Again, the visual effectiveness that marks the performance practices employed in the later plays is absent in Yayati. The non-realistic approach of the later plays, enables them to highlight parallels and significances obliquely. Unlike Yayati, the thematic thrust of the later plays rests at a subtler, subtextual level, and therefore enters the spectator's consciousness in a gradual, non-intrusive manner to penetrate the subconscious and take root. Exposure to an alien land and an alien culture, the feeling of being an outsider, the need to assert one's identity, the pressure to conform, feelings that are increasingly being felt by a large number of people in the modern globalized world of fast disappearing spatial boundaries—both within and outside one's country—are experiences that the playwright himself went through at one point of time. The situation is one that evokes complex responses in the subject—a sense of excitement at the range of opportunities made available is mingled with a feeling of insecurity and threat. The upwardly mobile middle class is the group that is most exposed to these dual realities. It prompts them to build alternate boundaries, to wall in and wall out. It is therefore crucial that theatre should address these issues in a manner that illuminates the insecurities and biases that motivate these drives. The selected plays reveal how familiar narratives can be structured in a manner that sensitizes the spectator to confront reality, and acknowledge the legitimacy of difference. The historic and mythic narratives alert the spectator to these needs, enable her/him to acknowledge the fact that assertion of one's space should not mean denying another the same right. A study of Karnad's responses to early interviews and to later ones reveals an interesting aspect of the creative process as they throw light on the gradual maturation of his insight into the kind of theatre he has produced. The flashes of insight that mark the creative process are the very elements that need to be produced in the spectator while viewing the play. Thus the spectator performs a vital role in the construction of meaning. It is my belief that while theatre—including Karnad's theatre—lends itself to multiple interpretations and production styles, a presentation technique based on aucitya and dhvani can create in the spectator a sense of equipoise (santa rasa) which enables her/him to empathize with and react to the issues that are central to the narratives. The generation of rasa-rasolpati—which transforms the spectator into a sahrdaya, kindles an insightful discernment and a proactive mindset that enables her/him to respond to social reality with commitment.
Meenakshi Mukherjee writes: “. . . post-colonialism foregrounds the need for recognising identities, voices and situations that were not granted by the colonial power, but are perceived and defined by us” (4). Theatre today, needs to make each individual conscious not just of her/his right to autonomy, but those of others as well. An individual has to acknowledge her/his responsibility to the world s/he inhabits. We need to recognize the identities, voices and situations of disempowerment around us and respond to them. It is my belief that the kind of theatre envisaged in the study has the power to perform the vital functions of sensitizing the spectator and make her/him acknowledge the need to respond ethically to social reality.
Works Cited


