The French historian and post structuralist philosopher, Michel Foucault (1923-1984) describes discourse as the network of languages, knowledge and histories that constitute any given moment. For him the historical events and situations that lead to the particular moment do not exist merely as events, but as echoes that formulate our own understanding of the contemporary experience. The themes, trends and institutions that have been created, and that we work against or through, define the reality in which we exist. Therefore, the 'contemporary' in which we work and think is not completely free and full of possibility – the contemporary is an outcome of a series of discursive frames that have been established and through which we have to exist. That is why the historical narrative of Indian theatre is critical in order to situate any practice – what we feel is instinctive or self evident is the by product of a series of events that have unfolded before, and have constrained and created the world we live in. Far from this being a frightening scenario, we have to look at it like a toolbox that we have inherited. It is through this toolbox that we create, and, much like the ancient world, it forever stays with us defining who we are and want to be. What happened in history creates the ground work for what happens in the contemporary, but, even beyond that, the most modern, highly alienated and global form, will always have the echo of the ancient within it – either fought, silent or eliminated – but still within.

17 Foucault was born in Poitiers, France, on October 15, 1926. His student years seem to have been psychologically tormented but he was intellectually brilliant. He became academically established during the 1960s, when he held a series of positions at French universities, before his election in 1969 to the ultra-prestigious Collège de France, where he was Professor of the History of Systems of Thought until his death. From the 1970s on, Foucault was very active politically. He was a founder of the Groupe d'information sur les prisons and often protested on behalf of homosexuals and other marginalized groups. He frequently lectured outside France, particularly in the United States, and in 1983 had agreed to teach annually at the University of California at Berkeley. An early victim of AIDS, Foucault died in Paris on June 25, 1984. In addition to works published during his lifetime, his lectures at the Collège de France were published posthumously which contained important elucidations and extensions of his ideas.
What we need to keep in mind here is the title of the chapter- I am calling it ‘pre’ Modern, yet also bracketing the ‘pre’. Martin Heidegger\(^1\) (1889-1976) first developed the strategy, which was regularly deployed by Jacques Derrida.\(^2\) (1930–2004) *Sous Rature*\(^3\), which literally translates to *under erasure* – that is to say, the word “Pre” in the phrase “pre Modern” is inadequate but necessary. When we say Pre Modern and Modern, we implicitly create a transitional moment from one to another, in time and space.

However, from the discursive point of view, the break is not as sharp as we sometimes give ourselves credit for. For now, language does not provide us with an

\(^2\) Martin Heidegger was not only one of the most original and important philosophers of the 20\(^{th}\) century, but also the most controversial. His thinking has contributed to such diverse fields as existentialism, political theory, psychology, theology, and postmodernism. His main concern was ontology or the study of being, an analysis of human existence (in respect to its temporal and historical character). In his later works Heidegger had stressed the nihilism of modern technological society, and attempted to win Western philosophical tradition back to the question of being. He placed an emphasis on language as the vehicle through which the question of being could be unfolded, and on the special role of poetry. His writings are notoriously difficult. *Being and Time* remains, still, his most influential work.

\(^3\) Jacques Derrida is, arguably, the most well known philosopher of contemporary times. He is also one of the most prolific. Distancing himself from the various philosophical movements and traditions that preceded him on the French intellectual scene (phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism) in the mid 1960s, he developed a strategy called deconstruction. Deconstruction is not purely negative, but it is primarily concerned with something tantamount to a ‘critique’ of the Western philosophical tradition, although this is generally staged via an analysis of specific texts. To simplify matters, deconstruction seeks to expose, and then to subvert, the various binary oppositions that undergird our dominant ways of thinking. Deconstruction has had an enormous influence in many disparate fields, including psychology, literary theory, cultural studies, linguistics, feminism, sociology and anthropology. Poised in the interstices between philosophy and non-philosophy (or philosophy and literature), it is not difficult to see why this is the case.

\(^\mathrm{16}\) *Sous Rature*: "Sous rature as a literary practice originated in the works of German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). The practice of placing words or terms under erasure first appeared in Heidegger’s work in a letter he penned to Ernst Junger in 1956 titled *Zur Seinsfrage* (the English translation is *The Question of Being*), in which Heidegger is seeking to define nihilism During the course of the letter, Heidegger also begins to speculate about the problematic nature of defining anything, let alone words. In particular, the meaning of the term ‘Being’ is contested and Heidegger crosses out the word, but lets both the deletion and the word remain. “Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since the word is necessary, it remains legible. According to the Heideggerian model, erasure was concerned with the problem of presence and absence of meaning in language. Heidegger was concerned with trying to return the absent meaning to the present meaning and the placing of a word or term under erasure “simultaneously recognized and questioned the term’s meaning and accepted use. French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) adopted this technique and further explored the implications of Heidegger’s *erasure* and its application in the wider setting of deconstructive literary theory. Derrida extended the problem of presence and absence to include the notion that erasure does not mark a lost presence, rather the potential impossibility of presence altogether. In other words, the potential impossibility of univocity of meaning ever having been attached to the word or term in the first place. Ultimately, Derrida argued, it was not just the particular signs that were placed under erasure, but the whole system of *signification*. 
expression that shows how the transition is always happening, and will never completely take place. The shift between Pre Modern and Modern will always remain incomplete and unfinished. For the purpose of this thesis, I would like you to look at the following chapter through the following frame: the self identity of Indian theatre is not nationally formalized, and many regional formulations are arguing, debating and experimenting in their desire to understand who and what they are and do. The transition from Pre-Modern to (Pre) Modern should be seen as the journey of multiple histories, multiple trajectories with a creativity that was, with regional-charismatic leadership, in the sense of fiefdoms, in conflict with a population that had only one or two ways of positioning the cultural value of theatre to a more formalized, nationalized kingdom, driven by a charisma and resources that transformed the coordinates of the creation and reception of theatre. This latter half we will consider in the next chapter on Ebrahim Alkazi21 (1925-) and the National School of Drama22(NSD), but until then, lets outline some of the fragmented and regional larvae, with historical documentation and personal experiences, so that the pre in (pre) modern comes alive in all its exploratory and microscopic journeys towards hegemony.

In India we have access to a theatrical inheritance that includes diverse acting traditions and genres that have no parallel in any other country, history or civilization. Even an attempt in that direction, no matter how well meaning, would be at the cost of bartering regional diversity for a cold and impersonal hegemony. This debate collapses the moment one is confronted by the reality of the linguistic heterogeneity that exists. Indian theatre has always been a sum total of its regional multiplicity, with its intricate anthology of scripts, performances, aesthetic affiliations and politics, as well as grappling with issues of identity in post-independent India by most urban theatre artists. How do we establish the contours of a theatrical canon in the midst of such a mind-boggling scenario, that has to take into account, individual affiliations, styles of working, personalized vision, raw material, dialects, patois and provenance.

21 Ebrahim Alkazi: Pioneering director in English and Hindi theatre. In 1962 he took over as the director of The National School of Drama continuing till 1977.
22 The National School of Drama (NSD): India’s premier training institution for theatre.
Should we deny the existence of these varied and multilayered cultural strands, and pluck one single thread, to weave a dull monochromatic landscape? How to disengage from the protocols of an imbricated discourse on Indian/national, an insistence on finding labels to categorize and slot impulses of creativity or is this a new insidious form of colonization? India celebrates the concept of Unity in Diversity, and notions of a Pan Indian Theatre strikes at the very root of this pluralistic uniqueness. National as a concept can only exist if it takes within its fold the linguistic and cultural plurality of India.

Post independence marked the stirrings of a highly introspective period for Indian theatre, where in a very conscious way, the theatre practitioners tried through their creative work to build a new cultural identity for a new nation. Varied theatre writings emerged, some trying to locate their stories in either a pre-colonial past or a postcolonial present. The positioning of the work was also done on the bases of regional and linguistic considerations and influences.

Even though India is getting fractured by religious, linguistic and ethnic fissures, in the middle of all this modern India drama has evolved as an art form, that has shown a capacity to cut across these divisive forces and present a genre that can loosely qualify as modern Indian Drama. This in no way should be viewed as a monolith, but more as a kaleidoscope, changing its patterns due to regional and, linguistic diversity. Mostly confined to urban centres, modern Indian theatre has developed into a multi lingual, multi cultural entity. Not affiliated to any political party, and also showing no hegemony of language or region, it has evolved through the spontaneous aspirations of the creative artist, connecting with the audience. Particularly since 1960, a generation of playwrights, directors, actors, and designers have through their work and creativity established a particular identity that is associated with them individually, and also in terms of the environment, which has shaped their imagination and history of performance.

For too long post independence theorists in theatre, have grappled with the problem of whether Indian Theatre is ‘Indian’ enough- or does it represent the complex dynamics of a post colonial society, trying to construct a theatre that takes into account
the diverse regional and linguistic heterogeneity. One needs to define the parameters and look for answers to the following questions to properly understand the complexity and diversity of the present day Indian theatre: What exactly is Indian theatre, or regional theatre or Punjabi theatre. Is there a genre or style or way of working or a history of theatre that can be called Indian theatre? Concomitantly is there a style, a genre, a way of working that denotes Punjabi theatre? Does Indian theatre mean an accumulation of varied theatrical genres that are performed in the major Indian languages, and then used as references? Do we also take into cognition the existence of classical theatre, regional theatre, folk traditions along with the post-independence developments in theatre, while analyzing this issue? Will that then help us in constructing an edifice of what represents ‘Indian’ theatre?

It is also impossible to construct a definitive image of what constitutes ‘Indian/national’ Theatre. Is there a political and historical construct, behind the term Indian/national theatre and what is its narrative? How is this then linked to regional theatre? Is one the big brother and the other the less privileged sibling? And is the term National theatre synonymous with the Hindi language and Hindu religion? And are regional theatre and the other religious and social groups precluded by this definition from claiming a national position?

The dominant 19th century European models that existed, and were practiced in India, were borrowed techniques, systems, effects and aesthetics, which had been made indigenous, and internalized by the Parsi23 theatre. This to a great extent became the framework through which, Modern Indian drama came into existence. Despite its structure and framing being European/British, it managed to create a theatre that expressed national ideology, social concerns, and also managed to segue the Indian mythology with a concept of the community through their narrative content. The performing conditions in India, because of the Parsi theatre movement (1850’s to 1930’s) went through a marked change. The shift was not only in terms of viewing patterns, but

---

23 Parsi theatre; (1850’s-1930’s) An aggregate of European techniques, pageantry and local forms – it can be seen as India’s first commercial theatre.
also a shift from the open-air performances into the proscenium arch (brought to India by the British in 1750’s)\textsuperscript{24}.

**Mapping Modern Theatre Trends in India**

It is not possible to map the history of Modern Indian theatre and even an attempt to trace its development and performance history in a unilateral way would be inherently an unsustainable framework. How do we date and categorize ‘modern’ Indian theatre? In India we live simultaneously in several time zones, and these get more textured by the diverse languages available to us. The living traditions, the ritual performance, oral renderings, folk theatre and epic spectacles that are part of our collective pre-modern legacies. Yet we cannot always claim all of them as our collective inheritance due to the diversity in language, distance in geography, accessibility, lack of good archival system, regional prejudices that become accentuated as there is no method of exchange- despite our constant refrain of being one nation, one culture.

Yet the institution of theatrical modernity was made possible by the powerful influence of European theatrical performances in the metropolitan cities of Bombay and Calcutta, in the second half of the nineteenth century. These varied influences from the folk, to the classical, to the regional, to the modern, resources of myths, folk narrative traditions, socio-political experiences, along with the connection with European and American drama forged a fresh cultural identity. This in turn, influenced and impacted most theatre works that emerged during that period. Either it was in the rejections of all the concepts and styles of staging that were associated with the Western theatre, or a romanticized embracing of pre-colonial forms of expression, such as the folk and classical traditions, as an effective means of decolonization.

\textsuperscript{24} Proscenium arch- The proscenium arch brought to India by the British in the 1750’s and elaborated afterwards, replaced the open air arena that had been the most prevalent site up to that time. The closed space that supplemented it was often a roughly made structure with tin and bamboo or architecturally constructed with brick and mortar. Inside seating was put in ( wooden benches and sofas) and because of the elaborate stage tricks incorporated in the performance, the proscenium was pushed back a fair distance from the spectator, with an orchestra pit dug into the earth, where the platform ended, between it and the audience. (from the Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre; Anuradha Kapur:: Parsi Theatre page 340)
The rich chronicle of Indian drama and theatre unveils the verity that the Indian theater is at least 5000 years old. "Natyasastra" by Bharat Muni is the earliest recorded book on dramaturgy and was written in the 4th Century AD. An expansive document, having the status of a shastra, encompasses a range of instructions, both practical and aesthetic. The Natyasastra could only have been made possible if there existed an active and sophisticated theatre tradition, which was then documented by Bharat Muni, and made available to the practitioners of this art.

There is enough evidence to support the fact that India had a vibrant and robust folk-theatre tradition with operatic singing, vigorous dances and a vital narrative since antiquity. Itinerant Jatra players, as well as Bahrupi, Chhau, Putul Nach, Kathakata, to name a few have been popular for centuries in the vast countryside and growing townships. Most of these folk forms enacted stories from the two Indian epics, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, on village stages for centuries.

---

25 Narasimha (literally "theatre shastra"); Most important single source for understanding the character of classical Sanskrit theatre, poetics, aesthetics, dance and music. Apart from its religious denotation, shastra can refer to any authoritative and systematic discipline—normative as well as prescriptive—code, manual treatise, text as well as science.

26 Bharat Muni In theatre, poetics and aesthetics, Bharata is regarded as the author of the Natyasastra

27 Jatra (or yatra, ‘journey’): best known form of traveling Bengali theatre. In olden times, a procession at religious festivals where a community of devotees danced and sang in several voices, while carrying idols, was such a specialized ‘journey’. The procession enveloped a wider sphere of action when it dramatically presented incidents in the life of the popular avatars like Krishna or Rama. The most prevalent jatra, Krishnajatra, rendered such events in songs and dances woven together in dialogue that was extempore.

28 Bahrupi (literally ‘multi-formed’); quick change artist across India who physically metamorphoses into many characters. They transform instantly before the eyes of the spectator by just turning around. Contrary to their popular image, these impersonators require great skill in order to change both dress and personality so fast. Reference to such itinerate mimics and actors occur as early as the Buddhist jataka tales (4th century BC).

29 Chhau (‘shadow’ ‘disguise’ or ‘mask’); generic name for over a dozen different dance-drama prevalent in a contiguous area comprising north and west Orissa, south Jarkhand, and west Bengal. In this theatrical form you can find a blend of classical, folk and tribal elements. Most of the stories that are enacted are drawn from the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

30 Putul Natch (literally ‘doll dance’) puppetry in the Bengali—speaking region extending from West Bengal to Tripura and Assam. The puppets, made of bamboo or hollowed wood, are jointed for easy manipulation with strings attached to the various parts of the body. The troupe includes a singer who unusually plays the harmonium and musicians on the clarinet. Often performed in rural fairs, the form uses an improvised stage and starts with the adoration of Krishna.

31 Kathakata (‘narration’, from kathak, ‘narrator’): The Arthasasstra (fourth century BC) the classic Hindu manual on governance and economics, refers to kathak as ‘people’ who make their livelihood from words. The tradition of reciting a religious text with annotations and elaborations for the common people is associated with the Puranas, particularly the Bhagavata (eight-ninth century). Lochan Sharam (born 1681) in his musical treatise Raga–Tarangini, refers to this form in the thirteenth and fourteenth century based on poems composed by the learned kind Bhavabhuti, (playwright) using ragas and expanding on them with the help of music, song and emotive acting.
The Birth of Modern Indian Drama

The birth of the eponymous ‘Modern Indian Theatre’ was connected with the advent of the proscenium theatre that originated and developed in Calcutta by the end of the eighteen century. Calcutta was the seat of political and administrative governance for the British Empire in the East. The British colonizers used English theatre as an extension to their club life, for the entertainment of the British traders, administrators, soldiers and their families. Initially the shows were only for the British and the European community that lived in Calcutta, but later Indians were also allowed to witness these performances. The repertoire of plays performed were of Shakespeare\(^2\), Oliver Goldsmith\(^3\), Moliere\(^4\) and many other writers from Europe, who were popular at that time in England.

The first Indian play in Bengal was ironically directed by a Russian musician and linguist called Herasim Lebedeff, in 1795 and the name of the play that he directed was called “Disguised”- “Kalpanik sambada” (imaginatory transformation) in Bengali. The playhouse was a makeshift structure made of mud, with tarpaulin sheets as a roof, following to a great extent the structure of a proscenium stage, with exits and entries and hurriedly assembled wings. For the first time women performers were used in this play, and as they were women from the red-light area, their presence was marked by a huge protest as they were considered disreputable and a corrupting influence on society. But their success on the stage made other theatre companies follow suit.

In the 1830’s, a large and flourishing mercantile community and professionals that consisted of bankers, lawyers, moneylenders, lived in Calcutta, and found in western ideas and education, a window into a world of new thoughts and ideas. These influences combined to make them discover a love for English literature and drama. A new genre of patrons emerged from the Bengali aristocracy, who in their palatial homes, created courtyards in which performances were held for an invited audience. It was in the courtyard that an invited audience sat, while the verandas framed by arches, suggested the proscenium structure. This was in the year 1831, when Sanskrit classics were

---

\(^2\) William Shakespeare: (1564-1616) English poet and dramatist.

\(^3\) Oliver Goldsmith: (1730?-1774) Irish born English essayist, poet, novelist and playwright.

\(^4\) Moliere (1622-1673). French playwright, actor and director.
translated and performed. The first original play that was written in Bengali and was staged in 1835 was called *Kulina Kulasarbaswa* (All about a Kulin tribe, 1854), written by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna\(^3\) (1822-1886).

The British rulers in India used theatre in India as a means to serve the objective of colonial rule. The colonial culture collaborated with the Indian gentry, to replace both the Indian classical and folk theatre with an indigenous version of English theatre, under the patronage of the rich *zamindars* settled in Calcutta. This was an attempt to make modernity acceptable to the tradition and custom bound Indian, and pave the way for social reform as envisaged by the British rulers. This new class of aristocrats admired British theatre and tried to emulate it in its ways of staging. There was a proliferation of themes that were religious, semi historical - Hindu epics and satires centring around the current social modes. It consisted of high pitched dialogue delivery, crude humour, song and dance routine and rhetorical melodrama, a subterranean reference and influence of the *Jatra*\(^3\) (the local folk theatre of Bengal).

The educated Bengali class wanted the theatre to follow the English pattern of performance, not only in terms of painted back-drops, but also in copying Elizabethan structures and forms of acting and presentation that they had experienced in the plays that were being staged in Calcutta by Western theatre companies. But the producers of the Bengali theatre, were fully aware that the only way they could financially survive was to cater to the taste of the general public, whose sensibility leaned towards the performance arts that had been nurtured and influenced by the local *Jatra* traditions, with its melodramatic flourishes, glitzy costumes, sentimental enactment and full-throated singing. The contrary pulls of Western theatre with local forms, made the local aristocracy that supported these arts, very uncomfortable, as their exposure to Westernized models, made them hold in contempt the local forms. This dilemma was

\[^3\] Ramnarayana Tarkaratna (1822-1886): dramatist regarded as a model for playwrights of the early Bengali theatre. The son of a Sanskrit scholar, he completed his studies at Sanskrit college Calcutta, was appointed at the Hindu metropolitan College (1853), and then served Sanskrit College (1855-1882).

\[^3\] *Jatra* (or *yatra,*journey*): best known form of traveling Bengali theatre.
partially realized through the works of Girish Chandra Ghosh\(^{37}\), who managed to devise a way of presentation that dovetailed the folk energies into a Western notion of theatre, with its box-set, wings and stage décor, in a prosenium setting.

Even within this framework of anglicized Indian theatre, satirical plays were written, by Michael Madhusudan Dutt\(^{38}\) *Is This Called Civilization*, offers a critique of the colonial view of modernity that was being thrust on upper-class Indians. In a certain way, this criticism was overlooked, as this provided a soft buffer against the potential of a more virulent attack against British policies. But with the active interest in the 1830s and 1840s of influential Bengalis such as the wealthy "Prince" Dwarkanath Tagore (grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore\(^{39}\)), theatre in the Bengali language began to develop in earnest.

In 1848, when a Bengali actor, Baishnav Charan Auddy, appeared in the lead role in *Othello*, the *Calcutta Star* wrote that the "debut of a real unpainted nigger Othello" had set Calcutta "agog". Later 19th-century highlights included original plays by Michael Madhusudan Dutt and plays translated into Bengali from Sanskrit, as well as English and French, by Jyotirindranath Tagore\(^{40}\) (1849-1925)(the gifted elder brother of Rabindranath). And from 1877 to the 1930s, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) acted, wrote and directed plays, some of which are still performed today. His innovative stage-settings, music and costume designs have left a lasting influence on Bengali "art" theatre.

Thus, modern Indian drama laid its foundation stone more by imitating British theatre groups that came to India to entertain the members of the East India Company,

37 Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912): actor, playwright, Director and producer, by common acclaim, the ‘father’ of Bengali theatre.
38 Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873): Bengali writer, who was drawn to Bengali theatre. Most of Dutt’s plays were staged after the establishment of Bengali public theatre, though they premiered at the various amateur theatricals of aristocratic Bengali families during his lifetime.
39 Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941): Bengali playwright, director, actor, composer and literary guru of modern India. Born into the aristocratic Tagore family, one of the most important households in the so-called Bengal Renaissance.of nineteenth-century Calcutta. He received an enlightened education at home, among other things the family organised a variety of in-house cultural activities in their improvised courtyard theatre.
40 Jyotirindranath (1849-1925): Bengali playwright and composer, he nurtured the latent dramatic talent in his younger brother Rabindranath Tagore The majority of his plays were translated from Sanskrit, English and French; Shakespeare, Kalidasa , Moliere contributed to the bulk of his genre.
and was not a product born out of a native genius, but a derivative copy of Western plays. In a certain way the birth of modern Indian theatre started from imitating a genre that was Western in form and structure. The other incongruity was that most of the troupes that came to India were not the top companies from England, as in those days the journey from England to India was long and tedious by ship. It took almost three months by ship to arrive in Calcutta, as the Suez Canal had not opened its passage to India. It was then left to the amateur companies, with not enough work in their own country, to grab this opportunity. As no busy professional company could be away for so long, these marginal companies, which were anyway struggling in the West, would, through their assignment in India be at least assured of continuous work for the next year or so. This is to say, that the exposure to Western theatre in India was not an experience of watching the best that existed in the West, but the second rate or third rate companies. This, I can imagine, became a huge disadvantage, as the influences of Western theatre in India happened not through the top notch countries, conveying the best of Western traditional and realistic theatre but by the amateur groups of that time, who came to perform in India.

This became the blueprint, through which modern Indian theatre took birth. But as this theatre was derived from Western sensibilities, but performed by local actors, who brought in their own performance history and set of influences, it was as if sensibilities of the East shared space with sensibilities from the West. In its cumulative effect the borrowing did not reduce either the East or the West, but illuminated the performance even when a text from another cultural context was being performed. Even when the content was Western and ostensibly alien, they interpreted and understood it from the prism of their own reality. They also dipped into the rich and dynamic traditional and regional theatre that existed in India, and which was actively performed and supported by the people as additional references towards their craft. Initially there was a disconnect between Western systems of performance and the regional systems. But over a period of time, we can say that something known as theatre that is born and incubated in the minds and imagination of an Indian director was emerging.
On another register, the advent of Modern Indian theatre came from the necessity to protest against the British colonizers. Through theatre, subversive messages, thoughts and ideas of social injustice and political chicanery by the British could be conveyed to the people, through performances.

Theatre became like an ‘underground movement’ to convey messages of nationalism, patriotism, and self determination, by highlighting the discriminatory politics of the British Raj. Through the epics, social evils were played out by positioning the villains of the epics as white men, against the glorious heroism of the heroes, who were Indians. Thus theatre became a powerful tool of dissent, and also an instrument for social awakening and nationalism.

It later, gained a contemporary shape by the imagination and artistic genius of the practitioners of modern Indian theatre, who used the platform of theatre to illustrate the myriad complexities of human relationships, the depiction of the various heroes and heroines in the epics and the hues of daily life. The history of Indian drama holds a mirror to the various changes that manifested the socio political and economic reality of a newly independent India. Although, as stated above, the genesis of contemporary theatre forms in Indian drama was sown during the British period, however, it is only after the independence of India, that it acquired an articulation that was local in content, vernacular in its aspirations and regional in its flavour. Theatre performed by Indians during the British Raj, depicted the anxieties and disappointments under colonialism and engaged with the frustrations and brutality experienced by the common man, who was not the determiner of his or her own destiny.

41 The festival of Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated in the states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and many other parts of India. Started by Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaja, the great Maratha ruler, to promote culture and nationalism, the festival was revived by Lokmanya Tilak (a freedom fighter) to spread the message of freedom struggle and to defy the British who had banned public assemblies. The festival gave the Indians a feeling of unity and revived their patriotic spirit and faith. This public festival formed the background for political leaders who delivered speeches to inspire people against the Western rule. They dovetailed in their religious festival subversive messages of self-rule and freedom, through enactment and song.
Theater in India under British rule gained a global contour, with an exposure to western ways of staging, and this influence exerted a structured way of manifesting daily life, with all its trials and tribulations. It was no more laced with the heroic deeds of celestial figures; it was no more woven around super powerful gods and mythological heroes--- rather it became the portrayal of the life and style of the common man; an illustration of the sufferings of the poor and the graphic presentation of the "unedited realities" of life, under colonial domination.

As the main motivation of theatre was to protest against the British exploitation so the thematic content of the plays was a narration of the daily existence with its subjugation, exploitation and the travails of the common man who was not free. It is fairly ironic that tools imported from the West were used as a protest against the West. Any history of Indian theatre cannot be properly engaged with, unless it takes into account the importance of how Western theatre systems were translated into localized Indian forms. This section takes into account the problems of working in India with systems that were designed in Europe for Western audiences. It engages with the evolution of these systems that have evolved and been transformed through fusion with Indian bodies, traditional Indian folk theatre, and story-telling traditions. This also was the start of a specific kind of theatre, which after independence showed a shift in focus of presentation, and changed the dramatic rendering from a 'larger than life' kind of acting to a rather realistic and naturalistic presentation. Not only the style, the themes in Indian drama also witnessed a marked change and gradually became a reflection of the life of the common people. It was in Dinabandhu Mitra’s \(^{42}\) *Nildarpan*, first performed in 1872, which very scathingly exposed the ruthless exploitation of the Bengali peasants by British traders, and portrayed the inhuman oppressions of the indigo planters; it was a "protest" play - the earliest to stir up mass anti-colonial feeling. The draconian Dramatic Performance Act of 1876, was a result of this play, and became an intervention by the colonial rulers, to deflect the growing nationalistic concerns of the people, against the British Empire. This single act of censorship played a significant role in stemming the growing potential of Indian theatre, as a theatre of protest, by showing a shift in themes.

\(^{42}\) Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873): pioneering Bengali dramatist. His most famous play *Nildarpan* (indigo mirror, 1860) portrayed the eco-political exploitation by the colonizers.
from patriotic fervour to issues of piety. The theatre of protest, became a tame animal. It was the founding of India's first notable anti-Fascist dramatic group, the Indian People's Theatre Association\(^{43}\) (IPTA), in the 1940s, by the Communist Party of India, that launched the modern movement. IPTA's traveling performances on makeshift stages all over (Bangalore, 1941; Bombay, 1942) attracted huge crowds during 1944-45. Many progressive, talented Bengali intellectuals such as the playwright and actor Utpal Dutt and the director Sombhu Mitra - both of whom feature strongly in *Dramatic Moments* - cut their dramatic teeth in the IPTA movement. Not surprisingly, political issues preoccupied most of the best non-professional theatre groups, especially in the 1960s: they translated and adapted works by Dostoyevsky, Brecht, Ibsen and Gorky.

Hindi and Marathi theatre also made their presence felt quite largely in altering the socio political set up of India during the British rule. Theater in India under British rule thus, slowly, became a logical expression of democratic ideas beliefs and mores. Theatre groups were formed during this time and theatre was clearly divided into two distinct categories, the urban theater and the rural theater. Although folk theater also continued to thrive, develop and had its own very consistent and loyal audience, yet the massive demand of altering the social, economic as well as the political set up of India was so strong that the brilliance of the folk theatre dimmed somewhat temporarily. It again revived its lost glory during and after the Indian independence.

In the 19th century, the English-educated classes of Calcutta began to spurn *jatra*, and other folk forms that were performed around that area and to hail the western-style proscenium stage with dramatic lighting and lavish sets, as the harbinger of modernity that fitted in well with their new civilizational aspirations. At the same time, the

---

\(^{43}\) Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA): pre-eminent activist institution formed as an all India organization in Bombay in 1943, borrowing its name from Romain Rolland's book titled *People's Theatre*, but stressing 'our people's struggle' for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice. At the conference held at the time of its formation, units from different parts of the country, some of which began functioning earlier (Bangalore 1941; Bombay 1942), participated and generated considerable enthusiasm among theatre workers, writers, musicians and politically conscious intellectuals. It soon became the premier forum for the performing arts. They were concerned about the lack of awareness of social and political realities, the threat of fascism and India colonization. Their aim was to make people conscious, through theatre and other modes of communication, of the nature of problems in India and abroad. Realism and folk traditions formed their preferred style. Nevertheless, for IPTA theatre was primarily a weapon for the masses to struggle against oppression and exploitation.
professional "West End-style" theatre became more and more spectacular, using cinema stars, gimmicky lighting and intrusive sound effects. Audiences came in droves to watch a realistic stage suicide under a passing train and other grand illusions.

Indian Theatre – a Complex Viewing

The history of a nation is linked in complex and shifting ways with the history of its aesthetics that have evolved changed and developed. Yet we also know that the idea of a nation, for instance, the collective and imposed sense of a nation, is a legacy we inherited from the British, along with the proscenium arch and the ubiquitous box set.

But this influence cannot be dismissed, or wished away, as it played a vital role in enriching our own theatre aesthetic. The development and changes that this ushered revitalized that which already existed. The borrowing and exchange, between the West and East, could also be viewed as reciprocal. Our system of theatrical knowledge, which transmits an actor's living work of art from one generation to another, got invigorated by the knowledge that theatre could create new themes that were flexible, and this understanding allowed for personal interpretation of traditional text. The story of the birth of Krishna showed a reinterpretation of this ancient story, by depicting an easily identifiable Kansa as a villainous English officer.

History is always viewed as a process of interaction with the 'other'. The 'outside' adds to our history, and our history makes it its own. But is there, today in the world of free access to information and globalization, anything that can be called alien, or does everything exist, in all its non-mystery, in the mind that imagines it? Yet somewhere everything links up to the other, in what would ostensibly be seen as chaotic and non-rational. However this does not mean that India is an anarchic playground, where everything goes, but rather that there is a deeper and eternal complexity that links up the separateness.

What is the role of Indian theatre today, and where has it come from. Was it born from the debris of the exiting colonizer, or did it evolve, as we imagine flowers to evolve,
organically, taking what it needs for sustenance, spewing out the irrelevant, the non-essential.

On the other hand many theoreticians of theatre have tried to single out within this multi-diverse, polyglot culture a quality of aesthetics, value systems, that could be termed as essentially Indian, “A phenomena peculiar to India art, is an amazing continuity of its traditions through the ages. Even in its most mature and sophisticated manifestation the links with the early sources and subsequent stage of evolution are reflected transparently”.44

“The term cultural diversity are pegged to the ideals of a nation that will, for all its good intentions, subsume differences and camouflage hierarchies”45.

This entire question can be posed differently. How to invest in the intercultural dynamics of Indian theatre that dissolve the walls of parochialism, narrow thinking, regionalism and communalism? Along with this are issues of modernity, contemporaraneity, post-colonial theatre, to modern theatrical performances. The reason for not having a documented performance history in India is due to its linguistic diversity and the multiplicity of theatrical practices that exist.

**Indian Theatre: Regional Theatre: Punjabi Theatre.**

“India, as in the third world national cultural matrix in the fold of which the secret energies and explicit boldness of modernity have abided. And I place the modern within the troubled domain of the national that is being turned inside out in theory, historical understanding and democratic politics. This placement always comes with a condition: today cultural production simply requires that we introduce categories whereby cultural practices is emancipated from the institutionalized status of the national/modern46.”

44 M L Varadpande: Critique of Indian theatre, v page-32.

45 Geeta Kapur: Published by Tulika When was Modernism Representational Dilemmas, page-162.

46 Geeta Kapur: Published by Tulika, When Was Modernism. Representational Dilemmas; - Page xiii.
Since the last thirty years my experience as a theatre director and teacher in India has provided me with an understanding and exposure to some outstanding productions and directors in India. Eminent theatre groups supply multiple levels of engagement with the inter-section theatre, modernistic tendencies, performing processes, colonial histories and the impact of globalization on theatre productions. We are inheritors of both a colonial, post-colonial and nationalist history. The past interacts with the present, and contains within it many layers of experience, production processes and an aesthetic that is both rooted and part of a modern sensibility. The question that recurs over and over again; what is modern in Indian theatre? The past has a transforming relationship with the present, which is constantly evident in playwriting, production values and concepts of performance in modern Indian theatre.

The problem of relating such concepts as nation, history, and culture as a single monolith to Indian theatre are conceptually shaky and unsustainable. It appears to me that it is absolutely impossible to frame Indian theatre in a ‘singleness’ as there is nothing that can be claimed as Indian theatre. Not a single Indian language has the advantage of being understood by everyone in India. At the other end of the conceptual spectrum is the constant references in discourse about ‘an Indian way of working’, ‘an aesthetic which is distinctly Indian’, ‘the legacy of a shared history,’ and a ‘civilization that is collectively inherited’, that this makes us ineluctably Indian is an oft repeated cliché. There is also this oft repeated argument about India with its continuous tradition, unbroken by the changes in religion, regime, and time. This is again one of the celebrated myths, as there is no single theatre in India, because there is no single theatrical concept in India. The concept of Indian theatre disappears completely under the weight of the linguistic and regional diversity. On another level Indian theatre can also be seen as the sum-total of the theatres in the major regional languages, framed by classical and traditional theatre on one hand, and the Post-Independence search for modernity on the other side. Most theorist and critics engaged in theatre performances, view performances more in terms of the nature of performance, rather then search for this ambiguous phenomena called ‘Indian theatre’
When we speak of Indian theatre or a national theatre, we seem to do so without taking into consideration the various regional theatres. Part of this misconception could also be based on our attitude of treating regional theatre as an abstraction of national theatre. This approach is neither realistic nor is it beneficial in creating frameworks of discussion. It is significant that the cohesiveness of India’s cultural expression comes from its linguistic plurality. For this reason, to call vernacular theatre done in local language as regional, can lead to misrepresentation in comprehending the reality and richness of theatrical expression in India. Each language theatre is significant, and each regional theatre is Indian. In that sense we do not call Punjabi theatre or Bengali theatre as regional theatre, but as equally valid expressions of Indian theatre.

The Peking Opera\(^7\) or Bolshoi\(^8\) theatre can be called the National Theatre of China and Russia respectively, but can India aspire for one single national theatre? A country which speaks in so many voices, and also lives in so many time zones, with a complex and rich history, cannot be standardized or encapsulated in singular notions of identity.

When Ratan Thiyam\(^9\) performs at ‘The Barbican Centre’ in London is he representing India or Manipur. When I perform a Punjabi Play at the Festival d’ Avignon, am I there as an Indian or as a Punjabi director? What status do we give Girish Karnad\(^{50}\) and Vijay Tendulkar\(^{51}\) in this pantheon? Do they occupy the space of the regional writer or are they national icons? Regional theatre pools its energies together to make up the relationship between the ‘national and the regional’. Parts make up the whole and one cannot exist without the other. This relationship is an integrated and indivisible unit.

---

\(^7\) The Peking Opera:- a form of traditional Chinese theatre which combines music, dance, mime, vocal performance and acrobatics. It started in the late eighteenth century and became fully developed by the mid nineteenth century.

\(^8\) Bolshoi Theatre: a historic theatre of Russia that contains opera singing and ballet.

\(^9\) Ratan Thiyam (1948-) Manipuri Director, who began his artistic career in poetry and painting. After graduating from the National School of Drama he started his own theatre company called the Chorus repertory theater.

\(^{50}\) Girish Karnad (1938-) One of the most eminent Kannada playwright.

\(^{51}\) Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008)-Most eminent Marathi playwright.
But according to Aparna Bhargava Dharwdker: “Why should Indian theatre be judged by the standards of a monolingual national theatre, particularly those of the West? That Indian theatre is qualitatively different from, and more complex than, most other contemporary national traditions is precisely why it poses a multifaceted critical challenge: its complexity can hardly be used to neutralize it as a critical challenge.”

The problems academics have encountered with identifying and defining a history of Indian theatre are linked to the fact that “…given the rich cultural and linguistic plurality of India, it is virtually impossible to conceive of ‘Indian theatre’ as a monolithic and unitary category and to go on from there to identify its ‘makers’.”

When I talk about modern Indian theatre, what comes to my mind is an image of a multiple vibrating interlinked web, with no centre, nor any periphery. Folk, traditional, classical, tribal, colonial, communal, experimental, commercial, Shakespeare, Mohan Rakesh, Ebrahim Alkazi, Shombu Mitra, Habib Tanvir, B.V Karanth, all bifurcate and takes many forms, as modern theatre can no longer be defined as localised in taste or practice. When we think of kathakali or naqqal, forms, it is immediately located in regional impulses and a definitive social space.

Post independence, there was a fervent search for a form and content that would define us and also echo the spirit of nationalism. Many theatre directors and actors looked ‘back’ at ‘tradition’ for inspiration, and a search for a lost identity. Some sought role models or rather stencils through which new identities could be traced on their imagination. But we must remember that, we cannot separate performance from the...
social context and ethos that generates it. Theatre directors like, B.V Karanth, Habib Tanvir, Kavalam Narayana Panicker and Ratan Thiyam, combined tradition with a modern sensibility, transforming both of them into a new and exciting synthesis. At the same time, walking a totally different route was Ebrahim Alkazi, director of the National school of Drama, who trained an entire generation of actors and directors, to follow the principals of high realism with theatricality in a way which was not only spectacular but also masterly.

The image that emerges is of a mad root, with everything taking place on one plane, which was both singular and multiple at the same time. The trajectory of Indian Theatre was never really a trajectory, but a culture. Not in the sense that we use it everyday, but in the sense of a biological culture lying in a petri dish of the nation, spawning overlapping multiplying and impossible to describe under one clear category.

In the same way, to issue categories like Punjabi theatre, or Tamil theatre, or Bengali theatre, is again a misnomer, as each individual director is performing within his own artistic affiliations, aesthetic inclination, creative impulses and emotional memories. No standardized benchmark or lodestone of regionalism can become the plank through which regional theatre can be prescribed or subscribed in any formalistic terms. This sort of unilateral thinking can regress into communal and religious fundamentalism, as the terms of reference seem to indicate, as if there is a definitive way of working that can be called Punjabi theatre, juxtaposed against Indian theatre. This could lead to regional chauvinism, that is the virus behind factionalism and divisive ways of thinking, and also to a great extent limit the discourse within regional boundaries, rather than expand its framework to include regional theatrical practices, within the ambit of national theatre.

Babukodi Venkataramana Karanth (1928 - 2002) was a much decorated film and theatre personality from India. Throughout his life he was director, actor and musician of modern Indian theatre and one of the pioneers of Kannada and Hindi new wave cinema.

Habib Tanvir (1923 –2009) was one of the most popular Urdu, Hindi playwrights, a theatre director, poet and actor.

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (1928-) is an Indian dramatist and poet.

Ratan Thiyam (1948-) is an Indian playwright and theatre director, and the winner of Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1987.
To try and artificially create a national framework for modern Indian theatre, is to try and equate Indian theatre, by seeking a parallel, with western models, where there is a common language, with national characteristics, in a metropolitan setting. This analogy cannot be translated on to the Indian soil, due to the sheer diversity of style, form, language, location, genre and modes of receptions, that exclude the selection of any ‘one’ kind of theatre to represent this multicultural mosaic of Indian theatre. To try and impose a notion of Indian theatre in this multicultural scenario would be an imposition that would be spurious and false. When a national theatre festival is formatted, then within its scope are included plays from Manipur, Bengal, Punjab, Kashmir – any state in the country that has performances that seem to reflect national aspirations, social milieu, values and systems, that speak in a voice that is local, but national, and contain certain universal human values.

Renewal of Ancestral Material

The 1960 and 1970 saw a huge surge of theatre activity in many urban centres in India. From Calcutta, to Bombay, and from Delhi to Bangalore, a range of plays emerged, that made one feel as if, finally, theatre in India had come to fruition. The range of plays that had been written during that period, not only took cognition of the rapidly industrialized India, and the changes it had brought into thinking patterns, life styles, and relationships, but also took in its fold the entire gamut of folk narratives and its structures and re-discovered the folk traditions to express a contemporary theatrical idiom.

This also became the appropriate moment when the theatre arts felt the need to link the past with the present, the urban with the rural, and to articulate creatively, contemporary issues in their own specific way, taking into account the cultural, social and political histories of their regions and country. A rich legacy of Sanskrit theatre and its dramaturgy, and the myriad regional folk traditions along with a sense of freedom that modernity brought, burst like a bright constellation on the proscenium stage.

Many playwrights borrowed narratives from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, regional folk tales and classical drama, and invested in them a fresh point of new,
creating new meanings and relevance. Dharamvir Bharati’s\textsuperscript{61} verse play \textit{Andha Yug} (blind age) is one of the most startling examples of this new form of writing. Widely performed, first by Satyadev Dubey\textsuperscript{62} in 1962, and then directed later by Ebrahim Alkazi\textsuperscript{63} for the National School of Drama in 1963. The play deals with the end of the war in Kurukshetra and centres around Ashwatthama, the son of Dronacharya, who is doomed to roam around in the ruins of a destroyed world. Bharati, drew a parallel with Ashwatthama’s loneliness in an existentialist way, creating an immediate connect, with the frustrations and uncertainties of the youth. In his epic work, he also showed a complete collapse of all value structures and the futility of war. Using the archetype characters from the Mahabharata, who were already familiar to the audience, he inverted the characters to give them allegorical and symbolic meanings. The central trope of blindness by the epic characters of \textit{Dhritarashtra} came to symbolize the failure of the political and social class. This had a deep resonance with the socio-political environment of the 60’s.

On the other hand, Mohan Rakesh\textsuperscript{64} returned to the classical Sanskrit poet, Kalidas and reconstructed his romance in a Hindi play called \textit{Ashadh Ka Ek Din}, which was directed in the early 1960’s by Shyamanand Jalan\textsuperscript{65}. In this play, Mohan Rakesh, rather then dwell on the breakdown of the man woman relationship, expanded the scope of the narrative to weave in the entire dilemma of state patronage versus individual freedom. In the same way Girish Karnad’s\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Tughlaq} (1964) recalled incidents from India history and connects them with the present political malaise of the 60’s. This play was conceived on a large scale, and most of the characters had a Shakespearean grandeur to them, along with a sense of the indigenous commercial drama that was popular in Karnataka. Most of the audience could not miss the connection between the anarchy of

\begin{itemize}
  \item Dharamvir Bharati (1926-1997): Hindi author born in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. A full time journalist, editing the popular Hindi magazine Dhammayug from 1960-1989. He wrote one full length play Andha yug in 1954, originally a radio play, now recognized as a classic in Modern Hindi drama.
  \item Satyadev Dubey (1936-): versatile and radical director in Marathi, Gujarati, English and Hindi theatre.
  \item Ebrahim Alkazi (1925-): pioneering director in English and Hindi theatre. In 1962, he took over as the director of The National School of Drama and continued until 1977.
  \item Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972): the most significant Hindi playwright of post-Independence India.
  \item Shyamanand Jalan (1934-): Hindi director, actor and organizer of several theatre organizations and institutions.
  \item Girish Karnad (1938-): Kannada actor-playwright, film director.
\end{itemize}
Tughlaq’s rule, creating an immediate parallel with the last days of Nehruvian chaos. But it was Vijay Tendulkar’s Ghashiram Kotwal, with its grand spectacle, music according to the sangeet natak tradition of the Marathi theatre that caught the imagination of the audience. The play deals with the political climate in Maharashtrian politics, during the time of Nana Phandnavis, and his Machiavellian intrigues in the midst of the degeneration in the Peshwa regime. He exposed the wily and corrupt Brahmins clergy of that time, creating a great discomfort, and for this a fusillade of criticism was hurled at him, by the middle-class Maharshtrian, who insisted on banning the play. Badal Sircar, Ebong Indrajit, or Evam Inderjit (written in 1965), was influenced by existentialist ideas, managing to create an immediate empathy with the angst of the contemporary Indian youth of the 60’s.

BV Karanth, in his production of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, combined elements from the Yakshaghana79 with modern dramaturgical tools to make sharp and incisive interventions that made us re-see the classic. B.V. Karanth because of his peripatetic temperament could not develop a repertory, through which his methodologies and ideas could be traced in a systematic and consistent manner. In a certain way his oeuvre can be discerned like flashes of light through productions like Malvikagnimitra, Hayavadana, and Jokumarswami, which have become milestones in the pantheon of Modern Indian drama. In a way, BV Karanth wanted to go back to the master performer and master practitioners of different cultures, and see what inspiration can be drawn from their tools and techniques to create a fresh vocabulary for training a modern actor. Not to imitate the traditional forms, but to attempt hybridization between two ways of working.

67 Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) trailblazing Marathi dramatist.
68 sangeet natak (literally means ‘music-dance’): glorious phenomena in Marathi theatre during the early decades of the twentieth century, representing an amalgam of two structures – singing of lyrics and theatrical acting.
69 Badal Sircar (1925-): Bengali dramatist. He formed his own company called Satabdi in 1967, which was determined to free theatre from the monetary nexus, and divisive transaction of ticket sales, by relying on voluntary donations.
70 Yakshaghana (Yaksha song): generic term referring mainly to a traditional form of Kannada theatre predominant in coastal Karnataka.
71 BV Karanth (1929-2002) One of the most eminent theatre director in contemporary India.
72 Malvikagnimitra: (Malavika and Agnimitra) is a five act love story written by Kalidas.
73 Hayavadana: a play written by Girish Karnad in 1971 took its leitmotif from an ancient tale.
74 Jokumaraswami: written by Chandrasekhar Kambar in 1972. is a folk-mythical play about fertility and impotence, and their implications extended to agriculture.
It the early 70’s, a need was felt to renew ancestral material and to reorient the body towards a theatre that moved away from realism, (when I refer to realism, I mean it as television, a documentary. Realism means facts, and facts mean nothing. When I talk about moving away from realism, I mean it in terms of an actor, searching for ‘truth’) this includes a body consciousness, a feel for music, dance and movement. It was motivated by a fervour, for a ‘lost inheritance’, a retrieval of a lost history in theatre due to colonial interjections in the taste, aesthetics and habits that had permeated the theatre due to its exposure to Western theatre norms. I think the richness of material available for theatre directors and actors comes from the above sources, and layers the perception. I do not believe that authenticity or purity is a virtue in theatre, I recognize theatre is a mixture of various interaction and influences, within which the origins and perspectives are assumed rather than denied. The influence of modern realism and that of dramatist like Ibsen and Shakespeare is enormous in India, despite the rich theatrical traditions that are inherent in our country. Theatre thrives on cross cultural fertilization, layering perceptions through encounters that lead to a pluralistic approach. This is not done by making an actor from Punjab, move like kathakali dancer, but by understanding the underlying principals behind the form, and seeing how to make connections, and share exchange.

The single most far reaching impact that Ebrahim Alkazi made on the consciousness of the Hindi theatre fraternity, was to make them realize that working in the theatre, was not like joining a hobby class, but entering a profession, which required a similar degree of seriousness, commitment and dedication as being a doctor or a lawyer. His meticulous, well researched productions, with an over emphasis on detailing and verisimilitude in costume, set and properties, saw a theatre that was arching towards realism.

But the contradiction was, that post-independence, realism was looked upon as a colonial import that needed to be rejected, for that reason Indian theatre zoomed into traditional forms as training tools, in search for a form, as well as in terms of stories. Out
of this search, emerged the playwriting of Karnad, Kambar\textsuperscript{75} and to some extent Tendulkar, who in some of their major works, took their cue from the past, to examine the present.

“A hundred crowded years of urban theatre seemed to have left almost nothing to hang on to, to take off from. And where was one to being again? Perhaps by looking at our audience again, by trying to understand what experience this audience expected to receive from theatre. This at least partly meant looking again at traditional forms.”\textsuperscript{76}

From the above statements, some significant questions emerge. How has the "canon" of Indian theatre been formed? Under what conditions of production and reception has Indian theatre evolved? How do notions of orientalism and cultural nationalism relate to Indian theatre? How have Indian playwrights and directors drawn upon Indian mythology and "folk" material? How have playwrights related to history?

How do we understand the so-called "folk" theatre done almost exclusively by urban directors and actors, for urban audiences, in proscenium spaces? What have been the stage histories of some of the major Indian plays of our times? How have different directors interpreted these plays in different ways in actual performance? How has the understanding of these plays changed with changing times?

The newly constituted National School of Drama, along with the Sangeet Natak Akademi\textsuperscript{77} in Delhi, became important centres where training programs, exchanges and encounters, gave the right impetus to the nascent theatre scene. Apart from this, workshops, festivals, both national and state festivals, allowed theatre audiences to see works from different parts of the country. A vibrant amateur theatre existed in most states and made its presence felt also on the national scene. New auditoriums, theatre groups as well as theatre journals carrying interviews, reviews, debates and critical essay added to the escalating theatre activity in the country.

\textsuperscript{75} Chandrasekhar Kambar (1938-) Kannada Playwright, poet, novelist and actor
\textsuperscript{76} Girish Karnad’s seminal essay: ‘In Search of a New Theatre
\textsuperscript{77} Sangeet Natak Akademi- established in 1953 for the promotion of music, dance and theatre and funded by the department of culture ,government of India
It would be no exaggeration to say, that Karnad was the main harbinger of the self-reflective theorizing about Indian theatre that began under the patronage of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, which then culminated on relevance of traditional art forms in discovering a contemporary theatre idiom.

This was in the seventies, when the notion of “The theatre of roots,” a coin phrased by Dr Suresh Awasthi, took over the imagination of not only the cultural agencies but also theatre directors. The Sangeet Natak Akademi started giving grants to young theatre workers to explore regional and vernacular traditions and forms. Since money has its own way of changing people, a lot of young directors jumped onto this bandwagon. This led to an array of spurious and cosmetic productions, where folk traditions were ‘othered’ on the stage. Western realism was the centre, and the folk provided the exotic periphery. We became our own worst orientalists! Which is not to say that the intentions of the Sangeet Natak Akademi were not honourable. On the contrary, there was an assumption that this would lead to a surge of rediscovery of lost form and tradition. But it worked in reverse, pushing the traditional and the folk into a more marginal role then ever before. This led to a trend that exists even now: the cultural ‘sexiness’ of rural performers.

But somewhere it also opened a door, which allowed the hybrid to reinvent itself under the proscenium arch with fresh text and performers. It was also hoped that this would lead to a serious and creative negotiation with the dynamics of postcolonial India encountering its traditional and folk disciplines. This hybrid danced, and was applauded by everyone: but it provoked fresh debate about legitimacy, appropriation and relevance. Despite this rhetoric, it was essential to view this with a critical and self-objective eye. The productions that took cognizance of the changing social and political reality, whether within the paradigm of the traditional or from the lap of western classics, had to be seen in the light of the political, social and gender issues that they raised. I could never

78 Sangeet natak Akademi: apex autonomous academy to promote Indian music, dance and theatre. Established 1953 and funded by the department of culture, government of India.
79 Dr. Surshe Awasthi 1918-2001) a noted scholar of folk and traditional theater of India. As secretary, Sangeet Natak Akademi (1965-1975), he sponsored folk and traditional performing troupes both for public performances in urban centers, and also for documentation.
comprehend the viability behind this debate. What already existed as traditional could not be appropriated by the people it belonged to. Yet no one had any problems in using realism - a western import!

Karnad’s *Hayavadana* (1971) was the first post-Independence play to derive its narrative from a folk tale, and to employ tools that were non-realistic, using conventions from the traditional and folk, the hand-held curtain, chorus, mixing of real and fictional characters, along with music and dance. His *Naga Mandala*, is the story of an unhappy bride, who fills her loneliness by conjuring fantasies, dreams and illusions to give meaning to her life. Stories which then get a life of their own and start functioning independently from her. The story about a snake becoming her lover, after drinking the magic potion, can be perceived on many levels. There is the literal narrative - a snake assuming the role of her husband. And on a completely different register the transformation of the husband into the snake assumes a philosophical tenor.

Karnad explores the meaning of creativity by presenting a complex world where fictional characters and real characters intermingle and the lines between the visible and the invisible are blurred. What makes his work fascinating is that even though it is set in the traditional/folk format, it examines issues that are contemporary.

When the husband discovers that his wife is pregnant he is furious and accuses her of infidelity, she is made to undergo a version of *agni-pareeksha*: (an ancient form of proving innocence). She decides to undertake the *nag pareeksha* to hold the snake in her hand, and attest her innocence. When she plunges her hand in the snake pit, the snake is pulled out and he coils around the women neck. This visual manifestation of innocence makes the villagers declare her a goddess.

In other words, the woman can be either a whore or a goddess, nothing in between. And, as in the Ramayana, the test is only for her, not the man. The man is never criticized or punished for his brutish behaviour. In this play Karnad suggests that the folk tales have a unique potential for a radical projection of women, and sexual fidelity. In
both *Hayavadana*, and *Naga Mandala*, the object of desire replaces the husband, who is the oppressor and allows the husband to be transformed *magically*.

**The moving towards the ‘new’ in Theatre**

What does the word ‘new’ mean in a culture that has several ancient forms of performances still being practiced? Some traditions have long lost their impulse and continue only as an empty ritual, or as a cultural habit, and sometimes there is a desperate attempt to preserve something that is dead and gone, and flog it like a vestigial survival or as a taxidermist does, preserve it as a museum piece.

The question that comes to my mind is, how does a theatre practitioner manage to slice through the layers of a stratified society, and draw imaginative inspiration from a tradition that is contrary to his own? How does one marry tradition and modernity? Are tradition and modernity two opposing forces? Where exactly does tradition end and modernity begin? Are they two separate warring polarities or are they part of the same continuum? Is tradition seen as stasis and contemporaneity as a living expression? And how do we bring these configurations into a creative ambit?

“I once saw a rehearsal at the Comedie Francaise80, a very young actor stood in front of a very old one and spoke and mimed the role with him like a reflection in a glass. This must not be confused with the great tradition, say, of the Noh actors passing knowledge orally from father to son. There it is meaning that is being communicated- and meaning never belongs to the past”81.

Ratan Thiyam82, with his “Chorus Company”, which has been in existence since 1976, did productions that mostly dealt with themes from the Epics. His play

---

80 Commedia dell’arte or Comedie Francaise: Was one of the most unique developments in the history of theatre in Europe. It originated in Italy in the late sixteenth century, and its influence spread all over Europe, becoming one of the most potent forces in shaping comedy in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, with echoes continuing in the twentieth century.

81 The Empty Space- Peter Brook: Page 14

82 Ratan Thiyam (1948-): Manipuri director, who runs a highly successful theatre company ‘Chorus’. Living in Manipur, he has built a complex for his company where the artist live in a collective, sharing all day-to-day activities.
Chakravyuha combined temporal and visual imagery through music, movement, sound and martial art traditions of Manipur. His three years training at the National School of Drama, gave him the ‘edge’ to negotiate traditional tools, to create a new model for theatre. Pageantry, elaborate costume, complex group compositions and spectacle became the Thiyam signature. His work invites an audience to see myths as dynamic, with the potential for exploring the present through evoking the archetypes of the past. In Trivandrum, Kavalam Narayana Panicker runs the Sopanam theater group, and his production of Bhasa’s Madhyama Vyaygam is linked to the context of the folk and traditional disciplines, in an attempt to invent fresh models for contemporary theatre. Panikkar often centres his plays around myths and parables, with the suggestive and metaphorical dimensions of poetry. Working with a company of Chakyar, his choreography has both emotional and psychological depth. Both Thiyam and Panicker’s productions is, steeped in the flavour of indigenousness, where actually visualized for a proscenium theatre, within an urban context. Their plays lent themselves to an allegorical reading to the myth, which opened it to new social meanings. This work has the quality that TS Eliot calls “The present moment of the past.” Yet Manipur and Kerala are always present in the works of both these directors.

Most of the directors in the 70’s and 80’s somewhere recognized that Indian theatre was changing. Some forms were dying, while others were renewing themselves, and new ones were evolving, as society itself was undergoing a transformation on many levels. Parallel to this was the growth of a theatre genre that tilted towards realism. It was ironic that even before western theatre practitioners had started turning towards the east for inspiration, their counterparts in India had already started a search for the very same...

---

83 Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (1928-): Malayalam theatre director, who has profoundly impacted the theatre practice in Kerala.

84 Chakyar; The hereditary custodian of Kutiyattam.

64. Thomas Steams Eliot, OM (26 September 1888–4 January 1965), was a poet, playwright and literary critic. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. Among his most famous writings are the poems The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The Waste Land, The Hollow Men, Ash Wednesday and Four Quartets; the plays Murder in the Cathedral and The Cocktail Party; Present of the Past Drafts of Memory in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”
elements in the west. It was as if both turned their eyes towards each other, in an endeavour to enrich and expand their own theatrical vocabulary.

This led to a division, a neat binary, between a theatre that uses a proscenium stage, and is influenced by western realism, and on the other hand, a search for an “Indianness”, a euphemism for a work that was situated in our cultural framework. Indian theatre, or Indian theatre directors enthusiastically involved in theatrical practice post independence, needed something new to act as referent. As realism was seen as westernized, a strange sort of de-colonization started happening, where the hybrid was celebrated and internalized and found a place in the urban theatre scene.

“Richard Schechner is not afraid or mixing (even of levelling) cultures; indeed he located this as the principal characteristic of any cultural fact. He displays a robust optimism. Perhaps excessively so, in claiming for each individual the possibility of a ‘culture of choice’-of learning and voluntarily adopting a chosen culture. Although this is an individual act, its presuppositions and consequences are political. However, rather then entering into a debate concerning the political legitimacy of intercultural practice, he prefers to position himself in terms of exchange and professional ethics. Exchange is only possible, he suggests, as swap or barter, i.e. at a level of artistic equality between professionals who mutually recognize each other as travelling companions. In this sense, to his credit, he defuses the question of hierarchical relations between very different cultures, instead turning his attention to questions of working relations. He is quite right to refuse to be intimidated by the new inquisitors of “political correctness” for he refuses to deny the admission to a culture, and to a political and cultural reflection, of those who have the good fortune to be born into a culture that they are supposed to represent and defend, as if it were some inalienable and non-negotiable birthright or national asset86”.

Countering this premise, Rustom Bharucha87 identifies this as a non liberal vision located ‘within the comfort of a metropolis, where cultures can be readily consumed along with their cuisine (Bharucha 2000:43) He wonders how far India’s low caste

---

86 The Intercultural Performance Reader: Patrice Pavis On Richard Schechner: Page 41
87 Rustom Bharucha: write, director, dramaturg, and cultural critic. Resides in Kolkota
Dalits participate in the ‘culture of choice,’ and he asks whether ethnicities are so fluid that they can be ‘bartered’

In my own work with the Naqqal form for the last twenty years, my aim was to see if there were elements in the theatrical vocabulary that I could connect with, rather than get tangled in cultural references or debates about appropriation. I work as an artist, and the search for a form, energy and structure is what I am constantly investigating, and I go wherever I can find it. This is not an attempt to lift traditional or folk forms ‘as it is’, and to graft the indigenous in a mindless manner. But to explore different theatrical ways of working, which then becomes for me a separate act of creation. The idea of creating new ‘ideograms’ for a new way of working, and for allowing meaning to be illuminated was what I was exploring.

“It is not, however, a question of seeking fixed ideograms as, for example in the Peking Opera, in which, in order to portray a particular flower, the actor makes a specific unchangeable gesture inherited from centuries of tradition. Now ideograms must constantly be sought and their composition appear immediate and spontaneous......The final results is a living form possessing its own logic.”

Dalit is a term for a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables (outcastes) or of low caste. Dalits are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over India and speak various languages.

Naqqal- (from the Persian word, ‘to imitate’) rural itinerant actors from Punjab.

88 Dalit is a term for a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables (outcastes) or of low caste. Dalits are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over India and speak various languages.

89 Naqqal- (from the Persian word, ‘to imitate) rural itinerant actors from Punjab.

90 Jerzy Grotowski was born in Rzeszów, Poland on 11 August 1933 and died on 14 August 1999, aged. Grotowski made his directorial debut in 1958 with the production “Gods of Rain” which introduced Grotowski’s bold approach to text, which he would continue to develop throughout his career, influencing many subsequent theatre artists. It was later that same year that Grotowski moved to Opole were he began to assemble a company of actors and artistic collaborators which would help him realize his unique vision. It was also here that he began to experiment with approaches to performance training which enabled him to shape the young actors - initially allocated to his provincial theatre - into the transformational artists they eventually became. Among the many productions for which his theatre company would soon become famous were "Orpheus" by Jean Cocteau, "Shakuntala" based on text by Kalidasa, "Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)" by Adam Mickiewicz and "Akropolis" by Stanislaw Wyspianski. This last production was the first complete realization of Grotowski's notion of ‘poor theatre’. In it the company of actors (representing concentration camp prisoners) build the structure of a crematorium around the audience while acting out stories from the Bible and Greek mythology. This conceptualization had particular resonance for the audiences in Opole, as the Auschwitz concentration camp was only sixty miles away. "Akropolis" was a play that received much attention, and could be said to have launched Grotowski's career internationally due to inventive and aggressive promotion among visiting foreign scholars and theatre professionals. A film of the production was made with an introduction by Peter Brook, which constitutes one of the most accessible and concrete records of Grotowski's work.
Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker argues that the rubric of postcolonial studies is of severely limited use when studying theatre for three reasons: that theatre is performative rather than discursive and textual; that theatre is necessarily local and contextual, rather than marked by "migrancy" and "exile" that postcolonial print culture so valorises; and theatre is dependent on indigenous languages and performative traditions rather than on Westernized modernity and Euro-phonic writing. She also does much to enrich our appreciation of Indian theatre as a multilingual field, where practically all major playwrights get translated and performed in a number of Indian languages with remarkable speed.

To take one spectacular example: Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* was directed by Satyadev Dubey in Hindi in Mumbai, by B.V. Karanth in Hindi in Delhi and Kannada in Bangalore, by Rajinder Nath in Hindi in Delhi, all in 1972, and by Vijaya Mehta in Marathi in Mumbai the following year. In fact, some important plays have been performed in translation before they appeared in the original language of composition - both Karnad's *Agni Mattu Male* (*Fire and Rain*) and Govind Deshpande's *Chanakya Vishnugupta* were first done in Hindi rather than Kannada or Marathi respectively. Also, many leading directors such as Satyadev Dubey, B.V. Karanth and Vijaya Mehta routinely work in two or three or even four languages.

How do we understand the so-called "folk" theatre done almost exclusively by urban directors and actors, for urban audiences, in proscenium spaces? What have been the stage histories of some of the major Indian plays of our times? How have different directors interpreted these plays in different ways in actual performance? How has the understanding of these plays changed with changing times?

---

91 Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker: is associate professor of theatre and drama in the university of Wisconsin-Madison.
92 Satyadev Dubey (1936-): versatile and radical theatre director in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and English theatre.
93 Rajinder Nath (1934-): Hindi director noted for his policy of exclusively staging contemporary Indian theatre.
94 Govind Purushottam Deshpande (1938-) Marathi playwright.
95 Vijaya Mehta (1934-): Marathi actress and director.
In popular imagination Habib Tanvir's name is linked with folk theatre. While he started his career, folk theatre was not considered fashionable or political correct. In a certain way he is considered a pioneer of folk theatre in India, and his relationship to folk theatre is distinctive, in terms of his preoccupations with contemporary theatre practice. His political and social consciousness was shaped in the crucible of left-wing politics. 

Habib Tanvir, dramatist and poet, and the director of the Naya theatre, works with actors who belong to the Chattisghar region, in Madhya Pradesh. From 1947 onwards, directors like Tanvir in Hindi and Sombhu Mitra in Bengali made new strides in experimenting with vital elements of tradition combined with a thoroughly contemporary sensibility. Their 'New Theatre' movement sought to combine the best of the old and the new. Tanvir's Naya Theatre company was composed of traditional nacha (dance) performers of Chhattisgarh and employed their music, songs, movements, dance and poetry. The productions were in Chattisgarhi, Hindi and Urdu.

'Agra Bazaar', first staged in 1954, drew appreciative audiences when recently performed as part of the Prithvi theatre festival in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore (2007). The play is a celebration of ordinary life - it is about the poet Nazir Akbarabadi, whose verses were popular with Hindus and Muslims in the bazaars of Agra city. A cucumber-seller, a kite-seller, a courtesan and a beggar were among his most devoted fans.

His Charan Das Chor, a wholly improvised play, was a significant turning point in Tanvir's career. It was not only a great success in Chhattisgarh but also in Delhi. Charan Das Chor, performed in 1975, broke fresh ground and is till date a play that releases unbridled verve, unleashed energy, sucking the audience into its creative vortex, no matter where it is performed. His interest in folk artist and his decision to work with them stems from both an ideological and aesthetic choice. There is a deep connection between left-wing politics and popular traditions. His commitment to the common man and their predicament can be seen in the larger context of it being part of his socialistic

---

96 Habib Tanvir (1923-2009) Hindi and Urdu playwright, director, author, manager and poet. One of the most significant playwright/director's of post-Independence India. Born In Raipur in a orthodox Muslim family, he started his career in Bombay in an ammunition factory. He also wrote film reviews in English, poems in Urdu and joined the Indian Peoples Theatre Association(IPTA) as an actor and director.
concerns. And how, through theatre, folk artist and the dispossessed could be empowered.

It was the urge to involve the people that led to the development of a new genre in theatre, which was the theatre of protest, and Utpal Dutt97 played a major role in establishing it. It was in 1950-1960 (post-Independence) period that he created plays that lampooned the Congress party, by making short burlesque performances, which were staged at leftist rallies in cities and villages. In the 1970’s he turned to the folk traditions of the Jatra to communicate radical messages that definitely showed his left-wing political proclivities. The topics ranged from history, to contemporary politics. Simultaneous to this, Badal Sircar98 resorted to the documentary narrative method to express his political affiliations.

The Third theatre movement initiated by Badal Sircar in the early 70’s was a non-proscenium, non verbal, theatre, that through the body and gestures, explored social problems, in which the aesthetics, concepts and dramaturgy of street theatre developed. His work had a profound influence on Indian theatre, and his way of working became a model for young students, political and social activists, to perform theatre on the streets, on carts, in village compounds, without money, without all the accoutrements that are normally associated with establishment theatre- costumes, lights, sets etc.

These experiments were theatrical counterparts to the struggle that was taking place in the streets and the villages - the struggle to liberate society from exploitation,

97 Utpal Dutt (1929-1993): revolutionary actor, director, and dramatist of the Bengali stage. A staunch Marxist, he joined the Indian People Theatre Association (IPTA), but left after a couple of years. He also established himself as one of the foremost proponents of the political theatre with a pronounced leftist orientation.

98 Badal Sarkar (or Badal Sircar) (1925 - ) is a famous Indian dramatist. He has written more than fifty plays of which Ebong Indrajit and Basi Khabar are well known literary pieces. He is actively involved with Bengali theatre. He rose to prominence in the 1970's and was one of the leading figures in the revival of street theater in Bengal. He revolutionized Bengali theatre with his angst-ridden, anti-establishment plays during the Naxalite movement. He has been awarded the Padma Shri in 1972, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1968 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship.
inequality and injustice. This theatre of the agit-prop\textsuperscript{99}, became extremely popular with students and activists who wanted to use the medium of theatre as a means of communicating political and social ideas for change. Street theatre became a pulpit to preach rhetorical and didactic messages, rather than be seen as an alternative vehicle for artistic expression. Because of the above mentioned factors, street theatre was also going through its own artistic dilemma. In the name of using theatre for change it was losing out on certain basic requirements of aesthetics and taste in its staging. Badal Sircar succinctly put it by saying “the term ’street theatre’ is composed of two words. Our primary concern should be the second word- theatre, otherwise the very purpose of this purposeful theatre will be defeated, however strong and important the content may be\textsuperscript{100}”.

Waiting in the wings were host of new directors, actors who surged forth in the late eighties and early nineties, who surged forth, dropping baggage, castrating the moribund, taking risks? Suddenly large events and the spectacular were replaced by the quotidian. This shift in emphasis from the collective to the personal led to a narrative change, where interior spaces of the character where explored, and the feature of everyday ‘ordinary’ living became central to the text. Amal Allana\textsuperscript{101}, Kiirti Jain\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{99} Agitprop is a portmanteau of agit/7ation and propaganda. The term originated in Bolshevist Russia (the future Soviet Union). The term propaganda in the Russian language didn't bear any negative connotation at that time. It simply meant “dissemination of ideas”. In the case of agitprop, the ideas to be disseminated were those of communism, including explanations of the policy of the Communist Party and the Soviet state. The term “agitprop” gave rise to agitprop theatre, a highly-politicized leftist theatre originated in Europe of 1920s-1930s and spread to America as well, with plays of Bertolt Brecht being a notable example. Gradually the term “agitprop” came to describe any kind of leftist politicized art.

\textsuperscript{100} Our street theatre, sangeet natak, 69, July September, 1983

\textsuperscript{101} Mrs. Amal Allana was born in 1947 in Mumbai. She graduated from the National School of Drama in 1968, majoring in Direction and winning the Girish Ghosh and Bharat Puruskar Awards. Her further studies in Direction were in the Berliner Ensemble, the National Theatre, Weimar, and the State Theatre at Dresden, GDR. On her return to India she began her professional career and set up ‘The Workshop’, a theatre group, along with her husband Dr. Nissar Allana, a stage and lighting designer.

\textsuperscript{102} Kirti Jain was born in 1947. Professor and Former Director, National School Drama. A director and writer in English and Hindi, Kirti Jain was a faculty member of the National School of Drama when she was pitchforked into the position of its skipper during rough weather. She served the longest tenure (1988-95) after Ebrahim Alkazi.
Anuradha Kapur, Maya Krishna Rao, Royston Abel and Veenapani Chawla, were not telling similar stories, and their ways of working were also to a great extent contrary from each other. Yet the similarity of concerns that they shared was based on their idea, was not only to retell the stories in a new form but also in new configurations. None of them were working on the identical lines or taking the same positions yet somewhere they belong to a similar family of minds. Their work and text was non-linear, and not clear-cut, and also non-sequential. They brought in contradictory art forms—films, slides, music, video clips, like a collage of images blasting away at conventions and clichés. These directors confronted the new, and saw tradition not in any esoteric terms, but as part of their heritage, which has to be not only taken for granted, but radicalized, sourced without apology or ideological posturing.

Veenapani Chawla, straddled tradition with modernity within the process of transition. This was achieved by a dexterous imagination, where traditional forms, Kalaripayattu, Koodiyattam and Kathakali, were confronted and made anew. Her

---

103 Dr. Anuradha Kapur. Born 1951, Director of the National School of Drama, New Delhi. She has written widely on theatre and her book, ‘Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: the Ramlila at Ramnagar’ was published by Seagull Books, Calcutta, (1993;2004). She has taught and directed in India and abroad and her theatre work is recognized extensively, nationally as well as internationally.

104 Maya Krishna Rao (born 1953) is a visiting faculty at the National School of Drama, Delhi, where she teaches Acting. Maya has trained in Kathakali from 1961, specializing in the male role, and worked in Theatre-in Education Companies in the U.K. and India. Presently, she acts, dances and directs herself. Her Company, Vismayah (founded in 1993), creates new theatre by drawing upon Indian traditions of dance, music, writing and other arts. Vismayah’s productions include Khol Do, The Job, Rainmaker, Departures, The 4-Wheel-Drive-Come-to-me-Mr. Sharma-Body-Fat-Murdered-Show and A Deep Fried Jam. Besides travelling widely in India, these shows have been to several dance and theatre festivals abroad.

105 Abhilash Pillai Diploma in Theatre Production and Stage Management from RADA, London; Post Graduate Diploma in Design and Direction from NSD; graduation in Theatre Arts from Calicut University, Kerala. Been a Trainee Director at Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, U.K. Directed plays in various Indian languages and English, and is a major directorial force in India.

106 Veenapani Chawla- (1947-) works in Pondicherry.

107 Kalaripayattu: Malayalam Dravidian martial art from Kerala in south India. Kalaripayattu means "practice of the arts of the battlefield." Possibly one of the oldest fighting systems in existence. It includes strikes, kicks, grappling, preset forms, weaponry and healing methods.

108 Koodiyattam or Kutiyattam is a form of Sanskrit theatre traditionally performed in the state of Kerala, India. Performed in the Sanskrit language in Hindu temples, it is believed to be 2000 years old. It is officially recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

109 Kathakali is a highly stylized classical Indian dance-drama noted for its attractive make-up of characters, their elaborate costumes, detailed gestures and well-defined body movements presented in tune with the anchor playback music and complementary percussion. It originated in the country's southern state of Kerala during the 16th century AD, approximately between 1555 and 1605, and has been updated over the
approach is metaphysical, involving a search for the spirit of the form, through which ancient signs and symbols could be explored, and made anew. As an artist she felt she had the right to reclaim, the legacy of the traditional arts, albeit in her own fashion.

Royston Abel and Anuradha Kapur sourced their works from Shakespeare. ‘Romeo and Juliet’, ‘Othello: a play in Black and white’, ‘Much Ado about Nautanki’ - showed how race and gender are constructed, and how race is a partially imagined reality. The five-act structure is reconstituted and then reassembled. The internal logic of the Shakespeare play is maintained, but reprogrammed in a new and lively way. The universal content is retained, but the differences of setting, context, local characters, and language and historicity change. As a result Shakespeare becomes less of a bard, and more of a ‘bhaiya’.

Along with Shakespeare, Anuradha Kapur has done some innovative and daring collaboration with painters, Nalani Malani\(^1\), Neelima Sheikh and Arpita Singh\(^1\). Moving screens, mobile installations, painted backdrops, created an unusual interaction and integration with the actors on the stage. Her production, of Antigone, was a collaboration with filmmaker Ein Lall where personal testimonies of the Gujarat victims added a horrifying extension to an already charged play. In one scene Antigone stands alone, trembling hands, outstretched, facing back, as if pushing destiny away. At that moment the character of Antigone, becomes emblematic, a political and historical construct.

The grass root cultural movement, Ninasam, in the village of Heggodu in Karnataka, is an iterant company, that travels across the length and breath of Karnataka, with performances, film shows, publications and is also involved with social, ecological and literacy programs. This organization has not been able to be replicated by any other state, and indicates the triumph of vision over circumstances. How an individual, through a dream that was translated through human endeavour, becomes capable achieving years with improved looks, refined gestures and added themes besides more ornate singing and precise drumming.

\(^1\) Nalani Malani, Neelima Sheikh, Arpita Singh: eminent visual artist

51
monumental success despite the limitations of support, in terms of organizational funds or infrastructure, but by the sheer dint of will power and human management. For this KV Subbanna was awarded the Magsaysay award in 1991. His repertory also dissolves the debate about rural/urban divide by creating a theatre idiom, that takes a text from any part of the world, and makes it its own, by trying to find the underlying resonance between a text that is ostensibly ‘foreign’ but deals with issues that are human. The credit for this institution goes to the untiring effort, and qualities of leadership that are deposited in its founder K.V. Subbanna. His insistence on doing theatre within a community, to serve the needs of the community, helped in solidifying a concept of theatre that was unique to Ninasam.

As we are aware, that ancestral traditions and cultures are indeed in the process of being eroded by the relentless onslaught of globalization. All performing arts traditions do have to contend with the indifference markets have towards them, and it is a matter of great concern. However, this modernity brings with it new technology and connectivity that can allow new forms of expression and survival to be generated. For instance, mobile phones, the internet, digital recording equipment, video CDs and DVDs are indeed useful for archiving and distribution of performances. What is the greater threat is the values that such transformations generate. It is no big secret that the interest in theatre, as a process where audiences could generate private or political memory, is now relegated to television and Star Plus. The real political and emotional question for us performers becomes one of response: how do we respond to this ‘threat’? Is it possible to not perceive this rapid change as a threat, but as a challenge to renew our own practices and traditions? New combinations, exciting new techniques of survival that generate new aesthetic

112 The Ramon Magsaysay Award was established in April 1957 by the trustees of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund based in New York City. With the concurrence of the Philippine government, the prize was created to commemorate Ramon Magsaysay, the late president of the Philippines, and to perpetuate his example of integrity in government, courageous service to the people, and pragmatic idealism within a democratic society. The Ramon Magsaysay Award is often considered Asia's Nobel Prize.

113 K.V. Subbanna (1932-2007) Important innovator in the development of Kannada theatre as a dramatist, director, actor and organizer. An agriculturist by profession, in 1949, he developed a theatre group called, Nilakantheswara Natyaseva sangha, which Subbanna developed into Ninasam.
motifs, are our new challenges. And theatre, as we all know, survives on challenge. A comfortable theatre without any pressures or political/economic problems is really a fantasy that goes against its own history. Theatre has been born and bred in the face of challenges. This is its sustaining power.

Punjabi Theatre: A Historical Background.

The northern state of Punjab (which prior to partition stretched from West Punjab in modern Pakistan eastwards to Delhi, and even after 1947, encompassed the present Indian state of Harayana as well as parts of Himachal Pradesh) has a social and political history quite distinct from any other state. Its folk traditions, in particular, have not had a rational historical continuity for complex and multilayered reasons. As, invaders found Punjab the easiest point of entry into India, political instability through the centuries made the most inroads into old social orders. Independence in 1947 fragmented Punjab stimulating changes that created contradictions in the values and aesthetics of the people. The division of Punjab between Pakistan and India disrupted the people's identity. A shattered psyche hovered tentatively between an articulation of dead chauvinism and an aspiration to move towards a suburban culture.

Commercialization, affected by popular cinema, pushed the arts in directions that had no resemblance to their origins. Inner compulsions of traditions that had always supported the conventional forms of theatre were submerged under mass consumerist entertainment. This led folk theatre forms to float, with no sustaining force to anchor them. In another significant development, the Punjabi language started being associated with the Sikh religion, influencing non-Sikh rural performers to switch over to Hindi, which had not been part of their creative expression. Consequently the folk forms were severed not only from their language, but also from memory, emotions, sounds, images and history. All Punjabi traditional theatre forms thus, raise the problematic question of garnering the essential from currently vague, superficial and faceless idiom, because of all these factors.
It was only in the twentieth century that drama came to be written for the purpose of performance. Before that what existed was an oral tradition of *kissa* (love stories) *vars* (heroic tales) and *jangnamas* (battle narratives). These oral narratives were full of verve, robust imagery and passionate poetry and were sung and enacted in the grand tradition of the strolling mistrels and balladeers. *Bichittar Natak* (the unique or unusual play) which is considered to be written by Guru Gobind Singh, (seventeenth century) is replete with vivid stories about the previous births of Guru Gobind Singh, along with the story of warring brothers, of journeys to Benaras, all captured in bold and colourful strokes. The document attributed to Guru Gobind Singh captures the milieu of that period but was definitely not a text that could lend itself to enactment. The book is a compendium of incidents, songs, *vars* and stories gathered during the seventeenth century, and a few religious hymns. It is more in the nature of a secular document, rather then a religious one. A huge and raging controversy surrounds this document and the word *natak* is used generically, rather then literally as there is nothing in the book that even vaguely resembles theatre. But the Sikh gurus were definitely aware of theatre, and acknowledged it in oblique ways: Guru Arjan the fifth Sikh guru wrote in the sixteenth century ...

---

114 Bachitra Natak by Dr Jodh Singh Head, Encyclopedia of Sikhsim. Punjabi University, Patiala.

BACHITRA NATAK (bachitra = marvellous, wondrous + natak = drama, play) is the name given a complex of compositions, commonly attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Guru or prophet teacher of the Sikh faith, assembled in his book, the Dasam Granth: hence, the name dasam (tenth) granth (book), i.e. Book of the Tenth Master to distinguish it from the earlier work, the Adi (first, primary or original) Granth, now venerated as Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The most familiar section of compositions collectively called Bachitra Natak Granth is the Bachitra Natak itself, some of the others being Chandi Chritra Ukti Bilas, Chandi Chritra, Var Sri Bhagauti Ji Ki (or Chandi di Var), Gian Prabodh, and Chaubis Autar.

The composition of Bachitra Natak may have begun in 1688, at Paonta during the first spurt of Guru Gobind Singh's literary activity. The date (Bk 1755/AD 1698) of completion of the section "Ramavatar," as mentioned in that section, may also be that of the completion of the whole work. In any case, autobiographical Bachitra Natak must have been completed before 1699, when Guru Gobind Singh inaugurated the Khalsa Panth, for the text does not refer to the event. The poem, however, contains a detailed description of the battle of Bhangani which took place in 1688, which lays down the other end of the date, i.e. the work was completed after 1688.

115 Guru Arjan Dev regards the world as ultimately Maya or illusion, and the life of man as a tableau of light and shade, but the Nirvana may not be achieved except through an acceptance of the reality of this unreality, and a proper disposition of the allotted role in the phantasmagoria of life. To that extent, the relative concreteness or solidity of the world is to be endorsed as a measure of understanding. So long as man has a role to play, the artefact of the stage or the theatre has to be taken for granted. For, it has thus pleased the Creator to bring about the world and people it with multiples of His self. And the whole...
Bhai Vir Singh’s *Raja Lakhdata* (1910) did not prescribe to the qualifications of being considered a play. The content of this verse play was in the nature of Sikh doctrines, more suitable for a religious discourse then for a dramatic rendering. Similarly, Aroor Singh Taib’s *Sukkha Sumundar* (Dry Sea; 1912) along with Gurbux Singh’s *Natak Manmohan* (Mannohan’s Drama) were more like indictments on social issues, such as prostitution, the evils of liquor and the dangers of the English education. Most of these plays in minor tenor did not have any impact on the minds or hearts of the people. They were more in the nature of being postured as preachy, proselytizing and self-righteous evangelical, and certainly not the stuff that makes for good drama.

Paradoxically the genesis of Modern Punjabi Theatre started with an Irish woman called Norah Richards, who came to India in 1911 with her husband Philip Ernest who was an Irish Unitarian minister, and had come to Lahore to teach English at Dyal Singh College. As an amateur actress she had been associated with The Irish National Theatre in Dublin. In Lahore she directed *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and its overwhelming success encouraged her to direct many more Shakespearean productions with her students. She was familiar with staging Shakespeare plays, as she had been a member of a Shakespearean company in England as an amateur actress. She succeeded in not only making Shakespeare accessible, but also created an emotional connection between the plays of Shakespeare, and the Punjabi audience. This experience became a catalyst in stimulating Punjabi students to delve into their own myths and social issues, and garner from it an idiom that was local, vernacular and regional. Norah had given the students of the college, a new slogan ‘Punjabi plays by Punjabi authors about Punjab for a Punjabi audience’.

In 1912 she initiated a competition of one-act plays which gave an impetus to local writers to write plays that dealt with issues that were regional and indigenous. From creation moves according to a predestined plan. Many a time has the grand show on earth been mounted and dismantled. It is not given to creature man to fully comprehend the essence of reality.
this competition two significant plays emerged, *Dhulan* (The bride) by Iswar Chander Nanda and *Dina Marriage Procession* by Rajendra Lal Sahni, as the culmination of her efforts. These two plays, written in the realistic mode, had an evangelical zeal, which today seems outdated and irrelevant. Richards clearly set standards for theatre where none existed. To reflect on the work purely in terms of nostalgia could cause problems, but to throw out nostalgia and memory would disturb history. It is probably best, therefore, to see her work in the framework of those times. This laid the foundation of Punjabi theatre. However Richard soon realized that it was important for Punjabis to work in their own language, and wrote a few one-act plays based on local themes and stories (*Valmiki, Sati, Mother-Earth*). These were similar in structure and style to the village comedies and morality plays that were prevalent in Ireland at that time.

Iswar Chander Nanda’s first full-length play was *Subhadra* (1922), that set him up firmly on the path of playwriting, away from the amateurish initial attempts at writing one act plays. It dealt with the issue of widow remarriage, yet despite the structure of a three act play, along with the progressive theme, the handling of the content was tentative and hesitant in that it belied the boldness of the theme. Even though he was inspired by the writings of Henrik Ibsen, his famous play-Lily *Da Viah* (Lily’s Marriage; 1928) was an appeal for love marriage, against the soulless practice of arranged marriages. Once again, despite the theme that promoted progressive ideas by supporting crucial issues of his day, such as the emancipation of women, his tone was timid and not forceful enough to make any impact. When India was partitioned in 1947, Norah moved to Andretta in Kangra valley, where she died in 1971 at the age of 95.

After her death Punjabi theatre could not locate a grid on which to peg their assertions in the absence of a living theatrical tradition. Punjabi theatre got submerged under mass consumerism, with a style of entertainment manifested itself in the Sapru

---

116 Ishwar Chander Nanda (1892-1961) popularly considered the father of Punjabi realistic theatre

117 Morality plays A medieval religious play in the vernacular in which the forces of good and evil act upon the protagonist who represents mankind. In the morality play, the forces of good and evil are personified in the figures of allegorical characters who are named for the moral quality they represent, such as Mercy, Shame, Beauty, and so on. The central conflict, the salvation or damnation of man’s soul, was before the advent of Calvinism, usually resolved in favour of salvation.

118 Henrik Ibsen: born in Skien, Norway in 1828 and died in 1906. One of the greatest dramatists from Norway.
House farces during the 1970. These coarse and unsubtle productions with salacious titles appealed to the Punjabi diaspora that had located itself in Delhi after partition.

Parallel to Richards, realistic plays, there also emerged a dramatist - Bawa Budh Singh,\textsuperscript{119} who lampooned conventional practices through the tools of satire. Through humour, social taboos, and obscurantist views were ridiculed. Perhaps this was the beginning of a tradition of critiquing moribund social mores, and moving towards a modernity. Unburdened by a reformist zeal or religious fervour, he had no desire to awaken people through progressive ideas or laud religious sentiments, as his plays ridiculed human foibles. \textit{Mundri Chhal} (the Ring Trick;1908) his first play, depicted the power of flattery to win hearts of unsuspecting maidens. \textit{Chandar Hari} (1909), showed the problems that can happen due to an arranged marriage, where alliances are made more on the basis of cast and economics, rather then the aspirations and dreams of young people.

Kirpa Sagar, (1857-1939): became the self appointed writer - laureate for Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and chronicled the intrigues and passions of his court, much in the style of Shakespearian characters, using larger then life characteristics, with grand locations and a feel for the spectacle. He was considered the pioneer of historical dramas and his play on Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1923) was in four acts, it dramatized those events that lead to the annexure of Kasur. More than detailing the events or situations that led to the annexure of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's kingdom, he was more interested in extolling his virtues as a sovereign, and evoked emotions of valour and heroism in a tone that reeked of sycophancy.

Unfortunately most of these playwrights remained on the periphery writing plays more for the sake of exploring another literary form to tell a story, rather then theatre per se. The second layer of Punjabi playwrights, Sant Singh Sekhon\textsuperscript{120}(1908-1997) and Harcharan Singh\textsuperscript{121} (1914-2006) claimed a more progressive space for themselves and aligned themselves with Marxist ideology along with Freudian ideas of sexuality, while

\textsuperscript{119} Bawa Budh Singh (1878-1931) pioneer of satirical farces in the Punjabi theatre.

\textsuperscript{120} Sant Singh Sekhon (1908-1997) prodigious Punjabi playwright.

\textsuperscript{121} Harcharan Singh (1914-2006) Punjabi Dramatist of twenty full length plays.
using subject-matter from Indian mythology. Sant Singh Sekhon’s plays despite their progressive stance, could not sustain their position in the pantheon of Punjabi writing, because he lacked knowledge of stagecraft and development of characters, in the given circumstances of the play. Harcharan Singh was more successful, as he wrote his plays, and staged them under his direction. So any lacunas in writing could be managed during the course of rehearsals.

To give a sense of acting protocols in 1970’s would be quite relevant here, as it is impossible to separate text from performance from acting styles and structures. Local theatre in Chandigarh had a diversity of artists, viewpoints and folklore that presented a rich palette of artistic genres. The playwright Sant Singh Sekhon’s plays were regularly preformed on the Chandigarh stage. His plays with their Marxist utopian socialism peppered with Freudian psychology, and layered with stories from Sikh history made the characters float in a syrupy soup of politics and religion. ‘Moian Sar Na Kai’ (The Dead do not Know), despite its passionate and rhetorical narrative, was indifferent to the aesthetic and emotional values required to connect with an audience. The stage had two mikes positioned in the centre, and the actors during their dialogue delivery would move near the mike to deliver their lines, almost pushing aside their co-actors while looking at the audience. Every time the audience laughed, the actors would stop mid-speech, wait for the laughter to stop and then restart. Choreography, design and stagecraft were an alien concept, or much worse associated with bourgeois theatre. This was the established norm in theatre and was completely acceptable to the audience.

In a totally different register was the work of Sheila Bhatia122, her lyrical and operatic style musicals, based on folk tales and myths like Heer Ranjha and Chand Badla Da, created a fresh audience who flocked to see her work. Their appreciation was based not only on nostalgia, but also due to the slick production values, high standards of acting, which contrasted sharply with the crassness of Sapru House theatre, which was being rejected by the more urban Punjabi audience. Sheila Bhatia in the initial stages used similar story telling techniques and aesthetics codes that had already existed. While reflecting on her work done during that period, what is the most impressive part of her

122 Sheila Bhatia (1916-2009): creator of Punjabi musicals and director of the dehi arts theatre
oeuvre is that, even while functioning within the paradigms already established by the male directors, Sheila Bhatia explored her own idiom and aesthetics, a worldview and way of working.

Sheila Bhatia, in Delhi, pioneered the Punjabi musical theatre movement with women oriented themes. With her company, between the mid sixties and the mid seventies, she created plays that exploded onto the stage having tremendous commercial success, and with fairly wide and popular appeal. Her production Hir Ranjha, (1956), Cham Badia Da (The Moon behind the Cloud, 1966) was a medley of Punjabi folk and wedding songs without any firm narrative. Despite the slightly ‘dark’ themes of some of her texts, her interpretation and representation was lyrical and romantic. Hawa Se Hippy Tak (From Eve to Hippy 1972) and Qissa Yeh Aurat Ka (The story of the woman, 1972) were ‘women-centric’. Although Bhatia’s direction was conscious of the woman’s position in a patriarchal society, yet one could neither identify nor recognize the women in her plays. Even while being defiant, they functioned within fairly conventional social spaces. When she tried to be progressive, as in ‘Hawa Se Hippy Tak’, (1972) the representation of the contemporary, crumbling value system seemed strained and contrived. Stock characters of the ‘radical youth’ and the ‘pot-smoking hippy’ were part of the discourse of intellectuals at the time, and her plays today have a certain historical value even though they did not always ring true.

She also directed Federico Garcia Lorca’s123 Blood Wedding (Tere Mere Lekh; 1984), Bulle Shah’s Sulagde Darya (Burning Rivers 1987)) and all done in an operatic style. Even though her central characters were women, the orientation of her work was more aesthetic than blatantly ideological. In Bhatia’s theatre the woman’s voice does not assert itself, careful not to disturb the twin frames of patriarchy and feudalism.

---

123 Garcia, Lorca,Federico (1898-1936) Spanish poet and playwright. One of the best known Spanish poets of the twentieth century and the most widely translated Spanish dramatist of the age; these facts owe something to Lorca’s tragic death at the hands of the Falangists; they also derive from the oddly symbolic way in which Lorca’s intense personal work reflects the death of liberty and the creative imagination in Spain, coinciding with the death of the Spanish revolution after three years of civil war (1936-1939)
She did receive considerable adulation in Delhi, as her theatre resurrected a new identity politics amongst a Punjabi community fractured by its dislocation due to Partition. She also stood in direct contrast to the lewd but popular ‘Sapru House’ theatre—an unfortunately negative stereotype with which the name of the auditorium came to be linked—most sophisticated Punjabis abhorred, although it also provided a link to Punjabi heritage and language. Sheila Bhatia offered them, instead, a return to the beauty of Punjabi poetry, music, and the panoramic references to culture through anecdote and story. Most theatre at that time were deeply influenced by the IPTA movement, whether in Bengal or in Punjab. The Indian People Theatre association-1943 played a cataclysmic role in the entry of women into the performing arts, as they made culture a vital aspect of nationalistic concern.

In 1974, The Department of Indian Theatre had been established by Balwant Gargi (1916-2003) in Panjab University, Chandigarh and concurrently The Speech and Drama Department was set up by Surjit Singh Sethi (1928-1995) in Patiala. These two departments helped in freeing the Punjabi theatre from a backwater aesthetics and provincialism by these two dramatists, as they brought in their work the spirit of experimentation and liberalization.

Balwant Gargi Lohakut (The blacksmith, 1944) touched on the topic of female desire in a feudal and patriarchal context. Surjit Singh Sethi’s play ‘The King Mirza and the Snake Charmer’ (King Mirza te sapera, 1965) showed a fervent search for a new idiom and syntax that could accommodate the changing reality. This play examines ennui in the absurdist sense and takes his inspirations, from plays like ‘Waiting for Godot. The change that these two playwrights sought in their works was not only in the content but also in the form and structure.

---

124 Pre-eminent activist, institution formed as an all-India organization in Bombay in 1943, borrowing its name from Romain Rolland’s book titled People’s theatre, but stressing ‘our people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice’.
Balwant Gargi (1916-2003) was the first Punjabi playwright to open Punjabi theatre to varied influences. His first play _Loha Kutt_ (The Blacksmith) was a stark portrayal of rural Punjab, with its superstitions and poverty. Against this rugged backdrop there existed two opposing camps exacerbated by a rewriting of the geography of female desire. This was unusual in 1944, when writing on female desire and sexuality was taboo and still under wraps. In a certain way he broke the primary identity of the woman as mother- sister- wife in Punjabi playwriting and represented her in ways that interrupted the stereotype, and in that sense he was a path breaker. In _Loha Kutt_ a real dialectic developed between the mother’s world and the daughter’s, and we sense the readiness of the mother to recognize that sex, desire and love have been experienced by her daughter. By accepting this she also accepts the existence of these emotions within herself as well. This play was followed by _Kanak Di Bali_ (Stalk of Wheat 1968) _Dhuni Di Agg_ (A Fire in The Furnace 1977) and _Saukan_ (Co-wife 1979). As far as the text was concerned, Gargi had a robust relationship with the Punjabi language and his plays, crystallized by his exposure to the works of J. M Synge and Federico Garcia Lorca, influenced the way he wrote them.

I would not call this borrowing or even plagiarism, but a recognition. If someone has trod the path before you, there need be no qualms over using certain ideas as points upon which to dilate and create your own. Countless artists from all disciplines use the artistic ‘quote’ to salute older or contemporary practitioners, but Gargi was singled out for criticism over ‘borrowing’. I believe in Gargi’s case this accusation may be unjustified - he took ideas, but made them his own. In this way he managed to lift Punjabi playwriting from the smell of the cowsheds and hookah-smoking patriarchs and began using the female body as the site through which new ideas were made visible. As he was a male writer living and writing in the 1940’s, it was difficult for him to move beyond his male alliances. Even though the central characters in his plays are women, the male eye is evident in the way it fetishizes the woman, turning her into an object of curiosity.

Tremors of change happened in 1976, when in a daring move the Department of Culture, Punjab, set up a regional repertory with thirty actors. In a state where theatre was still thought of as a den of iniquity, and actors often equated with wastrels, people who
worked in the theatre had a difficult time. Ravneet Kaur, Director, Cultural Affairs was placed in charge of this nascent organization. Without any blueprint before her, this feisty IAS officer, in response to changing values, eventually transformed the debased image of theatre, and raised the aesthetic bar of the profession. She made an effort to take theatre in new directions, by bringing diversity into every aspect of theatre – to reinvigorate theatre’s approach to classics, increase dialogue with the community, and expand her commitment to the commissioning of new projects. Ram Gopal Bajaj, M.K. Raina and Balraj Pandit, trained at The National School of Drama were invited to direct plays for the newly created company. Without going into the success or failure of these productions, or the mistakes or limitation in its functioning, the roots of work done, and before their accomplishments could be recognized or their institutional identity emerge, the repertory was dismantled. In fact it is no exaggeration to say that if the repertory had been allowed to stay, it would have changed the face of theatre in Punjab. Although the idea of a regional theatre repertory was initiated by Gargi, the continuous interference in its functioning by local artists and politicians led to factionalism that ultimately brought the curtain down on a very significant and important chapter in Punjabi theatre.

Whatever the matrix of causes, it left behind a number of provocative questions that hovered over the theatrical horizon in Punjab. The repertory which came under the aegis of ‘The Department of Culture’ was shifted to ‘Public Relations’ – to become the artist of the agitprop, doomed to silence. Within a year and a half the repertory, which had burst like a constellation onto an arid landscape, died leaving no epitaph behind.

Gursharan Singh (1929–) with his bold and evocative polemics exposed the disruptive forces that were tearing the fabric of Punjab during the height of violence. His plays are performed in rural areas and have tremendous mass following. In 1980 Punjab was in the grip of violence and terrorist activity had become a daily phenomena. Brutal killing, communal divide and fear loomed over the landscape like a sceptre of doom to the fun loving and robust community of Punjab.

When I shifted to Chandigarh in 1984, I was part of a debate that recognised that a gap had opened between modern theatre and traditional forms. This issue is
complex because the traditional forms are exciting theatrically but ideologically and socially they are often reactionary, and melodramatic. The relationship between the traditional forms and a modern practitioner cannot be one of imitation, but more in terms of it being internalised so that they become part of one's way of working. The folk tradition provided a range of stage conventions, concepts and technique.

“We live in a period where older traditions exist side by side with new traditional arts, the fruits of both consciously ‘invented traditions’ and less thought-out but very robust hybrids. Furthermore, and very importantly, many theatre experiments have been in collaboration with, and/or deeply affected by, traditional performing arts and rituals.”

I work with Naqqals who are Punjabi folk actors, musicians and female impersonators. Then I have actors from Chandigarh, a little ‘French City’, designed by La Corbusier. This city was built in the middle of nowhere with an artificial lake, and a park made out of waste material. This was its history and this was its ritual. The work I make exists neither in the village from where these singers come, nor from the city. The city for me flows into the village and the village flows back. The concrete jungle is a space; the memory and history the Naqqals bring transforms it into a place. A place where we gather to transcend the logic of rural versus urban.

The Naqqal form is a dying tradition, and has become fossilised and irrelevant, even within the context of the popular village culture. I made an attempt to understand the impulses that created the tradition, not to adapt it for contemporary theatre, but to understand their techniques, so that these become part of the muscle of my work. It is not so much the purloining of a tradition but to create a contemporary motif of work. As most contemporary actors are seeped in naturalism, working with traditional forms helps in breaking away from those constrictions and moving towards a more theatrical form of presentation that becomes specific, rooted and thereby contemporary.

Working with the Naqqals in a certain way cluster around the problem of the authentic in Punjabi theatre. The Naqqals as performers have along lineage, but are paradoxically without a continuous or firm tradition. They enact ballads, sing dance and

127 Schechner, Richard. Over, Under and Around. PP11
lampoon the powers that be, with the conventional license of clowns. In recent times their considerable popularity has been challenged by cinema and television and they have had to survive by doing ‘disco’ dancing at weddings and other community festivities. But in my work, they appear along with urban performers, not as decorative ‘acts’ or even as a sign of cultural aesthetics, but rather they serve to displace the category of the authentic at several levels. The theatre I will be examining will not be ‘Punjabi’ Theatre, in the sense that this theatre is determined and constrained by linguistic and ultimately, regional hegemony. This is contemporary Indian theatre, performed using the Punjabi language, rather than Punjabi Theatre jostling for a place in a National framework. Using this as the premise, the history of Indian theatre gets closely linked to the history of theatre happening all over the country in various regions, which also includes Punjab.

Conclusion

So many trajectories and discursive histories, without a national suture would have flowed in their own trajectories, with their own ideological and performative traditions. I do not want to say that they do not innovate and reinvent. On the contrary, change and reinvention are the essence of any successful theatre. However, with the formalization of the institution, and the social-cultural-ideological infections and enthusiasms it released as things that reinvented the meaning of innovation and reinvention. That is to say, now innovation was not undertaken for reasons of creativity, or contingency or the whims of the directors or actors. Innovation, pastiche, borrowing, re-creating, performing were now framed as distinctly Modern Activities, and the ideology of Modernism, and the superstars of theatre and philosophy and literature within Modernism, were not creating content that we could borrow, but creating a new world, a new way, a utopian revolution.

Marxism, literature, psychoanalysis, relooking at tradition – no more was this an activity that was driven by “mere creativity” – creativity was transformed into the impulse of a thinking being, into a logical and thought through process that borrowed from worlds beyond itself. Creativity, for audiences as well as creators, was no longer “instinctive” or “fluffy”, creativity was all of that, but it also had thought and direction. The institution created a new way of looking at what we did, and showed us what we could do, together. This was the shift from Pre – Modern to (Pre) Modern.