

Alternative Stages: Anti-Realism, Gender, and Contemporary Indian “Folk” Theatre*

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I. “TRADITIONAL” INDIAN THEATRE AND THE STATUS OF FOLK FORMS

In the theoretical and polemical discourses that have elaborated contemporary Indian theatre’s “encounter with tradition” since the 1960s, the notion of “tradition” usually encapsulates the full range of indigenous modes of drama, theatre, and performance which emerged diachronically over two millennia, but have assumed a synchronous existence in the present. Hence the term “traditional Indian theatre” signifies, in the singular or as a mass noun, the secular and classical Sanskrit drama of Kalidasa, Bhasa, and Shudraka; post-classical North Indian religious forms like Ramlila and Raslila; classically-derived balletic forms like the Kathakali and Kutiyattam of Kerala; regional folk forms like the Yakshagana of Karnataka and the Bhavai of Gujarat; and intermediary-popular forms like the Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh, the Tamasha of Maharashtra, and the Jatra of Bengal. Such promiscuity of signification is essential for maintaining the near-Manichaean and resolutely ahistorical opposition between “Indian tradition” and “Western modernity.” In nativist, revivalist, or cultural-nationalist perspectives, all indigenous forms that predate colonialism or lie outside the sphere of European norms are valorized as natural, organic, and transcendent, whereas the products of Western influence are dismissed as artificial, derivative, and trivial. Moreover, such monolithic constructions of an always-redemptive Indian tradition are justified in these perspectives by reference to the cultural continuity, formal interconnectedness, and aesthetic unity of so-called traditional forms—all qualities that supposedly manifest themselves unproblematically in the present. Writing “in defense of the ‘theatre of roots’” in 1985, after two decades of intense experimentation by Indian playwrights, directors, and performers in the contemporary use of traditional forms, Suresh Awasthi thus asserts that “never before during the last one century and more was theatre practised in such diversified form, and at the same time with such unity in essential theatrical values” (“Defence” 85).

In practice, however, the repository of “tradition” has been neither as inclusive nor as eclectic as such arguments suggest. Most of the critical and creative engagement with indigenous forms in the post-independence period has come to centre on the folk perform-

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ance genres popular in various rural regions throughout the country, because the category of "folk" brings into play the most complex range of ideological, political, sociocultural, and aesthetic polarities in contemporary India. In one major scheme of polarization, the term "folk" complements and opposes the term "classical" on a continuum that defines the two dominant Indian modes of cultural transmission and preservation, whether the object in question is language, literary form, dance, music, the plastic and visual arts, ritual, performance, or everyday life. The classical-folk duality in turn corresponds to a series of binaries in which the first term is implicitly privileged in relation to the second—metropolitan/provincial, elite/popular, sophisticated/crude, urban/rural, and written/oral. In a second scheme of polarization, folk forms embody the culture of the village rather than that of the city, at an ideological moment when the sociocultural disjunctions and economic inequalities between these two domains have become persistent "national" problems. Commenting on the "unfortunate dichotomy between urban and rural life . . . [which] is expressed in disparities in economic standards, services, educational levels and cultural developments," Badal Sircar links the historical development of the Indian city with "colonial interests," and that of the village with a "traditional indigenous culture" which even colonialism could not destroy (*Third Theatre* 1). The city-village relation in India thus becomes (perhaps unintentionally) a version of Raymond Williams' analysis of unequal city-country relations in the feudal and industrial West, conferring the same priority on the village as a materially exploited but culturally resilient space (see Williams 46-54).

With specific reference to theatre, this ideological conception of the village creates its own oppositions. The energy and vitality of folk performance genres appear all the more remarkable in view of the subservient socioeconomic position of the village in the modern period, while the sophisticated cultural forms of the city seem self-indulgent and lifeless. In terms of aesthetic form, the essentially stylized, anti-modern, anti-realistic, open-air, environmental qualities of folk performance constitute a form of "total theatre" antithetical to the seemingly regimented products of the enclosed proscenium stage. Similarly, as the participant in a compensatory collective ritual that fulfils the needs of the community, the rural spectator stands in signal contrast to the isolated urban theatregoer in a darkened auditorium. The political conception of folk theatre as a people's theatre evokes in part the European Enlightenment definition of "folk" as "the people." But in India it also points to the popular appeal of village forms, their potential for subversive social meaning, and their connection with various forms of populist street theatre. The folk repertoire thus appears as a historical legacy as well as a powerful resource in the present.

The contemporary cultural and political potential of folk forms first came into view during the 1940s, when the Indian People's Theatre Association based its program for a "cultural awakening of the masses of India" on a revitalization of the country's "traditional arts" and "rich cultural heritage." The IPTA's traditionalism was the first major modern reaction against two deeply entrenched colonial practices: a century-long denigration of "corrupt" indigenous forms by the colonial and Indian urban elite, and the thorough commercialization of

urban proscenium theatre by bourgeois Parsi entrepreneurs. Folk theatre thus answered the need for *non-commercial* forms that were already familiar and appealing to “the people,” and could become the basis of meaningful sociopolitical fictions about their lives. By speaking to both kinds of oppressed “folk”—urban industrial workers and peasants caught in pre-industrial agrarian economies—folk forms could also attempt to bridge the problematic urban-rural divide, and sustain a mass theatre movement of the kind envisioned by the IPTA. Malini Bhattacharya clarifies that “the call to resuscitate folk culture was not a purely revivalist slogan, but embodies the strategy of promoting a vigorous exchange between different existing forms of entertainment, and of being the cultural forum where urban and rural sections of the struggling people might communicate” (“Bengal” 7). In theory, the “pre-modernity” of folk forms could make the IPTA’s political message of opposition to fascism, imperialism, and capitalism accessible to mass audiences, in both cities and villages.

In actuality, since most IPTA functionaries were politicized *urban* theatre workers, intermediary forms like the Tamasha and Powada in Maharashtra and the Jatra in Bengal became the most important “folk” genres in the Association’s radical repertoire. The IPTA also achieved its greatest successes with plays in the naturalistic and propagandist modes, such as *Nabanna*, *Zubeida*, *Pathan*, *Yes kis ka khoon hai?*, *Roar China*, and *You Made Me a Communist*. The political playwright Govind Deshpande dismisses the IPTA’s “fetish of folk” as a sign of middle-class sentimentalism masquerading as socialist realism (“Fetish” 49). But the movement’s historical role in defining the *culture of the people* as the basis of theatre in the new nation remains incontestable. As Sudhi Pradhan argues, all the major political parties in the 1940s were interested in populist cultural forms, “but mere anti-communism could not lead them further. It was left to the Marxists to disclose the potency of the art forms that are close to the people, their immense possibilities, their untapped source of strength and thereby ‘the opening of the magic door to mass mobilisation’” (1: xiv).

In the half-century since the decline of the IPTA as a nationwide theatre movement, numerous other developments have secured a role for folk culture and performance in contemporary theatre that goes far beyond the specific political objectives of the 1940s. To begin with, the incremental engagement with folk materials on the part of theatre workers over the course of these decades is quantitatively remarkable for its scale, and qualitatively significant for having shaped several major post-independence careers. In the first category are the playwright-directors Habib Tanvir, Chandrashekhhar Kambar, K. N. Panikkar, and Ratan Thiyam, whose theatre has been devoted either largely or exclusively to the practice of folk and traditional forms, and represents, in aggregate, the most thorough exploration of the resources of tradition. Populated by earthy rural characters and imprinted with the pressures and divisions of village life, the plays of Tanvir and Kambar represent the “low” end of this spectrum of experimentation (in terms of theme and effect, not artistic quality); more or less comparable to the Mahabharata plays discussed earlier, the numerous productions of Panikkar and Thiyam represent the “high” end. In keeping with the localized nature of folk culture, each of these practitioners has also become strongly associated with the forms and lan-

guage of a specific region: Tanvir with the tribals of the Chhattisgarh area in central India, Kambar with the Bayalata form of north Karnataka, Panikkar with the folk and classical traditions of coastal Kerala, and Thiyam with the Meitei tribal culture of Manipur.

The second important category consists of playwrights like Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar and directors like B. V. Karanth and Vijaya Mehta, who do not limit themselves to folk materials but practice a wide range of theatrical modes. However, they have produced pathbreaking work during the last three decades by employing folk narratives and conventions in specific plays. Thus, among the classics of post-independence anti-realist practice, Karnad's *Hayavadana* draws on a twelfth-century folktale, and reflexively employs the conventions of the Yakshagana folk form of Karnataka, which both B. V. Karanth and Vijaya Mehta incorporated into their respective productions of 1972 and 1973. Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* incorporates two separate Kannada folktales but does not follow any particular folk form; instead, it gives inanimate objects (like the flames in village lamps) human representation, includes dance and music, and makes extensive use of mime to dispel the illusion of realist action. Tendulkar's *Ghashiram kotwal* relies extensively on the Tamasha and Dashavatar forms of Maharashtra for its corrosive fictionalization of late-eighteenth century Maratha history. In addition to the production of *Hayavadana* mentioned above, Karanth's productions of Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* (in the Bayalata form), and *Barnama vana* (a Yakshagana version of *Macbeth*) are among his most celebrated. Mehta's well-known productions of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (as *Ajab nyaya vartulacha*), and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (as *Devajine karuna keli*) also employ the conventions of Tamasha.

In addition to these examples of new and experimental work by established practitioners, there are at least two other means by which folk forms have proliferated on the contemporary stage. Convinced of the value of the theatrical experience they provide, some directors have re-developed and re-presented well-known older folk plays, such as the Gujarati *Jasma odan*, directed by Shanta Gandhi for the National School of Drama in 1968; Rasiklal Parekh's *Mena gurbhari*, directed in the Malvi language by Bharat Dave for the NSD Repertory Company in 1980-81; and the Rajasthani *Amar Singh Rathore*. Pursuing a performance-centered form of intertextuality, other directors have presented a large number of Sanskrit and European plays in what Nemichandra Jain calls the "new [folk] idiom" in theatre. Shudraka's *Mrichchakatika* in Habib Tanvir's vernacular Chhattisgarhi version (as *Mitti ki gadi*), Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General* in the Nautanki style of Uttar Pradesh (as *Ala afsar*), and Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* in the Tamasha style of Maharashtra (as *Teen paishacha tamasha*) exemplify this trend. As a result of increased interest in indigenous styles of performance, the category of "folk" itself has expanded in two ways: in one direction, it now includes virtually all indigenous forms except classical Sanskrit theatre, and in the other, it has brought lesser-known folk forms such as the bhand-pather of Kashmir, the naqal of Punjab, the swang of Rajasthan, the nach of Madhya Pradesh, and the kathakatha of Bengal actively into the repertoire of theatrical experiments.

This explosive increase in formal experimentation at the level of practice co-exists with a determined bureaucratic effort to generate and sustain interest in folk forms through various forms of patronage and conservation. During the Sangeet Natak Akademi's Drama Seminar of 1956, the only folk genre discussed at length (by Shanta Gandhi and other participants) was the Bhavai form of Gujarat, although the individual presentations on theatre in Karnataka, Kerala, Manipur, Maharashtra, Orissa, Punjab, and Tamilnadu contained short asides on existing folk traditions. In an ironic echo of the IPTA's platform, the Seminar's formal recommendations to the Sangeet Natak Akademi (recorded in the Academy's *Report* for 1953-58) included the "opinion" that

the regeneration of the Indian theatre can only be possible by revitalising the traditional folk forms so as to narrow the gulf between the dramatic forms that have developed during the last hundred years and the survivals from the past. The Seminar recommends that adequate steps be taken not only for the careful and scientific study of the folk drama in different parts of India but also for preventing their decay and disappearance and for giving them recognition and new life. (31)

Over the next fifteen years, the scholar-critic Suresh Awasthi took the initiative in organizing institutional events where the resources of folk culture became the subject of focused debate. As Secretary of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, he organized a national seminar on "Contemporary Playwriting and Play Production" in 1961 where his own presentation dealt with "the question of traditional theatre and its relevance for contemporary theatre work" ("Defence" 86). To his dismay, in the modernist climate of that decade, Awasthi was "dubbed a revivalist and reactionary by practitioners of the colonial theatre and reporters of theatre events. They maintained that traditional theatre had no relevance for contemporary work . . . [and] spoke as prophets of the doom of traditional theatre" ("Defence" 86). In 1971 (exactly ten years later), as Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Awasthi organized a "National Roundtable on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre," whose participants included the most important playwrights, directors, and theatre critics of the time.¹ The proceedings of this seminar were published in a special issue of the Akademi's journal, *Sangeet Natak* (no. 21, July-September 1971). From 1965 to 1975, Awasthi also managed a program of "sponsored traditional performances, festivals and exhibitions in Delhi and other centres," which in his own words met initially with disapproval and indifference, but gradually acquired the character of a "movement" (86). The Akademi's "Scheme of Assistance to Young Theatre Workers" who were interested in experimenting with traditional forms (1984-94) was very much in the same line of state patronage, sponsoring four regional and one national festival every year for a decade. In 1985, the journal *Sangeet Natak* published a special double issue on the subject of the "Traditional Idiom in Contemporary Theatre" (nos. 77-78), guest-edited by Nemichandra Jain, with Awasthi as a principal contributor. With the exception of Shanta Gandhi, G. Shankara Pillai, and Awasthi himself, this discussion shifted the debate over tradition to a new generation of playwrights and directors, once more with

the overall conclusion that “after more than a century of almost barren attempts at playwriting and staging after Western models, our theatre seems at last ready to reject this imitative pursuit and to venture into its own distinctive, indigenous territory” (Jain “Some Notes” 9).²

This forty-year programmatic effort is marked by circular reasoning—critics of Indian theatre must pay serious attention to traditional forms because they constitute the basis of extensive and increasingly significant practice, but the extent and significance of the practice are in large measure determined by state patronage and bureaucratically-sponsored debate. Notwithstanding the faulty logic, the extensive engagement with anti-realistic non-urban forms has unquestionably reoriented contemporary thinking about theatre, producing revised conceptions of the dramatic text, the text-performance and author-audience relations, the figure of the performer, performance spaces, staging conventions, and the varied locations of theatre. The mythic, ritualistic, and primal narratives of folk culture offer a refreshing counterbalance to the textures of urban existence, and a succession of major plays that transcend exoticism and mystification have introduced a unique energy into the field of representation. At the same time, folk forms have refocused attention on the problematic relation of rural and urban in India, as cultural and political spaces, subjects of theatrical representation, and sites for the creation and consumption of theatre. Some playwrights deliberating seriously on the use of folk conventions have also arrived at their own radical conclusions about the relationship between folk and classical traditions in Indian culture. In theatre, the binary of “great” and “little” traditions has dissolved into a recognition of complementarity, leading a playwright like Karnad to argue that “there is no difference between the theatre conventions of classical drama and those of folk drama. The principles that govern their dramatic aesthetics are the same” (*Contemporary Indian Theatre* 80; cited hereafter as *CIT*). Habib Tanvir gives the same argument a historical dimension by asserting that “the classical structure in art is nothing but a terse crystallization of the folk structure in art” (“Indian Experiment” 9).

The theory and practice of folk forms in contemporary Indian theatre is therefore a subject that demands critical procedures adequate to its complexity. I have discussed elsewhere the *ideological* effect of traditionalist positions in erasing the historicity and particularity of post-independence theatre as a diverse body of work. In this essay I approach theatre based on folk forms as a field of contemporary *practice*—not the most significant, and certainly not the only significant form of theatre in the present, as some proponents claim, but one that is important enough to be rescued from spurious claims about authenticity on the one hand, and charges of mere fetishism and revivalism on the other. Two clarifications are necessary, however, if we are to see this critical object “as in itself it really is.” First, contemporary plays that employ folk narratives and performance conventions are texts and performance events of a qualitatively different kind from folk theatre in its own agrarian setting, however “primitive” and “folksy” they may appear. In fact, the relation between these two forms underscores the problems of a continuing disjunction between rural and urban culture, and a consequent separation of form from content—problems that should be confronted, not

avoided. Second, the "encounter with tradition" among playwrights, directors, and performers is not a uniform phenomenon, but takes on varied forms according to the individual practitioner's background, location, training, and objectives. Like the nation itself, folk culture in India is diverse: those who draw on it for theatrical purposes are not recuperating an undifferentiated cultural essence, but using pre-modern cultural matter of various kinds to create a variety of distinctive stage vehicles in the present.

The most viable approach to contemporary folk theatre, therefore, appears to lie in the particulars of practice. Numerous commentators have emphasized, indeed over-emphasized, the ideological function of the folk aesthetic in an anticolonial, anti-Western, anti-realistic theatrical program. But as Govind Deshpande notes, few have asked why serious urban playwrights have turned to folk materials, and what effects and meanings the indigenous forms communicate ("Fetish" 50). In the next three sections, I take up the relation between folk theatre and its urban reconfigurations, the problems inherent in this exchange, and the distinctive interventions folk plays have made in the contemporary politics of gender and culture. In the final section I use this thematic framework for the discussion of Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* (1972).

II. FOLK THEATRE AND "URBAN FOLK" THEATRE

The intertextual and interdependent nature of folk genres has been a major methodological concern among anthropologists of South Asia since the 1980s, and as an expressive form integral to village culture, "theatre" occupies a prominent place on the perceived continuum of genres. A. K. Ramanujan suggests that we should view "folktale and myth, grandmother's tale and bardic narratives, ritual and theatre, nonliterate traditions and literate ones as complementary, context-sensitive parts of one system" ("Two Realms" 42). In this system, theatre relates to the other components in two distinctive ways. If the genres of cultural performance are ranged according to their *akam* (interior, private) and *puram* (exterior, public) qualities, folk theatre appears as the most elaborate public genre, and hence the "end-point of the continuum . . . As we move toward the *puram* end, the props which give the bard a public presence increase. . . . These accompaniments attain their fullest development in the village theatre: a prepared stage, lighting, makeup, costume, many actors, and a stage manager, often a script" (46-47). Among the *public* genres of folk performance, moreover, theatre is most closely related to ritual, which is religious rather than aesthetic in intent, but still serves as the model for theatrical performance.

These anthropological perspectives encapsulate many of the arguments theatre practitioners have made about the communal, ecological, and ritual qualities of folk theatre. The views of two commentators who focus respectively on the archetypal and psychosexual qualities of this theatre are especially interesting. Taking up the relation of ritual to drama,

G. Shankara Pillai observes that

ritualistic forms are intended to create the consciousness of latent cosmic power and hence are based on myths which have deep roots in the religious sensibility of a community. Theatre plots are superimposed on these strong ritual structures to attract, hold and enchant the community they are raised for. This mix of myth and ritual and theatre might vary in different forms but the total structure is quite different from the structure of a piece intended to entertain the masses. (Pillai 43)

The form, moreover, is inseparable from its functions. Pillai insists that a ritualistic form cannot be taken apart, because "each form is in character a composite whole, and has unbreakable ties with the locality, its ecology, its myths, their social implications. The 'theatre' in these forms cannot be isolated: and if isolated it will lose its life force immediately, like a flower plucked off a tree" (43). Folk performance, therefore, has to be grasped simultaneously at all three instrumental levels—those of myth, ritual, *and* theatre.

Chandrashekhkar Kambar, one of the most important contemporary practitioners of folk-based theatre, also emphasizes the participatory and liberatory qualities of the form. If the aspect of ritual participation separates folk theatre from "mere" entertainment, it also serves as a source of gratification and release, although differently from popular urban forms. Kambar explains that in a society where "the quality of living is one of sanctioned inhibition, of suppressed drives, emotional or sexual," the realm of entertainment itself "assumes a total and microcosmic character—microcosmic in the sense that entertainment then reflects all the creative urges and needs in the world outside" ("Folk Theatre" xii). Giving priority to the religious elements in folk theatre, Kambar contrasts the fragmentation of cultural forms in a secularized society with the holistic nature of theatrical performance in folk culture: "A Londoner finds his dance, song, drama and religion at different places. A man from my village looks for all these things together" (xiii). The collective occasions for this periodic release are also determined by the natural cycle of events in an agrarian community. As a form that embodies "the shared myth of the community, not the experience of individuals" (Kaul 23), folk theatre does its work not by surprising its audience but by retreading predictable ground on certain predetermined occasions.

Pillai and Kambar's descriptions of folk theatre do not, however, extend in an unmodified form either to their own plays in the folk style or to those of Habib Tanvir, Girish Karnad, K. N. Panikkar, and Ratan Thiyam. Although these authors occupy varying positions of proximity and distance from the folk cultures they represent, their plays are uniformly *not in themselves the products of folk culture*. As a "counter-critique" of traditionalism would underscore, the plays represent, rather, the complex and decidedly "modern" theatrical means by which the matter of village life is transported to, and performed in, the city. The difference lies not merely in the "mediation" of pre-modern forms by a "contemporary sensibility," but in the qualitatively different conditions of production, circulation, and reception. In principle, a play modelled on folk performance may seem to employ conventions antithetical to those of

a modern proscenium play--a plot rooted in myth, folklore, or ritual; non-proscenium staging; an anti-realistic structure accommodating music, dance, and stylized movement; and dramatized characters who "present" the action and address the audience directly. But in practice, most such plays employ urban performers, use the same theatrical spaces as does realist theatre, and cater to the same audience that patronizes all the other forms of urban performance, including film and television. The *theatrical* experience these plays offer is unquestionably different; the *sociocultural* contexts of that experience are not. Only in exceptional cases, such as Tanvir's Naya Theatre and the work of the Heggodu-based group Ninasam, does the performance of folk materials actually involve folk performers and rural locations.

The full-length stage vehicles that have emerged from experimental work with folk forms in India should therefore be defined as "urban folk" drama, and distinguished in multiple ways from folk theatre *per se*. First, the serious urban folk plays are mainly products of individual authorship in a culture where the recognition of the playwright as "author" invests even quintessentially "theatrical" work with "literary" qualities. Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Naga-mandala* and Tendulkar's *Ghashiram kotwal* are signal examples of this process. Critics have approached these works as literary artifacts; "placed" them within the authors' respective careers as signalling important new phases in artistic development; analyzed them with reference to genre, authorial intention, and audience response; and invested them with considerable cultural capital. The same is largely true of the "performance texts" of Kambar, Panikkar, and Thiyam. Due to the premium Indian theatrical culture has placed on tradition and authenticity, plays such as *Jokumaraswami*, *Charandas chor*, Thiyam's *Chakravyuha*, and Panikkar's Mahabharata sequence are performances of high cultural value, and urban practitioners of folk genres are among the most widely honored figures in contemporary Indian theatre. Although in the Indian context such prestige translates more into symbolic than real capital, it does place the authors and their work at the other extreme from the anonymities of folk performance.

Second, the urban folk plays belong as much to the culture of textuality and print as to the culture of performance. A. K. Ramanujan and Stuart H. Blackburn note that "even when they are written, narratives in premodern traditions are still . . . usually orally delivered (told, recited, sung, or intoned) and aurally received. It is not the art of writing but the technology of printing that effectively transforms folk or classical traditions. The real contrast, then, is not oral/written but oral-written/printed" ("Introduction" 26). This "real contrast" defines the relation of rural to urban folk theatre despite efforts by some critics to enhance the performative dimension of the latter by contrasting it with the textuality of urban realist drama. Suresh Awasthi argues that

[i]n realistic theatre the number of staging signs is kept as low as possible, and their impact minimized in order to preserve the integrity of the verbal signs. In the stylized new theatre, the impact of staging signs is maximized and their number multiplied. It is because

of this that while the reading time of plays like *Urubhangam*, *Madhyama Vyayoga*, and *Karna-Bhar* [all plays by Bhasa, revived by K. N. Panikkar] is thirty to forty minutes, their performing time is nearly two hours. The difference in the reading-performing-time ratios of the stylized and realistic theatre is the most obvious feature of the former. ("Defence" 89)

However, the crucial difference between essential orality and print textuality lies not in the measure by which a performance text *exceeds* a written text, but in the fact that the written text underlying the performance exists *in print*, independent of performance. Although its primary visibility is at the level of performance, urban folk drama enters the domain of print as a necessary effect of the conditions of contemporary authorship, and thereafter acquires all the important attributes of printed drama as an autonomous, discussable, often "literary" form. It circulates in the original language of composition as well as in multiple languages through translation, as a text and on the stage. Moreover, in radical distinction from folk theatre itself, urban folk drama is a transportable entity: while the former always belongs to a specific region, language, ecological cycle, and participating community, the latter can be detached from all these particularities and performed (in the original language or in translation) anywhere an audience is available. Of course, urban folk plays are not texts of the same *kind* as realist social and political plays, nor does their textuality cancel the improvisatory, mixed, and unscripted qualities of performance. However, they *are* without question texts, increasingly embedded in the culture of print rather than that of oral-aural communication. In fact, their availability as texts becomes a measure of their increased visibility, significance, and value, because it turns them into objects of reading, pedagogy, and criticism.

Finally, the mediations of authorship, intentionality, and textuality imply that urban folk theatre is not a replication of folk performance, but an autonomous form with its own aesthetic, cultural, and political objectives in relation to a predominantly urban audience. The idea that a playwright or director must bring a "contemporary sensibility" to bear on folk forms has been central to the discourse of tradition since the 1940s—in order to be transformative, folk forms must speak powerfully to, and have relevance for, their immediate audience. The incompatibility between rural subject matter and the urban sites of performance therefore places a great deal of responsibility on the playwright or director, who must renegotiate every feature of folk theatre—form, content, style, language, and staging conventions—to ensure its success in non-folk locations.

III. THE PROBLEMS OF URBAN FOLK THEATRE

These "paradoxical" qualities of urban folk theatre collectively denote a syncretic practice that is inherently problematic because of the fusion of traditional materials with modern expectations and contexts. Two issues have proved to be particularly intractable for practi-

tioners and critics in India: the disjunction between urban and rural spheres of experience has worsened despite the efforts to bridge the gap through cultural performance, and consequently, the form of urban folk theatre is often detachable from its content. In an overpopulated, rapidly developing nation with a large middle class (by Indian socioeconomic standards), up-to-date forms of professional and technological education, and a heavy commitment to industrialization, urban life defines the conditions of existence for the majority of theatre-going audiences. As Mohan Rakesh's comments (in *Sahitya aur sanskriti*, 22-23) about the limitations of the village as a literary subject suggest, playwrights incline towards realism and urban experience precisely because these qualities have a compelling relation to both the author's and the audience's reality. By the same token, the anti-modern aesthetic of urban folk theatre contradicts (as it tries to counteract) the direction which the nation itself has taken as a political, economic, and cultural entity, giving folk forms an unavoidable aura of exoticism on the urban stage, and creating an often unbridgeable gap between the spectator and the spectacle. G. P. Deshpande describes "the newly found love for the classic and the folk" among urban practitioners as a sign of "the search for roots by an alienated middle class," and compares folk forms with bedtime stories that "[put] you to sleep with the complacent belief that you have done your duty by Indian culture and towards the 'other' Indian people" ("Fetish" 49). In Rajinder Nath's view, traditional forms can express "straight-forward elemental, unambiguous stories, but when it comes to expressing the ambiguous and complex reality of modern life they somehow fail" (27). A lifelong resident of Calcutta, Mohit Chattopadhyaya expresses sentiments shared by numerous other urban authors (playwrights, novelists, poets) when he acknowledges

an estrangement between me in this city and the rituals which are still being observed in some tribal area. In the past, there were links between the city and the village, there were common areas of communication. Today, when we adopt a theme or a technique from, say, Western Europe, or from a tribal area in our country, although the latter may seem to be geographically nearer, in our experiences both can be equidistant. (*CIT* 31).

Taking up the specific issue of theatre, Rustom Bharucha states bluntly that "in the absence of sustained interactions between urban and rural theatre workers at intra/inter-regional levels, the dichotomies of development remain as stark as ever, with the city continuing to live off the human and ecological resources of rural communities" ("House" 41). These reservations on the part of Indian practitioners coincide remarkably with the critique of traditionalism by major contemporary authors in postcolonial Africa. Femi Osofisan, the Nigerian playwright-director, argues that "the artist lives in history, and the truth is simply that the momentum of history can no longer be sublimated by the old processes of traditional rite" (74). Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o objects to the fallacious confusion of culture with "irrelevant traditionalism"—it is not possible either "to lift traditional structures and cultures intact into modern Africa," or to "somehow maintain colonial, economic, and other social institutions and graft on them an African culture" (12). In African cultures as in India, the

traditional is disjunct from the modern, and past and present are alike subject to history.

Closely related to the problem of the urban audience's alienation from village culture is the problem of the sociology of the village forms themselves. During the Drama Seminar of 1956, several participants interested in folk performance genres had already commented on the danger the country's emergent culture of development posed for them. The director Shanta Gandhi, the principal post-independence exponent of Bhavai, talked about the imminent extinction of folk drama in various regions, and the "deteriorated stage" of Bhavai in Gujarat—due in part to nineteenth century puritanism, but mostly to negligence and poverty in the present (*Proceedings* 105). J. C. Mathur found sufficient reason "to believe that community culture and tradition are completely broken down and shattered in most of the regions of this sub-continent" (*Proceedings* 122-23). E. Alkazi was considerably more forceful in arguing against the belief that artistic experimentation with folk forms like Bhavai would restore them to their once glorious existence:

That is an illusion. The community of the Bhavai artists and their audiences themselves and the whole structure of the countryside have undergone such a transformation that most of the old tunes are likely to be repelled by the people themselves as bad tunes giving out false notes. The folks will decide what they would have as entertainments. We have no right to interfere. But we can certainly take . . . our own arts to them [and] improve them by adopting what we may find good in folk forms. We must not confuse the two distinct issues which have emerged out of . . . this rather lengthy discussion. (*Proceedings* 122)

Thirty years later, the cultural effects of socioeconomic change are clearly evident. K. N. Panikkar comments in a 1989 interview that his village childhood was full of communal events such as singing mendicants, performances at the temple, agricultural festivals, and open-air dancing; but "nowadays if you go to my village you won't find any such art forms" (*CIT* 58). Mahesh Elkunchwar, the most vocal contemporary realist, agrees with this perception of the collapse of village culture, but complicates the authorial issues further by dissociating himself from the very forms that should have come "naturally" to him.

I personally found the "form" of folk theatre unusable, because what I had to say was so harsh and stark that I felt it would drown in the festive atmosphere of song, dance, and color in folk drama. Besides, there is always the question of the relevance of folk drama today. The rural culture that gave birth to this art form is now nearly defunct. If the thread that links village life and folk art is now weak and even broken, how can my urban sensibility, shaped largely by Western ideas, relate to this art form? . . . I also feel no "nostalgia" for this art form. Maybe because I'm from the village. But people in rural areas have easily accepted the contradictions that arise when old ways disappear and new ways come in, when the old and the new get mixed up in hodgepodge ways. People in the cities suffer from undue anxiety about these things. ("Natyaprasava" 91-92)

Elkunchwar therefore questions the attribution of "true experimentalism" and "authentic

Indianness" to plays like *Hayavadana* and *Ghashiram kotwal*, which in his opinion imposed folk forms artificially on mythic and historical material (Figure 16). In a bolder generalization, he dismisses "all forms of [urban] folk theatre as 'instances of artistic kleptomania,'" and signs of a "revivalism" which deliberately overlooks the collapse of the rural structure and the irreversible change in village traditions (Elkunchwar "Interview" 1, 2). Bharucha similarly dismisses the "theatre of roots" as a conceptually bankrupt construct which is "neither linked sufficiently to the contexts of folk and traditional disciplines . . . nor capable of inventing new models of theatre more 'rooted' in the immediacies of the present" ("House" 41).

Elkunchwar's comments underscore two further problems. All the attention lavished on folk forms in theatre theory and practice during the last four decades has not led to any significant regeneration of the forms *in their own environment*, because the vitality of folk culture depends on sociocultural and economic conditions to which the aesthetic debate over theatrical forms is largely irrelevant. As Osofisan notes in the comparable context of Nigeria, the "comprehensive repertory of myth and ritual . . . whose seasonal re-enactments helped to restore harmony in the race, face the prospect of attrition in the contemporary intellectual climate. And the flux of social transformation stays unrelieved in the crisis of ritual" (72). There is, moreover, the issue of the connection between folk forms and pre-modern modes of socioeconomic organization in India. Badal Sircar feels that "in spite of the popularity of the traditional and folk theatres in the villages, the ideas and the themes treated remain mostly stagnant and sterile, unconnected with their own problems of emancipation—social, economic, and cultural" (*Third Theatre* 3). Similarly, the well-known theatre activist Safdar Hashmi acknowledges the necessity of counteracting the destructive effects of colonialism on traditional Indian culture, "but the problem is that if you work with the traditional form, along comes the traditional content with its superstition, backwardness, obscurantism, and its promotion of feudal structures" (qtd. in Van Erven 141). Indian anthropologists, sociologists, and political economists alike recognize that the simultaneous disappearance of "feudalism" and its art forms may be the necessary price of positive social change, because like other cultural phenomena, folk traditions respond to historical shifts, and any attempts to arrest such change would contradict historical process. By the same logic, it would be an anachronistic move for theatre workers to try to preserve cultural traditions that are no longer socially sustainable.

Given the precarious existence of folk forms in their own environment, and the continuing cultural abyss between village and city, it is the use of *folk* rather than sophisticated forms by urban practitioners that has come to be seen as superficial, exploitative, and sterile, in direct and paradoxical contradiction of its professed objectives. The director M. K. Raina feels that "the urban theatre worker has picked up the product, but has ignored aspects of its genesis—its history, its anthropology, its religion and, therefore, its link with the past" (Raina 29). A more pervasive problem is the pursuit of "naïve," anti-realistic forms as an end in itself, with no correlation to content. According to Shanta Gandhi, director of the Bhavai

classic *Jasma odan*, in the search for a new theatre semiotic folk forms can be raided merely for “production styles,” but “unless this trend is more securely tied up with the writing of new plays reflecting the contemporary ethos, the current enthusiasm for ‘going back to our roots’ may fade out as most fashions do” (14). Or, as G. Shankara Pillai complains, theatre practitioners have begun to graft folk performance elements arbitrarily onto contemporary subject matter in the belief that they are creating an exemplary syncretism. Like Deshpande, Pillai considers it important to ask why urban practitioners are using traditional forms, and this leads to other troubling questions.

Has the chosen form an immediate and demanding connection with the theme we have to communicate to an audience of modern sensibilities? Are we creating a new myth for twentieth-century society, claiming it demands a ritualistic form of expression, a new pattern of theatre? My emphasis here is on the spontaneous urgency of the whole thing, the natural demand of the subject matter on the playwright and director. (Pillai 45)

In actuality, while the practice of imposing folk forms on incongruous subject matter is widely in evidence, the plays that exemplify the strengths of urban folk drama have invariably fused anti-realistic non-urban forms with narratives that do attempt to resituate myths in the here and now.

IV. FORM AND CONTENT IN URBAN FOLK THEATRE

The problems inherent in the genre of urban folk theatre puncture the redemptive role some cultural critics have assigned to it in an anti-Western, postcolonial practice. But they also underscore the importance of individual authors and directors who have negotiated these difficulties, and created not only successful but iconic works that expand our sense of the possibilities of dramatic composition and theatrical representation. Plays like Karnad's *Hayavadana*, Tendulkar's *Ghashiram kotwal*, Kambar's *Jokumaraswami*, and Tanvir's *Charandas chor* establish radically new relations between the textual and the performative, the traditional and the contemporary. While adhering to the representational conventions of a ritualistic form, each play develops a serious psychological or sociopolitical thematic which explores the continuing resonance of myth and ritual in the changed sociopolitical circumstances of the present. The use of folk forms in complex vehicles of this kind is not a fetishistic call for a “close, unnegotiable particularity or for some mystical, unsoiled pristinitism”; rather, as Wole Soyinka notes, it is a “reinstatement of values authentic to . . . society, modified only by the demands of a contemporary world” (qtd. in Olaniyan 487).

The quantity and diversity of urban folk drama produced in India since the 1960s by a range of practitioners is impressive, and too extensive for a detailed enumeration; the analysis of method and meaning in a few strong plays can reveal how these fully realized contem-

porary classics were fashioned from "unsophisticated" folk materials. In the following readings I focus on two issues in particular--the playwrights' self-conscious manipulation of the folk conventions of presentation, and the centrality of gender issues in their representation. The structure of (largely anonymous) folk drama usually consists of the interplay between an outer rhetorical frame containing the *sutradhar* (literally, "puppet-master") and one or two ancillary characters, and a dramatized inner narrative. The reflexive frames in *Hayavadana* and *Jokumaraswami* place the individual authors firmly *outside* the narratives, whatever their own actual proximity to folk culture (Karnad is a self-professed city-dweller; Kambar is a "folk person" by background, but also a scholar with a doctoral degree who has spent most of his adult life in Bangalore). The frames also enable the playwrights to locate the *performance* (as distinct from the narrative of the inner play) in the historical and political present, and hence to create an ironic disjunction between the pre-modern narrative of the inner play and the postcolonial positioning of the outer. In its totality, the play then acquires an ineluctable contemporaneity.

The primacy of women characters in all three plays establishes an equally unmistakable correlation between gender and genre. In realist contemporary drama, the "urban textual constructs" of such male playwrights as Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, the early Badal Sircar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Jayawant Dalvi, and Mahesh Dattani have come to be associated with the aesthetic of modernity, the institution of patriarchy, the mode of social realism, the structure of the well-made play, and the socio-economic condition of nuclear or extended families in urban or semi-urban locations. The experience of women characters in this environment is overwhelmingly that of oppression, marginalization, exploitation, violence, and even death. In their various domestic and social roles women may be strong or weak, vocal or silent, liberated or repressed, complicit or resistant, conformist or subversive, generous or self-seeking—but in their totality the urban and quasi-urban worlds are frustrating, disappointing, or seriously destructive. In discussions of gender, Indian theatre critics usually contrast this body of male-authored texts with the modes of "feminist performance" developed by directors such as Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, Saonli Mitra, Usha Ganguli, Anuradha Kapur, and Anamika Haksar, among others. Placing women's experience at the centre of their practice, these activist professionals have revised the concepts of plot, character, time, place, and meaning to recreate theatre as an open-ended process rather than a finished product. As fully indigenized forms of feminist representation, their works also have in common the effect of destabilizing textuality, modernity, and patriarchy. Considered in conjunction, these two major varieties of male/female theatre offer a range of other binary oppositions—text/performance, product/process, close/open, realist/anti-realist, complicit/resistant—that seem to encapsulate gender issues quite fully.

The narratives of urban folk theatre constitute, however, a third important site for the representation of women in contemporary Indian theatre, displaying some distinctive qualities that are absent in the other two forms. The essential basis of difference here is not the gender of the author, which continues to be exclusively male (Karnad, Kambar, Tanvir, Panikkar,

Thiyam), but the qualitatively different attitudes to gender that emerge *within* the plays when male authors move out of the urban social-realist mode into the anti-modern, anti-realistic, charismatic realm of folk culture. In this respect, theatre parallels the revisionary moves within South Asian folklore studies to recognize folkloric production as "inevitably political," gender ideology as "a basic resource in the making of all kinds of cultural meanings," and women as occupying "the center stage of this work" (Appadurai et al. *Gender, Genre* 8, 5). Ramanujan describes women's tales as a "counter-system," whether women are the tellers or the subjects of narrative. Commenting on women's expressive genres in rural North India, Gloria Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold stress that the performance of song and story provides "a privileged arena for women's subversive speech" (193), and that "women were not the unquestioning bearers of 'tradition' . . . they subtly but articulately challenged tradition at every turn" (xxvi). One way to grasp the subversive potential of apparently conformist gender roles, they suggest, is to recognize that

tradition and resistance are seldom antithetical, that each culture harbours within itself critiques of its most authoritative pronouncements; and . . . while such critiques frequently take the form of such ostensibly "traditional" forms of speech as proverbs, songs, and folktales, they enter at the same time into the realm of the political, as they are deployed in the construction and reconstruction of identities and social worlds in which relations of power are deeply implicated. (Raheja and Gold 193)

New readings of folklore as well as its contemporary appropriations in theatre, therefore, support the reinscription of gender as a central concern in urban folk drama. This quality of the genre has remained obscure because the dominant tendency is to regard folk theatre as a colorful, celebratory, and unconventional spectacle that offers a temporary release from life's conflicts rather than serving as another image of them. The assimilation of folk theatre to the rhetoric of cultural regeneration also obscures the fact that in its contemporary versions it usually subverts structures of authority and destabilizes the status quo. When such a form gives women a central role, it becomes part of the larger cultural repository of attitudes to gender, and should receive due critical attention.

Plays such as *Hayavadana*, *Jokumaraswami*, and *Charandas chor* are important contributions to the dialogue on gender because they embody several principles largely absent in realist drama. First, women in these works are objects of desire as well as desiring subjects, and they want something other than what society has ordained for them. The very presence of such desire violates the norms of feminine behaviour and disturbs established notions of propriety. Second, women succeed in their quest because of the interchangeability of male partners. The proscribed object of desire magically replaces the husband in these plays, usually in the *form* of the husband. Since the men can "stand in" for each other, there is no unique male self to which the woman owes fidelity—a notion that questions the principle of male proprietorship, and hence undermines a basic premise of patriarchy. Third, while realist drama emphasizes and often romanticizes the maternal role, folk narratives stress the femi-

nine but not necessarily the maternal. Or, to put it differently, fertility and motherhood are important in folk plays, but can be detached from the constraints of marital fidelity. The women in all three plays, self-possessed and vocal, want men they cannot legitimately have; each one accomplishes her desire, but only provisionally, and like the queen bee destroys her male partner (lover or husband) in the process. The ideology of urban folk drama thus manifests itself most conspicuously in the treatment of femininity, sexuality, desire, and power: although the challenge to patriarchy is not absolute, women in folk drama find the means of exercising an ambivalent freedom within its constraints, unlike their urban counterparts in Rakesh's *Adhe adhure* or Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata! court chalu ahe*. The presence of these subversive thematic elements, and their accommodation within a particular folk structure in Kambar's *Jokumaraswami*, are my focus in the remainder of this essay.

V. LAND, WOMEN, AND MALE POSSESSION: CHANDRASHEKHAR KAMBAR'S *JOKUMARASWAMI*

As another definitive work in the 1970s sequence of experimental urban folk plays, Chandrashekhara Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* stands in a revealing relation of sameness and difference to Karnad's *Hayavadana*. It appeared a year later (1972), and in the same language (Kannada), but portrayed the folk culture of a different rural region of Karnataka (the north), and drew upon a different genre of folk performance (Bayalata). The play had its early stagings in Kannada, with B. V. Karanth again assuming a prominent role: he directed the first production for the Pratima Natak Mandali (Bangalore) in 1972, cast Karnad as Gowda and Kambar as the *sutradhar*, and played the role of Himmela himself. Translated into Hindi as *Aur tota bola* (And the Parrot Said), *Jokumaraswami* then appeared under Satyadev Dubey's direction in Bombay in 1979 (for Theatre Unit as well as Awishkar), and under Rajinder Nath's direction in Delhi in 1980 (for the SRC Repertory Company). Under the auspices of Ninasam (Heggodu), Kambar himself directed the version performed during the Nehru Centenary Festival in 1989, and played the role of the *sutradhar* once again. The Kannada revivals of the play have been associated almost exclusively with Kambar and Karanth, mainly in locations within the state of Karnataka; there have also been performances in Punjabi, Tamil, and Gujarati, in cities such as Calcutta, Chandigarh, Madras, and Ahmedabad. Like *Hayavadana*, from the beginning *Jokumaraswami* has been a showpiece of the brilliant theatre afforded by rural forms of performance and ritual; unlike Karnad's work, it posits an integral relationship between author and subject matter, and uncovers different strategies of authorial mediation between a folk event and its theatrical representation in postcolonial times.

Karnad states this difference succinctly when he notes that "unlike most Indian playwrights writing today, Chandrashekhara Kambar does not come from an urban background. As he was born and brought up in the country, there is no self-consciousness in his use of *Bayalata*, a secular folk form of his region" (Karnad TP 15). Kambar himself accepts the identity of a "folk" person "simply because I honestly cannot be anything else," and claims



Hayavadana, Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh (1989), New Delhi.



Jokumaraswami, Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh.

a solidarity with “my people” that has the same political force as urban forms of Left populism (“Folk Theatre” xi). As a playwright and director, he has used this position of vantage in two ways: to advance a systematic theory of folk theatre, and to stress the intrinsic qualities of folk performance in relation to, rather than their co-optation into, urban theatre. In Kambar’s conception, folk theatre is a vibrant, quasi-religious, artistic, communal, often overly decorative or diffuse, formulaic, convention-bound but improvisatory mode of performance that fulfils the expressive needs of a stable and organic society. He asserts that “a folk play is found in its authentic and only form in performance and not in any other form as in the literary play,” and that its various components—music, dialogue, dance or gesture—are not discrete elements but “mutually dependent and reinforcing” (“Traditional Theatre” 26). But Kambar’s response to the crucial question of what relevance folk theatre has for the “modern literary dramatist” consists mainly in an enumeration of *differences* between rural and urban artists, and between “the needs and equipment of the urban middle class . . . [and] those of rural society” (“Traditional Theatre” 27). The strategies which transform folk performance into an urban genre are thus not definable in advance, but have to be inferred from the particulars of a given play.

From this viewpoint, *Jokumaraswami* presents not a cerebral synthesis of diverse textual and theatrical elements but a reflexive structure in which all the vital components are focused on the multiple meanings of an annual folk ritual. The title of the play invokes a fertility god celebrated in north Karnataka villages every year on *Jokumara hunnive*, the full moon night during the late monsoon month of *Bhadrapada* (August–September). The playwright’s explanatory note about the event evokes a phallic ritual that is “low” in terms of caste and class associations, unselfconscious in its celebration of male sexuality, and primal in its symbolism:

Women belonging to the castes of fisherman, washerman and lime-maker make phallus-shaped idols of Jokumaraswami out of wet clay. Applying butter to the phallus tip, they place the idols in baskets. Packing each idol firmly into an erect position with *neem* (margosa) leaves, they carry the baskets on their heads and go from house to house singing songs in praise of Jokumaraswami. . . . There is an ancient myth behind all these stories, a myth which is relevant to the play. It goes somewhat like this: Jokumaraswami, the son of Shiva, takes birth on earth as the son of Ditnadevi. From the second day after his birth till the sixth he seduces all the women of the village. On the seventh day the angry cuckolds of the village kill him with ritual cruelty. Wherever his blood falls, the earth turns green and fertile. (*Jokumaraswami* xiv)

This story of the violation of patriarchal norms, the ecological identity of women, and the ritual sacrifice of the priapic male informs both the outer and inner plays in *Jokumaraswami*. The outer rhetorical frame consists of the Sutradhar (master of ceremonies and counterpart of the Bhagavata), Himmela (his sidekick), and Mela (a male chorus). The inner play centers around Gowda, a boorish and sexually impotent village landowner; his childless wife

Gowdathi; and the peasant Basanna, who is engaged in an ongoing struggle with Gowda over land rights. In a last desperate effort to become a mother, Gowdathi offers ritual worship to Jokumaraswami on the day of his festival, and tries to feed Gowda a ritual meal that would counteract his impotence. Due to a substitution she does not know about, Basanna consumes the meal, and then becomes her lover. When Gowda learns about the affair and Gowdathi's pregnancy, his henchmen ambush Basanna and shoot him dead.

Like Karnad, but through a simpler structure which juxtaposes the communal presence with dramatic dialogue between characters, Kambar also uses the conventions of folk theatre reflexively, for parodic and satiric effect, by questioning the very appropriateness of the subject of performance. The play begins, for instance, with eleven characters (musicians and actors) on a bare stage with a single raised platform, who collectively set up the ritual occasion as well as the broad narrative through song. Immediately following this prelude, however, Himmela debates the propriety of worshipping Jokumaraswami instead of the traditional presiding deity of folk performance, Ganesha. As the Sutradhar narrates Jokumara's exploits as an indiscriminate seducer of women, Himmela takes on the role of censor, and insists that such an "obscene god" poses a "big risk" at a dignified community gathering. He inserts euphemisms into the Sutradhar's sexually explicit descriptions, and urges the use of poetry rather than prose as a less "dangerous" narrative medium for the god's exploits. The Sutradhar in turn is committed to Jokumaraswami as subject because this god stands for youth, beauty, renewal, and the fundamental human urge towards procreation. As a result, the divine object of worship here is an "illegitimate" deity who is also the problematic subject of the play; the opening dialogue simultaneously questions and performs the ritual propitiation that ensures success for the participatory event of theatre. The symbolic presence of Jokumaraswami establishes the subversion of all forms of patriarchal control as the play's dominant message.

In keeping with this objective, Kambar situates the action of both outer and inner plays unambiguously in the present, and meshes ritual deeply with the rural politics of land, caste, and gender. In Karnad's view, "by working out the psychological, social, and political implications of the concept of virility, the play brings out the ambiguous nature of the very fertility rite it had set out to celebrate" (TP 16). The basic dramatic principle here is that of systematic opposition between the two principal males, with Basanna appearing as a type of the fertility god Jokumaraswami and Gowda as the anti-type. Gowda oppresses both women and peasants but is impotent as husband, lover, and cultivator; Basanna is powerless but virile and rebellious, a natural hero among women as well as men. This antagonism manifests itself in performance as a radical difference of physique and manner: the corpulent Gowda appears with exaggerated make-up, comically heavy side-burns, and a gang of four henchmen dressed in black who sing all their dialogue; Basanna wears ordinary peasant dress, stands alone, and speaks prose. The absorption of myth into everyday reality appears further in the deification of Gowda's musket—the object that enforces his unjust power—as "the god Dum Dum." The god of ritual thus becomes the ironic counterpoint to the anti-god

created by modern forms of organized oppression: while Jokumaraswami creates life, the musket god reduces living human beings to "ash and a whiff of smoke" (9). As a phallic object and a euphemism for the male sexual organ, the gun also symbolizes weakness masquerading as strength. So Basanna has nothing but contempt for both of Gowda's "weapons," while the victims he shoots with his own gun, he claims, "don't die, they litter" (26). Translated into real-life terms by Basanna's unambiguous defiance, the mythic and ritualistic polarities of life and death connect the play to present-day power struggles in the agrarian south.

Caught between the antithetical males, Gowdathi inhabits a world that is at once more conventional and more violently radical than the one inhabited by Padmini. As the neglected wife of an abusive village headman, Gowdathi is strongly circumscribed by patriarchy, and her overwhelming desire for a child is essentially "feminine" and conformist. As she explains pleadingly to her husband (while really addressing Basanna), "You are . . . a man and you don't need children or a home. You feel you can go on like a lone owl. I am a woman. How can I live without children?" (34). With advice from the village women, Gowdathi also begins the fulfilment of her quest legitimately enough—by feeding her husband a dish of the snake gourd symbolic of Jokumaraswami, she hopes to accomplish through the magic of ritual what ten years of marriage have failed to bring about. Her desire becomes subversive, however, because its legitimate object (the husband) is both unavailable and incapable. The symbolic exchange of bodies—the substitution of lover for husband—also comes about due to Gowda's cowardice. Instead of confronting Basanna in the "devil's field," as he had threatened, Gowda sends his henchmen in his place and escapes to the prostitute Shari's house. Once Basanna has consumed the meal intended for Gowda, he functions simultaneously as the ritual agent who has to fulfil the purpose of the god inside his body, the rebellious peasant, and the socially inferior lover who can give an abandoned wife what she wants. The ritual, therefore, is both real and a convenient fiction serving the ends of sexual and social resistance.

There is no attempt in *Jokumaraswami*, however, to "excuse" adultery by appealing to ritual compulsions or the accident of substitution. Gowdathi yields to Basanna in full knowledge of the transgressive nature of her act, because her needs as a woman override the social and sexual taboos, and her womanliness makes her stronger in every respect, not weaker. Kambar also develops a complex dual symbolism around Gowdathi to draw her fully into the rural politics of land and class. As the mature woman desiring motherhood, she symbolizes the fertile earth which can only be "husbanded" by the strong male. Gowda pretends to be a sexual predator who has not "left any land in this village untouched" (14), but his impotence merely underscores his illegitimate control over the land which Basanna, Basanna's father, and others of their caste and class have cultivated with great labour. As the mistreated wife, Gowdathi also symbolizes the social groups her husband has dispossessed. Her union with Basanna is doubly appropriate because they are both victims of oppression, and determined to avenge themselves against the same oppressor. Kambar's 1989 production of

Jokumaraswami at the Nehru Festival caught the mutuality and sexual force of this relationship brilliantly, especially in the courtship scene where the delicate, radiant Gowdathi joined hands and danced with a lover who had submitted entirely to her aura. Following such a declaration of independence, the murder of Basanna by Gowda and his men takes on multiple meanings—it marks the ritual death of the fertility god, the socially sanctioned punishment of the illicit lover by the licit husband, and the destruction of a politicized but powerless peasantry by the ruthless landlord class. But in no case does death prevent regeneration—Basanna's child lives on inside Gowdathi, the husband has to accept his humiliation at the lover's hands, and the earth continues to be fruitful because of the peasant's labour. Femininity becomes the generative principle in the natural as well as social worlds.

At another political level of signification that is even more visible in performance, *Jokumaraswami* creates a community of women across social and moral divisions. In the opening musical sequence male and female performers stand separately, facing each other. In the dramatic action, all the women in the play—Gowdathi, the prostitute Shari, the young village girl Ningi, and the servants Shivi and Bassi—stand united against the overbearing yet grotesquely comic figure of Gowda. As the wife Gowdathi has to plead abjectly with him about her needs, whereas Shari and Ningi abuse him openly, even though he has kept Shari for years and has offered the same "secure" future to Ningi. Ningi deliberately passes over Gowda in favour of Gurya, another landless peasant whose spirit Gowda has tried to break repeatedly. In a central scene that starkly violates caste and class boundaries, Gowdathi arrives at Shari's home to plead with this "beloved whore, whore my mother" to relinquish *Jokumaraswami* to her, because "like you, I'm a woman" (21). What follows is a very long scene (in performance) of female bonding, with Gowdathi, Shivi, Bassi, and Shari dancing around the central image of *Jokumaraswami*. Shari initially wants to propitiate the god herself so that she may retain a few male customers as she grows older. But her contempt for Gowda and empathy for Gowdathi overcome this self-interest, and she fulfils the role of surrogate mother to her social and sexual rival even though that increases her own prospects of a lonely and impoverished future. The two women outside the sphere of direct male control—the virgin Ningi and the whore Shari—are thus embodiments of self-possessed femininity in the play, because they have a gritty defiance that the wife, or even a rebellious peasant like Basanna, cannot match. More than Basanna's masculinity (which hastens his death), it is this sisterhood of sympathetic women that seems to ensure a secure future for Gowdathi and her child.

The critic C. N. Ramachandran has argued that the structures of sophisticated literature are "analogous to social structures," while those of "folk literature oppose and reject—symbolically at least—existing social structures" (21). The rigid formalism of Indian "elite" (urban, realist) theatre, he contends, analogously reflects the acceptance and endorsement of a rigidly structured society on the basis of caste/class in which every member's rights and duties are fixed" (21). The constitutive features of folk theatre, embodied in *Jokumaraswami*, counteract such rigidity and conformity in every respect. The improvisatory nature of the

performance implies a rejection of textual authority, analogous to the rejection of social and political codes. The absence of a linear coherent structure challenges notions of hierarchy and order. Anti-realistic representation, and the framing device which always gives utterance to the present voice of the community, together make the illusion/reality distinction superfluous. The inclusion of music and dance indicate a community- rather than individual-centered consciousness. The entire form is a symbolic gesture of protest and a rejection of authority, unlike elite theatre, which does not allow the violation of established tenets. This view of folk theatre as a resistant form deepens the paradox that folk cultures in India are a product of pre-modern modes of socioeconomic organization, and undergo inevitable atrophy as the rural regions adapt to modern urbanization, industrialization, and development. Kambar comments that in the region of north Karnataka to which he belongs, "even today [people] live largely governed by feudal values and have structures and textures of living which belong to other, previous times" (xi). By representing these textures, he suggests, the playwright or poet may heighten social awareness and bring about a measure of social change. For Kambar, however, art is also a means of delving into the collective unconscious, of discovering "structures, tones, myths and symbols which are so fundamental and hence so powerful, that issues like contemporaneity do not feature where [the artist] functions" ("Folk Theatre" xi). Certainly, folk theatre and its urban derivations cannot have the transparent contemporaneity of realist forms set in the urban present. But in their resistance to authority, folk-based forms—however primal their appeal in other respects—mount a sociopolitical critique that is thoroughly accessible to the urban spectator, and the clear hand of an author self-consciously shaping his material for urban consumption enhances this accessibility.

The element of critique is conspicuously evident in *Jokumaraswami*, a play closer to village experience than Karnad's multilayered *Hayavadana*. Kambar attacks the pre-modern social structure, making "a very Brechtian statement about the rights of the peasants to the land on which they work virtually as serfs for an absentee landlord" (Karnad TP 16). But he also taps into the deep structures of psychic and sexual experience in *Jokumaraswami* by translating pre-modern antagonisms into a real and symbolic opposition between virility and impotence. In the ritualistic structure of the resulting stage vehicle, the audience's understanding of successful resistance has to accommodate the sacrificial death of the hero. The versatility of the urban folk form is also evident in the play—it provides a theatrical experience antithetical to that of the realist drama of urban domesticity, but does not relinquish its hold on the social and political problems particular to its locations. With respect to gender, however, the differences from urban realist drama are striking and significant. In the world of folk culture, women have the power to speak, act, and control the fate of men. They are the prize objects for which men willingly or unwillingly sacrifice themselves. Whatever the audience's aesthetic and ideological leanings, contemporary Indian practice offers compelling reasons to de-exoticize folk theatre, and attend to the ways in which it participates in the politics of gender, class, and community in the present.

NOTES

1. In alphabetical order, the Roundtable participants were E. Alkazi, Suresh Awasthi, Sheila Bhatia, Romesh Chandar, Manoranjan Das, P. L. Deshpande, Satyadev Dubey, Utpal Dutt, Dina Gandhi, Shanta Gandhi, Balwant Gargi, Nemichandra Jain, B. V. Karanth, Girish Karnad, J. C. Mathur, G. Shankara Pillai, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, and Kapila Vatsyayana. No other *critical* forum since 1971 has managed to assemble a comparable group of practitioners.
2. Again in alphabetical order, the contributors to this special issue were Lokendra Arambam, Suresh Awasthi, Govind Deshpande, Shanta Gandhi, Nemichandra Jain, Chandrashekhar Kambar, Bansi Kaul, Vijaya Mehta, Manoj Mitra, Naa Muthuswami, Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, Rajinder Nath, K. N. Panikkar, G. Shankara Pillai, Kironmoy Raha, M. K. Raina, Rudraprasad Sengupta, and Shanta Serbjeet Singh.

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