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Abstract

In this interview, Bishnupriya Dutt and Anuradha Kapur discuss their experience of the COVID pandemic in India, its consequences for Indian theatre makers, and the various responses to the pandemic. The interview covers a range of issues including the tradition of Left activist theatre as a form of social organisation in times of crisis; the different effects COVID had in the theatre cities of Kolkata and Delhi; the emergence of new forms of theatre and performance; the forms of social solidarity COVID inspired as well as the social tensions it inflamed, particularly in relation to gender-based violence, in India, which led to a powerful wave of women's protests; and on how theatre responded to the immense internal reverse migration that COVID created – the largest internal displacement of people in India since partition.

Keywords: COVID; Indian theatre; women's protests; reverse migration; pandemic

Tony Fisher: I'd like to discuss the effects of the COVID pandemic on the theatre in India – both in terms of the local effects vis-à-vis practices and

makers, but also in terms of institutions and larger structures. However, I thought we might begin by looking at what the pre-pandemic theatre scene was like in Kolkata and Delhi, and then India more generally, and to do so in light of where we are now. By this, I don't mean to invoke a sense of nostalgia for theatre pre-COVID, but rather to think about what may have changed between then and now. For example, I wonder if we can think of COVID as demarcating a split in historical time? Is it correct to speak of a pre- and post-pandemic temporality? That's perhaps something we can reflect on. One of the things that strikes me about the experience of COVID and in particular the period between 2020–2021 when we had lockdowns across the world, when theatres were dark, but also, when so many people tragically lost their lives, is how distant that time seems from us in some respects – as if there were a kind of collective amnesia. When one thinks about that time, I don't know about you, but it feels to me quite alien. So, it's important for us, I think, to try to recollect and record what happened. Perhaps, then, I can ask you for your reflections on the experience of COVID and its impact on theatre at the time?

Bishnupriya Dutt: One thing which was coming to my mind is that theatre in post-colonial India is largely committed to being an amateur

practice. So, when the theatres shut down, due to COVID, there was no expectation for any help or support from any sources. Most of the actors do not earn their livelihood from the theatres and survival was not an issue in the economic sense. The theatres shutting down affected really the backstage workers who earn a daily wage, working from one theatre to the other, at least in Kolkata. Post COVID, the economy of running a theatre has worsened and expenses have gone up sky-high, making it difficult to run on any sort of economically viable model. To rent a theatre, to pay the backstage workers, and advertise the show, has made the theatre companies more precarious. However, the angst of theatre practitioners to the ongoing crisis, not being able to respond to issues such as poverty, unemployment, migration and the authoritarian state trying to impose new labour and agricultural laws was psychologically frustrating and traumatic. They missed their co-actors, the daily meetings at rehearsals and even audiences, falling back into their core idea of the theatrical collectives. Instead, what many young theatre makers did was plunge into relief and voluntary work which were being organized at the grassroot level and at the same time they tried to collect funds to contribute to the backstage workers.

In this context I have been following the commendable work of one theatre organization called Theatre Formation Partibartak, run by Joyraj and Srabanti Bhattacharya who along with other members of their theatre company set up a community kitchen in a slum in Howrah. Along with their co-member Arko Mukhaerjee and Sandra Chatterjee they did online performances or whenever possible in person musical and dance concerts to raise funds for the community kitchen. They were not trying to 'entertain' anybody but would sing the old Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) protest songs as fundraisers. Subsequently they moved into a nearby abandoned jute factory which continues to run the community kitchen till today but now for a nominal payment. After COVID, they raised funds to purchase the premises and while running the kitchen from the ground floor, they also built an experimental

theatre and performance space, which allows them to still continue with their work with local communities while avoiding the issues of skyrocketing expenses. They are therefore offering an alternate economic model of survival of theatre practices and given their location, easy access to the local public who do not go to the centre of the city to watch theatre.

COVID on the other hand was an excuse for the authoritarian neo-liberal state to cut funding to theatre companies and theatre makers in a big way. What had historically allowed the theatre to survive without becoming a cultural industry by receiving generous state subsidies is now jeopardized. I'm not sure how these are connected, except maybe the state understood how precarious the practices are and cutting subsidies could eliminate the theatre which speaks out against the authoritarian state and initiates agonistic debates. This is a dangerous trend, and many theatre makers are compromising on their ideological principles to keep the state and government happy so that the subsidies continue. Alternately, they are seeking corporate sponsorship – diluting the political edge which distinguished the progressive amateur theatre movement in Kolkata.

Anuradha Kapur: I think there was parity between Kolkata and Delhi in terms of the dire conditions into which the daily wage worker, the worker in the informal sector of the theatre, was thrown.

Most theatre workers whether actors, designers, directors or crafters, do not earn a regular salary as there are not many state-supported repertory companies in Delhi; even theatre groups that have been awarded what is called a salary grant by the GOI have been subject to irregular funding; sometimes grants take years in coming and this had started even before the pandemic. State subsidy is slowly being withdrawn from the theatre.

Those outside these few state-supported groups or repertories work on a project basis and are mostly part time. Most have precarious short-term contracts, if at all.

Many theatre practitioners in Delhi run acting studios and this work has become, over the past decade, one of the main means of livelihood in the

city. But their livelihood is precarious too – work-spaces have to be maintained, and rent and electricity paid from the fees they gather from students. With the lockdown all these studios closed because no students were allowed to register and assemble.

The Kingdom of Dreams the most lavish commercial entertainment complex in Delhi NCR, that employed large numbers of theatre workers downed shutters, and scores of actors and crew became jobless overnight. Thus, the COVID lockdown meant for most theatre workers, no food, no rent, no means of sustenance.

Delhi Kalaakar Relief Fund, Janam, and Katkatha did relief work to distribute food, medical supplies and aid. How to recognize and name this relief work? Gargi Bharadwaj recalled her thoughts from the field at that time in a recent conversation with me: It is important to recognise, she says, that the work that Delhi Kalakaar Relief Fund was doing, as also many other artists were doing, was ‘neither charity nor our professional seeking’. We were trying to ‘hold the ground completely abandoned by the state’. She elaborates, ‘this was a unique moment’, which indicated the state’s ‘complete withdrawal from its primary responsibilities of ensuring a safe life to its people’, its ‘overindulgence in punitive forms of action against those who dissent’ and with that a ‘complete collapse of any accountability (of the state)’.

A lot of new informal makeshift play spaces opened up after the first wave of the pandemic; rooms, basements, terraces, angans, backyards across Delhi situated both in middle-class neighbourhoods as well as working-class ones. They often seated no more than 40 people; they doubled up, and still double up, as garage spaces and parking lots.

A different understanding of playing space had occurred; an understanding that recognizes on the one hand the urgency of keeping the theatre alive and thereby also keeping alive a sense of community, by which experience theatre itself lives; and of recognizing the equally urgent need to find alternative spaces since the auditoriums, anyway too highly priced and out of reach, had now altogether shut down. This understanding was not about making theatre *for* a site. This was not about site-

specific theatre, which is premised on the features of building, architecture and landscape. Playing space was needed for theatre to exist, and it was found; but these new spaces generated a new actor-spectator relationship, and a different viewing perspective.

What is feasible in a small room is dictated by the room size of course; but the room also proposes a *range* of relationships between actors and spectators within that room. Another room will propose another set of relationships. A different understanding of proxemics – intimacy, nearness and distance, point of view and placement. Because rooms whatever their dimensions are not simply containers.

Thus, I suggest that while architecture does automatically produce work adapted to it, forms that are *susceptible* to the material features of a building need sustained exploration. Therefore, we must ask why there is now a return to a certain pyramidal structure of playmaking where the text is at the top of this pyramid.

The social circumstances of theatre making, at this moment, have made the possibility of working with large groups very difficult, at least in Delhi. A large group cannot function on a regular basis in the city anymore because the everyday economics of theatre making prohibits that. So, just as the theatre space is small, so is the work also small in scale.

In this context, I seek to call attention to the word frugality which it seems to me has returned into the discourse today. Even though I understand that frugality in the theatre is something that is inevitable and in some ways necessary after the pandemic, I think this *idea* of frugality itself might need to be modulated, inflected. It need not connect up automatically with that form of text-based realism which has been the dominant grammar of Delhi theatre since the 1960s. This connection, this apparent family line, I suggest, needs a reconsideration. A rethink, such as focusing on the power of the pared down object; on the specific materiality of what is brought onto the playing area; the architectural preconditions that define a repurposed space.

So, while an urgent and freeing move away from the managerial ethos of the large theatres was made during the COVID period in Delhi, an

equally urgent reconsideration of performative grammar needs to be made as well.

Additionally, on the other hand, there has been a return to the popular grammar of street theatre in Delhi. The stories that these street performances tell, especially those that are played by university groups, are courageous and pertinent, but their performative grammar appears to have become abbreviated. There might be many reasons for this; including the cruciality of the moment and the lack of rehearsal time. But I do believe that street performances can be made more amenable to the social conditions that were corporeally experienced during and after the pandemic, by use of object and costume for example. But then might we even think to expect such formal changes, and so quickly?

TF: There are a number of interesting things you've drawn attention to here. On the one hand, Bishnupriya, you were talking about structures of solidarity which are being mobilized in response to the effects of COVID which obviously applies to a particular form of theatre, but also probably more extensively, situating this within the particular experience that India had with COVID. There were huge social crises prompted by COVID, which mobilized vast forms of on-the-ground grassroots solidarity, of which theatre played its part. You've mentioned, for example, Anuradha, that Janam was doing things, along these lines with workers' organisations and so on. So you have an articulation of theatre which is rooted in a certain political understanding of the need for solidarity; but then, on the other hand, as you were describing it, Anuradha, you also have this sort of crisis, a structural crisis in theatre, in the sense that the large older theatres- the pre-pandemic way of making theatre in large spaces, more spectacular spaces, seems to have been transformed by COVID. And what has emerged instead is a plethora of new spaces, and yet nobody quite knows what to do with them, or rather, a new form hasn't quite emerged to think through what opportunity those spaces offer for theatre, in terms of innovating the form.

BD: And just to add to that, I think just before COVID, there were large-scale nationwide protests, where activist performers like Maya Rao, or Janam were out on the streets – calling out the State and the authorities while discovering a new aesthetics of street theatre. And these came to an end because these were the spaces the state evacuated of all the protestors and overnight – even

white-washed the walls of their graffiti. The memory of these heterotopic sites continued to haunt us as we saw the streets emptied. As a gesture the women of Shaheenbagh in Delhi, protesting against the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act, left their shoes behind to mark their space – a couple of days after the nationwide lockdown was declared on 25 March 2020 and the police forcefully evacuated the protesters from the protest site.

COVID invisibilized these political spaces and eradicated the experiences of public assemblies which were so exhilarating [prior to the pandemic], and which have disappeared completely and never recovered from the long lockdown periods. Many of the organizers of the earlier protests were routinely rounded up, served warrants and incarcerated under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) modified and passed in August 2019, providing the authorities with a special procedure to deal with supposedly terrorist activities amongst other things. In reality it is a means to muffle all dissenting voices. Maya Rao's online work, where we heard her deep androgynous voice calling out the names of those arrested and persecuted, as, visually, pages of the constitution scattered across the empty roads, sets the tone of poignancy, nostalgia and melancholia to date.

This is the Delhi story, but in Kolkata the COVID story is different: theatre activities and activism returned much sooner and more forthrightly; new activists appeared, who created plays in the agit prop mode, so that they could be played outdoors highlighting many of the issues of COVID: its micro experiences as well as its macro issues. A street theatre festival (2–6 November 2022) in the Jadavpur University¹ showcased around 10 plays, all responding to the COVID crisis in various ways. There were groups of enthusiastic young theatre makers from Kolkata as well as the suburbs, who were all responding to the claustrophobic environment of COVID, including the rise of sexual violence, which was rampant, and the precarity, impoverishment and abjection [it left so many people confronting].

1. Ahvana Paul, Tamalika Roy, Sumit Monal, and Shrinjita Biswas, 'Reclaiming Public Spaces in Post-Pandemic India (Kolkata): Activist Theatre, Gender and a Resurgence of the Marginal', *Theatre Research International* 49, no 1 (2024): 111–7.

All of these plays offered strong class and gender perspectives and flagged the fallacy of [the idyll of] domesticity by highlighting domestic violence which during COVID lockdowns increased tenfold across India. They dealt with the large-scale unemployment and the historical reverse migration that resulted from COVID as factories and industries closed down leaving the workers [abandoned by the state] to find their way home, by walking long distances – many dying and suffering along the route. Most of these plays were prepared during COVID and performed in terraces, empty streets, parks and elsewhere. Many a time the performers were chased away by the police and the authorities but found nooks and corners to perform their work, and through these performances were able to challenge the rigid divides between private and public spaces which the lockdown had imposed.

TF: What this suggests is the kind of contradiction between the spatiality of the theatre and the straightened spatiality imposed by the pandemic, with its lockdowns. Obviously, the context you are describing, Bishnupriya, of governmental lockdown, which becomes a pretext for the oppression of certain types of activists, compels theatre and political interventions to coincide. But COVID also meant theatre makers made use of a different form of public space, which is the online space. What new opportunities, new forms of theatrical spatiality, and new forms of public spatiality became available for Indian theatre makers? Did it incentivize different kinds of spatialities for theatre and even for a new kind of theatre of protest? Did you see much of that occurring?

BD: I think Anuradha would be able to answer that, because artists who did go online also had a certain economic and cultural capital. And had a long history of working with the digital medium, obtaining generous funding, which Anuradha would know more about.

AK: Many of the practitioners who made digital work during the pandemic had worked with the digital before; but during the pandemic they explored different formats. Amitesh Grover for example reworked his vocabulary to figure out 'game' formats that underlined isolation and voyeurism that is produced by, and on, the screen. In an online theatre festival, he curated for Rangashankara Bangalore, he set up conversations about new forms of theatre and

assembly. Jyoti Dogra cited online makeup tutorials and made, in close up, an intimate public story about her struggles with crafting a digital identity. Mallika Taneja made *Allegedly*, an examination of consent in a relationship fashioned as online conversations between friends and colleagues, lawyers, and voyeurs. Journalists and photographers documented the extraordinary everyday – the long march of the workers to their villages. Ajit Anjum's daily documentation about reverse migration showed up the Supreme Court's narrative – that there were no workers on the road – for what it was. Ajit Anjum now has a hugely subscribed YouTube channel. But he found his viewership because he filmed, while walking, from morning to night, the invisibilised everyday of the COVID lockdown. Maya Rao put videos on our phones. Her character, Paro, described outlandish adventures. But what was happening on the ground was indeed outlandish, hard to comprehend. Maya's Paro slept in cement containers, walked with a tiger who seemed to want company, persuaded a brother-in-law to join the foot march; abandoned neighbours and family, tore herself away from a favourite colony park, and set out. A little fragment of this story was sent out every morning. As Pia pointed out, Maya found a form.

TF: What is very interesting in what you are saying about that particular kind of intervention is its relationship to those photographs, particularly of documenting what was the greatest internal displacement of population in India since the partition.

AK: Yes. Yes. Yes

TF: So, how does theatre respond to this huge social catastrophe? Obviously, photographers were able to document this mass exodus of people from the cities and we know Rustom Bharucha has written on these photographs very compellingly in his book *The Second Wave*,² but in terms of theatre's response, it was Maya Rao who was able to respond to that social crises; what about the others you mention?

BD: The plays [I mentioned] - particularly their form – were not congenial to taking up the macro themes of the COVID crisis and additionally many of them were drawn to the micro histories and experiences against the very problematic mainstream media coverage. Theatre could actually portray better than television or newspapers, the smaller hardships, real people and sufferings. Indeed, it is a journalism of a sort

which was alternative to the big media and based on real incidents and was documenting micro histories. Many of the theatre makers who made such plays like Bhoomisuta Das, Dipanwita Banik Das, Sanjita Pathermanush, Vartika, and many others, took incidents, and the names of actual people from the larger media coverage, to make them come alive and, in a way, through the performances, give them the voice to express their conditions and stories of trauma. In a mode of critique, they also highlighted the alienated and apathetic attitude of the middle class: as housing colonies or apartment blocks in urban India, where large sections of the middle class live, blocked entrance to daily help who come to assist with domestic labour like cleaning, washing and cooking. The entire burden of domestic labour as a result fell on the women of the house but also a callousness in regards to the domestic support system as the employers no longer felt it necessary to pay them their salaries. Without work and the country's transport system at a standstill, many of them, impoverished, tried to find their way home to the villages. So, taking these kinds of experiences from daily life, or referencing stories covered in the media, the plays focused on some of the most horrifying experiences of COVID and particularly [the experiential aspect of] reverse migration.

For example, the play *Pandemic* by Gobardanga Naksha performed on 21 September 2020 in the suburban town of Gobardanga, picked up the true story of six workers who were run over by a train on the railway track. The middle-class, learning about the incident from the newspapers or television coverage, could only speculate about why they were sleeping on the railway tracks: was it an attempt to commit suicide or was it something else – and what really transpired? In this case the actors expressed their opinion, revealing their biases and alienation, though most of their comments were casual and callous – some had deep insights and the play tried to stage all the versions they came across around the tragic incident.

Chena Adhuli's play *Jamlo Makdam*, first performed on 14 March 2021 in Hoogly, Nalikul, is named after a twelve-year old Adivasi girl who was walking back to her parents' home in Chhattisgarh from Telangana, where she worked as a child labourer in the chilli plantation – a journey of more than 150 kms. Exhausted and dehydrated she passed away only 50 kms from her home. In the play, the actress playing Jamlo is tied to a tree as she tries to move forward – every time she leaps, tries to gain momentum to cover ground by sheer physical labour, she finds it exhausting and draining. The sheer repetition of the leap and the struggle to sustain momentum for the 30 minutes of the performance actually transferred the experience of the labour involved in the long walks the migrant population all over the country undertook, and testified to the frailty of human bodies. Since they were all improvised pieces, there was no one authorial voice but a collective effort, a collaboration emerging out of empathy and identifications [of the performers with these COVID stories]. Bhumi Suta Das from Gobardanga Naksha as part of the play *Pandemic* devised a symbolic gesture of breaking a television every day in the main thoroughfare in Gobardanga (a small town) to register a protest against the constant misinformation circulated by the mainstream media and its refusal to take a critical position in the face of such devastation – in the name of 'objective journalism'.

These are young activists and taking to the streets with theatre was their first foray into the genre. Earlier they used to hire the theatres and do maybe two shows a year, but the urgency of these issues made them take to the streets as they discovered new theatrical languages and idioms to express their angst and rage but also to show empathy at the same time. And after COVID restrictions were lifted, they started reaching out to different audiences across Bengal.

So, I think they did discover a new genre of street theatre, which I haven't seen in Kolkata and West Bengal for a very long time. This is what you (TF) have called the Activist Theatre, 'defined as a democratic theatre of protest', whose actors are not only performers but also strategists.³

TF: You have both referred to language, to a new language, a new grammar, or at least to the shifting grammars of theatre and what potential new repertoires emerged out of these experiments.

2. Rustom Bharucha, *The Second Wave: Reflections on the Pandemic Through Photography, Performance and Public Culture* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2023).

Perhaps it is far too early to say what will stick, what will consolidate into potentially new forms, and what is just an immediate response to a situation and so begins and ends with that situation. Although it is hard to say at this point, but from this emphasis on language, is there a new kind of grammar of performance in the making, coming out of COVID? Is a new kind of language of theatre a potentiality, are we able to see this, now that we are a little further away from the crisis of the pandemic? Are we beginning to see some of these forms consolidate into something more substantial, do you think? Notwithstanding what you were saying, Anuradha, about these spaces in Delhi which are not quite there yet?

AK: There is a parallel mobilization of street theatre by governmental agencies and also right-wing groups. Vaccines were a popular topic. Food distribution was another. I think again on the languages of these performances: they say entirely different things from opposite ideological orientations but are sometimes similar in gesture, stance, costume, speech. A perplexing moment which I think needs handling – about which I have spoken earlier as well. On the other hand, small inventive actions like shooting very short films with the meagrest of means come to mind. A film about a daughter who rides a bicycle all the way from Delhi to her village, with her father pillion, in order to save themselves from starving in the lockdown. This film, called *Tirtham* was made by Ajay Sharma and was four minutes long.

BD: It is a new language given the unprecedented impact of the COVID crisis but also drawing from the genealogy of the older street theatres. It was a moment which created a nostalgia for the works of the cultural left, such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) particularly during the famine of 1943. Many of the artistes narrate this history and talk about how relief work and theatre making went hand in hand in the past and also in the present. The raw experience of the suffering and misery finds mediation through the performers and performing bodies who also encounter the people through relief work. It allowed young activists to come out of isolation and a sense of alienation from their own middle-class existence and through their bodies and

voice could express a raw perspective of reality. What was heartening was that the voices of the theatre makers we were hearing were mostly women who adopted a conscious gendered position. In my own experience with Bengali theatre, particularly street theatre, I have never seen such large-scale visibility of women activists and activists since the new wave of street theatre from the COVID times.

Similarly last year [2024] the incident around the sexual violence and death of a medical student in the R.G. Kar government hospital, brought many of the women performers out in the streets once more – singing songs of protest, dancing and through their bodies expressing outrage and resistance. Miming from Brecht's short story about infanticide, 'Marie Farrar' (1922), flash mobs, experimenting with classical dance forms and many other such thematics and forms, appropriate for protests against sexual violence. The short performances create certain gestures of resistance which then become the mnemonics of the protest and attain a life of their own. These are new languages which are developing but not devoid of a past or a future.

TF: So did the COVID period at least then create a context where organisation could start, and where people could start thinking about how they wanted to organise? Because in a way you are saying that when the women's protests emerged, they were already drawing on a structure that had begun to form during the COVID period. Was there a particular form of organisation that was developing then, even if people were sequestered in lockdown? What kind of conversations were going on that engendered that kind of possibility?

BD: Yes, these are coming from a genre of older left cultural practices but now with a gendered sensibility. We saw that in Kolkata, COVID brought the left into organizing themselves as Red volunteers to start intensive relief work and establish an elaborate care-providing network which the state or the system refused to provide. From providing oxygen cylinders to medical consultations to hospital admissions for critical cases, the Red volunteers were extremely active in all neighborhoods and communities.

And even today, when the political left is not so prominent in electoral politics, but when the left parties called for a protest around the R.G. Kar Hospital incident, calling it 'Reclaim the

3. Tony Fisher, *The Aesthetic Exception: Essays on Art, Theatre, and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 153.

Night' on 14 August 2024, there were thousands of people out in the streets in the night. The Left – particularly the cultural left – is still seen as having credibility in matters around the actual needs, aspirations and desires of the common people.

In Bengal, I think it is the cultural activists who are attaining more and more visibility. But backed by the older party networks and communist party organizations which may have been weakening but remain resilient in the left's survival through activism.

TF: And that tradition, of the Leftist amateur theatre, articulated historically in relation to cultural work, is rooted in the commitment to sociality, to social progress and so on. These traditions persisted even during COVID, and they managed to somehow persist through being articulated in relationship to political organizing during COVID in terms of relief efforts and so on.

BD: The cultural front sort of helps them to stay alive and survive.

TF: Returning to the effects of COVID in Delhi's theatre, and thinking along the lines, Anuradha, of what you were saying earlier, particularly around this idea of social capital in relation to online spaces, did COVID expose the striations or cultural divisions of the theatre community? You spoke of COVID leading to certain forms, crafted for very particular groups, occurring in these smaller spaces. Would you say they possessed a similar social dynamic and cultural capital to those participating in online spaces that you also saw emerging? Or do you see the possibility for a more democratic or even democratic space being made available through those spaces?

AK: In these spaces a large number of young practitioners congregate. But more intergenerational audiences have also begun coming in; the viewing habits and the comforts of a plush auditorium seat have begun to be given up. On the other hand, a strange oppositeness has taken place. The scale of shows that populate the big theatres is larger than ever before. Versions of the epics; TV stars to the fore; hugely expensive tickets. These are drawing audiences and run to full houses. The frequency of these shows has greatly increased too. The ticket prices in Delhi now for some shows are anywhere between of ₹2000 to even occasionally

₹10000. Auditoriums are always full. A very strange sectionalisation of theatre work which I can't actually decode. This range of ticket pricing in Delhi is new to me; It has been part of the world of English language theatre of Delhi, as well as of theatre made with corporate funding, but that plays in Hindi are able to fill the house with that sort of ticket range, is a surprise for me. The minimum ticket now, even in the tiniest of informal spaces is Rs 500. So, what are the different economies functioning here? What different sorts of expectations? What kinds of crosscuts?

BD: The National School of Drama (NSD) organizes the Bharat Rang Mahotsav (National Theatre Festival) which is completely paid for by the state, ticket prices have more than doubled in the last few years.

AK: Yes, you told me, I was astonished.

BD: And again, there's been a large-scale corporatization of theatre culture. Big business houses like the Aditya Birla Group sponsor theatre companies to stage spectacular shows on an annual basis.

AK: Yes, Aditya Birla.

BD: Then there is the Mahindra Group who organize a theatre festival and awards for the last twenty years. They keep the prices of the ticket down and offer students free access. The same play for example, Makarand Deshpande's *Siachen* which was showcased in the META Festival in 2024 has now come on an independent tour and ticket prices are ten times more. I don't know who goes to such plays and audience compositions change invariably.

AK: Yes, I don't know, and the point is this rise is post-COVID. It's not helping the actor very substantially I am sure, and it's not helping the backstage worker.

BD: Kolkata still has ₹50 - ₹100 tickets and a larger section of the middle class are regular theatre goers. In Delhi and Mumbai, the theatre scene is far more exclusive and expensive.

AK: Calcutta still has lower ticket rates that cater to the middle class. Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore all now have very high ticket rates. Delhi is the last city in the queue as it were to get this high-ticket audience into the theatre. Who fills these halls I wonder, what sort of Delhi elite?

TF: And so that increase in ticket pricing is changing the demographics of who is able to go to

the theatre. I am interested in what you were saying in terms of how one has to shift one's discourse about theatre and the understanding of theatre and whether new categories have to be constructed to really try to grasp what one might call the new political economy of theatre post-COVID. And it's intriguing in a way, because what comes through most in what you are saying is that the situation post-COVID hasn't really led to technically inventive theatre per se, but it has led to a more expensive, perhaps more socially conservative type of theatre than existed prior to COVID?

AK: There may not have been technically inventive theatres per se; but there have been protest actions that have invented a visual vocabulary of, and for, performance. Inder Salim, a performance artist based in Delhi, invented a daily routine for himself. For almost a year he raised flags, made of various materials – plastic, cotton, waste, rag, gunny, jute, on his balcony with direct, and sometimes cryptic messages written on them. Visible every day on his balcony, visible to his entire neighbourhood in East Delhi.

BD: In West Bengal, the government owns many theatres not only in the city of Kolkata, but also in the suburbs. But what happens, when a lot of these groups participate in protests, such as the R.G. Kar Hospital incident, the state government often sees them as antagonistic towards the establishment and refuses to allot them the theatres for their shows. These then become a bargaining and negotiating point and the administration allots the theatres to those who didn't go out into the streets, or join protest marches, who didn't criticize the government; on the other side, the theatre makers realize the problems of looking at the state or government as patrons or benefactors.

AK: In Delhi, Maya's works, Navtej Johar's performances, Gaur Gill's photographs, Gurinder Singh's film *Trolley Times*, among works by other makers who documented Shaheen Bagh and the 2020-2021 farmers' protest, have been shown in galleries and private spaces. New work has not been made lately so far I can see; as was new work made in Kolkata about the RG Kar case.

BD: Kolkata has a large, dedicated theatre audience. That sort of keeps these groups going.

AK: It's like a cultural front situation, which Delhi doesn't have.

BD: Many of these directors and actors are very popular in the public domain and depend on their own work and popularity to draw audiences. So, even if the state stops giving them theatres, they will survive because they will find other locations to do their theatre in.

TF: But this performance turn, in Kolkata – specifically this use of performance is very interesting as a way of trying to discover or articulate a new kind of language or a language capable of expressing something which can't simply be converted into the usual structures of drama – something that requires a greater inventive response. And it's peculiar that it is centred around Kolkata. But that is primarily because of its particular traditions, activist traditions which are fairly strong in Kolkata. Is that right? What is the reason do you think for that?

AK: I'd like to take a step sideways here; about the language of protest. About performance grammar and its local pedagogical histories if you like. Kolkata has had a history of using mime as part of the language of protest. It has been taught in specific ways; it has been received and used in specific ways. In Delhi mime is not popular and hardly used at all. Particular forms resonate in particular ways in different spaces. Their histories and uses are often region specific.

To go back to the small space, the space itself democratizes the possibility of practice, but the language of practice does not necessarily respond to that democratization.

BD: I would like to draw Anuradha's attention to Tony's first question on institutions – in postcolonial India, cultural institutions were significant and allowed many directors like you to experiment, discover new languages and strategies (feminist and gendered) and protected the theatre from market forces and commercialization. Now those spaces in the current neoliberal times are really shrinking, and people have to find their spaces outside these institutions to retain their autonomy. How did COVID accelerate the process of increasing authoritarianism, censorship and hegemonic control?

AK: But Bishnupriya, what's happening to these spaces is pre-COVID.

BD: Pre-COVID, but during and post it worsened.

AK: In the NSD the changes initiated in theatre pedagogy and practice go back a decade, to 2014. Non-adaptive binaries have returned: 'Indian' and 'Western' theatre, modern and traditional theatre, the 'Natyasastra' versus 'Western' acting methodologies. After the COVID lockdown when the institution reconvened these binaries came to shape the pedagogy.

TF: So, COVID, in a sense, merely intensified those tendencies?

AK: I think so.

TF: This must be articulated in relation to the entrenchment of the populist politics and the capture of the institutions by particular state formations.

AK: With respect to the NSD, a certain institutional history was in the process of being erased before the lockdown; the process of erasure was compounded by the lockdown. The Shaheen Bagh protest, by comparison was evacuated *because* of COVID.

TF: That's in fact shocking. But this comes back to my earlier question about memory. What were we before COVID and what are we post-COVID? Some things seem to have shifted in the way people think about time, and I am not quite sure what it is. I am very struck by what in the final chapter of Rustom Bharucha's book⁴ - if you remember he talks about endings and beginnings - is expressed as a kind of catastrophic depiction and obviously he was writing it just as the second wave ended, and the third wave was beginning, so maybe he would have a different view now, but it has almost a dystopic tone to it. Now I wonder if in a similar way to how Rustom describes the lessons of COVID, we are left post-COVID, facing a kind of dismal time? Where, as it were, it's hard to find incentivising forms that have a sense of futurity to them - that seem hopeful. On the other hand, it is really striking how effective the women's protests are in their intervention. I don't know, but would you share that certain sentiment with Rustom in terms of where we have been left post-COVID, or was Rustom being, I don't know, too ...

BD: Apocalyptic! A theatre person cannot be so pessimistic, through the theatre we want to look at the future, and I think a lot of the plays which I am talking

about, and activism as such, look into the future with hope and optimism. Theatre has its way of engaging with the issues and problems of society, explores resolutions, builds resistances and stimulates desires to rebuild political communities - which stand in solidarity and address problems. It also holds on to memories of crisis and does not allow one to forget the anomalies of what creates the conditions of crisis - but helps one to devise strategies to deal with it. All the plays both of us were mentioning consisted of that little bit of resilience, a will to survive, and I think the theatre, which was sort of responding to the crisis, did pick up this impulse - one of struggle and agitation and not take things lying down and surrendering to the apocalyptic moment.

AK: I agree completely. The fact that a theatre group survives is saying something about resilience. We may disagree on the languages and grammars, and we may see even a return to a certain kind of conventionality, but work is happening, is pushing to survive.

TF: So, the need for a new theatre grammar becomes an imperative for the world we have inherited post-COVID? We may be struggling to find what that grammar is exactly, how it takes shape as a form of theatre, but I think you are right - there is no more human centered form than theatre; so in a way, if COVID saw a virus assailing humanity, then theatre offers a space in which the human reasserts and rediscovers itself, because theatre requires a certain kind of commitment to human sociality.

BD: Again, to come back, you know, to Maya Rao or the young activists, they build artistic modes of resistance. There is a sense of that power and the resilience of the people. It is not victimhood, so I think that's where we were and are invested in as we work closely with practice and practitioners.

TF: Well, do you think we have come to an end? Our conversation seems to have reached a certain point. Is there anything else we want to say?

AK: Just a small little thought, pertaining to the crises in practice institutions. Performance departments, art schools, studios and theatres are being set up in private universities, while many drama departments and drama schools in public universities are shrinking, even dying because of funding cuts. The fee structures of private

4. Bharucha, *The Second Wave*.

universities are prohibitive as we know, and primarily elite students can gain access to them; the students in centrally funded arts institutions like NSD are on full scholarship. I think the generalization that 95% of the students who have graduated from the NSD would not have been able to afford a theatre education will hold. So a question: have thoughts about collectivities, and collaborative practices in art making, shifted out of public institutions and what kind of life, if at all, will they have in private universities? How will praxis and skill be defined? What sort of outcomes sought? What 'job' preparedness inculcated?

BD: The final question you raised, Tony, was on international collaborations and ecologies of touring, and I think COVID was something which affected the entire world but there was also a conscious provincialism in the way theatre of each country or each region was responding to the local micro-conditions. It was not something which could be expressed in a universal language, particularly the experiences of the global south and the global north – although there was a lot to share of experiences amongst us all through online seminars and discussions. I believe that there was nobody from any progressive theatre culture who did not respond to this reverse migration and the displacement of labour forces from their work habitats. The middle-class preoccupation of theatre was temporarily suspended. There were very strong empathies and a discovery of new modes of caring. For me, that was a moment when people in the theatre really responded in the most positive way possible.

AK: One part of the vocabulary of care as it was manifested in the times of the pandemic is taken from the *langar* in Sikhism in many senses, it would seem to me. The *langar* is where all visitors are seated in rows on the ground, irrespective of caste, class, gender, and religion, and are offered a simple meal. A community kitchen is operated for this purpose. The *langar* is also seen as a space for refuge and rest. We saw these community actions at Shaheen Bagh, and at the farmers' protest also. There were other kinds of *langars* as well, that of giving oxygen to people who could not afford to get to hospital. The duties and actions of the *sevadar*, the one

responsible for care in the gurudwara, informed, it would seem to me, the languages of performing care across Delhi at that time.

A little story here, about the gurudwara at Jantar Mantar. It keeps its toilets and dormitories open all night for protestors sitting at Jantar Mantar, a designated protest site virtually next door; the protestors can take refuge and rest there, whatever the nature of their protest. Their protest does not have to align with the ideas propagated by Sikhism. It's a practice of care and hospitality that is practiced in the everyday.

BD: And what a lovely world, the one of empathizing and caring particularly when authoritarian states and right-wing forces are always trying to pit one religious community against the other and create enemies and friends according to religion; but that was a positive outcome, something which came out of the relief work, of the cultural work, of the cultural front.

AK: Absolutely! And the relief work at that scale, I think, probably has hardly any match in the world.

TF: Those forms of sociality you are describing, those forms of solidarity, which were made visible at that time, given the political context in India at the moment, has any of that memory passed on? Is there still evidence of what has been learnt from that experience that is prevalent today? What have we learnt do you think?

AK: The memory is probably present, because the practice is not new. But the memory is tinged with some nostalgia, some melancholia.

BD: Community upholds the patriarchal structures and instigates violence against women.

AK: Yes, huge violence.

BD: So, we don't want to romanticize patriarchy or community.

AK: Yes, absolutely.

BD: ...The experience of COVID-19 and its implications on theatre practice demonstrated how social discourse is still critical for performances and larger debates in the public domain. Significantly, its mnemonics captured the social reality, even brutality, of abjection, impoverishment and displacements; a real contrast to the conspicuous lifestyle which has become integral to mainstream cultures which is increasingly de-politicising practices.

Notes on contributors

Tony Fisher is Professor of Theatre, Politics and Aesthetics at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. He has a long-standing interest in the relationship between the arts, and theatre in particular, and politics and political power, both historically and in contemporary socio-political contexts. He is the author of two monographs *The Aesthetic Exception: Essays on Art, Theatre and Politics* (Manchester University Press, 2023) and *Theatre and Governance in Britain: 1500-1900, Democracy, Disorder and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), as well as several edited volumes and journal articles.

Anuradha Kapur is a theatre maker and teacher. Her theatre work has travelled nationally and internationally and she has taught in theatre schools and universities in India and abroad. She is a founder member of Vivadi, a working group of theatre practitioners, visual artists, film makers, musicians and writers. Vivadi seeks to do interdisciplinary work and attempts exchange between practice and research. Vivadi's works have ranged from Performance Sculpture and Installation projects to working on actor's biographies, to texts devised by Geetanjali Shree, to works of modern Indian playwrights and translations of Kuo Pao Kun, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Brecht, and Heiner Müller, among others. Her writings on performance have been widely anthologized and her book *Actors Pilgrims Kings and Gods: the Ramlila at Ramnagar* was published by Seagull Books, Calcutta (1993, 2004). Kapur was invited to curate the performance window for body.city: citing contemporary culture in India, presented at the House of World Cultures, Berlin, September 2003. She co-curated the theatre section of the Serendipity Arts Festival Goa in 2016 and 2017 and the International

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