

## **2. HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE OF ADISHAKTI**

### *Spiritual Fundamentals of the New Aesthetic*

In Adishakti's view the value of performance/art lies in its ability to create a state of 'ecstasy' in the mind of the spectator; or to put it differently, to provide a bridge to a heightened or elevated state of consciousness

The uplifting power of art is inherent in its nature, for art is itself the expression of a heightened consciousness. If the creations of the artist/performer come from his/her most enhanced states of consciousness they will communicate to the spectator through a contagion of consciousness.

That such a contagion is possible is born out by the notion of osmosis. Enhanced states of consciousness are those in which the boundaries of everyday consciousness are rolled back.

Adishakti explores this process through two principal means. First, employing methodologies arising from:

### *Methodologies from Psychological practice*

Indian systems of thought have provided the world with psychological practices/yoga, which enable the individual to go beyond his/her existing states of consciousness to reach levels beyond those of everyday life. The assumption is that these states of consciousness which one perceives to be beyond oneself are actually regions of oneself, which one is as yet unaware of.

Adishakti has developed a fluid, subjectively interpretative psychological practice for the performer. Each individual uses it as a framework for expanding the peripheries of his/her consciousness in his/her own time and own way and own pace. For in this matter there can be no general method. There are as many methods and processes as there are people.

The attempt at enhancing the consciousness or of extending its boundaries also involves the 'colonizing' of our potential or possibility through the thrust for inspiration.

When we talk of inspiration, we talk of it as though it is something, which comes to us from outside ourselves, from a space, which is other than what we are in everyday life. In the intense need to find solutions to creative problems, one sometimes makes great leaps of consciousness into spaces of ourselves, which exist beyond those of daily existence. These are vertical leaps into a potential of ourselves, which at that moment seems beyond us.

The solutions that come to us from there are instances of inspiration. These spaces can become part of our everyday consciousness if one tries to access them often enough. And

if that were to happen, inspiration would still tantalize us from even higher reaches, inveigling us to go further beyond; enlarging the boundaries of our consciousness even more.

This work has an enormous relevance to performance practice. For the struggle to go beyond the everyday in a process of continuous becoming creates a vibrating, energized persona, which reaches out to the spectator and touches him/her through a contagion of consciousness.

The second means by which Adishakti explores the reaching of enhanced states of consciousness is through:

### ***The Performer's Body***

Consciousness exists also in the body. It expresses itself as energy. And it is with this enhanced energy that a performer can seduce the spectator into the performance.

The daily, functional use of the body occurs without reflection or choice. It is stereotyped and executed unconsciously. The more our actions are carried out spontaneously, without the least difficulty, the more can attention be directed to something else. But this spells death for body consciousness, for this spontaneity is a conditioned reflex.

If one wants to free oneself from reflexive response, one must fight against the spontaneous and the natural in the body. One must initiate a process, which undermines automatism, by using the body in a different way: by relearning how to stand, by using a different balance axis, by moving according to rules which deny those of daily behavior. This will call for a constant awareness in the body. Only by using the body in a non-functional way, is the consciousness in the body stimulated to take on a more active role, thus displacing automatism and accomplishing the mutation of inertia into energy, of weight into lightness.

This attempt to release the consciousness in the body has enormous implications for Adishakti's performance practice. It has compelled it to evolve a physical language of performance expression. This language was the starting point of Adishakti's new form. Later Adishakti was to employ this language as a signifier or text, which conveys meaning through visuals created by the body.

### ***Text And Adishakti's New Aesthetic***

The choices Adishakti made regarding texts it would use in its performances evolved out of its urge to create a multiple aesthetic polyphony, by building bridges between disparate ways of viewing particular themes.

### ***Sita, 1979***

In 1979 Adishakti produced Snehalata Reddy's *Sita* . It was an interpretation of the character from the epic Ramayana. From the point of view of feminist discourse in

India it was a significant play. But its monothematic focus made one question the quality of this intervention into a work that resonated with multi-layered significance. The interesting discovery, which emerged out of this questioning, was that the traditional Indian literature was non-literal, and tended towards allegory, metaphor and the symbolic.

### ***Oedipus, 1981***

In the production following *Sita* in 1981, Adishakti turned to Greek Tragedy: Sophocles' *Oedipus*. This production came out of a personal spiritual quest and naturally reflected Indian spiritual readings of the Greek text.

In the Greek aesthetic an act of bodily mutilation is perceived to be an unforgivable crime; and yet Oedipus tells the populace that it was Apollo, his daemon/ divine spirit, who had directed him to put out his eyes. And at the end of the play he says that he knows that there was a more 'awful' destiny in store for him. The word for 'awful' in the original classical Greek is a synonym for awe-inspiring.

In Adishakti's interpretation the act of blinding was perceived to be a psychological turning of the eyes from the outside to the inside in search of Truth. In the old Vedic tradition the Sun is a symbol of Truth; Apollo is the Sun god. The interpretation was that Oedipus prompted by Teiresius, the blind prophet, turns his eyes within himself to look for truth; for external events are merely the external expressions of inner realities. In doing this Oedipus takes a *saltum* in growth and becomes a Truth-seeker. In the last play of the trilogy: Oedipus at Colonus: he is perceived to be a sacred figure, like Teiresius, whose presence confers sanctity to a situation and endorses its correctness.

### ***The Trojan Women, 1984***

Through *Oedipus* and its next production, Adishakti was groping towards a response to the aesthetic dilemmas posed by post colonialism. In 1984 it produced Euripedes' *The Trojan Women*. Adishakti's interpretation, which involved a rewriting of the text, reflected the original anti war intent of Euripedes as well as the Indian philosophical concept that the absolute manifests itself progressively in the universe. And as it manifests itself in history the older dharma/ values, customs etc., give way to the new, for with the progress of terrestrial evolution these lose their truth and value.

### ***Savitri, 1991, and the departure from representational theatre***

It is important to mention here that after *The Trojan Women* Adishakti was no longer interested in representational theatre, which reflected every-day reality. Influenced deeply by evolutions within traditional Indian thought and the new physics, both of which questioned the nature of perceived reality, it departed from the use of realism in the content of its productions from that point onward.

In 1991 Adishakti worked to produce Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. Through certain linguistic clues, which Sri Aurobindo found in this folk tale of conjugal love, he

connected it to the tradition of the Vedic cycle, which transformed it into a symbol of larger psychological and spiritual experiences.

Taking its cue from Sri Aurobindo, Adishakti started exploring the most living expression of the tradition accessible to it--- the folklore. In fact for Adishakti folklore is identified in terms of the accessible. With this definition as its tool it discovered that by moving backward in time through the literary history of the culture to the Veda, Adishakti could unearth innumerable interpretations and points of a view about a particular myth, which provided it with the essence of its 'multiple aesthetic polyphony.'

A word about the Veda. It contains the spiritual and psychological seeds of Indian culture. It is a way of perceiving reality and coming to grips with it. And behind its symbolic figures and images it is so broadly inclusive and embracing, that it has inspired the Indian tendency to assimilate all that comes towards it and turn it into its own terms. The concept of the One manifested as the Many comes directly from this text.

Adishakti believes that it is the manner in which the Veda has been progressively unpacked in history that provides its' interpretations with a multiple sidedness. For these interpretations have been expressed variously through intellectual, aesthetic, and moral points of view, in different ages of time. And consequently it has become more and more accessible to larger and larger groups of people. In fact each successive expression of the Veda, because it was more accessible than the last and to a larger group of people than the last, was an expression of the folklore of the time. For example from the secret, occult, largely incomprehensible Seer vision of the Vedic Rishi, it was unpacked intellectually to a larger group of people through the Upanishads; and emotionally, aesthetically and religiously to a yet larger group of people later in time through the Epics and Puranas. And it continues to be unpacked through popular expressions of it today.

This movement of the Veda towards greater and greater accessibility, through larger accommodation and inclusion so as to reach more people has led to the syncretic quality of its folklore manifestations. It is this, which is attractive to Adishakti, for it is interested in releasing the multiple voices, which this syncretic lore contains. These reflect the plurality of contemporary reality and its multiple sidedness.

Since *Savitri*, Adishakti has created pieces, which have used symbols and have been allegorical and metaphorical. Both, the folklore, which is syncretic and the Vedic concepts, which are multi-layered when they have been unpacked, can be best expressed through metaphor and allegory.

### ***Impressions of Bhima, 1994, and the spiritual struggle***

The Veda and its resonance in folklore were explored in Adishakti's *Impressions of Bhima*, in 1994. In this production Adishakti looked at the story of Bhima, a hero from the Mahabharata, who images the man of power and physical strength. The

personification of Bhima in the Mahabharata is based on the Vedic archetype Vayu; who incidentally figures as Bhima's father in the epic.

All Vedic images and figures are symbols of psychological and spiritual states. And these states are never perceived as static. On the contrary they are in a constant state of evolution. In fact the motive of the Veda is to encourage and support the evolution of these psychological states from one level to the other in an ever-ascending order. The march is from height to greater height.

Thus Vayu, the lord of Life was considered to be the force, which pervaded all material existence and was the condition for its activities. All nervous and emotional activities of the human being belong to the domain of Vayu. In the Purana, Vayu was formulated as Prana, the universal breath of life. From the evolutionary standpoint this mechanical force gives way to volitional behavior or the Will. Thus Vayu, the nervous-physical energy, gives way to Agni who is the master of Tapas/ the inner energy. In Adishakti's production *Impressions of Bnima*, Agni replaced Vayu as the archetype behind Bhima's personification in the resolution of the performance.

This Vedic, symbolic, psychological and spiritual reading of Bhima was contextualized within a subaltern landscape, which was created by material provided by numerous folk tales about him from different parts of the country. What emerged was a deconstruction of the epic hero of the Mahabharata. In this age of the non-hero, the man of physical power and strength was recreated, into a psychological hero. And therefore in its resolution the production transferred the warrior's battle to the field where alone complete victory is possible. Instead of a struggle for scattered outward aims and transient success, at the end the warrior wants nothing less than an inner victory through a spiritual struggle, or *psychomachia*.

### ***Brhannala, 1998, and the union of polarities***

For its next production, *Brhannala*, in 1998 Adishakti turned to the folklore surrounding the Draupadi Worship in Tamil Nadu and followed it backward in time to the Veda and related it forward in time to neo physics and theories of brain lateralization.

The Draupadi Worship relates Arjuna as a female impersonator/Brhannala, to Ardhnarishwara: the Vedic image of Siva as the lord who is half woman and half man. For, according to the Veda, the polarities of the male and female symbolize other cosmic polarities. Ardhnanarishwara was therefore a metaphor for healing the perceived schism between objective and subjective reality, of matter and spirit, time and space, through the organic whole of the male and the female.

The Worship of Draupadi also related Arjuna to Siva through Arjuna's name as Savyasachin: which means one who is ambidextrous. Arjuna as Savyasachin knows how to use both his left hand, which is feminine and his right hand, which is masculine. Hence both Brhannala/Savyasachin and Ardhnarishwara are great dancers, both are also great archers, both combine the feminine and masculine elements, both have extremely erotic natures, but can be ascetics; both have strong cerebral/ brahmin

characteristics as well as the warrior moods: "The Brahmin in his cerebral, self denying asceticism was the traditional masculine counterpoint to the more violent, 'virile' active Kshatriya, the latter representing ----however odd this may seem to the modern consciousness ---the feminine principle in the cosmos" (Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*).

An unpacking of the Veda in contemporary terms seemed to be in order. For modern day brain lateralisation theories talk of the right hand as male and the left hand as female, and divide functions, capacities and processes of knowledge to different sides of the brain--right and left. Hence art, intuition, metaphor, music are the functions of the left hand because they process information in spatial terms; and physics, rationality, words, logic, war are functions of the right hand as they process information through time.

Also the discoveries of contemporary scientists and philosophers - Einstein's space/time continuum, Bohr's theory of complementarity, Sri Aurobindo's Gnosis-support the metaphor for the union of polarities which these traditional, symbolic figures represent; and suggest that these images from the tradition are merely forerunners of a new way to think about reality.

*Brhannala* as a production emerged out of this research and thinking. It was an allegory concerned with polarities and their union, elliptically imaged through events in Arjuna's life.

### ***Ganapati, 2000, and the creative cycle***

In *Ganapati* produced in 2000, Adishakti researched the folklore surrounding the birth stories of Ganapati and his predecessor from the Vedic Cycle-Martanda. It also looked into the domain of cultural psychology and economic theory regarding the circulation of wealth. The research led to a focus on the nature of inspiration, on creativity and creations. The cycle of creation, celebration, destruction and return, which inform the motif of the birth stories of both Ganapati and Martanda was seen as the cycle of the creative process at every level: biological, material, economic, social, cultural, psychological and spiritual. In Adishakti's interpretation *Ganapati* was envisaged as a metaphor for hybridity; and his empowerment by Siva symbolizing his return, was seen as the sanction of value given by tradition to the hybrid as a potent creative force.

In this piece as in *Brhannala*, Adishakti's perception of reality as one whole, rather than as a fractured one where nature and the human are compartmentalized into two separate categories, found expression in imaging significant values through animal figures.

### ***Language and text***

The language that Adishakti has performed its productions in has been English. This has facilitated a reach for Adishakti all over India and in other parts of the world. But so as to locate the English within an Indian context it has been exploring the regional languages of Tamil and Malayalam.

However in the last three of its productions it is moving towards a minimal use of the verbal text and giving an increasing space for other kinds of texts, such as visual images and music

### ***Form and Adishakti's New Aesthetic***

#### ***The need for innovation in form***

In 1996 Eugenio Barba the director of the Odin Teatret, Holstebro, Denmark wrote to Adishakti lamenting that "---in Europe theatre is dying like the epidemic."

In India too both contemporary and traditional theater are facing a decline.



The threat is to the form. It is assumed that theatre is doing poorly because cinema is able to do everything theatre does, much better. It has the reach, the technological resources and commercial validity which theatre does not. So this makes theatre redundant.

Theatre's forte is that it is a performance form. Its inimitable strength is the live, sensorial, presence of the performer. Unlike the actor in cinema, the audience can almost touch, smell, feel, and taste the actor in the theatre.

Adishakti believes that theatre must reinvent itself around this strength and enlarge its scope. It must leave its older avatar behind and become something else. It must evolve into a *new contemporary creative performance expression*, the central figure of which will be the performer. Adishakti's aesthetic which basis itself on the interaction between performer and spectator through a contagion of consciousness lends itself to this reinvention.

In fact the inner logic of this aesthetic has compelled Adishakti into inventing this new form. In attempting to enhance the psychological, sensorial presence of the performer it has been led into equipping him/her with a variety of skills, which provide the new performance form with a host of signifiers lacking in theatre practice, thus enlarging its scope.

In 1983 Adishakti began working towards creating a performance language, which would enhance the physical presence of the performer on stage by employing a nonfunctional energy.

Many of the traditional forms in India use nonfunctional energy on stage. However although the Adishakti team has learnt various traditional martial forms and performance forms like Kalaripayattu, Kathakali, Koodiyattam and Chhau, it has done so in order to go beyond the codification of these forms so as to uncover and release their hidden principles, which are universal in application.

And after long years of patient, time consuming practice, self-observation, analysis and self discovery the Adishakti team has been able to understand the essential dynamics of these forms, trace the processes of their evolution, discover their first principles and then evolve processes which demonstrate how these forms can be altered in an organic way for use in a contemporary performance situation.

For example through rigorous research Adishakti discovered that several performance traditions in India evolved from the martial arts of the region. For instance the performance form of Kathakali developed from the anterior Kalaripayattu form, a martial art of Kerala.

There are many postures and movements in Kathakkali, which are recognizable as elements from Kalaripayattu. For example the basic stance of Kathakali is very similar to the Kalaripayattu *amarcha* or the squat position used in fighting with a short stick. The *pranam* or the movement for ritual worship in Kathakali, is constructed from such movements and stances from Kalaripayattu like the *Chadi Ketu*, the *Amararcha*, the



*Hanuman* posture, the first leg exercise and the *Choriche*. ***The transformation of these ingredients from a martial art form into the performance form of Kathakkali occurred when a new principle was introduced in to the Kalaripayattu form.*** This new principle was a fixed and unchanging balance axis, a fixed stance and a fixed energy center, which does not exist in Kalaripayattu as the movements of this form have to serve the functional needs of combat.

To test its findings Adishakti explored introducing a totally new element into the Kalaripayattu movements to see whether the form would change. It decided to use a different pattern of breath than that normally used in the martial art. The breath energy employed in Kalaripayattu is functional; it tries to meet the needs of combat. Adishakti believed that the employment of a different breath pattern dictating the dynamics of the movement would change it.

This decision was determined by Adishakti's definition of performance energy. In Adishakti's view a performance energy is that in which seventy five percent of the energy is held simmering in, within the performer and only twenty five percent of it is used for external expression. This inveigles the spectator to be seduced into the performance in search of that hidden seventy five percent of energy. As energy translates into breath the Adishakti team decided to employ this ratio of breath to the movements of Kalaripayattu.

The exploration was a success, for the Adishakti team discovered that not only did the movements of Kalaripayattu change but they also revealed the possibility of conveying signification and were therefore more expressive and performative.

Another result of this exploration which emerged was the realization that, a few of the new movements, which emerged had a similarity with some performance traditions, also based on martial arts traditions from other parts of India. For example when the first leg exercise of Kalaripayattu was performed with this differing breath pattern, the movement became slower, balletic, more controlled and had a similarity to the *chaali*/ walk of the dance-theatre form of Mayurbhanj Chhau.

This finding has impelled Adishakti to reach out to culturally differing though similar genres in its quest for the creation of new hybrid forms.

Over the years it is on the basis of this kind of research that Adishakti has created its own contemporary language of movement and performance. This performance language of movement or *angika* is the most physical aspect of the form, which expresses the ***New Aesthetic***.

#### ***Linking voice with movement and visuals:***

It was in *The Trojan Women*, that Adishakti first used a physical language of expression. But one of the fundamental flaws of that production was that the energy of the vocal expression did not match the energy of the physical expression. While one was stylized the other was not. So Adishakti next had to develop a matching sound style for verbal expression or *vachika*.

Supported by an individual grant from the Ford Foundation in 1987 to its artistic director and by grants from the Det Lange Udvalge and the Charles Wallace India Trust in 1989, Adishakti investigated the voice and its secrets. It did this with Patsy Rodernberg and Cicely Berry, the voice coaches of the Royal Shakespeare Company, London; actors of the Odin Teatret in Holstebro Denmark; the Dagar brothers and Dhruvad singing; Amanur Mahdev Chakyyar and the *vachika* /sound style of Koodiyattam, the oldest surviving form of theater based on the Natyashastra; and *pranayama* and Kalaripayattu.

From the learning during this period Adishakti evolved a unique method for voice training, which employs a mix of *yoga asanas* for relaxing the body and the vocal cords and for the enhanced use of the upper palate; underwater vocalization for increasing breath capacity and for strengthening the diaphragm; *pranayama*, the chanting of the *vachika* of Koodoyattam and the *sargam* of Dhruvad practice, for increased resonance in the entire body.

All these practices have the additional benefit of contributing to strengthening the nerves, which is crucial when the performance practice depends on such an extravagant use of energy. They are also conducive towards creating a meditative state of mind, which is the most fertile state for the generation of new creativity and original thinking

Over the years this methodology has evolved further due to additional experiential knowledge gained through trying to meet the individual needs of a variety of persons from different fields.

Thus Adishakti has trained:

1. Cinema and television actors like Deepa Lagoo, Sushmita Mukharjee , Alok Nath, Sohaila Kapur, Javed Jafri, Neena Gupta, Mita Vashista;
2. Jazz singers from Mumbai like Winston Creado and Lorella Jacinto;
3. Gazal and thumari vocalists like Uday Chandra;
4. News- readers like Arpit Agrawal of NDTV;

In its quest for a stylized pattern of verbal expression in non-representational performance, Adishakti researched the sound style or *vachika* of Koodiyattam. This preliminary investigation led to an understanding of a basic principle behind this form, that if the voice is placed in a particular resonator of the body it will yield a particular emotional color. For example if the voice is placed in the resonator in the chest it could be expressive of heroism or if it is placed in the resonator of the head it could express anger. On the basis of this Adishakti evolved a sound pattern for vocal expression.

In 1992 Adishakti showcased the results of all this work through its production *Savitri*.

In the next Adishakti production, *Impressions of Bhima* in 1994, the physical language of expression and its vocal counterpart reached their fruition. In this work the language of movement was employed by the performer to provide visual images, which would reveal the sub text of the spoken word.

Another achievement of this performance was that by introducing certain principles of cinema, and not its technology, it added to the scope of live performance. Through the new language of physical expression, the performer created the effect of rapidly changing 'portmanteau' images, quick spatial and temporal changes, which replicated in principle cinema's ability to spatialize time and dynamize space. The performance was also very visually loaded and served as a text along with the minimal spoken text.

*Impressions of Bhima* was a landmark in performance history. It stretched the limits of theatre performance. And it used physical images provided by the movements of the performer in a different way than was done either in traditional performance or in contemporary performance. The contemporary performer with Adishakti, Vinay Kumar, was widely recognized as bringing additional dimensions to performance in *Impressions of Bhima*, reaching a new integration in facial, physical and vocal expression.

*Impressions of Bhima* was viewed widely both in India and abroad.

### ***Using breath techniques to enhance psychological expression***

This production however threw up another lacuna in the performance craft of the New Aesthetic. Adishakti did not have a language or methodology for psychological expression or *satvika*, which matched the energy of the body's language for expression. Western methods of acting use Stanislavski's process of emotional recall for psychological expression. But this method works only for realistic and representational theatre because it uses the logic of real thought. It does not work in a performance form where the energy used by the performer is non-functional and extra daily.

In the work that followed in 1998-99, *Brhannala*, Adishakti was able to overcome this problem after an exploration of the Koodiyattam performance techniques which use breath for the generation of each *bhava* / emotion, and for its expression in the face.

Breath and its impact on body dynamics and its impact on vocal expression had already been a preoccupation with Adishakti for sometime. And in 1987 Adishakti had engaged with Koodiyattam guru Amanur Mahdev Chakkyar and asked him whether the energy centers of the body, which motivate action, the voice resonators and the psychological centers/ the *chakras* of the Tantra tradition were related to each other and connected to the breath in Koodiyattam expression. Amanoor Mahadev Chakkyar said that they were indeed but refused to reveal how.

The answer came to us in 1997 out of a series of exercises, which were an elliptical movement around the axis of the breath/ *bhava* co relationship in Koodiyattam.

We discovered that all three: psychological/*satvika*, vocal/*vachika* and bodily/*angika* expressions are indeed united by a common breath. That it is not merely a coincidence that the resonators of the voice, the centers of physical energy and the *chakras*/ psychological centers are located in related regions of the body. **And this stands to reason when one accepts that breath is really the physical expression of thought and emotion.** A particular kind of breath to express one *bhava* /emotion in the face will express the same emotion in the voice, in the mind and in the body. And in *Brhannala*

Adishakti was therefore able to creatively extend the breath patterns used in Koodiyattam for facial expression, into bodily and vocal expression.

For example the same breath used in expressing *karuna* or sorrow in Koodiyattam facial expression or *mukha abhinaya*, was used by actor Vinay Kumar to express anguish through his voice in *Brhannala* when he cries as Arjuna at the death of Abhimanyu. In Koodiyattam, *karuna* is expressed through the face by a process in which the breath energy is pulled up from the base of the spine and stored in the chest region while the breath energy from the neck is compressed down on this concentration in the chest. The concentration of these two energies coming from physically different parts of the body results in the feeling of a load in the heart, it also visibly creates an expression of extreme pain on the face. This expression of pain feeds the emotional center and arouses real emotional pain. It is akin to watching yourself cry in the mirror, which makes you then cry more fiercely.

In the case of the voice, the breath, which is concentrated in the chest emerges in a strangulated sound, it emerges with extreme difficulty. This is a physiological replication of what happens to breath in a real life situation of emotional pain. The shock of tragedy robs the body of breath and the cry that emerges then is almost a plea for oxygen. Here again, in the performance situation, the sound the actor creates feeds the emotion and further helps the performer to take the expression of the emotion further.

The entire performance of *Brhannala* therefore was informed by a technique of breath. Whether the performer, Vinay Kumar, was making a transition from one thought to the other or was physically expressing something with his body or with his voice or imbuing a theatrical moment with an inner dimension--it was breath and its rhythms, which lay behind it all.

Vinay Kumar was able therefore to achieve a level of detail in his performance that he had not reached before. Handling detail in performance is important ---for the number of things that a performer can do per minute is what makes his/her performance energized, complex and layered. With the physical help of breath as a motivation, therefore, Vinay Kumar could employ his body, his mind, and his voice all at the same time, in a hitherto unprecedented way.

*Brhannala* too was considered a breakthrough in live performance. For apart from contributing to contemporary performance craft it further stretched the limits of theatre performance by metaphorically figuring Bohr's theory of complementarity on the performance space.

In the linchpin scene from *Brhannala*, Siva and Arjuna, played by solo performer Vinay Kumar, figured as the polar opposites of the male and female, time and space, the ascetic and the erotic. Through music, text and choreography the middle ground between these polarities was progressively revealed, and they were visually and experientially metaphorised into one seamless alloy. One could see the polarities become an organic whole when they glided into each other through the middle ground.

Theater aesthetics in contemporary India for sometime has accepted the duality created by the Aristotelian logic which holds that extremes can never be united through an excluded middle ground. The concept of conflict creating drama has been and continues to be a favorite with many practitioners. *Brhannala* was an attempt to address this dualism, which has existed in Western culture since the fifth century when Parmenides divided the world into being and non being and more recently when Descartes divided the 'in here' from the 'out there', by providing the alternative position held by Indian thought in the concept of Ardhnarishwara and in the new physics by complementarity. It attempted to paraphrase these two concepts visually through stagecraft.

### ***Further enhancement through rhythm and music***

During the work towards *Brhannala* Adishakti realized that while breath was the Koodiyattam performer's craft to stimulate expression, rhythm was an impulse underlying all expression.

The most striking element in Koodiyattam music is the rhythm. It feeds the performer. It feeds his inner rhythms. The breath that lies behind the expression in Koodiyattam, is one with this rhythm. Each *abhinaya*/ is expressed through a particular kind of breath. And each *abhinaya* or expression of emotion or thought has its own patterns of rhythm on the percussion instruments. Every external expression, be it a *mudra*/gesture or facial or physical expression or a *netra abhinaya*/ expression of the eye, is informed by a breath

which is rhythmic. Similarly all inner motivation is informed by rhythm. As the breath behind the *abhinaya* is the physical expression of thought and emotion, in the same manner the rhythm in Koodiyattam is behind the performer as an unwritten or unspoken text. It would seem then that rhythm is a text in Koodiyattam performance.

So armed with a one-year grant from the India Foundation of the Arts in 1999 to work on the project Music as a Text in Koodiyattam and Contemporary Performance Adishakti started exploring rhythm as a possible signifier in performance.

The one year was occupied by the Adishakti team in learning how to play percussion with expertise and in researching, accumulating, learning and evolving a new variety of rhythms as a vocabulary. At the end of the year Adishakti arranged the rhythms it had learnt and created, into a musical performance piece called *In Ryhthm*, which was showcased in Auroville and Pondicherry in the first week of January 2000. *In Rhythm* was nowhere near the realization of a performance employing rhythm as a text. But it indicated future directions towards realizing it.

As this was an investigation without precedent Adishakti needed more time than the stipulated one year and more resources than were available to it. Fortunately further evolutions in this work were possible, among other outcomes, because of the Ford Foundation grant, which came to Adishakti in December 1999. And by September 2000 it showcased the results of its investigations through the production *Ganapati*.

Rhythm, like the physical image, embodies a preverbal stage in the process of our coming to grips with reality. When words supplant images/sound we loose contact with a direct and fresh experience of reality, for it begins to be provided to us through the indirect agency of the created word. And as rhythms come out of a different space within us and touch a different space in the audience/spectator they have to be employed in a different manner, than we do the verbal text or even body images, to communicate significance.

Through this production Adishakti realized that each one of the performer's instruments of expression, the word, the physical image, the aural sound, is sovereign in expressing a concept from a particular angle or a particular point of view, and each mode of expression has its own characteristic contribution to the unpacking of the central conceit, which the other forms of expressions cannot replace. The multi-dimensional, multi-layered content was revealed through simultaneity of expression by physical images created by the actor's body, by the verbal text in juxtaposition to the physical images, and by aural images created by the live music.

Of all the performances that Adishakti has created *Ganapati* was the one that completely shattered the limits of what we know as theatre. Through it Adishakti's new contemporary creative performance expression was beginning to emerge.



### *Using space to enhance performance*

There was another input, which went into the creation of *Ganapati*, which has not been mentioned so far.

Adishakti had incorporated inputs from other disciplines such as cinema and physics for its work towards *Bhima* and *Brhannala*, which has already been discussed above. During the process of the creation of *Ganapati* in 2000, Adishakti interacted with Yashpal Srivastava, an architect from Mumbai.

Adishakti has been interested in an exploration of space with the aim of expanding its vision on the varieties of ways in which space could be used in performance to release performance energies and on the possibilities of enhancing its capacities as a signifier.

There are many ways in which the traditional actor can use space and deal with scale in performance. The Koodiyattam actor, for example, already uses and extends space through the eyes and the gestures of the hands and suggests the visuals around her/him through mimetic gesture and expression.

In *Ganapati* Adishakti along with the architect explored the idea of extending space and employing it as a signifier through sound and light. The extension of space through light is already a known architectural and performance practice, but the use of sound to signify a particular kind of space and to reinforce that signification through light was a new and interesting variation both for the architect and for Adishakti.

Also both architecture and performance share certain elements in common although they have different forms of expression for them. Rhythm is one such. In architecture rhythm is expressed through repetition in form, for example a long row of pillars. Adishakti adopted this device in its organization of space in the first twenty minutes of the performance in *Ganapati*, so as to convey a spatial sense of rhythm, in this drama created through rhythm.

### *Aesthetic and perceptual pluralism*

Adishakti's aesthetic pluralism, which gives sovereignty to all the modes of expression, is a reflection of the pluralism of the contemporary world, its' multiple sightedness. For the modern mind can take in more viewpoints than one---even contrary ones---at the same time. It can see the same thing from all angles and distances. Indeed this process of displacement is fundamental to Adishakti's notion of creativity.

Adishakti believes that if live performance has to remain valid as an art form, it must reflect the protean nature of the contemporary perception of truth and reality in its form and not only in its content. It must try to bring out the simultaneity of its multiple-sightedness, its tangled dynamism, through the very form and structure of the expression. It believes this can best be done by employing as many modes of expression as possible to act as texts or as signifiers of content within a totality that would be a formal metaphor.



*Ganapati* employed three such modes: aural images, visual images and verbal text. And they were not employed as a support or illustration of each other, as is commonly done, but as a particular experience of the central conceit from different psychological perspectives--thus creating a mobile psychological space within the performer and the spectator. The spectator was constantly seduced into shifting her/his psychological space so as to be with the performance. And in this way instead of being a passive observer s/he was constantly engaged in a silent interaction with the performer and the events in the performance space.

Psychological mobility throws up to the surface awareness of the viewer the number of different states of consciousness, which there are in him/her, thus enlarging his/her peripheries of consciousness. The tyranny of the mind over the other states of consciousness, which in performance is reflected in the dominant position given to the verbal text, has to be replaced by an equal representation of other modes of expression, which give voice to other psychological spaces within us.

In a negative sense psychological mobility is something, which the individual experiences in the contemporary world due to constantly having to adjust to the rapid changes taking place and the sense of being eternally in a transitional mode. This is stressful. However through an aesthetic experience it can be converted into a healthy and positive state of becoming.

### *Next steps*

Today Adishakti is looking forward to further developing its *new contemporary creative performance expression*, by evolving a multiplicity of different signifiers or texts for its new form. This makes it imperative for it to further deepen and expand its communication with a variety of other fields. For it is by the displacement, resulting from these interactions, that its multiple signifiers will evolve.

In the coming years Adishakti anticipates that its *new aesthetic* and its *new contemporary creative performance expression*, will inspire a revolutionary creative movement in India. For Adishakti believes that the new aesthetic **is more an attitudinal perspective than a fixed form or language**. It believes that by communicating this larger fundamental to its audiences it would ensure that the resonating creative response is free, unique and therefore rich.

Such a movement will take place if in addition to the performances of its work on a national and international scale, its workshops and lecture demonstrations, Adishakti also engages in holding apprenticeship programs on its space for young talented artists from different parts of the country and the world. It has already committed itself to one such significant program on its space for a group of performers from South Africa in January 2002, and is planning to recruit young apprentices from members of its workshops held in different parts of the country from the year 2002.

For a further dissemination of the new aesthetic, Adishakti plans to bring out a six-monthly journal of arts and ideas, which will provide a forum for its thoughts and praxis. Other objectives of this journal are more fully discussed in Chapter III of this proposal.

