

Theatre Research and Laboratory Outside the Urb : Problems & Possibilities

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I have been challenged. Adishakti is located 200 kilometers from the big metro of Chennai. It is 10 kilometers from the town of Pondicherry. It is in a rural area. And I am told: "Artistes who move away from the city may get an opportunity to focus more on their craft, but at the same time they have to balance the reality of being away from where the action is-- in the cities."

My presentation is in two parts. The first part deals with the relationship between the concerns, which preoccupy Adishakti, and those of the larger world. The second part deals with the 'city' or 'urb' and its relevance as a cultural metropolis in the world we occupy today.

I must clarify right away that the work of the Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Art Research is not merely about developing a craft of performance as an end in itself. The work that we are engaged in at the Laboratory, tucked away in a remote part of the country is in response to certain needs, which emerge out of a larger world. Our research, our investigations towards evolving a language of performance and a new aesthetic in laboratory conditions, must be seen in this context.

Adishakti's work over the years has been to confront and address certain issues related to the practice of art and particularly the practice of theatre art in the context of the following preoccupations:

The validity of theatre in the times of cinema.

The cultural atmosphere in this region of South Asia in the context of post-colonialism.

The growing atmosphere of a homogeneous consciousness or sameness world- wide

Theatre & Cinema :

In 1996 Eugenio Barba the director of the Odin Teatret, Holstebro, Denmark wrote to me 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. The theatre is doing poorly because cinema is able to do everything theatre does, much better. It has the reach, {and therefore the political correctness} the

technological resources and commercial validity, which theatre does not. It is the Art of the times. And it seems to have made theatre redundant.

The crucial difference between Cinema and Theatre, both of which employ a plurality of perceptual arts to act as signifiers, is that in Theatre the only reality is the live presence of the actor while Cinema accommodates every other reality except that of Presence.

At one level therefore the work of Adishakti has been aimed at re-establishing the validity of theatre around this notion of the live presence of the performer. The aim: to equip the performer with tools whereby she can impact her audience through an enhanced and vibrating energy both physically and psychologically.

Adishakti has also worked during this time to widen the scope of theatre. Of trying to make it do more than it has been doing so far or making it evolve beyond what it has been doing so far. In the line of the tradition we have looked at using the different arts as signifiers or texts. But not entirely as the tradition does, where each text merely illustrates exactly what the other is saying. Thus the word, the gesture, the movement are encouraged to repeat themselves in each other etc.

The contemporary mind however is not satisfied by this aesthetic of

repetition because it can take in more viewpoints than one at the same time. And if live performance has to remain valid as an art form, it must reflect the simultaneity of this multiple-sightedness, through the very form and structure of the expression. I believe this can best be done by employing as many modes of expression as possible to act as texts or as signifiers. And each one of these must be employed not as a support or illustration of each other, but as a particular experience of the central conceit from different psychological perspectives .

At the end of the day Adishakti has tried to give theatre a wider scope, the position of a summative art, which can be anything and everything and it has given it a spiritual validity. This spiritual validity is based on the elevating impact on the spectator, of the live sensorial presence of the performer through a contagion of her consciousness.

Culture and Postcoloniality :

Over the years, Adishakti has evolved an aesthetic identity. It has moved gradually towards the hybrid as a valid, robust and healthy option. For the hybrid is inclusive and pluralistic. It accommodates multiple inputs across time, space and other cultures —we have a precedent of it in our history and therefore it is in continuity with the cultural spirit of South

Asia. But this new aesthetic has to be constantly defined and reinvented as the world moves on.

The cornerstone of hybridity is accommodation and inclusion . It is a belief in a middle ground and in a bridge, which can hold all manner of irreconcilables. And the tradition gives us images for this idea in concepts like Ardhanarishwara, the Lord who is half woman and half man and Ganapati –the god who epitomizes hybridity with his animal head and human body.

The sociology of Marx basis itself on dualism/ on conflict/ on division and therefore for the Left the notion of hybridity is in opposition to the austere honoring of conflict . It is a sell out and a compromise to bridge with 'difference', to accommodate the 'other'; when class division demands stark loyalty and the honoring of division. Hybridity is seen as the compromise, which comes due the flow of capital.

The Right too is based on division and therefore exclusivity. It defines what is not within the culture, it espouses an 'original Indian culture' and asks us through an act of historical amnesia to erase the intermediate past, it excludes arbitrarily, where naturally the habit of living has been to absorb all that has come into the ambit of experience. Therefore hybridity seriously offends its sense of definition, its exclusivity, and its purism.

For Adishakti these arguments against the hybrid aesthetic are not persuasive, because they challenge the notion of accommodation---which to us is a morally more tenable position than that of exclusion and division.

The Global Consciousness of Sameness:

Another issue, which Adishakti has been engaged with over the last ten years, is the growing consciousness of sameness worldwide and its implications for culture and creativity. The democratization of knowledge, the information technology revolution, globalization---all have a cause effect relationship with this emerging consciousness of sameness and homogeneity in culture.

Why is homogeneity to be feared?

To begin with it could lead to the loss of plurality, alterity and specificity. We could loose countless alternative systems and processes of knowing and therefore many knowledges, due to the emergence of a mainstream, homogeneous culture, worldwide. And one of the vehicles of the spread of such a culture would be the urban metropolis or city culture.

The other reason why it is important to guard specificity is because

it is the expression of individuality---of uniqueness, of originality in a group, and in the individual. And it is this individuality, which provides an aggregate or group with variety, which then in interaction stimulates creativity through the shock of difference. At Adishakti we try to create dialogues with what I like to call 'difference' for this very reason. We have for example had a dialogue between Dalit percussionists and a Sanskrit Channda Shastra expert; between traditional and contemporary performers, between musicians from the Hindustani tradition and from the Carnatic tradition, between cultures from different regions etc. Through this what we hope to reinforce { apart from the give and take of learning and teaching} is the awareness and appreciation of the 'others' uniqueness. In turn, such an interaction with the unique and the different invariably stimulates new creativity.

Adishakti has also been attempting to nurse alternative knowledges from the fields of performance, building technologies, health, the eco system etc, by investigating them and applying them to our contemporary needs. And in our encounter with the repositories of these knowledges, we have endeavored, of course, to clarify our own formal and imaginative directions, but also, and equally, to stimulate them to discover old knowledges anew.

To sum up I would say that to prevent a universalized homogeneity from creeping into Adishakti's hybrid aesthetic we have had to

constantly reach deep into the soul of the specific cultural practices and concerns, which inform our environment. And in the process we find ourselves moving between specificity and larger wholes. This is resonant with the world we occupy today where there are two simultaneous but contrary movements. One, which is a movement towards larger aggregates and the other which on the contrary is towards greater atomism.

And regarding this phenomena I make two observations, which voice Adishakti's practice and its purpose

I believe that in art practice the movement towards larger wholes is an attempt at communication. While the movement towards the specific and atomic is a quest for meaning.

The division or plurality of the contemporary consciousness, its simultaneous movement towards atomism and larger wholes, holds within it the possibility of a more complex cohesiveness than ever known before. For the capacity of the contemporary consciousness to see things from different points of view could lead to a unity which does not suppress or merely transcend the diversity and disparity of its components but holds them together as an immanent force, and brings out of each its fullness of individuality.

The City and its Relevance as a Cultural Metropolis Today

I come now to the second part of my presentation.

My plea is that the metropolis is no longer relevant in a world where the more or less equitable spread of knowledge and culture and the proliferation of the means to accomplish this have created a psychology in the species, which is characterized by a consciousness of sameness. The question of a center and its margin/ periphery or of the provincial and the metropolitan at least culturally ought not to arise.

Additionally in such a world there is a relevance for the proliferation of small organizations like Adishakti, living away from the metropolis and having multiple connections with other communities at the local, the regional, the national and finally the global level.

Collective life is more at ease with itself, more varied, more fruitful when it can concentrate itself in small spaces and simpler organisms. The interesting periods of human life, for instances the scenes in which it has been the most richly lived, were those when humanity lived in small aggregates; aggregates, which allowed for individuality and therefore variation and intensity of life.

Two thirds of contemporary Europe, for instance, owes its civilization to three such moments of human history--- the religious life of the congeries of tribes, which called itself Israel; the

Greek city- states and the artistic and intellectual life in medieval Italy. All came out of aggregates possibly no bigger than a district.

Similarly in India when it was divided into small units both in the north and the south, there was a greater creative output. The larger Maurya, Gupta and Mughal Empires contributed mainly towards Political and Administrative organization, as have other empires in other times and other parts of the world. There was some output of art and culture but not always of the finest quality.

The defect of the small aggregates lay in the fact that they tended towards impermanence, disorder, and even an insufficient capacity for widespread material well-being. Therefore this early form of collective life tended to disappear and give place to larger organizations---nations, kingdoms, empires.

In larger aggregates life loses its color, richness, variety, freedom and impulse towards creativity because the individual dwindles and is overpowered by the huge organism of the larger whole. And not only the individual but also the city, the region sacrifice their independent life and become mechanical parts of a machine. Indeed collective life diffusing itself in too vast a space seems to lose intensity and productiveness.

Larger aggregates, which have had a vigorous life have gained it

through a sort of artificial concentration of vitality and intensity of life in some center or head or capital: e.g Rome, London, Paris. But this has been purchased by condemning the rest of the organization to a dull life; the peripheries sacrifice themselves for the vital intensity of the urbs or metropolis.

Ironically the global consciousness we are moving towards today makes it possible for us to enjoy the benefits of both the large aggregates and the small aggregates of previous history. Indeed today we can have a number of small communities, within a larger aggregate; and while polity takes care of the business of administration, security and economic well being, these small aggregates can take care of the cultural health of the community.

And this is possible because we can live anywhere today and absorb the thinking and psychological movements occurring in other parts of the world. It is no longer a necessity for creators/ artists to live in the city to find their inspiration.

Adishakti's experience of living away from the 'city', or 'urb' the so-called center where 'the action is' and yet responding to the cultural needs of the times is a case in point. On the ground its interactions with a larger world occur through a graded structure of aggregates from the small to the big. The first of these is at the local level where it is in interaction with the village communities in its neighborhood. And the relationship here ranges across the cultural, the economic and the social spheres. Next the interaction

is with the towns and cities in the neighborhood and these are from as near as Pondicherry to as far as Tanjavur. Beyond this the interaction nationally and globally is through the company's performance tours and through inter disciplinary, inter cultural, inter regional exchange at the Adishakti campus through collaborations, workshops, residencies and performances. Thus between the individual and the larger whole there come as aids a variety of aggregates, which protect her from the monolith of the collective suggestion.

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