Rajagopal’s play Veriyattam or Possession uses another creative way to express a message to an audience through Kattaikkuttu. Costumes and characters in Veriyattam are close to traditional Kuttu costumes and Kuttu heroes, but the story is new. What is interesting about Veriyattam is the inclusion within the play of different aspects of Tamil village culture, such as a religious procession in which a traditional Terukkuttu is being performed and possession occurs. The play also contains ‘Tiger dance’ or Puliyattam and vigorous drumming. In addition to a novel story, city audiences have the chance to witness cultural elements they don’t know anymore. In a creative and artistic way the audience is educated about its heritage.

I felt and experienced that different methods of education can inspire each other in many ways: knowledge and experience, disciplined skill training and chaotic brainstorming, copying the teacher and following your own inspiration in mind and body, ritual power and creativity. But why should we mix methods of education and look beyond our own way of teaching? What is there in creativity without knowledge? It’s an empty shell. Acting without skill-training, stories without meaning and appearance without inner power are boring to watch. What do we find in traditional plays without creativity? They fall to connect to our actual life. We experience them as old fashioned. We don’t understand them.

The world today is a mixed world. All kinds of global influences become part of the society. We cannot speak anymore of a traditional society where the religious power is the only truth. Modernity has taken over. But awareness of religion and heritage still exists. And in those parts of the cities where it has been lost, there exists a desire for these ancient values.

Art tries to reflect on the actual situation. It has to! People are changing and searching. So art has to change and search, too. It has to be meaningful for the artist and for the audience. So, art needs to look for a blend of expressions, traditional ways of acting and contemporary forms. Old stories with actual influence. All around India you find interesting and beautiful performances where creative and traditional aspects are mixed in several ways. An artistic quest is going on in learning, in searching, in discovering, exploring and balancing. With different outcomes. I believe that knowledge of both worlds will enrich students of the arts. *
We had no idea how our piece would be received. What followed was a surprise to all of us. The piece, planned for about 30 minutes, had lasted for 45 minutes when I got off stage. The women in the audience were right on line with me, adding to my performance with loud nods and crackling their knuckles. When they actually followed me out into the rain to give me a hug and demand when I would act the piece in front of the real Marudhayi (the name of the Dhobi woman), I felt several inches taller. Truly, Marudhayi makes me feel like a giant even today every time I speak her words. The play has now travelled to a variety of audiences including feminist groups and hard-core theatrephiles.

That led to a long search to read more than what my own femininity limited me with. It was a chance viewing of an, ‘Oh! Feel sorry for us’-type of a film on the aravani (transsexuals), which prompted me to explore this community, which I had selectively forgotten. But hesitancy of experimenting with my body for a subject like this deterred me for a while.

In mid-2000, I interviewed six aravani and came up with a 45 minutes story about a generic aravani, called Nirvanam, which was then shaped by members of the Thamizh nadu Aravani Association. Once I had met my aravani sister in a church and started talking to her over a cup of coffee in a roadside stall, things fell gradually into place. It then took five months of meetings with different aravani, in my own house, often in the presence of my daughters, sometimes by appointment, sometimes by-chance, in suburban trains, on the beach, at tea stalls, sometimes recorded on tapes, sometimes recorded in memory, but always documented with mutual trust that gave shape to what Nirvanam is today. The promise to retain their dignity, portray not just their pain, but their determination and sturdiness in withstanding it, their pleasure in coming into their womanhood, finding solidarity with fellow travellers, and daring to exist against all odds, moulded both the form and content of my performance.

On my return from the US after my Fulbright scholarship, I have been following a similar interview-tell-a-story pattern to address two major issues along with two NGOs working on those: Domestic Violence for an NGO called Prevention of Crime and Victim Care, and Child Sexual Abuse for Ashreya. In both cases I conducted extensive interviews with victims, psychologists and legal experts before putting my story together. The stories were then test-run amongst experts and in the case of domestic violence, amongst victims too. Hunting for and hitting M e n o t today circulate amongst factory workers, school parents and corporate agencies to create awareness on these issues, both in English and Tamil.

In December 2003, Venkata Chakravarthy, the person I am married to, was invited to script a play for me based on the behind-the-scene scenario of film actresses in the Tamil Cinema for the ‘Amman and Avenging Women in Tamil Cinema’ seminar. The script of Kannadi, as the piece came to be called, travels from the early 1930s when the Devadasi women, after the drafting of the Abolishment of Devadasi Act in 1934, moved to the city to find employment in the Tamil cinema—a process that went on well into the 1980s when middle-class anxieties and pressures started acting on them. After its premier at the seminar itself, in English, the play has travelled widely within the city both in English and Tamil and has recently been invited to be performed at the ‘Conference on Post-colonialism and Popular Culture’ at Stella Maris College, Chennai.

The decision to tell only stories, stories about womanhood, was a conscious one. In 1996 I thought it was simply a natural progression to my own evolution. But then the stories I started saying were not mine, though the way I said them were mine. Immaterial to who got the story, from where, I had to find my own comfort zone in putting forth the story, which did not have classic Greek literary structures, which were linear, but real, to make the characters true, dignified, and not caricatures, I made false steps. Fell on my face, got up, dusted it and started all over again.

With five full-length one-woman acts, three scripted and performed by me, it seemed that, perhaps, there was little new to say on gender. That was when Maitri Gopalakrishna called asking for an appointment. I had not yet heard of the Kuttu Festival 2005. I had been briefly acquainted with Hanne M. de Bruin and P. Rajagopal, but knew not much of their working style. ‘We, as the curators of the festival would like you to come up with a one-woman piece exploring the M ahabhara from a contemporary, feminist point of view.’ The call was huge and daunting.

I had just two months in which to cover at least five versions of the epic and at least two different commentaries and then zero in on what I would like my piece to cover. Many of the themes had already been taken up for performance by other traditional and modern South Indian theatre, puppetry and dance groups. This was my sixth venture in preparing a text for myself. I had the onus of keeping the piece in line with my agenda of preference, that of ‘performing gender’. When stumbling on to Irawathi Karve’s M ahabhara text, Yuganta, helped. Then watching the way Veenapani Chawla had spring-boarded from the same text, Yuganta, for her script on Bhima helped me to arrive at a convincing script based on the life of Dushala.

The emergence of Dushala as a play is embedded into a long Indian history of the treatment of the girl child. In fact, it was the absence of Dushala that made my script. To be born as the only sister of the Kauravas, growing

Pritam Chakravarty performing ‘Duhsala’ for the first time at the Kuttu Festival 2005, Punjanasantankal Village

![Image of Pritam Chakravarty performing 'Duhsala' for the first time at the Kuttu Festival 2005, Punjanasantankal Village]
up in the beautiful city of Hastinapur, having watched the entire epic unfold under her eyes, being a victim of the circumstances, but remaining a passive agent to all, fascinated me. In all the versions I read during my preparation, I could find her mentioned just four times and in all cases only her name. I decided to watch all the other women through the eyes of this silent spectator. Girl child neglect weaved itself into the text with ease. Next came working out the performance itself.

In all my scripts I have given particular attention to clothing and props. While Nirvanam is consciously performed with the clothes I am in on that day and keeping all else to a stark, bare minimum, and keeping in mind to erase my sexuality, Kannadi works on real excess. For Velavi, the script about the old Dhobi woman, it was colours spread across the performance area. For Dushala I had the choice of recreating the regal costumes normally used for M ahabharata performances or come up with something more contemporary. Though I had the floor plan of the performance area, I decided to wait until the day of the show itself to work out my style. Two saffron screens already available with the organizers were decisive. I used black as my beginning and end colours adding a green scarf. The sackcloth skirt, which the Festival’s costumer Margot van Dam designed, became my own stage costume to which I added a mud pot and the Festival’s costumer Margot van Dam designed, became my own stage costume to which I added a mud pot and a long cycle chain. I tried not to impersonate the character, but keep both the teller and told separate from each other. That way it avoids the traditional identification with the character and allows her to unfold in the performance:

If gender everywhere is a social construct, then do I choose my gender to be performed for the day like I choose my costume for the day from my wardrobe? If its other— the masculine— [only] defines the idea of feminine how do I understand ‘feminism’— as a transgressive way of life? If culture is not limited to geographical or linguistic distinctions, how do I come to terms with my own past, and thereby function in the present and future? Is my past my own or does the community I emerge from have a claim to it also? Is it then limited by how other communities view this past? Is every deed of mine defined by some dark secret from my past? If all identity is already assigned as something unchangeable, then when do I begin to question the ‘I’ itself and the way my body is circumscribed by this culturally constructed identity? What if, if I let my body break the shackles of these knots; no matter how badly it is hurt in the process and to recognize that I am not alone?

Definitions of how I see gender, sexuality, culture and identity have shifted greatly in this last decade. I have come to understand that all these are fluid and that each one of us operates under split conditions. Ideally it is this split condition that I would like to explore in future. I began to expand the idea of the split condition to all avenues from where we gather our conditionings. My own studies, my history, my chauvinism of holding my first thirty years with a pride of being Tamil, then understanding that my upper caste identity splinters it no matter how much I de-brahminise myself, my first academic step into learning about gender then spreading into more organic expressions of the same in everyday life, my comfort zone of story-telling as opposed to more traditional acting, and my activism is what I would like to marry into my forthcoming performances. Thus, they can become not a mere personal journey, but a human journey that can be taken up to study any situation by anybody in the future. *

ANADINATH: THE UNKNOWN PERCUSSION MAESTRO

~~~~~~~~ Pulak Dutta ~~~~~~~

Pulak Dutta is a practicing artist, musician and music director. He teaches at the Department of Graphic Art, Kala Bhavana, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan.

On December 18, 2002, Supriyo Tagore described Anadinath Dutta as a ‘distinguished ashramite’ in the weekly prayer at the Upasana Griha in Santiniketan. ‘I consider him a distinguished ashramite because he was one of the very few talented people who quietly served the ashram without expecting anything in return.’

Anadinath was born in 1923 at Bishnupur into a family of traditional craftsman. Bishnupur is well known for its rich cultural heritage. It is also the only Hindustani Classical Music Gharana of Bengal. Situated in the district of Bankura of West Bengal it was the capital of M allabhum, a Vaishnava kingdom. The whole of Eastern India was flooded with the spirit of creativity in every sphere of cultural activity during the 16th century. A new worldview, a new consciousness—the wave of Vaishnavism was felt everywhere from the king’s palace to the hut of the poor. Vaishnavism was not only a religion; it was a religious, social and cultural movement at the same time—an ‘aesthetic religion’. The borderline between high and low art, classical and popular art, between terracotta temple, Baluchari silk, conch shell craft as well as between Kirtan and Dhrupad was either very thin or did not exist at all. It is still quite vibrant with its festivals, music, traditional craft and a simple way of life. Anadinath spent the first twenty-six years of his life here. His personality and his music developed in this cultural ambience. A melia Maciszewski, a former music student of Santiniketan and an ethnomusicologist from Austin, video-interviewed him in 1996: