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Day 2 | 19th December 2019 | Opening Lecture | Drama Tradition As Protected Ignorance | Y.S. Alone

Thank you very much, for giving me this opportunity. And I'm sorry that I am not present physically with all of you. It's really sad that I have not been able to make it, courtesy my Vice Chancellor and the prevailing situation existing on the JNU campus. I also thank the organizers for giving me this opportunity to speak before you –I'm going to speak on **Drama Traditions As Protection of Ignorance**, and I specially thank Anuja and Kai for making me speak on this particular topic. Because the ways in which drama traditions have gone, I just wish to make a very critical overview. But not going into the historiography or history. I begin my talk by quoting, the 25th November 1949, B R Ambedkar's address in the constituent assembly. He says and I quote, "On 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions, in politics we will have equality and in social and economic life, we will have inequality. In politics, we will be recognizing the principle of one man, one vote and one vote, one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principles of one man one value." So, this particular quotation is very important to understand the contradictions that we have been nurturing ever since our independence and ever since we declared ourselves as a Republic.

What was situating in the pre-colonial and colonial times continues in the post-colonial era. The contradictions have become integral part of the Indian mindset and this becomes hugely problematic because it is embedded in the narratives, in the normative and it is also embedded in the day to day functioning and the ways in which our life is governed— by certain ritual practices, the belief system, the ideologies and the entire ethos of inequalities. This is a huge contradiction Indians are living in and I wish to unfold these kinds of contradictions in the performative condition. By using my conceptual formulation of protected ignorance—In short, I would like to explain what it means— the protected ignorance is a conceptual framework aimed at producing the knowledge production process in India or anywhere in the world. The relation of knowledge production to its objective is critical— whether it is to kill ignorance or seed righteousness. If the objective is not to end ignorance and maintain the status quo and not enable change, it becomes protected ignorance. This is also unrighteous and therefore, consequently, is protected ignorance. So, this is a broad concept, which I've been working on over a period of time and I've been applying it. So how do I see the dramatic traditions as part of the performative traditions as part of the protected ignorance project?

Now, I would like to give a very small example of how you really recognize protected ignorance. For example, professor of Physics gets up in the morning and pours water to the sun, I think this is the fantastic example of Protected ignorance, because he

knows that the water will never reach the sun. But irrespective of that, he gets up in the morning and makes this kind of a ritual and performs this daily ritual practice. So his performance, his ideas are governed by those ritualistic belief systems, that even his own knowledge of Physics does not really empower him to change or for that matter discard these kinds of practices. And this phenomenon is quite rampant in India when we start any program. Most of the time our program begins with certain a kind of chanting which are irrational in nature and we always try to understand it as part of our day to day practices, our cultural practices. So, it's all about making myth as realities and these myths have played an important role in the lives of Indians. It is so bizarre that even an educated, or the so-called intellectual or for that matter, the secularists or for that matter, the liberal—they have been living with this kind of mythic condition, though the claims to be liberal, claims to be intellectual, claims to be a very secular, but somehow the mythic does not come out of their life and they stick to those kinds of mythic realities and the mythic tradition.

It becomes quite difficult to have any claims and therefore, what one notices is that the element of self— self as a category of interrogation or the critique of the self does not get produced or does not become any kind of a criteria, in order to understand the kind of day to day performances we have in our everyday life. This is a huge contradiction, and therefore, what one notices is that— our performative tradition has this particular dimension of mythic as reality. How we protect our myths and our tradition becomes hugely problematic. It becomes a huge burden. So, even when it comes to playing off certain social realism, what one notices is that there is this whole dictum that goes on the party line— like what your political outfit really wants to represent and how your performance then becomes a useful tool in order to realize their political goals. So, social realism is directed on the party lines. And therefore, you will notice that many plays that have been written and enacted on those lines veer away from many realities, the deeper realities of the problems of society. Therefore, I would like to say that these kinds of social realities on the party lines cannot be really deemed as part of freedom of expression, because the freedom of expression is a very empowering category. And the ways in which a writer, the director, the performers, make use of their language and the ways in which they construct this narrative, needs to be seen as attempt for freedom. Though there is always freedom of expression, but, at the same time, whether the real objectives of the freedom of expression are really realized or not? That then becomes one of the inquiry in the present day situation.

One notices is that in 1855, Mahatma Phule wrote the fantastic play, *Tritiya Ratna* and one can say that this was the first modern play in India. One may contest how you define modernism. But if addressing social inequalities is part of your modernity project and ideas of liberty and equality are integral to it, what are the ways in which you understand or notice these changes that maybe empowering in nature?

And to make or practice equalities in the society as part of your democratic functioning of it. So, these aspects are very important in *Tritiya Ratna*. In relation to most of the plays written around that time, *Tritiya Ratna* completely differs because it was neither based on indigenous folk theater or Sanskrit Drama, or the works of

Shakespeare. But rather it was fundamentally connected to the time and space in which it was written and Phule was the great revolutionary. Still, in the theatre performances, the essence of Mahatma Phule, or the writings of Mahatma Phule and the plays and the *pauvadas* and everything he wrote, does not become part of your academic pedagogy or even become part of your discussion. And there is this silence which is deliberately maintained, because the silence is also part of your Protected ignorance. And it is intentional, it is not something which becomes natural, but rather it is an intentional category. *Tritiya Ratna* also makes a critique of the mode of productions of inequalities and importance of education— like how education is important for the masses and for the development of human beings is heavily emphasized. Phule also underlines the importance of knowledge and power in 19th century India but does not become part of criticality in the Indian academia. And this still exists— the ways in which our academic knowledge production goes and the ways in which we are trained to be very critical or to question the society or the social ethos or your psychological dimensions, is a kind of perversions that an ideology perpetuates. And how those ideologies get perpetuated through certain kind of performative principles or the performative traditions. Since the so-called drama tradition that followed in the 19th century and later 20th century is all about concealment and legitimization of the mythical narratives produced by the casting tools. Therefore, there is a complete bypass of *Tritiya Ratna*, and, in the theatre tradition somehow completely silenced. And the dramas which are written on, or which are mythological base, become part of *the* tradition. One can say that in Marathi theatre tradition, it is very glaring. Now the ways in which proscenium theater develops and then gets into the nitty-gritty of the technology and arc lights and it also created a meta narrative of modernity. But the mythic also get embedded in the meta narrative of modernity without any criticality. Without looking at tradition very critically and what you really espouse for! And therefore, the issue of cultural past and cultural modernity becomes very integral to each other, it becomes interdependent. And thus the question of caste and gender gets completely bypassed in the theater tradition. The tensions which the communities face, which an individual face in the society, which are also imposing factors and there is also an anarchy. All these factors somehow get bypassed in the representation of the performative tradition. So mythic becomes real and also enters into the ethos of the so-called cultural modernity as part of the tradition.

Now, I would like to recall Sharad Patil's writings, and he is one scholar who pointed out the contradictions that exist in the Natya Shastra. And how do we read social and specially the caste and Varna factors and the conflicts in the texts like Natya Shastra? Because Natya Shastra is considered a very pure, sacred kind of text in the performative tradition. But really you don't try to see the contradictions that exists. The tension that exists in the very conceptualization of the Natya Shastra and then how Varna hierarchy also becomes an operative means in the Natya Shastra. So, the Brahmanical tradition always by pass these kinds of contradictions and never ever really attempts to unpack the conflicts that can be raised through the textual tradition. While *Tritiya Ratna's* agenda of moving away from Protected ignorance, the reassertion of mythic in the backdrop of modernity becomes fundamental manifestations to enter into the world of mythic as real.

One notices productions of mythologies as part of the modernity project. Now, there is always this question of a power game— why the mythic becomes part of your cultural practices? And then how the performative tradition eulogizes this kind of mythic as reality? Now the proscenium theater becomes a monopoly of few. I mean, one has to see the caste dimensions that go in the production houses and also in the performative traditions that get overpowered only by few, and mostly, by the caste Hindus. Therefore, you will notice that they have absolute power and control over the forms of representations, as well as the politics of representation. So your politics is all about concealment, is all about protecting ignorances within the performative traditions. And not to really to create consciousness of any kind of self-criticality. So power to articulate and position of power are two different entities that in the public sphere articulates what the politicality directs to perform. Now likes of Arendt have discussed how totalitarianism is produced. However, it is necessary to understand the formulations or strategies as to how totalitarianism is produced and collective prejudiced self, as an agency to inflict ideological power, becomes necessary means to unfold the various strategies of concealments.

Concealments are always intentional. It is not sudden. But it is a very intentional activity. So, it becomes intentional in nature and in reading the absurd as well as false. It is related with the absurd and false, but since the concealments are intentional in nature. So, the absurd also becomes part of a tool to conceal certain things. It becomes quite complicated. The category “false” (vis-à-vis real) propagates the absurd and irrational. But by enforcing structures of inequalities, in and through the performative body—through a visual vocabulary that is employed as “real”, it is simultaneously used to legitimize the mythic as real. Thus, what is called as real has to be understood through the ways in which performative contents are designed and are part of democratic equalities. Heightened realism in the performance and its documentation is often viewed as pure formal— formal in this case is equally devoted to labor and its rewarding capabilities.

One has to see as to how the labor aspect is also an embedded factor in these kinds of productive capabilities. As in, when myth as real becomes part of strategy to maintain Protected ignorance, performative principle surrounding such tradition is a tool to maintain irrational as ongoing normative. So, your irrational becomes part of your ongoing normative and you try to legitimize those irrationalities into your performative principles, into your performative traditions. Thus, we often observe a very consolidated offer to bypass labor and make cultural production as representation of the so-called creative mind where operative means is to conceal. Affective and performative dimensions and its deep connections with labor in the subaltern communities has been discussed greatly by Dr. Brahma Prakash in his recent book *Cultural Labor*, where popular performers as part of self-celebrity mode is always from the so-called cultural principles, as has been said by many modernists. He further observes, and I quote, “The boundary between Culture with capital “C” and culture with a small “c” becomes the arbitrary manifestation of the reality of caste class traditions,” which is a very important observation he makes.

Now, this brings us to the problem of subaltern, like in the Indian context the word has been used extensively and I have some issues with this kind of generalization. Because when Gramsci defines subaltern, he says that it is those who do not have access to power and resources. He considers them as subaltern and the historians and the cultural historians have used this, I mean they have abused this term in India because one has to see which community/communities do not have access to power and resources. Even the farmer movements have been termed as subaltern, now, more than 95% of the farming communities in India are followers of untouchability. How do you call them subaltern? This becomes a huge problem. Similarly, Dr Ambedkar defines caste as not only division of labor, but also division of laborers.

Thus your critical framework of subaltern does not empower you to understand the division of laborers. It's very important and therefore to see the day to day performance of a human being within the caste configurations—where the gatekeepers of a proscenium theatre represent particular communities or castes, it is a problem that we do see critically. The creative labels and typologies are very distinct and have created a certain aesthetical static-ness to understand the differing effect. This kind of an aesthetic static-ness gets created by certain kind of typological formulations. There is this canonization process that enters even in the theater tradition, irrespective of moral elements from the European theatrical traditions and making it a part of your proscenium theater. But, you know, you want to get absorbed as something Indian. When you think of something Indian what you do is just make a mythology or some kind of a mythical tradition you try to adhere to, and another one is just the representation of the caste Hindu communities. The ways in which they perform in their day to day life and their performance is guided by the caste considerations—you also have the similar kind of performances getting enacted on the stage without making any critique of self. Of course, the actors, they don't have any power to have any kind of a critical self, but certainly the writers and the directors have that power to be critical of the self. And how many of them have really used this kind of a consciousness in their performative representations? The performance used for generations of a political consciousness is also a means to be understood within the boundaries of language. And consciousness is a key to perceive and understand the very normative, itself. But the real is projected as an obstruction in the hyper formalism not to create consciousness of any rationality as such, but to make ways to maintain the absurdity of social inequalities. So the social inequalities which is very absurd, which is a psychotic perversion, gets constantly supported and represented and structured within the structural formulations of the performative traditions and the canonized principles. One can well understand as to how *Mandar Mala* heightens the logic of so called classical. Now, it's very interesting if you see that play which is available with Doordarshan and has been shown a number of times. The hype, the logic of so called classical, however, the sounds of people in performances of the excluded are directed to generate consciousness of abject conditionality. And means and ways to narrate and perform such excerpts of the society, but they hardly get documented and they hardly get narrativised in the annals of the archival narrations. The absurd and real become very Brahmanic. The claims of absurdity, by most of the modernists is a very Brahminical claim. And therefore, one has to really question the whole, the ethos of ethicality and morality

through which the rules and principles gets governed. Some performances of the *Ambedkarite Jalsas* are opposed to absurd and mythic real. It's very important that the *Ambedkarite Jalsas* as which have been part of Maharashtra traditions these days or even which have been there since the days of Dr. Ambedkar, mainly right from the days of Bhansode and then afterwards, especially after 1940s onwards, one notices that there is an absolute opposition to this absurd and mythic real. The real question would be, do performance traditions opposed to mythic as real, turn towards so called nihilism?

I mean there is always this whole aspect of nihilism that is always brought in and like are you really nihilistic? Is that so? Can that affect become a nihilistic kind of a thing? So, nihilistic is created as naturalization process and brought in as something always negative. However, it may be observed that reading nihilism in the context of the consciousness of self and consciousness of collective welfare starts unfolding the hegemonic attitudes, as well as its design means to retain claims to power. There is this constant opposition that is being claimed and that is being always maintained—but there is this opposition to these kinds of claims and opposition to dislodge these kinds of claims. So, does power operate in the writings of the character, or for that matter, does it become an intrinsic nature in the representation of performance? This becomes a very important question to understand how really all these factors... because a writer and director, they are also part of society. They are not away from the society and how they are those impacting factors. But whether your consciousness is in power to absorb these kinds of impacting factors or to oppose this kind of impacting factors and create a different kind of sensibility? And whether these sensibilities really affect the performers? So, in India, modernity is cosmetic and doesn't extend to the "self" or the means by which this "self" is represented. You cannot separate it—critique of the self, its representation and modernity are integrally linked.

Therefore, one has to really question what Tendulkar has done in *Sakharam Binder*. It's a very celebrated and important play in Marathi theater tradition. But why is the character such a male chauvinist and giving shelter to the deserted wives and then deriving sexual pleasure? Does this character's representation reflect Brahmanical cultural nationalism? Or what other ways can his absurd perversions be explained? Or, it really goes and also opposes the Phule project, started by *Tritiya Ratna*? The 18th century becomes a very convenient tool for Tendulkar to show the social absurd, but the 19th and 20th century Pune and elsewhere, or 20th century Maharashtra does not become a backdrop for Tendulkar to delineate the social absurd. Why it is so? And therefore, one has to really question critically and see the very intentionality of Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* as well as *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The political violence which is enacted through *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The hierarchical social order is also political violence, caste is a political category, why these intrinsic factors, which exist in the society, do not become part of your representational strategies within the so called social absurd, in the theatrical performance? Therefore, one has to critically see that Tendulkar's formulations and then how the Brahminic meta-narrative, the consciousness of Brahminic meta-narrative of modernity becomes his means to pick and choose, despite the fact that you know,

he was friendly with Namdeo Dhasal. He was writing about Namdeo Dhasal, he even translated his poems. But irrespective of that, the relationship operates more at the formal level rather than as an embedded category to unfold the absurd, the social absurd, the psychotic perversion. This is where one has to really question another celebrated writer Mahesh Elkunchwar. He was a professor of English literature and he was aware what the English theatrical tradition and in general, the European theatrical traditions were. And many of these people have been part of the reading and understanding English literature, and they borrowed many of those elements in their writings, without acknowledging or without accepting the fact that it has been borrowed. Elkunchwar's *Wada Chirebandi* is another celebrated play and he's another celebrated writer. But if you see *Wada Chirebandi* —It is a type of a feudal family and then there is this urban, rural which gets divided through the fantastic crafting of the stage. So formalistically *Wada Chirebandi* is a fantastic play! But when it comes to the strategies of representations and the idea of social real, it gets confined only to a feudal family, which is very caste oriented, and that is presented as something universal, which is bizarre, which is another absurd. Does it have everyday representation of strategies of self-desired means? Then the performers move from melodrama to hyper realism with the mixture of formalism and glitter of stage lights. It is all embedded within and this "embedded within" comes out of your Brahminic experiences. Because the Brahminic experiences of inequalities, and agreed to conceal, or to maintain within, without breaking any kind of a normative. Therefore, one has to see as to how *Wada Chirebandi*, despite formalistically a wonderful play, but somehow when it comes to the social real or the absurd, the absurdity which exists within that brahminic consciousness, somehow gets eulogized and celebrated as a greatness, as a landmark in the history of the performance. That is where it becomes problematic.

Another important play I would like to discuss is of Shirwadkar's *Natasamrat*. The canonized brahminical modernity has created a very canonized form of *Natasamratas*. If that becomes *the* play, as if it is *the* only thing which a performer has to do in their life, right from Sriram Lagoo to even Patekar and Joshi and everybody, is it not creating a typified canonization of the brahminic modernity? And therefore, one has to really, really see that there are a number of plays, which have been written and also we have a simultaneous tradition of *Dandar*, *Tamasha*, *Jalsa*, which are part of the lower caste communities. But they do not get the same place as *Natasamrat* or *Wada Chirenbandi* get. That becomes hugely problematic and therefore these kinds of performative traditions become part of the project of Protected ignorance. Their aim is concealment. It is only aimed at creating augmented ignorances. Now likes of Annabhao Sathe, he made use of Lok Natya and he juxtaposed the exploiter, the exploited, the rich, the labor, the capitalist and the worker and the owner versus the labor family. That urbanism which was there and the ways in which society was functioning during that time and Annabhao Sathe captures that in his Lok Natya and makes them as social real— which is not absurd, which is aimed at a righteous kind of consciousness, which also has intentionality and then at the same time the formalism through which he operates, especially his writings and it is completely away from the brahminical formalisms— from the brahminical writings. Similarly, Chitnis' *Yuga Yatra* which is a very important play. It

draws example from history and mythic traditions and raises fundamental questions. The condition of the Shudras and there is this questioning of the mythic tradition as well. The myth is also used as part of your unfolding the social absurd. And then, at one level you have these kinds of productions, at another level you have a very different kind of productions all the time eulogizing and then claiming some kind of psychological drama, or playing of the psychological aspect of the characters of the of the mythologies or the epic traditions like *Mahabharat*.

Then another opposition to the mythic tradition is Kamlakar Dhahad which is *Mrutyudinva Muktidin* which is a fantastic play. Then these become part of the day to day performances, for the masses and make them realize of their own self and their abject conditionality. Then you have plays like *Suryastha* by Hemant Khobragade. Now these are the kind of plays which completely oppose and move away from brahminic metanarratives— the brahminic metanarrative that has been created by the Puneri tradition and to certain extent even the Marathi Mumbai tradition.

The ways in which Elkunchwar or Tendulkar get eulogized and their dramas, become *the* canon of modern dramas. But there is an ideological opposition to these kinds of aesthetical metanarratives of the performances. And one has to see *Suryashthaor Mrutyudinva Muktidin*, which create a very different kind of ethos and the aesthetical parity. Therefore, one has to see the how these kinds of things emanate from the power positions in terms of writings, in terms of performances and then the Jalsa tradition by the Ambedkarites is completely opposed to the brahminic metanarrative. So the affect is always intentional in nature, there is some passivity in it, and the formal engagements of the community as an exclusive one. One has to see this kind of structured absurdity that goes into the performative traditions as part of the project of Protected ignorance. Whereas, there are a number of these plays which talk about the democratic equalities. Related to the constitutional ethos of democracy and resolving these contradictions. So, resolving these contradictions also becomes very important and that is why Dr. Ambedkar addressed these contradictions in the political, social and economic sphere and the similar contradictions, one can also see in the cultural productivity. But these contradictions somehow are not addressed neither in the writings nor in the production process.

One has to see as to how these contradictions get represented and I'm not saying that one has to resolve those contradictions, or that we can resolve these contradictions through performance. That kind of position I will not take. Every writer, every director, every artist have their own autonomy and they work with that kind of autonomy and they have that freedom of expression. They have a right. They have every kind of liberty. But at the same time are their intentions that of maintaining these ignorances and carry forward these ignorances or to attack those ignorances or unfold or unpack these ignorances and going away from the ethos of the Brahmanical meta narrative? At one level, you have different theatrical productions like the Sanskrit dramas, and, at another level, you have a very different kind of dramatic tradition. So this concealment becomes hugely problematic and it

needs to be analyzed more critically. I hope I addressed some of those issues through this lecture and thank you very much.