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Day 1 | 18th December 2019 | Opening Lecture | Questioning the Protocols and Possibilities of Documentary Theatre: A Dramaturgical Perspective | Rustom Bharucha

I would like to thank Anuja, Kai, and the entire team of Serendipity for making this event happen. Contrary to the element of chance that is contained in the word “serendipity,” I would say that nothing has been left to chance in the meticulous organization of this event, which is the outcome of many months of hard work. This backstage creative labor, which is often invisibilized and undocumented, needs to be duly acknowledged.

In all candor, I have to acknowledge that I am challenged in thinking through the protocols and possibilities of documentary theatre. Indeed, at no point in my experience as a speaker in conferences have I found myself asking so many questions. At one level, these questions can be attributed to the fact that I have never written about “documentary theatre,” even as I have drawn on the discourse that has been built around documentary cinema, photography, video, and art practice. Arguably, “documentary theatre” is as yet an emergent phenomenon in the Indian context, if by “documentary theatre” we mean a theatre that draws self-consciously on already existing documents – for instance, Anuja Ghosalkar’s *Lady Anandi*, which is built on archival research of her maternal great-grandfather’s career as a Marathi actor and female-impersonator in the late nineteenth century, and Zuleikha Choudhary’s *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case*, based on an actual court case between 1930-1946 of a possible sanyasi-impostor claiming to be a zamindar in Dhaka, who had been assumed to be dead a decade earlier. Beyond these concrete examples, we can also think of documentary theatre in the Indian context existing in less defined ways as in street theatre, Theatre in Education focusing on the enactment of history in the classroom, and applied theatre practices which use documentary methods drawn from Augusto Boal.

Given these different ways of engaging with the “real,” let us try and think of documentary theatre not as a fixed genre but as a field of practices, many of which are processual and some of which have yet to be invented. Second, along with the component of “theatre” in documentary theatre, which comes with its inevitable baggage of “illusion,” “character,” “transformation,” “embodiment,” let us consider the potentially catalytic role played by “documentation practices,” which exist beyond theatre in disciplines like archaeology, art history, photography, museology, oral history. For instance, I have spent three years of my life recording and listening to a man called Komal Kothari, whose profound knowledge of the material cultures of the desert resulted in a book titled *Rajasthan: An Oral History*. While the outcome of this documentation was a book, and not a theatre production, I learned that there is a complex performativity in the speaker-listener interaction mediated by a recording device that underlies any documentation process. These blurred zones between “documentary” and “documentation,” between what is “lived” and “recorded,” will animate my lecture today.

For the purpose of this lecture, I would like to position myself as a dramaturg, which is yet another word in search of a definition in the Indian context. The profession of the dramaturg doesn't really exist in India, but this hasn't stopped me from working as one, informally and below the radar. I see the dramaturg as a trouble-shooter, a provocateur, a critical insider into a creative process, and, above all, as a translator, not just of words but of concepts, ideas, and problems into the immediacies and exigencies of specific performance practices embedded in concrete performative circumstances. The dramaturg is an in-between, interstitial figure, which is a state of being that most appeals to me. It also calls attention, quite strikingly, to the "ambivalent nature" that Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl read in the documentary. Highlighting its condition of "uncertainty," as opposed to its aura of certitude, Lind and Steyerl see the documentary creating "zones of entanglement between the aesthetic and the ethic, between artifice and authenticity, between fiction and fact, between documentary power and documentary potential, and between art and its social, political, and economic conditions."

This statement resonates for me, but I would like to trouble its assumptions by drawing on an early essay committed to a definition of "documentary theatre," which ends on an assertive note stating that "reality, however opaque it may appear, can be explained in every detail." The essay in question is *The Material and the Models* by the German playwright Peter Weiss, who is best known for his play *Marat/Sade*, a hyper-theatrical re-enactment of the French Revolution in a mental asylum. There is not a hint of *Marat/Sade* in "The Material and the Models," which seems to be drawing on Weiss's second play *The Investigation* based on an almost verbatim record of the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt between 1963-65. *The Material and the Models* was written in 1968 and first presented at the Berliner Ensemble in East Berlin, at a very different point in time from our own – a time that could be described as "pre-postmodern" and "pre-Post Truth." Indeed, the praxis-driven, modernist axioms provided by Weiss may seem anachronistic. However, following one of Giorgio Agamben's key insights into his philosophical reflection on *What is Contemporary?*, it could be argued that it is precisely through ruptures in time as represented by anachronisms that one can begin to see the contemporary.

So, with no further ado, let us begin with the first axiom from Weiss's notes which are subtitled, "towards a definition of documentary theatre":

Documentary Theatre is a theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews... are the basis of the performance.

Reportage: let us stop right there, and remind ourselves that John Grierson, veteran documentary film maker, who is said to have created the word "documentary" in 1926, had emphasized that it is not news, not information, not newsreels, not reportage, but something close to "a creative treatment of actuality." In essence, Weiss would not disagree. While upholding a "theatre of reportage," he nonetheless goes on to say that documentary theatre "must be a form of artistic expression to have any validity."

Back to axiom 1: "Records, documents, letters, etc. are the basis of the performance." I think this definition holds up remarkably well. To this day documentary theatre draws its

stimulus, its adrenaline, its raison d'être from already existing documents, not unlike the use of "found objects" in contemporary art. It is the very materiality of these documents that provides the basis for documentary theatre's aesthetics and politics.

The statement that follows is more problematic:

Documentary Theatre refrains from all invention; it takes authentic material and puts it on the stage, unaltered in content, edited in form.

What would be the point of "refraining from invention"? Wouldn't documentary theatre be unutterably literal, if not boring, in the absence of invention? More problematically, what do we make of "authentic material"? Could it be equated with, say, a letter written by a sepoy from a battlefield in Europe during the First World War which never reached its destination in a village in Punjab? This letter has never been read before. You are reading it for the first time in the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London, touching and smelling its paper. Would this visceral first contact with the letter constitute an experience of "authentic material"? Enough has been theorized around the discourse of the archive for us to know that its institutionalization, its archaeology, its temperature, its system of indexing and classification, its protocols relating to access, and, more critically, the copyright laws and fees which need to be cleared before the document can be freed from the confines of the archive... all these factors mediate the "authenticity" of documentary materials.

Later in his essay, Weiss reiterates the category of the "authentic" in a more complex register:

Documentary Theatre, so long as it does not itself take to the streets, cannot compete with an authentic political event.

Is Weiss saying that if documentary theatre does take to the streets that it can compete with an authentic political event? What kind of documentary theatre can one think of that does take to the streets in India? Street theatre would not qualify because the habitat of such theatre *is* the street. Would one regard the ongoing insurrection of JNU students taking to the streets of Delhi as an explosive instance of "documentary theatre," with slogans and statistics supporting their struggle? Perhaps. But the question is: what would be the point of such "documentary theatre" competing with an "authentic political event" when it is political in its own right? More critically, is it possible for theatre workers functioning within the civic protocols of theatre institutions to compete with political events? We will get to this question towards the end of this talk.

Speaking for myself, I inevitably substitute any reference to "authentic material" with "evidence." I first became aware of the political implications of evidence in the early 1990s when I had attended a vibrant conference on "Documenting Social and Political Movements" in Pune where I remember a stalwart of the women's movement acknowledging, "We thought that we knew everything about the movement in which we had participated since the 1970s. But when we started to work on our documentation centre, we discovered that we had to create our evidence." These words resonate for me

even today. What does it mean to “create” evidence? Clearly, evidence is never a readymade, a given set of axiomatic facts, radiating neutrality. On the contrary, it is produced through any number of strategies, omissions, inflections, and biases. This is no different in documentary theatre practice: It is one thing to draw on materials like letters, documents, reports, but it is only through the shaping and alteration of this material that one creates evidence. Intentionality underlies any such shaping of evidence in documentary theatre.

What would be the point of shaping evidence in documentary theatre? Following Noam Chomsky’s matter-of-fact statement that “it is the responsibility of intellectuals to expose lies and to tell the truth,” we could claim that this is the responsibility of documentary theatre artists as well. However, this insistence on “truth” has to contend with the ambivalence of “lies” in the making of theatre. From the earliest times, theatre has been targeted and condemned as a repository of dissemblance: what you see on stage is not what exists in real life. The question that needs to be probed here is: what kind of lies does documentary theatre strategize in its search for truth? Does truth matter? Daniel Wetzel of the three-person German collective Rimini Protokoll identified with diverse practices of “documentary theatre” does not think so: “In the end we really are not interested in whether someone is telling the truth, but rather how he presents himself and what role he is playing.”

Let me tease out the premises of this statement by offering an oblique view of one of Rimini Protokoll’s productions, *Call Cutta in a Box*, a virtual conversation between a call centre worker in Calcutta and a visitor/guest in a European city who has bought a ticket to participate in the conversation and to learn some secrets of globalization from within the confines of a call centre, the belly of the beast as it were of global trade and commerce. To get to the point: what were the “white lies” being enacted in this conversation?

1. While *Call Cutta in a Box* did take place in a “real” call centre in Calcutta, it was not exactly located in the very thick of the call centre workers. Rather, the piece was performed in an alcove to the side of the action in a relatively sequestered space. Let’s call this a bit of “structural adjustment,” to appropriate the language of the World Bank.
2. More seriously, the call centre worker in front of the computer screen was not a call centre worker. He was a Bengali youth who had responded to an advertisement by the Max Mueller Bhavan to participate in *Call Cutta in a Box*. A perfect candidate for any Rimini Protokoll piece: he was not a “real” actor, whose participation is “taboo” in almost all of their productions. As Stefan Kaegi, a member of Rimini Protokoll puts it, “The actor who can be trusted is one who needs no rehearsals.” Very different from the earnest premise of August Boal who believed that revolutions need to be “rehearsed” through workshop interventions by spect-actors. There are no “spect-actors” in Rimini Protokoll’s productions, only “critical spectators” in the tradition of Brecht’s epic theatre. Furthermore, if there is no formal “rehearsal” as such for any Rimini Protokoll production, there is a “script,” or, more precisely, a sketch of instructions in a particular sequence and time-frame, which was dutifully followed by the Bengali “call centre worker” in the production. The one problem with his conversational expertise was that there was no rupture, not the slightest glitch,

which could make anyone suspect he was not a “real” call centre worker. This “white lie” was never troubled.

Let me pull out for a while from this scenario to point out that if there is any one contribution that Rimini Protokoll has made to “documentary theatre,” it would be its formulation and dexterous implementation of its seminal construct – “experts of the everyday” – which displaces the more condescending categories of “non-actors,” “non-professionals,” or worse, “ordinary people.” These “experts,” who enact their own stories in dramaturgies framed by Rimini Protokoll, come from the widest range of working people like detectives, truck drivers, elderly women, military police, street cleaners, porters, and muezzins, from a diverse range of geographical locations. Underlying this seeming democratization of global theatre practice – a “distribution of the sensible,” as Jacques Ranciere would put it - we need to acknowledge the existence of a funding apparatus that enables Rimini Protokoll’s productions to travel the world, not unlike superstar political artists like Milo Rau who also works with “real people”– most recently, migrant workers from Africa in the town of Matera, Italy, who are playing the roles of Jesus Christ and His Apostles in *The New Gospel*, which is “part movie, part documentary, part political campaign.”

Returning to Rimini Protokoll, the real point to be debated is that there is no particular “commitment” in their work to follow up on the afterlives of their “experts.” Once the production is done, the “complicity” with the experts, as they put in, in opposition to any long-standing “relationship,” is over and done with. “The complicity is temporary,” as Rimini Protokoll declares in its as-yet unwritten manifesto. What matters is how these subalterns play their roles on stage, confounding the spectatorship of global cosmopolitan audiences.

To what extent can this role-playing illuminate and not just tease the immediacies of the “real”? From my peripheral vision of *Call Cutta in a Box*, I could see the “real” call centre where three burly guys were stealthily prowling around the workers like surveillance monitors. Abruptly, one of these leaders would stop by a worker and then proceed to thump him on his back, shouting, “Come on, get your act together.” In these bullying tactics, one could sense both the brutality and the humiliation that pervades the lives of call centre workers, which, for all the illusions of social mobility, are marked by chronic fatigue and quick burn-out. Jon McKenzie has described this condition succinctly in the title of his book *Perform or Else*. Not a glimmer of this brutal ultimatum could be sensed in *Call Cutta in a Box*, which ended in the version that I saw with the Bengali call-centre worker inevitably singing Rabindrasangeet and the European woman singing some folk song and both of them waving to each other across the virtual world. In this sweetness, the critique of globalization was systematically erased.

Let us now turn to a more serious axiom with disturbing political and ethical implications:

Documentary Theatre may become a tribunal. There is no need to aim for the authenticity of the Court at Nuremberg, the Auschwitz

trial in Frankfurt, a hearing of the American Senate...: but the questions, the attacks of the real court room can be used, and given a new slant.

I would like to take you to a different kind of courtroom scenario, which was simulated as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which was set up in 1996, in that critical transition between the alleged end of apartheid and the beginnings of a new South Africa. Conceptualized and sanctioned on the dubious premise that perpetrators of political crimes should be granted amnesty, ostensibly to circumvent the imminence of civil war, the masterminds of the TRC graciously allowed 2,140 survivors and eye-witnesses of apartheid crimes to provide testimony, to tell their stories to the nation at large in live televised broadcasts of the hearings. Framed within the theatricality of an itinerant road show, and the immediacy of national soap opera, the “emotional truth” of these stories was assumed to have a healing touch, contributing towards the larger reconciliation of society at large.

Early in the run of the TRC hearings, there was a searing moment when an African woman called Nomonde Calata, while delivering her testimony on the murder of her husband Fort Calata, suddenly interrupted her matter-of-fact documentation of the crime by throwing her head back and wailing. She howled. This was not a scream – certainly not a “silent scream” in a Brechtian sense, or an “inner scream.” This was a real cry that went on seemingly forever. The Cry of Nomonde Calata, as it later got apotheosized and mythologized. All kinds of things were read into this cry: the “defining sound of the TRC,” as Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it, a nation coming to terms with itself, a catharsis of the multitude.

I am bringing up this cry for two reasons so that we can think about its implications at a dramaturgical level:

1. Documentary Theatre can be exceptionally verbose. Courtroom drama structured around testimonials and interrogations is particularly prone to an excess of words with the occasional input of visuals and sketches. My question is: How does documentary theatre deal with the non-verbal dimensions of any testimonial at the level of corporeal enactment and sound? Is it best to erase these tears and cries which indicate the breakdown of language? Or is it possible to perform the non-verbal cry, risking in the process a certain kind of sensationalism, or worse, a demonstration of virtuosity? One of the cardinal principles of “documentary theatre” is that it should work against virtuosity and aspire for imperfection. Too much “technically accomplished acting” would be to miss the point. So how does one render the inscription of the non-verbal in documentary theatre?
2. Returning to Nomonde Calata’s cry, I would pose a different dramaturgical challenge. Predictably, after Mrs. Calata cried and became a national heroine overnight, she was promptly forgotten. However, her “cry” remained in the public and cultural domain, decontextualized from her personal history and appropriated in all kinds of ways, acquiring cultural, symbolic, and artistic capital. The composer Phillip Miller, for instance, who is William Kentridge’s associate in numerous installations, inserted the raw material of Nomonde Calata’s cry into a larger “cantata for voice, tape, and testimony.” Later, on being questioned about the ethics underlying his documentation practice, he seems to have vacillated about his choice with doubts and liberal angst. In this fall-out of no-truth and no-reconciliation, it was left to

theatre scholar Catherine Cole to do the necessary and intelligible task: she went to the home of Nomonde Calata and asked her, "What do you feel about your cry being repeated over and over again?" To which, Mrs. Calata responded by saying, "I'm still crying but there's no one to listen."

I use this moment to acknowledge that we in the theatre may face any number of problems producing our work, but, ultimately, we are privileged because in the act of theatre, we assume the presence of an audience that listens to us. To complicate this privilege, we could ask: What happens in documentary theatre practice when one is focusing on the life of someone like Nomonde Calata to whom no one appears to be listening? Does one then take refuge in the privilege of "giving voice"? The silence of Nomonde Calata is not an instance of "public solitude" or "ritualized mourning" but of "private grief" that is confined within the walls of a room, segregated from any public consideration. How does one perform this silence in documentary theatre?

I turn to the TRC for yet another technique of documentation practice that is often used in documentary theatre: Re-enactment. In some of the TRC hearings, acts of torture were demonstrated physically: a man sitting astride the body of another man lying on the floor, face downwards, mouth gagged, while the "torturer" turns his head and grins into the camera. I am not sure what exactly is gained at a legal level from such corporeal re-enactments of crime. Does it contribute to the accuracy of evidence or does it complicate it through the obvious relish, if not pleasure, of re-enacting a simulation of violence? Documentary theatre practice in the most extreme of situations and locations compels us to question both the validity and exploitative potential of re-enactments.

I am reminded of a workshop held in the Westville Correctional Centre (a euphemism for a maximum security prison) in Durban, South Africa, where the inmates were devising a play on their own lives which I was privileged to witness in an early rehearsal. In the first scene of the play, one of the inmates walks into the performance space, bows, and looks up, addressing an imaginary tribunal of three multiracial judges – African, Afrikaans, Indian. "My Lords," he says, "I am such-and-such. I am Zulu. You have accused me of rape. My Lords, I have not raped. You've accused me of rape because I'm black. Since you hold this crime against me, I will show you how to rape." Then follows a 3-minute intensely physical demonstration of rape through movement and gesture, which ends abruptly. The inmate bows to the judges and exits.

Clearly, this first scene is a provocation that works against the grain of well-meaning prison theatre which is built on the premise of "rehabilitation," the creation of "good citizens" emerging out of the criminality of the underworld. In contrast to this feel-good civic potentiality, the re-enactment of rape in the Westville workshop was probably one of the most terrifying representations of violence that I have seen in my experience of theatre. So unsettling was the action in its graphic brutality that I was compelled to tell the director of the workshop as a dramaturg that the second scene of the play had to represent the invisible victim in some form or the other. And this is what materialized as the play evolved into a documentation of patriarchy and violence in South Africa, which was eventually

performed for a cross-section of the prison community, with the Superintendent of Prisons invited to the performance as a Chief Guest. The fact that this performance was followed by a riot in the prison cells on the very next day, precipitated by warring gangs, compels us to confront the scary possibility that the riot may have been sparked by a reaction of the gangs to the performance by the “non-gang gang” of actors.

Suffice it to say that re-enactments which deal with political atrocities of the here and now can be volatile and dangerous. Far from being therapeutic articulations of problems and crises, they can backfire and trigger a different set of problems. In Rwanda, we know that when survivors participated in re-enactments of their testimonials in annual celebrations of the “new Rwanda,” many of them were re-traumatized. Arguably, there is an unconscious dimension at work in many re-enactments, particularly those where the participants may not be aware that they are re-enacting something that has already been enacted either through an existing production or a real-life political event.

Such was the enigma that continues to haunt the uncanny resemblance between two events in Manipur –1. Sabitri Heisnam’s phenomenal portrait of the tribal Naxalite Dopdi in Mahasweta Devi’s incendiary short story *Draupadi*, which ends on a terrifying note with the raped Dopdi stripping herself naked in front of her civilized bhadralok police officer, laughing in his face, and challenging him to “counter” her, and 2. the activist protest of 12 Meira Paibis (“women torch-bearers”) who stripped naked in front of the Kangla Fort in Imphal, Manipur, occupied at that time by the Indian army, in protest against the brutal rape of a young Manipuri woman, Thangjam Manorama. Sabitri’s split-second exposure of her naked body on the Manipuri stage in 2000 in the final scene of *Draupadi*, which had initially precipitated an outrage of self-righteous and moralistic protest from the theatre community in Manipur, was followed by the frenzied protest of twelve naked Meira Paibis in 2004. In public consciousness, the two events got conflated with the activist protest appearing to “re-enact” Sabitri’s enactment of the closing moment in Mahasweta Devi’s story.

While it would be tempting to read a similitude in their manifestations, a closer examination of the activist protest and the theatre production reveals that there was no “conclusive clear empirical connection between the two events,” still less any causality, which is the view of theatre scholar Trina Banerjee based on her meticulous research on the subject. If in Sabitri’s performance, we are struck by a corporeal hyper-consciousness that is burningly alive to the smallest detail of gesture, timing, and vocal inflection, in the “performance” of the Meira Paibis, there is by their own admission a profoundly unconscious manifestation of rage.

Disclaiming any attempt to impose a false correspondence between his production and the Kangla protest, Kanhailal articulated his position in the most succinct of terms: “As far as I know there is no connection. The Imas who protested in 2004 did not have any relationship with the play. They probably don’t see plays. They are old.... But that is not the point. Things just happen historically at a juncture. They have the spirit inside, the spirit of the times. There is no conscious connection.” In this statement, Kanhailal opens himself to

what I would describe as the strange eruptions and manifestations of the political unconscious in the public sphere.

How can we begin to understand the unconscious dimensions of documentary theatre, a practice that is more often than not associated with critical consciousness, intentionality, and a strong component of research? Working against the grain of documentary theatre as an act of deliberation, what is it that inexplicably drives one in the direction of a particular document? Is it merely a sense of urgency, or is there a politics of desire that compels us to push the boundaries of the unknown? How may this search illuminate not merely a clarification of the politics of the past, but an anticipation of the politics of the future in the present?

This would be an appropriate moment to focus on the last part of this lecture where I would like to address the possibilities of nurturing new modes of documentary theatre in India today. Enough has been said in this lecture about materials, models, manifestations and enigmas of the “real,” but no theatre practice can ever be sustained exclusively through ideas, techniques, and forms. We need new organizational frameworks that can enable us to research documentary materials and resources not merely at a dramaturgical level, but with close attention to the sustenance of life itself. For this purpose, we need to look outside the comfort zones of our existing urban models and become more aware of what is happening to the very organization of theatre practice in remote parts of the country.

For instance, even as Serendipity is happening here in Goa, there is another festival struggling to take off the ground in the interior of Assam in a village called Rampur, in Goalpara district – a festival titled *Under the Sal Tree*, a visionary intervention by the late theatre director Sukracharjya Rabha of Badungduppa Kalakendra, who died far too suddenly. Sukracharjya had received his early training from Kanhailal who was involved in the formative years of the festival. Pushing the limits of Third Theatre, *Under the Sal Tree* attempts to address the cultural, social, and economic realities of the indigenous Rabha community by forging a new kind of theatre practice where ecology, the rights and livelihood of indigenous people, oral history, and narrative can come together in a festival where visitors are invited not only to see the productions, but to actually live on the festival grounds in specially made bamboo huts, which are surrounded by a grove of *sal* trees.

What, one could ask, is the relevance of calling to your attention this theatre enterprise in the context of documentary theatre? First of all, I think it makes one realize that the epistemology of the document need not be restricted to a written or visual artefact, a letter or manuscript or painting. It could be a natural resource. Trees can serve as documents.

While the world of Badungduppa Kalakendra may seem very remote for many of us at Serendipity, it would be expedient to keep in mind that we are facing more or less the same political pressures and shrinkage of space for dissent and critical dialogue. If the actors of Badungduppa in Assam may be directly hit by the imposition of the National Registration of Citizens, which has already been implemented in their state, there is no reason to believe that those of us living outside Assam in our illusory comfort zones are not likely to face the

same intimidation in relation to the registration of our identities and assumed citizenship. Let us look upon this arbitrary and coercive registration process as the “documentary theatre” of the State. What kind of documentary theatre practices can we invent to counter this particular Theatre of the State?

We are living at a time when the performativity of our political culture as represented by the dominant parties, organizations, and allies of the Hindu Right, has arrived at such a brazen, triumphalist affirmation of communal norms, that we, as theatre workers, run the risk of seeing our skills and strategies as performers being appropriated and transformed into larger-than-life, spellbinding master performances of the State. In this scenario, it would be a waste of time and energy to “compete” with the politicians at their own game, to invoke one of Peter Weiss’s keywords which I had invoked at the start of the lecture. In the thoroughly inauthentic political culture of our times, it would be foolish to out-perform the politicians.

In this context, some philosophers like Chantal Mouffe have suggested that if the Left needs to renew itself then it must learn to appropriate the political populism of the Right. I would reject this argument not only on ideological grounds given the shifty nature of any kind of populism which can veer from Right to Left or Left to Right, or, at times, manipulate both Right and Left positions at the same time. More pragmatically, I would acknowledge that we as theatre workers are not particularly equipped or trained to adopt and mobilize a populist stance, which comes with very specific skills and manipulations of deception. While our earlier allegiance to “popular” modes of protest may need to be re-ignited with new levels of cunning and irony, I do believe that we would be failed populists.

Finally, in the absence of any sustained funding or support for emergent documentary theatre practices in India, let us capitalize on the innate strength of theatre’s resources, which are astonishingly minimal if one has the courage to dispense with the trappings of spectacle and sophisticated production values. In the most startlingly micro of radical interventions in a documentary mode, the dalit activist-singer-composer Shambhaji Bhagat has trained young cultural activists from Mumbai to enter peoples’ homes in slum settlements where they gather the family members together and read the Preamble of the Indian Constitution to them. I am humbled by the sheer economy and pertinence of this initiative which illuminates how the rudiments of documentary theatre can be grounded in the smallest of actions. In this particular case, one of the most important and beleaguered of documents in India today is being read to the most downtrodden of India’s citizens, whose right to discuss the axioms of constitutionalism in their own language is given due respect. While it could be argued that this particular initiative had to be stopped due to growing censorship and a culture of intimidation, there is no reason to believe that it cannot inspire other such initiatives. With every step in the larger exploration of documentary theatre, the struggle continues.