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**Day 3 | 20th December 2019 | Speaking Local, Acting Global | Ashutosh Potdar | Zhao Chuan | Geetanjali Kulkarni | Mangai | Moderator: Sharmista Saha**

**Sharmista Saha:** If we not do think of them as ideas or fixed conceptual terms, then how do we understand the global or the local? So, talking about modernity, A K Ramanujan once said that with modernity, what had happened. really, was that from context sensitive ideas, we had come to context free ideas. And the idea of citizenship is like one of those context free ideas, which is capable of thinking in universal terms, right? We all know about the debates around the Citizenship Amendment Act. We know the debates around NRC. If citizenship is that universal terminology, if citizenship for us is modernity, then the protests are a symbol of how we are negotiating the terms for something which is so universal. So how do we think of citizenship in our world today? What is the principle? What is going to be the principle for thinking about citizenship in our world today? So we see there's a vehement protest against keeping Muslims out of the list that has come out of people who can claim citizenship. And on the other side, we also see in Assam, there's a very different logic to citizenship that has been kept forward. In the morning, for example, we once again started talking about principles, we spoke in terms of how there's capitalism, but there's an impossibility of fighting capitalism as it were. And on the other hand, as if juxtaposed, I don't know if Anuja even thought about it, but Yalgaar's performance, who are absolutely clear about their principle, right, they spoke about equality as if it is not as an abstract idea as we would like it to be, right? When such questions of equality, when such questions of citizenship, which pose themselves as universals, come in front of us, how do we negotiate the local? How do we negotiate the regional?

So, having said that, I would like to open this panel. We have with us Ashutosh Potdar, who is a playwright and also an academic; we have Geetanjali, who is an actor, and also she runs an N.G.O and does good work with tribal children. Then we have Zhao Chuan, who is a theater and visual arts practitioner from China. And then we have Mangai, who is a theater practitioner, feminist theater practitioner, from Tamil Nadu. So I would like to start with Ashutosh.

**Ashutosh Potdar:** Thank you Anuja and Kai. The note here says -- last sentence-- : “In a country such as India, where regional languages are used as tools for political divisiveness, can we re-imagine language as a mode for dissent against a nationalistic narrative?” I'm so much under pressure. One pressure is, when you speak in Marathi, or when you do theater or whatever writing in Marathi or any regional languages, the first stamp on you is this: you're speaking like a Raj Thackarey or some Mamata Banerjee or Shiv Sena. That's unfortunate. So I'm surprised here to read the note. Though not pleasantly, but I take this kind of pressure. And another pressure is always on languages. What the pressure is to re-imagine language as mode for dissent against nationalistic narrative. So with these pressures on my mind, I'm going to present what I think of local and global. I would like to move ahead

of local and global as far as artistic practices and social practices are concerned in late globalization feeds. More sophisticated technologies, free flowing internet, transportation, newer opportunities have built liquidity in a state of contention. It allows transcending boundaries. Collapsing of new local and new global have seen new social systems and changes in social patterns. People are moving out but not only in search of work and prosperity. We can look at the migration pattern of new workforces with background in farming that have been moving out, and, at the same time, maintain their agriculture set up in their own towns. An influx of migrants from different cultures has been changing the social dynamic of a place. I don't see it as a rational, predictable and stable process. We don't live with a stable set of norms, traditions and institutions. But that does not mean that we face only changes. The changes are not predictable. That's what I am saying. It's not one sided. It's not one directional. It's not progressive. It's not linear. It is visible in a way, languages are emerging in contemporary time.

For instant Marathi, the language in which I write: a new set of vocabularies for everyday use of language, and reflections and creative use of language has been changing stunningly. I don't mean to point at the use of English in written expression, but the thinking process itself has been changing. I don't see characters in a play with stable features or profiles of an individual. They are not unified character sets, not rationally perceived linguistic identities. Characters are not informed by stable categories such as occupation, religious affiliations, nationality, gender, leisure pursuits, lifestyles, etc. However, there is an urge to be stable at the same time. We need security, we need religious occupation and security of community. Communities are local, aspirational, and aspirations are global. One is critical of both global as well as local, but aspires to be in a stable space and that's creating a lot of chaos and confusion. But, at the same time, we are drawn to the melodramatic form of good and bad. It's fascinating, but good and bad remain changeable, being an opportunist one changes hats of global and local whenever one wants to. As a result here is the generation of artists that is always in-between, always in-between global and local. This has led to an increased skepticism and a general apathy towards both local and global. Temporary workforce has enabled mobility among different spaces. But this freewheeling pleasures of mobility between spaces, between cultures, is available to only privileged individuals. The people who benefit most from this local and global fluidity are socially and economically privileged individuals, like us. They are the ones who are able to float freely around the world. They exist in time rather than space. They operate in locations where the economic conditions are most favorable, and standards of living are high. Therefore, there is a, quote unquote, global within local. That's another point.

So what I'm trying to say is there is nothing like only local and only global, there is a global within local and languages have always remained at the forefront of the debate, like Marathi for instance. Marathi, I mean standard Marathi, and dialects of Marathi: rural and urban Marathi, Marathi of Bahujan and Marathi of Abhijan, Bahujan elites; and Marathi of educated and of the mass and Marathi of illiterates, can be presented in a dual relationship of local and urban. So, for someone who writes in what you call standard Marathi, accepted Marathi, Puneri Marathi, if you want to say that, other Marathis remain at the local level. So, there is always a kind of multi-layer relationship between global and local. So there are a number of layers. So when I wrote one of my first plays called *Anandbhog Mall*, the play wasn't written in Standard Marathi, I wrote it in a dialect form of Marathi. But that wasn't accepted. When I wrote *F-1105*, we wanted to send this play for some festival that was

supported by the government of Maharashtra, but I couldn't say the play is written in Marathi, because I wrote this play in four languages. So, this kind of acceptance is not there at the state level. So the point here is that there are multiple layers of global and local. In this way local and global becomes a multi-layer phenomenon and one has to pay attention to the nuances of what form of global and local one is referring to.

It's important to mention Mahatma Phule, because he was very sensitive about all these things, where he identified a dialectical form for his Jalsas, and, at the same time, rejected Standard Marathi. So, in a sense, Mahatma Phule also has played within this global and local layer. Local and global dynamic is not just the result of hybridity, but, in the Indian context, it is a result of, or a response to, anti-colonialism, caste hierarchies in India, as well as nationalistic discourse. Dialogues across global and local require attention to both specificity of address and histories of making that may have traveled so far. Another aspect we need to pay attention to is spectatorship. Who is looking at global and local? Who decides local is parochial? Who decides local as a dogmatic, as against global, which is very open, liberal and free flowing? Who glorified rootedness of local, as something very, very much part of nation and something that is severe in the time of fragmented culture and dying values? So, I also would like to refer to Nativist discourse that is very popular in Marathi and led by Marathi writer Bhalchandra Nemade. So, one who always says that these are our languages and we should write in only our languages, because then only we can survive with this nation. So who does all these things? There is a sense of spectatorship that's involved here. So, global and local is decided by whom? And that's the question we need to ask. The point I want to make here is that local and global can't be seen only from an outsider's perspective. They should be considered on their own terms and as a specificity of living history, to which one has to adapt.

As a writer, in order to understand local and global, I like to start rescuing myself by creating binaries. I start by creating binaries. I create binaries in order to challenge these binaries. So therefore, melodrama is closer to my heart. I like to work within melodramatic form. Melodrama enables me to create metaphors that can transgress boundaries. Merging points can be created with the help of melodrama, because unless you create melodrama you cannot break the melodrama. Unless you create binaries you cannot break those binaries. So I like to work within local and global kind of binaries and then challenge those binaries as a playwright. In building merging points of local and global, I am interested in material: clothing, fabrics, teaching, time, fixing and overall rituals of practices that are around. I make characters perform different kinds of rituals that serve the purpose of metaphors of permanence and identity. The rituals creating identities, space and metaphors. Space and metaphors help me build the bridge between local and global. What I mean by local and global is reaching out of the immediate context of the practice. One maintains the local, interact and transforms it, through the interactive processes itself. I did this in my play called *Sindhu Sudhakar Rum Ani Itar*. It was like a face morphing, body morphing, time morphing game for me, confusing and infusing something that was outside as well as inside. When I started writing this play, the image of God Narsimha came in my mind. You know God Narsimha, who is sitting at the threshold and tearing the Raksha's belly— that's the well-known God Narsimha story. It's not about local and global becoming one. I don't imagine local and global becoming one. It's about maintaining distinct identities, spaces, circumstances and at the same time fusing them together. I love the calendar picture of three headed God Datta with entire universe around him of dog, cow, trees. Toward the end

of my play *Sindhu Sudhakar Rum Ani Itar*. Sindhu Sudhakar aka Inder tells Sindhu, aka Ram or Rama that she looks like God Dutta. And there is a dialogue in my play:

"Inder says: *Datta Datta You look like split into three faces.*

Rama says (smiling): *Nonsense.*

Inder: *Seriously. One Sindhu's and another Rama's face.*

Rama: *And third?*

Inder: *Two mixed. Rama smiles."*

So, I look at three faces, one, two and the third as a mixed face. I'm interested in this kind of thresholdness of global and local -- being at the middle and alert to the simultaneously existing worlds around you. Thank you.

**Sharmista Saha:** I think we'll go to the next speaker and take the questions in the end.

**Geetanjali Kulkarni** - It's really very difficult for me to articulate what I think. The first thing which came to my mind when I saw that title, was that when I was at N.S.D, B V Karanth said, that there cannot be a National School of Drama and that theater always has to be local. And, for the first time, I was 20 years old then, I had, for the first time that thought that there cannot be anything national. There cannot be anything like one nation or one language. I was introduced to that thought by B V Karanth, who was an eminent theater person. And that time I didn't know that I'll go back to an Adivasi village and will start working there. Which made me understand that thought and also, not just understand but to experience that thought, while working with people who are from small communities, and who are finding their voice.

So the work I do in villages is interdisciplinary work which I do with an N.G.O which works in the field of education. So, we perform children's literature, which tries to enhance reading and writing skills of children. We work in tribal areas, and with ashram schools, the residential schools for tribal people, which are government schools. They are supposed to learn the Standard Marathi, which Ashutosh just mentioned. They are not given any other support, they come to school and directly we expect them to learn the Standard Marathi, which is very different from the language, and the ethos they come from. So, what we try to do is not to compromise, or not to change their natural language, giving them the opportunity to express in their natural language, but, at the same time, trying to learn the Standard Marathi so that they are not behind, because they have aspirations. They have to go out in the world and earn their living. So, we don't want to be in an Utopian world where they'll find something in the jungles, because there are no jungles now, and we don't want them to, we don't wish that they end up in a Bricklin. So we don't want them to do that for just becoming a laborer working for some feudal lord. So, for that we need to take them to the standard language, but at the same time, they should not lose their wisdom, their knowledge which they have in their local language. It's a very difficult task, because we have seen people, teachers, losing their natural language trying to cope with that Standard Marathi. And now again, the pressure is trying to cop up with English, because English has become the language of Brahmins now. Because English has become the language of knowledge. In Marathi, you don't have knowledge anymore, so everybody has to learn English. For me to come here, and if I start to speak in Marathi, you will not understand anything. It's not a language of knowledge, of communication anymore. So it is very difficult, just being local. It is very difficult just being local and for a local person to become global.

But at the same time I'm very optimistic. I'm very hopeful, because art, theater have the capacity to take that local wisdom, that knowledge, that language to that global level. I'm not demeaning local knowledge, but it's about aspirations. And to deny aspiration to any person is not right, you know. Equal opportunity is not given to everybody. So I feel that at all levels we have to constantly work with each other and fortunately, art has the capacity. Like the Yalgaar Sanskrutik Manch, who were singing in Marathi, but also the emotion reached us. So likewise, I think art, theater have the capacity to break these boundaries and make local people more empowered and global people more empathetic towards the local people in local knowledge and local wisdom. So I hope, I'm treating it in the right way, I don't know, I'm not an academic. I don't have words. I don't have jargons. But I only understand that when I'm working with children in small communities from Adivasi area, I am learning so much from them, because they have the knowledge. They have the wisdom, they have the understanding, which is much more needed than what is aspirational.

But, at the same time, because I have those privileges, as Ashutosh mentioned, I take it for granted, but maybe an Adivasi girl or a boy wants to become that. So let them. I have to give them that opportunity. Don't lose your localness, don't lose your natural language, but, at the same time, you have the opportunity of becoming urban or global or whatever. You have to have those facilities, opportunities and then you may decide what exchange can happen. Because that exchange is going to make us richer, empowered -- enriched as communities, as artists. As a theater person, I'll tell you what experience I have and then I will end it. Because of theater and the discipline of National School of Drama and the caste and the type of education, I was because what I have received in my life because of that I've become very, I had become like a soldier.

So when I went to this Adivasi community, and I was working with a group of actors, and we were doing shows in different villages, we did one show in a village where a drunkard had come and he was repeating what we were saying. And initially I got very disturbed, like how come somebody comes in and disturbs our performance? This is not right. I tried to control. Then we went to another town on another day, and we were using puppets for a show. And one little girl from the *pada* came behind and saw the whole performance from behind: how the puppets are being operated. In a proscenium theater this would have never happened. Because it was open, because it was so informal, that happened. And, I think the director of our N.G.O, quotes one word of Adivasi people which is *Anagraha*. How to translate *Anagraha*? I don't know—Informality, not to insist, not to impose. So some of our Adivasi people are *Anagrahi*, who let things happen. I learned so much, because that's a local wisdom. And I think we need to understand that exchange should happen and maybe some of my experiences will help my Adivasi children, some of their experiences will help me. So the interdisciplinary, global, local exchange has to happen continuously, then only we would be empowering each other and giving equal chance. Like the Yalgaar artists said today, equal opportunity, equal chance to everybody, to each and every citizen of the world, and not just to a country or a community. That's what I feel. I hope I am on the right track, I'm not sure about.

**Sharmista Saha:** Okay, so Geetanjali kind of told us a little bit about the shifting localities of the global. And how the language of the learned, that has earlier been Marathi, shifted to English. And what's the wisdom that we have that we can take from the local? I mean, I'm

reminded of Sameena's lecture yesterday when she spoke about these concepts in legal terms that we could also borrow from. So that is also something that we could think of. Okay, our next presenter is Zhao Chuan.

**Zhao Chuan:** Thank you. Yeah, sometimes we feel that we quite clearly know about the local and the global. But more or less global always means somewhere in the West, right? It doesn't really mean Shanghai or here in Goa. In contrast, it means Berlin, Paris or New York. It is always somewhere there, not Cape Town. This is also the kind of problem I had for quite some years. Let's start from actually my own background in theatre.

I was, as you mentioned, from visual arts. I worked with literary art forms for many years, but I only gradually moved to theater after 2005. From the beginning, I'm quite cautious about this and we, (I and my theater collective Grass Stage that I spoke about yesterday) put lots of efforts to make a connection to East Asian countries, especially with these left-wing theater people. We think it's very important to confront the so-called globalization phenomenon and to think about what kind of efforts we can make. The first Grass Stage show actually premiered in Guangzhou, Korea. It's about the Korean War back in the early 50's. This was our first production and we looked into the matters during that time to see what exactly it brought to the people and how people suffered back then. I'm so glad I got invited here and have the chance to meet lots of people here. Quite often we meet people from India not in India, but somewhere in the "global", which means maybe in Berlin or somewhere in Switzerland or somewhere in Japan. Some time ago, with the support of some global money, I initiated a platform, which is more or less like this here, to get people gathered in Shanghai. I'm more interested in inviting people from Africa, Asia, South Asia and South America, places that we normally don't really see in Shanghai. Because the major economies worldwide always support only their artists to go abroad. As a result, all our so-called cultural exchange is connected to those global countries. Like the Shanghai International Art Festival, in which you will see productions from London and New York, but you don't normally see a production from India. Because Indian culture is not that much introduced to us, compared to all this western culture. To me, this is problematic. So, this platform that I initiated runs every second year and it is called Staging Alterity. I think next year, I would also like to invite Anuja and Kai to come with their project to Shanghai. To see what we can do. In addition to Staging Alterity, I also want to talk about a theatre piece I have made with my collective, called World Factory.

It started in 2009 when I traveled to Manchester for the Manchester International Festival, and then I realized Manchester was called World Factory back in the times of first Industrial Revolution. I suddenly made connected it to workers' condition today in China, because China is also called world factory nowadays. It was moved from Europe to Asia and now it is China. Maybe it will move on. But no matter where the factory is in the last 200 years, the workers' conditions have always been poor. Although we went through so many revolutions and reforms it hasn't really much changed. Why? This is a very local issue for the people who live and work there, but also very global. Nothing is truly that local, I believe.

We used a lot of documentation to trace the history of this world factory phenomenon in order to make the production and also, tell the contemporary condition of the workers in China. I visited the UK for twice to do research. Finally in 2014 the work was produced and

since then, I also mentioned that yesterday, we started to work a lot with workers in China, especially in the south coast. In particular, with workers from this company called Foxconn, which produces iPhones, Apple computers. Basically, what we do is to work with the workers in factory zone. There used to be 400,000 people working in one factory zone. It is huge. Now the business is not that good. They reduced like 100,000 of them. They are living in one place together. We are only able to work with very few of them. What we do is a theater in which these workers stage their own stories and are able to present themselves with dignity. But can we change anything? Actually, I don't think we can change anything. The only thing we can do, I think is, to let them be braver, to enable them to confront the situation, the hardship of life, to let them be more experienced with different things, like legal issues, whatever they could learn a little bit from. And also, I learned from an Indian director through one of these festivals somewhere in Europe, that he liked to bring his collaborators overseas, because it will bring something to them, it might help to open them up. This is a crucial difference to this big-name documentary theater company, Rimini Protocol, for them the experts are just their material. They capitalize on these people's expertise. But when we work with them it is not really about that, but rather about seeking possibilities and opportunities to grow together, to be together, to share things together. But somehow, we also failed to be global. This was the story I was meant to tell yesterday on my panel, but somehow I didn't know how to start. But if I'm not talking too long, then this is maybe the occasion to talk about it. Because at the beginning, when we made World Factory I had another partner. They are based in Cambridge in UK. When they were in Shanghai, they heard my idea and they said : "oh we really like this idea. Could you count me in? If you come to UK, we can help." Then I applied for some money and I went there. I also shared all my material that I had gathered in China with them. They said, oh, this is great. I went on for several years. I started getting the feeling that there's a problem, because they are not truly interested in working with us, but getting our material. We even had National Theater Studio for two weeks for development, which is so good. They applied for lots of funding for the collaboration with this Chinese grassroots company, but we didn't really know exactly about this collaboration. We only learned about it very late at the final presentation.

They had a production show at the Young Vic in London. In their program we are just mentioned as a research partner. But I told them in the beginning, this was our initiative. I got very angry. I wrote to them: you don't really want to have a collaboration at the very beginning, so let's don't pretend we are having a collaboration *now*. Eventually we don't really have resources for such kind of global competition. But we still need to hold whatever we have, intellectual properties or whatever. We feel so bad for this case and these well-educated people. In the end, we return to this world factory logic -- we become a low material supplier for this theater piece shown by the middle-class people there. Somehow I think, maybe what I'm saying is not exactly correct, but I get very emotional when this happens to me. And so, I just want to say, go global, you may also be very cautious about where to go. And then if it is possible we can have our own global, we can have more open idea of where the global is. I think this could also be one central point.

**Mangai:** That was great. That was a real journey from Maharashtra to Shanghai to Tamil Nadu. I mean, I do have lots of things to comment on local and global but, as of now, I would just say they are certainly not oppositional or they're not binaries in my head, but I think negotiations of the kinds Zhao was talking about, and I think Rustom is right here, who identified all these issues way back in the academic arena of how do you really collaborate if

there is no equality? If there is no sense of justice, I don't think collaboration is possible at all. You know, I mean, even if you're ideologically okay. I'm just going to draw from some of the experiences that I've had from 2007 to be precise. And my collaborator in the true sense of the word is V Geeta, who is a feminist historian and a Periyar scholar who came into writing place primarily because she wanted her research, which was available as articles and books and everything to be taken back to the people from whom she researched.

So this is the first play that she wrote called *Kaala Kanavu*, we can translate it as a Dream of Time. Which really traced the history of feminist thought in Tamil Nadu, from late 19th century to about mid-20th century. Geeta and I are almost contemporaries in and our trajectories politically have been slightly different, but we have been great pals and companions and fellow travelers and comrades. So what we really thought was to take the locally grounded history with our understanding of the global idea of feminism. So it really helped us to kind of make the turn, ask the questions that we wanted to ask about feminist history, because we didn't want it to be additive. We didn't want it to be interventionists in the sense Susie Tharu and Lolita were talking about, but we were really asking, have these women and their participation changed the social history and the history of the movements in any which way, instead of saying what did women do to the movements? You know, not in that sense, so we wanted to really raise and I think we were faced with almost about 100 odd women, live women, their stories, their words, and Geeta is a stickler for documents. So every single word had to be presented verbatim. So the problem for me was how do you perform quotations? How do you really kind of bring it and we have no time to create 120 characters. So the answer that I took was to really look at it from what do these voices mean to us today? So my journey was retrace things, my history and try to see where are the places where these women touch me today in this life. So what we really did was to really bring in the affinities and the differences that the women faced among themselves and the debates that they created, along with all the posters that were displayed to the audience. Like the one that Anuja and Kai had put up, they put it up outside that performance space for the audience to record whatever they wanted to record and I have reams of cloth now accumulated over these performances. And one of the examples that we did was to work on Devadasi debate.

We had somebody like Muthulakshmi Reddy who was a parliamentarian, and we also had a Periyarist female woman leader from the Devadasi community— Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammal who shared completely different views on the Devadasi debate and we brought their voices on stage on par with each other without really taking a judgmental stance without really taking our sides, and also, I think somewhere we also brought in artists like K B Sundarambal to Burma, I mean wherever Tamil was spoken, as one of the women who made a lot of change in the social fabric. So we did that play, and we called it a Docudrama. One of the curious examples I want to give was when we came to the women in the left movement, and I had a personal stake because I come from the left women's movement. I wasn't in the left party per say when I produced the play, but I still think that's my legacy. And we had all these names. We had all the stories, but no words, no documentation, sometimes not even a photograph. So what we did was to really ask another collaborator, playwright called Inquilab to create a kind of a narrative storytelling through song you know, so what we came up with was a rhetoric and kind of a roll call of all these women in the form of a song, which is what you know, which was a very poignant moment in the play. But as somebody who had produced who had directed and written the play we know that was a shortcut. And we knew we were filling up a void that the left movement had left behind, you know the names that

they did not refer. So when we moved on, and Geeta went on to write about six plays after that, and, in 2014, she decided to do a play based on one of our feminist leaders called Maithili Shivaraman and her writings. The book is available as a collection of articles— she wrote about two instances, one of the first police encounter death in Tamil Nadu, and the other one was custodial rape, which was fought for 25 years in the court and she wrote articles in *E.P.W* [Economic and Political Weekly] and that became the crux for us to produce the play. And Geeta, one of them she structured it based on *Antigone*, the other one was based on Ariel Dorfman's *Death and The Maiden* in terms of the broader structure of the play. But, and the play, ironically, it's also called testimony *Vakkumoolam*, and that play what I think it gave us was to give a working class woman as a political subject. And I think that is really, really rare to come across. And we're very happy that we did that play. And what I want to share with you now is another play that she wrote about the trajectory of indentured female laborer like you said, not just the western global, but the Tamil speaking indentured laborers who move to Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Caribbean island up to Fiji. And what you're going to see now is Tamilians who were settled in Trinidad still singing songs to the mother goddess in Tamil without knowing that it is Tamil. I just want you to have a look at that. So that's a quote of one of the people who are trying to offer their prayers to Mariamman to actually cure the child who is now settled in Trinidad. So these were all lived lives. And I think for me the interest in lived lives apart from the historical interest that V. Geeta had has also been with actual communities with which I have been working primarily among the trans communities, right from 2000 onwards when they were deemed as high risk category, and in Tamil Nadu, we built a very, very strong trans movement, which we tried to form through theater. One of the plays that we did was to make a 14 minute play out of A Revati's *Vellai Mozhi* which is translated as Truth About My Life, whose name is now in Columbia library wall, along with Toni Morrison and others. Revati's name is the only Indian female author's name that's found a place in Columbia University. Now we try to make it into a performance. We've have had about 37 shows so far for the past one year or so. But what she does, because it's her own play, and she herself is acting, she responds to events that are happening around whether it be a suicide of a trans man, or about a new poem that a fellow trans artist has brought in. And very interestingly, the play really takes on a new life, apart from whatever she herself wrote as her life story. And I think similar experiments have been done with LGBTQAI crowds, and the most recent one was in Bangalore, where there was a lot of research done on the building, which was called Begum Mahal. And there's still a bus stop in Bangalore called Begum Mahal. And there are one or two of you who had watched the performance there. And it was researched by two trans activists, along with a school student. And the script was evolved through workshops and the production has come about with a mixed cast. And we are still facing, while I want to really stress on this way of trying to create a performance piece out of real lives and real-life stories, the problem has been one of the age old problem of representation.

You know, how do we really kind of represent and how do we really arrive at a way to construct newer text, a new kind of actor perhaps, and also a kind of new consciousness that needs to inform us when we are going to watch these kind of plays, even as an audience, I think because it doesn't really fall within the grammar of the universal grammar of aesthetics that one would really talk about. But to me, I think all these documentary-based practices and life stories call for an accountability. I'm weighed down by that accountability. You know, every moment you utter a word, you think twice about whether you got

permission to say it out, or you don't. Because you never know, we don't allow people to come and take pictures while we are rehearsing these plays, especially of life stories that are happening around, but in some ways, I think we are interpreting when I say we not just me as a theater maker, but also the people who have shared their lives. And examples of that, for me has been in Sri Lanka, which is a war-torn country. And I've been working in the eastern part of Sri Lanka with young girls who are a war generation community and then they share with you the stories. The last play that I did with them, they just didn't want any of their identities to be known, but they wanted the stories to be told. So what we did was to make material objects from the households tell the story, like a lamp, a clothesline, and we ended the play with a coconut grater. Those of you who know it's a standard thing in Sri Lanka and in Kerala, because they have to travel with it. And the coconut grater says, I have seen many camps, you know, and I walked around, but I still have things to offer because I work every day, and we distributed to people puffed rice and coconut. And I remember the fulfillment of the audience sharing that short, small meal with you makes a lot of difference and I think I would end with that. For me I think these require, apart from empathy, understanding, interpretation, what I think we need is compassion. Thank you.

**Sharmishtha Saha:** Okay, so before I open it to the house for question answers. I'll quickly run through what we discussed and one more thought that I had. So Ashutosh you spoke about the burden of the regional as it were, and then that there were not these binaries. But there was a third aspect to talking about the regional and the global, which is a mix of both, a liminal space as you don't really know what to locate within it. Then Geetanjali you spoke about the shifting localities of the global and which also is Zhao kind of mentioned and at the same time, you almost asked us to think about completely changing the center of the global as it were, to move it to some other place apart from the West, I think that we need to take that very seriously. And then finally we came with Mangai's beautiful presentation we saw the little performance that she showed us. She, of course, agreed, I think with some of the other speakers that the local and the global are not really binaries, but she brought to us another aspect of talking about documentary theater, the Docudrama that they used to perform, which is the question of accountability when you are doing documentary theater, although they are interpretations. So when we are talking about the global and the local, right? Especially that we are in the context of documentary theater, how would we talk about the document, or the real here because I think at the end of the day, like you also mentioned that interpretation plays a huge role in the plays that we do. Representation plays a very big role whether we accept it or not. In the morning, there was some debate as to whether there is this binary between representation and life, or even in life, there are performances that we do. So within a gamut of a lot of these discussions that are happening around us, how do we perform global or local within the language of documentary theater? Ashutosh. Do you have any comment?

**Geetanjali Kulkarni:** Actually, I didn't understand what is the question.

**Sharmishtha Saha:** - What I was trying to say that if we think about documentary theater, like you performed the other day, right? You took narratives of '92 and then you spoke about very specific incidents that happened in Bombay. Let's say we are saying that this is documentary theater. So what should be the form of that which we are calling documentary theater? Because Mangai was also mentioning that there has to be accountability in documentary theater because in fiction, we imagine that you can play around. But since we

are ultimately also interpreting, and this is a space of artistic practice, then how, and what do you do when you're playing around with documents?

**Ashutosh Potdar:** Now, why are we again separating fiction from document? I like to imagine, spaces, but that doesn't mean that I'm not real. I'm not, not representing something. I think there is something called imaginary representation that's always been there. Because also my imagination is informed by my thinking process that's built in the imaginative process. I'm trying to say is when you say documentary, it doesn't have to be non-imaginative, or one doesn't have to cancel imagination. One has to pay attention to all that is happening around and one can be imaginative because otherwise the entire exercise will be just an exercise. So then once you start building your imagination, form will evolve I think. As far as I'm concerned, again I focus on the idea of metaphor itself. And the idea of metaphors evolved through the melodramatic process. I believe in melodrama as an Indian writer basically. I associate closely to melodrama. And, I think we can identify our own metaphors or our own symbols, and then we can build our representation.

**Geetanjali Kulkarni:** - For example, if we take specifically the document, which we performed – me, Sameena and Hitesh. We had taken the permission, I think we should ask people who have shared their accounts, whether they want to be performed or not. That is very important. But at the same time, I agree with Ashutosh because, for example, when I did a film called *Court*, I was following a public prosecutor. I was meeting advocates, I didn't actually tell them that I'm going to use that information, because I didn't even know whether I'll be part of the film or not, I didn't know whether that film will happen or not, that it will get so much recognition. I couldn't ask their permission, but, at the same time, I followed them. I met a lot of advocates, lawyers, I went to court proceedings. It depends. You shouldn't exploit anything. At the same time, there has to be some space, where you can imagine things and you can perform, or you can just take things from society. I personally don't believe in copyright. I believe in copyleft. I don't mind people stealing things. So infiltration is okay for me. I will feel happy if someone steals something from me. I am a fan of Dubey-ji and in theatre workshops he would always tell us, steal some things as actors and fill up your baskets. So I always steal, today I saw Sharmishtha, I'll take something from her or then I saw Rustom and I will take something from him. I keep on stealing things as a performer. And there is a phrase in Marathi, Vyas muni a 1000 years ago has contaminated everything so we have nothing left. But of course, if we are narrating Shaila Satpute's story, we asked for her permission. But every time it's not possible. But if there is a problem then you should accept it and stop it as a performer. We shouldn't be greedy as actors. That's what we can do.

**Ashutosh Potdar:** Just one example. Shukracharya Rhabha had begun working on my play. He was rehearsing scenes from my play. I wrote this play and then I shared it with him and he had come to Pune, Kolhapur, Bangalore. We were in the process of building the play. Very interestingly Shukracharya mentioned in his archaic Hindi that whatever happens in my play, it happens at Golpara, near Rampur also. Now this is a kind of documentary evidence. It was a very interesting dynamic because he was converting all those written expressions into dramatic and dance form. And that was so exciting for me. And going back to what Rustom Bharucha has also said, there is a kind of intracultural expression that was building up in 2015 -16. This is something that keeps on happening and one doesn't have to be consciously

real or consciously non real. There is always an attempt to build a certain vocabulary and I think that is a continuous process.

**Mangai:** I'm just exercising a bit of a caution while I completely agree with you that, I mean, there's no limit to imagination, and I think that's why we are in this business. But I think whether it is a real life women that I talked about who you're trying to document— my audience and when I say my audience, the Tamil circle who will know who Muthulakshmi Reddy is, who would have seen photographs, I am not going to take the risk, so it could be a small gesture, it could be some towel that's just thrown around. There is something I need to really make sure, not claim authenticity, we'll put it in quotes, but we need to be careful. But in the case of either trans lives or Dalit lives that we are trying to document, and I'm sure if you had followed up, there was a book on trans men lives, *Invisible Men*, in which many of these trans people were interviewed. The writer is a student of mine, and it begins with one of my plays, and she interviewed most of the people who were also my friends, who at the time of interview, were okay with sharing, but had differences in the way she had shared it later. And for them, it's life and death. And I don't think we are in a position to question it. In one of our plays we had among trans women, one trans man, and all the other trans women stories, because I knew that it's going to be difficult for them to say it. So we shuffled it. But for this trans man, I couldn't find anybody else who would even play the man. Just play the man, in the play. You know, because these were trans women who told me they will not even wear working clothes for rehearsal. They said, we fought for the saree, we'll come in a saree for your rehearsal, and you can't really question them. I understand that you may call it touchy. I called it touchy after five years after working with them, but it is a matter of time. It's a lot of painstaking effort to really build trust, especially when we are trying to do that. And if they have had this experience of marginality, while I'm very critical of this, pushing the identity politics too much. But I also feel that it changed me from within. All my bloated ideas about imagination and creativity. Everything became extremely cautious after 2002 when I started working with the LGBTQI community. Thank you.

**Audience Question:** - You know, times are changing. And on the one hand I agree with you, Mangai that limitless imagination, artist license, you know, we have a right to imagine and in that imagining there is truth of a kind and that kind of stuff. I'm more and more skeptical. And this has to do with the fact that if you're dealing, let's say with First Nations, people from Canada, indigenous people in Australia, they have fought very, very hard, you know, for very, very basic rights, which are still not available to them. So I think it's not that they have a hostile attitude to anyone doing a play about them, but their permission, their collaboration is absolutely essential. You know, the ethics have to be very clear on this and you cannot then have, you know, very great global artists, you know, saying, I'm going to do a play about indigenous people and not involve any indigenous people in it— not acceptable anymore. It's just not done. But it was done in the 70's. Peter Brook did a play about the Ik who are a tribe in Africa who was starving to death and killing each other. Forget it. No Ik in the production okay. But they didn't even research it with the Ik. The Ik didn't even know that a play was being done about them via an anthropological study. That was it was a big hit in the intercultural circuit in 1970's. I don't think that can happen any longer. And I think that's a good thing, that there has to be a little more negotiation with marginalized communities. And if you are doing a play specifically about their lives and about their history, how can you erase them? I think we can no longer fall back on the universalist logic which actually drove a lot of inter-culturalism, it's the human and all of that. But humans

think differently, and they fight differently. And after that maybe true collaboration, maybe some other forms can emerge. But at this point in time, I think we have to respect the codes, the protocols, the ethics of people, we are presuming to represent.

**Geetanjali Kulkarni:** I completely agree and I think that's what I think as artists, we shouldn't be greedy. And we should draw a line where we can imagine and use the knowledge or stories of people and where we cannot, when such situation comes that somebody is disturbed or gets affected because of our right to tell the story then we should quit. There will be some points which won't have any solution. But, at the same time, of course, if I'm telling a story of Adivasi girl, I have to ask that person, whether I can tell her story or if she would like to tell your own story? So yes, I think it is very important.

**Zhao Chuan:** Just add to what you said because maybe I mentioned to you before this Indian director, back in the 70's and 80's. He worked for Peter Brook, supported him with this Indian production and he was told he was his assistant director. I found this very interesting. So I look back into Peter Brook's memoir, and about this production he did in Africa and India, both huge productions. He's really proud of what he had achieved, but there's almost no Indian name mentioned in the team, maybe only one and also same with the Africa situation. There's no local people mentioned and most of the people, collaborators are the people he brought from Europe.

**Audience Question:** Just a question to Geetu and Rustom actually. You made this claim that today if you would depict the First Nations you would never do it without taking their consent that would never happen. And you also make this ethical claim that this should be part of the protocols of how we produce theater. Now, my question is, in how far does this relate to the genre of the theater that you produce or the genre of the literature that you might produce? Because I would agree very strongly with you when it's about realistic depictions, when it's about documentation in an uncritical, conventional sense. But how would it be when it's about imagination when it's about say, the story of a First Nation in 50 years, or imagine its future in 100 years? I'm also asking because we did exactly such a workshop not on First Nations but on Imaginations at JNU two weeks ago. So how would this or would this complicate this idea?

**Audience Question:** Yes, genre does complicate it at some levels. You know, like if I'm going to do a play where I'm saying the play is not happening now. It's a projection of what could happen 50 years from now 100.

**Audience Question:** I just want to ask that if there's also a danger of being highly patronizing in that regard, isn't it? To even assume that I am the person in power and you are powerless in this interaction and I will give up? What am I giving up?

**Geetanjali Kulkarni:** No, it happens. It will happen because if you are privileged and if you have knowledge, you are powerful.

**Audience Question:** But we are assuming very fixed positions of power and powerless.

**Mangai:** I this is a very tricky situation. And I think we cannot be patronizing. That will be the worst insult. No, I think, that dialogue has to happen, however difficult that is. And there is a

shared history of struggle. You know, and we are being allies in many forums. And that has to be acknowledged and then an open discussion has to happen. And for me, feminism gives me a wonderful model. We have broken ourselves into splinters and risen up again. We know how or what it is to be broken up. And we need to accept it. But not with that kind of attitude. Because already when you are deciding to collaborate on a project like this, you are aware of your responsibility and accountability. And if you are not on the same page and you end up having differences and controversies, I don't think I'm going to let go if I'm very sure about what it is that I was trying to practice.

**Geetanjali Kulkarni:** - If the person is not accepting it, I am talking about the extreme situation where maybe I'm giving you an example that if I'm telling a story of a Adivasi girl and if she, at that point feels that no, this story shouldn't be told to the world, then I have to accept it. Maybe I'll try to convince her. Maybe I'll try my best that now we both will tell this story or whatever is the possible way of compromising. But, at this end, if she feels and if I see that she's not even confident of telling me because I'm more articulate, then I have to, my conscience has to accept that. And I have to leave it there. That's what I feel. But just can't give up...no I'm not saying giving up. I am saying we have to use our wisdom.

**Mangai:** No, I think Geetanjali we are talking about moments in various struggles that we are facing, an impasse that comes where there is no possibility for a dialogue, discussion which happens with vis-à-vis caste, vis-a-vis tribal, vis-à-vis sexuality, and very... it's easy to play the victim card and identity card and get away with it. Now I don't want to do that because I do come from a history of struggle, so I don't want to say that, I mean, you call me insensitive. I agree, and I am willing to change my ways, but come for a dialogue. So that play being fought in feminist circles against the victim card. We have fought over dowry, over rape. I mean which is exactly what we are doing every time. We don't want to play the victim card you know, which is why the term survivor itself came. I feel it's not just easy and it's not an individualistic choice that one has. It really kind of permeates around so many permutations and combinations that one has to deal with. I agree with you. I mean, if nothing else can be done, then you have to let go. But I don't think you should stop.

**Geetanjali Kulkarni:** No, I'm not. Of course, I completely agree with you. We shouldn't stop. I'm not saying that there shouldn't be any arguments or discussions. But I'm saying at the extreme point— for example there was a difference between Ariane Mushkin and the indigenous dancers recently. And I think her troop was not allowed to perform, ultimately the troop said that we will perform in Europe. Something like that happened, but I think it was not right. I don't think the creative person had the right to do it. That's what I feel, that you're using some wisdom and you're not collaborating with them, is not acceptable.

**Sharmishtha Saha:** I think we'll end it here. We all started by agreeing, which was beautiful and then ended with some differences. I think we'll end at that.

[**ERRATA:** At minute 47:51 Mangai said that Mythili Sivaraman authored a book called *Fire in the Belly*. It was an error and the correct name of the book is *Haunted by Fire*.]