

Indian Theatre

Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom

Ralph Yarrow

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Languages West

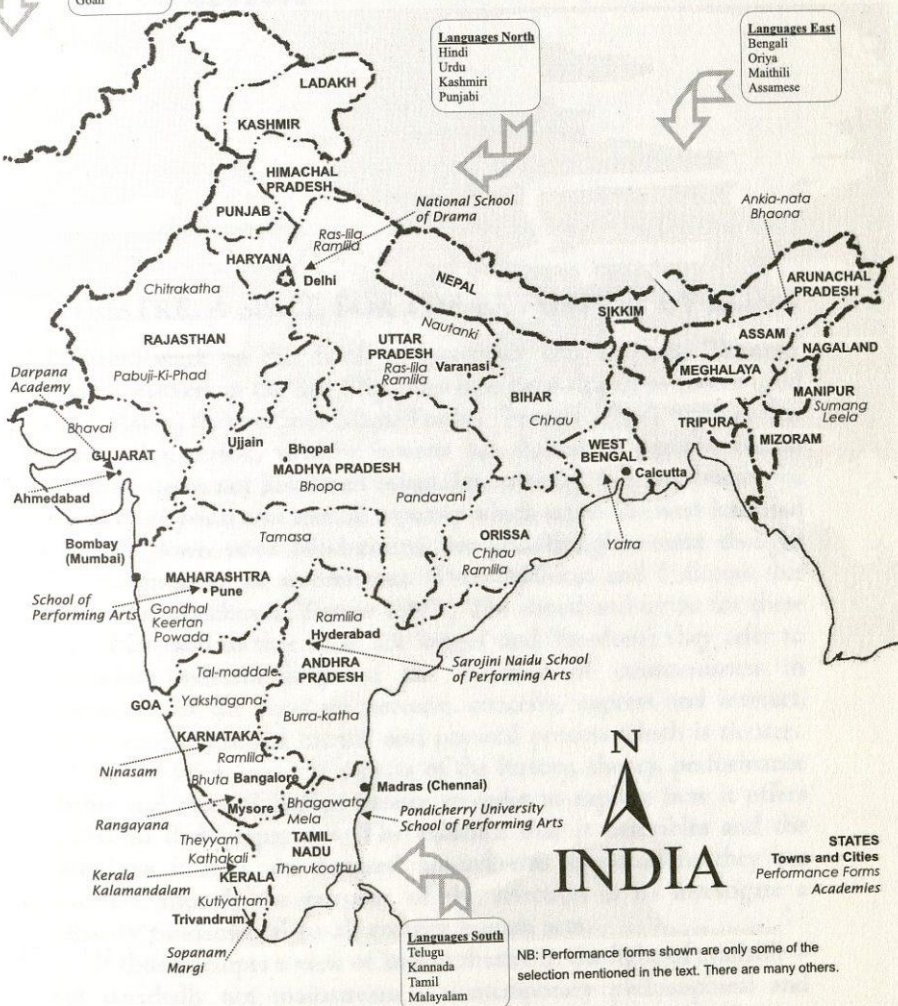
Rajasthani
Gujarati
Marathi
Goan

Languages North

Hindi
Urdu
Kashmiri
Punjabi

Languages East

Bengali
Oriya
Maithili
Assamese



NB: Performance forms shown are only some of the selection mentioned in the text. There are many others.

Map of India

Where, as in many of the above cases, the work is also available in English translation (or, as in the case of Karnad, self-translation), English as intertext becomes English as intermediary. Theatre written directly in English also exists, although it has tended to suffer from somewhat belated anti-colonialist bigotry, and Indian work in drama in English is much less visible than in fiction and poetry.

It is however the case that much of the debate about theatre forms, and particularly about the relationship between theatre and politics, has been carried on in English. Not because it is the language of the former colonialists, but because it is a language in which Indians of a certain degree of education can speak to each other. The same may be true of the way text functions here in the third category discussed above; it is a coded model for a particular kind of investigation, one which is driven principally – though not exclusively – by intellectual discrimination. Its approach, by and large, is more obviously 'deconstructive' than that of the models previously discussed – though here again there are qualifications, for example in the case of the Panikkar play, which aims to raise questions, although going about it by the use of parallel processing and imaginative suggestion. What this implies is that here too there is a 'spectrum', 'fan' or 'web', stretching perhaps from 'text' as an activation of intellectual analysis (à la Brecht) to 'text' as an amalgam of sensory and imaginative stimuli (Artaud). The aim of both is to 'perform', to achieve an outcome which passes through text into texturing and emerges in what is received by the audience. The next chapter develops this perspective further.

Performance

Chapter 2 has suggested dimensions in which text and performance overlap. This chapter will outline some of the many forms within the spectrum of Indian performance and will take a look at the contexts in which they arise and at their functions within those contexts. It will also look at their effects on performers and spectators/participants, and try to assess what kinds of influence they have. It will however confine itself (if that is the right word) to 'traditional' forms as discussed by e.g. Vatsyayan (1980), Varadpande (1992) and Richmond *et al* (1990); the contemporary situation is profiled and discussed in Chapter 5. Some questions which are considered in this chapter are: What perspectives on performance does Indian theatre invite? Are these in any way compatible with aspects of contemporary western 'performance theory'? Does performance instigate or make available new or extended ways of being and acting? If so, can we understand its processes as fundamental to mental, physical and emotional activity? The final section looks at the image and role of women in performance. The whole chapter, both by discussing different categories under which performance may be approached and by exploring some aspects of the kinds of processes it represents, points forward also to the question of how performance is theorised, which is the topic of Chapter 4.

MODELS OF CATEGORISATION

The very tendency for forms to proliferate can be seen as evidence of the variety of creative origination. Where does this variety come from? It seems likely that humans attempt by as many channels as possible to explore and express – and perhaps to influence – our

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status as individuals, our position in the scheme of things cosmic, comic or constitutional.

It is worth saying that this chapter is (i) central, in that I am claiming that Indian theatre is essentially performance – as performance-text, performance-theory and multiple performance-forms, and (ii) the most problematic to organise, because performance crosses so many boundaries, manifests itself in so many different ways, is a mobile and flexible phenomenon. It is in fact precisely this problem of pinning it down which is a mark of its essential vitality, its status as life rather than idealisation. This poses problems for 'scholars' of the traditional kind, but also for the element of scholar, or the desire to operate with relatively fixed categories, in me and all of us. Theatre (and Indian theatre is a magnificent example) has a tendency to sweep aside this pigeon-holing anality. On the other hand, what I am writing and you are reading is a book, not (quite) a performance; it has to operate with the categories and limits of sequential language. So we do need some kind of pattern.

What frequently has been taken to be synonymous with Indian theatre in the past is Sanskrit drama, and perhaps precisely because it does provide such a pattern. It also looks as though it might be the historical origin of much Indian performance. Sanskrit drama is also discussed in the context of theory in the next chapter; I am more concerned here with its status within the event-spectrum of performance. What kinds of event does it represent, and for whom?

Schechner says: 'origin theories are irrelevant to understanding theater' (1988, 6). Nevertheless, most books on Indian theatre start with (and many do not get beyond) a discussion of Sanskrit drama, which thereby comes to be thought of as the original form. Apart from Schechner's valid objections, which I will come to later, this myth of origin needs to be reconsidered on its own terms. Where it is partially valid is in the sense that Sanskrit theatre provides a defining model for what can be thought of as 'classical Indian theatre'. This term reveals its own limits on examination: 'classical' seems essentially to mean a historically-circumscribed textually extant form recognisable to and classifiable by scholars; the slipperiness of 'Indian', 'theatre' and 'history' have already been referred to in Chapter I. However, the main identifiable elements of this model are:

- a consistent formal pattern or structure;
- an underlying aesthetic based on an identifiable source (*Natya Sastra*);

- repeatable performance criteria;
- thematic material derived from identifiable sources (*Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, the *Puranas* etc.);
- named (if not precisely identifiable) authors;
- some elements of relatively precise dating;
- some fragments of performance history.

In other words, the kinds of things that make scholars happy and give them material for theories of various kinds. Some of these theories (notably those relating to aesthetic experience and to the existence or otherwise of the tragic) will be discussed in Chapter 4. But the elements listed are in themselves stable enough to provide a shape, to indicate a style. For a long time it was a style only intermittently acknowledged in the west, though Goethe was enthusiastic about Kalidasa, for instance, and textual material relevant to theatre was significant to investigations of language and culture carried out by 'orientalising' Sanskritists and others at either end of the nineteenth century.

The elements do make it fairly clear that a generic model for performance of this kind existed; its main theatrical features are the mythopoetic textual base, the use of non-realistic settings, largely presentational (as opposed to dialogic/interactive) acting requirements, the important role of music, and fidelity to criteria laid down in the *Natya Sastra*. *Kathakali* offers a degree of similarity to this model, which seems to afford the imaginative richness and linguistic subtlety Goethe valued; *Yakshagana* also comes close in some respects; *Kudiyattam*, though now very much a specialist activity, is 'easily the most prominent survivor among the forms containing some essential elements of content and structural features of the Sanskrit theatre' (Vatsyayan 1980, 15); and there have been deliberate 'revivals' of Sanskrit drama at the Ujjain festival. *Kudiyattam* is particularly notable for its elaborate gestural coding and 'slow-paced' nature, in that a short incident from *Ramayana* may be the impetus for performance of several hours' duration; it signals also the requirement on the part of the spectators for a high degree of attentiveness and sophistication in recognising, interpreting and evaluating the details of any particular interpretation. Performance aesthetics, as entered into by the receivers, are highly valued as a mark of cultural, spiritual and probably also social distinction.

However, although such an audience may appear to be exclusive or privileged, during the past century it has become clear, both in India and to interested parties elsewhere, that Sanskrit theatre must

have existed within a wide diversity of forms. What has survived may possibly be regarded as a refinement or crystallisation of some of them, though that view is open to challenge.

That diversity is now seen as the primary scenario; historically, the position of Sanskrit theatre has thus shifted and been relativised by later 'discoveries', particularly since in many cases the other forms thus highlighted have a continuous performance history and/or still flourish. Sanskrit drama, on the other hand, only exists in performance as and when it is consciously preserved (as in the Academy and festivals at Bhopal and Ujjain) or revived. So the current situation is that the 'classical' or written form which for a long time was thought to be the principal manifestation of Indian theatre needs to be seen as an important element, but only one element, in a rich canvas. So, useful as the Sanskrit drama model is, it needs to be supplemented.

Theatre, even in this sense, is not quite the same as performance; or rather, as the drift of my argument so far implies, performance includes theatre rather than the reverse. It is tempting to assume that this relatively precise model 'comes first'; and it is true that many kinds of Indian performance draw on similar aesthetic intentions and make use of material from the same sources. In other words the elements singled out above can indeed be useful, because they are to be found in Sanskrit drama, which is important because it is historically the first written form of which we have evidence, and because it was clearly a highly developed model with clearly-defined performance features. But Schechner can be helpful here in that he offers a different and extended compass of what 'performance' may be, which enables us to see Sanskrit drama as one set of formal moves within a whole range of possibilities, as a significant option rather than as the only blueprint.

Schechner replaces the idea of 'origin' with the 'fan' and the 'web' (Schechner 1988, xii–xv). The *fan* stretches across the following:

ritualization/rites + ceremonies/shamanism
 art-making process
 play/performance in daily life/sports etc.
 eruption and resolution of crisis.

The *web* links origins (European and non-European) to rites and to play, and crisis behaviour to 'environmental theatre' (see below, Chapter 4) as forms of dynamic activity. Theatre is part of a spectrum of events; these events interact as history interacts with

private and public consciousness in art. 'Performance' has an extended time-span which includes the build-up, the framing of the event, and the 'cooling-off', for performers and receivers and thus relates to 'ongoing systems of social and aesthetic life' (1988, xiv), both in its structure and in its mode of operation. The *fan* thus stretches to an overview of kinds of public activity, whilst the *web* links them together as modes of behaviour which respond to critical situations and/or instigate change.

This approach does not rule out the kinds of event represented by Sanskrit drama, which may in some respects offer archetypal features by which to understand much else; but it locates them as part of a mobile canvas: both diachronically, as part of the transfer, poaching, interaction, mimicry, of performance behaviour in any period and through time, and synchronically, as part of the processes which make up the dynamic of 'transportation' or 'transformation' initiated by performative events at any one moment (Schechner 1985, 117–151). This kind of model widens the optic within which Indian performance can be understood, even though it too has its limitations of focus, as suggested in Chapter 1.

This also feels much more like the experience of performance in India. Whether one is caught up in a procession or demonstration, of which street theatre may be one end of a spectrum, or watching a Bollywood movie, or attending a classical concert or a performance of *Bharatanatyam* or *Kathakali*, or seeing women dancing in traditional costume with no audience at all at 11pm in a country village, the actions and the event are, at least immediately, much less insulated from the community and its daily concerns than is the case with proscenium arch theatre. This in spite of the fact that the performance forms are only minimally 'realistic': the presence of the 'extra-daily', to use Barba's term, is not regarded as strange in Indian life. Performance occurs as part of the social and communal situation rather than something separated off from it, as is the case with 'art' in the western post-medieval sense.

This view of performance construes it as in a variety of senses purposeful: for Schechner, it lies at the efficacy end of his 'efficacy/entertainment braid' (1988, 120–124). Given the wide range of performance forms in India, it is reasonable to suppose that they fulfilled different shades of purpose, speaking different languages (performative as well as linguistic) to different constituents; and that Sanskrit drama, directed largely at court or upper levels of the caste hierarchy, falls within this range. However, Schechner's approach,

which highlights performative circumstances within the framework of community, and Barba's, which focuses on performance technique and behaviour, both also contribute to a wider vision. It is noticeable that Indian scholars too have found it necessary to construct flexible or plural models.

Varadpande (1992) identifies multiple forms related to different cultural, political and historical purposes: entertainment, instruction, inculturation (preservation of heritage via myths, tradition), ritual, exorcism (community and cultural, religious and anthropological values), appeasement of perceived or believed powers, political and or social comment, sometimes subversive.

The forms and their purposes therefore overlap; Sanskrit drama served some of the above purposes, operating within a particular social nexus in order to validate and maintain rights and forms of behaviour. Both it and many 'folk' (not forgetting Vatsyayan's caution about this term) forms were rooted in similar belief-structures, and frequently used metaphorical narrative and exemplary detail from common myth/epic sources. These stories were no doubt conveyed by upper-caste, frequently Brahmin, authority-figures. Sanskrit theatre does not necessarily represent 'higher' values or aspirations, social, religious and/or aesthetic, than do other forms, though it does consciously strive to articulate these values, which necessarily take different modes of expression depending on the participants and receivers.

The attributes ascribed to theatre in the myth of its origin proposed in *Natya Sastra* (as a compilation from the poetry/recitation of *Rg Veda*, the song of *Sama Veda*, the performance process of *Yajur Veda* and the aesthetics of *Atharva Veda*) do include 'special knowledge' and 'sacred material' in order to perform 'sacrifice in honor of the gods' (Richmond et al 1990, 27); but this does not serve to differentiate either Sanskrit drama or the more 'classical' performance forms from others, all of which in some measure accommodate many of the purposes and processes sketched out by Schechner and Varadpande (see also the discussion of Sanskrit Drama in Chapter 4).

Indeed one of the specific aims of the devotional/folk form *Raslila* is to produce a state of *anand* (bliss), cognate with the aesthetic pleasure of *rasa*; and the early *Nata* community of artists believed they had a 'sacred duty to make people laugh' (Varadpande 1992, 9). Laughter, of course, is a form of release, both physical and psychological; it arises as and encourages 'space for play'; it is, as Hermann Hesse (another traveller to the East) makes clear, a means to freedom from imprisonment in single role and egoic self. Some of



Plate 1. *Patayani* (Keralan ritual form): Madan, Kalan, Marutha. Courtesy Traditional Arts Project, School of Drama, University of Calicut.



Plate 2. *Chakyar Koothu* (Keralan mono-narrative). Courtesy Traditional Arts Project, School of Drama, University of Calicut.



Plate 7. Darpana/UNESCO health education project, Gujarat: *Bhavai* performance. Courtesy Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, Ahmedabad.



Plate 8. Jana Sanskriti performing in rural West Bengal. Courtesy Jana Sanskriti, West Bengal.

its more important functions may survive better outside more formal modes: Varadpande proposes that the *Vidushaka* figure (clown, but also director, stage manager, narrator, commentator etc.) 'died of suffocation in Sanskrit theatre' (10) but lives on in the *Kattiyakaran* of *Therukoothu*, the *Bhagavata* of *Yakshagana*, and in many other forms.

Performance in India evolves through both ritual and temple forms, from narrative traditions and from communal celebrations. 'Folk' and 'classical' form a continuum, as do efficacy and entertainment. Narrative issues into and crosses with epic and dramatic criteria. Nowhere is there the exclusive 'realism' of the European nineteenth-century tradition. Indian performance can be epic; historical; didactic; documentary; dialectic; socially cohesive; controversial; entertainment/diversion; sentimental; demanding/empowering; elevating. Because the mytho-poetic base remains dominant, all forms retain the possibility of many levels of meaning and consequently of interpretative engagement (and thus escape being merely a reinforcement of authority-structures which would otherwise be likely given their derivation from a 'sacred' cachet).

Richmond, Swann and Zarilli (Richmond et al 1990) categorise forms as *classical*, *folk/popular*, *ritual*, *devotional* and *modern*. This scheme allows them to differentiate usefully in some respects. The *classical* is more historically reliant on patronage, involves control by the *guru* tradition, is closer to the aesthetic principles of the *Natya Sastra*; *folk* suggests more exuberance and accessibility, closer regional affiliations, more profane material and a professional or semi-professional structure; Schechner's categories of *efficacy* (for *ritual*), *transportation* (for *devotional*) and *entertainment* (for *modern*) are invoked, though not acknowledged. But this schematisation, like most others, is, as the authors concede, inadequate in so far as all categories overlap continually. However, it does allow them to indicate for example factors such as reliance on patronage as opposed to a more professional or semi-professional structure and the incorporation of more westernised models in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Economics are important in theatre anywhere and especially so in terms of the possible developments open to performers, directors and promoters: these issues will be looked at particularly with reference to the contemporary situation in Chapter 5.

Vatsyayan's categories include 'ballad' form (she places *Pabuji ki pada* and *Burra Katha* here); cycle plays like *Ramlila* and *Raslila* (somewhat similar to European 'mysteries'); forms which draw on the epics but with a strong emphasis on local culture (*Bhavai*, *Tamasa*,

Therukoothu, *Nautanki*, *Yatra* etc.); those which can be located somewhere between the formal sophistication of e.g. *Kudiyattam* and the improvisational 'street-theatre' quality of the preceding group, e.g. *Yakshagana*, *Bhagavatamela*; those where elaborate formal sophistication is paramount (*Kathakali* is the obvious example); and those, like the *Chhau* group, in which dance is the most important element (Vatsyayan 1980, 10).

What we therefore have in these different models is a mosaic of overlapping criteria and features indicative of enormous richness and dynamism. In most cases examples of these forms are still extant, sometimes, as for instance in the case of *Kathakali*, following a 'revival' (which itself followed an eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century upper-class orientation towards forms imported by the British and a consequent marginalising of some traditional forms); and they all, or nearly all, have the resources to respond to the contemporary situation. This we shall return to in Chapter 5.

OUTLINE OF SOME PERFORMANCE FORMS

What follows is a *brief* account of some of the many forms to be found in India. For more detail the reader is referred to the descriptions of specific forms to be found in the works cited by Varadpande, Vatsyayan and, with the caveat mentioned in Chapter 1, Richmond *et al.* Das (1992) lists 84 forms with brief descriptions, but this is by no means all-inclusive (for instance, neither *Kathakali* nor *Yakshagana* appear in her list). The subsequent discussion again considers only some forms in order to bring out significant features.

Although I think that the classifications attempted by the above writers are in many cases very useful in revealing key features, the discussion so far has indicated that what I see underlying them is a tendency towards flexibility and interrelation. I will come back to the implications of this and examine them in the light of other approaches. However, the categories which I set up below are deliberately simpler and, in one case at least, much more inclusive than those referred to in the books mentioned. It is in a way no accident that they become progressively looser.

Narrative forms

I have discussed the status and function of some of these in Chapter 2 in terms of the emergence of performance from narrative. There are

many mainly narrative forms using musicians, main narrator, some dialogue and gesture, etc., filling the gap between narrative and full dramatic performance; for example:

Pandavani (Madhya Pradesh)
Oja-Pali (Assam)
Tal-maddale (Karnataka)
Burra Katha (Andhra Pradesh)
Gondhal, Keertan, Powada (Maharashtra)

In addition there exist also several forms in which the central performer is a picture-showman, sometimes assisted, for instance by his wife:

Chitrakatha (Pushkar, Rajasthan)
Bhopa (Bhopal)
 other forms in Maharashtra
Pabuji Ki Phad, Rajasthani picture-ceremonies/narratives.

These employ variants on the use of picture-scrolls (*Phad*) – sometimes unfurled slowly, sometimes displayed all at once, with the narrator using a pointer to guide the spectators through the characters and incidents displayed. Stories are mainly drawn from epic material, frequently adapted to local circumstances and thus functioning both as moral framework and repository of local history (NB some of these are somewhat differently classified by Vatsyayan). *Puppets* also illustrate narrative (glove puppets mainly in Kerala and Orissa, also sometimes shadow-puppets).

Further story-telling traditions include those practised by the Kathaka and Suta castes: the *Chakyars* of Kerala are descended from the latter. *Kuttu* is a narrative Chakyar form (performed by the Nambiar caste), in which, in a virtuoso display of monoacting extending the story-teller's art into more developed role-play, the Chakyar acts all parts as the *Vidushaka*: it develops further into *Kudiyattam*, which uses several actors (on the lines of the evolution in Greek theatre from one chorus figure, to dialogue of two actors, to protagonist + antagonist + chorus). The secrets of *Chakyar Kuttu* performance are traditionally transmitted from uncle to nephew; narration takes twenty-one days or more, and during the first twelve the performer is at liberty to improvise, weave in contemporary references, use and interact with the audience, make mocking comments on people of nominally high status, and so on. This functions both as a performance methodology (assuring the

audience's interest and repeated presence before progressing to the last section) and as a claim for another kind of totality or extension: the performer becomes the source of both contemporary and traditional wisdom, he exemplifies a kind of all-knowingness which parallels the organic or cosmic dimensions of ritual performance.

Narrative issues into and crosses with epic and dramatic modes in for instance the presence of the *Sutradhara/Bhagavata* figure in e.g. *Yakshagana* and the singer/narrator in *Kathakali*. There are many gradations in between; similarly there is a spectrum or continuum of forms and effects and an interchangeability of many elements between 'folk' and 'classical': in most cases they draw on the epics, on Brahminic tradition and/or Dravidian ritual practices, often in equal measure. Different forms however emphasise different performance aspects, e.g. *Kathakali* mixes *abhinaya* (expressive gesture) and the martial art form *Kalari*, *Manipuri* makes extensive use of dance, *Ras-lila* is structured around poetry and music. All these forms 'dramatise' or theatricalise narrative in one way or another (sometimes in several at once).

Ritual-related forms

These are directly at the 'efficacy' end of Schechner's braid (though there is little in Indian theatre, as opposed to Indian cinema, which is not in some sense or other). They are frequently preceded by rites lasting up to forty-one days, sometimes including the preparation of a *kalam* (drawing) which is then wholly or partly erased and, as it were, transformed into the action. Examples include:

Mudiyettu: Kali kills Darika, usually in a spectacular chase and fight sequence.

Theyyam: three-part event including Thottam – recitation and drumming – and Theyyam – possession by 'god' or entity. Some writers suggest that *Kathakali* represents an upper-class aestheticisation.

Bhuta: possession by devils/ancestors as 'ghosts', who act as judges, reminders of 'proper' behaviour.

Ras-lila: the play of Krishna = ras = joyous essence: aim is to achieve *ananda*; dance is the external form used as an aide-mémoire to more central meditation-function; performed at Vrindavan and Mathura; dance origins in rural circle forms, developed to include sophisticated movement similar to *Kathak*.

Krishna-attam: only in Kerala temples: the purpose is to beget a male child, or to get a good husband: male-oriented rites in a matriarchy?

In order to explore important features in more depth, I am going to look at one form: *Theyyam*.

Theyyam is a Keralan form which has been widely written about (articles in *The Drama Review*, Sankara Pillai's book mentioned below). The *Theyyam* performer is called the *Kolakarran*: 'the man who takes the form of a god' (the formulation is interesting: see my remarks in Chapters I and 4). There are many different *Theyyams* in different districts.

Common features, similar in other forms, include strong rhythmic and visual elements, e.g. drumming throughout; in the case of *Theyyam* the early section, *Thottam*, consists of several hours of drumming as ritual invocation. Other parts are to some extent open-ended, allowing for new elements and/or repetition, but the sequence is (i) invocation; (ii) recitation of deity's story (*Thottam*); (iii) possession dance (*Theyyam*); (iv) further stories in the first person, marking a shift from narrative to performative mode; (v) blessings from deity; (vi) removal of headgear. As in Sanskrit drama there is therefore a distinct relationship between sequence and intended effect (see Chapter 4): as Schechner indicates, there is both a substantial building-up and cooling-off period.

Massive headgear, brilliant colour, repetitive dance/display, chanting, burning torches and/or coloured powders help to create a sense of the powerful and 'other-worldly' presence which the performer who incarnates the *Theyyam* takes on. Contact with the earth is strengthened by dancing, drumming and the heart-beat rhythms; costumes and headgear are made from natural materials; fire, water, earth and air frame and punctuate the event. It is attended by the whole community; the performers come from around twelve 'scheduled' castes and during most of the year are farmers, tailors, witch doctors etc. The event starts as the sun sets and continues until dawn. The level of intensity fluctuates; everyone from babies to elders is there, but their attention is relaxed or focused alternately: captured by the initial call of the drums, fascinated by the first appearance of the performer-*Theyyam*, make-up and headgear in an intermediate stage; in between these the rhythm may relax, with other focal points – *pūja*, rises and falls in the pitch and tempo of the drumming – until the second emergence of the *Theyyam* in full regalia;

thereafter too there are processional or more measured phases, punctuated by dramatic display or aggressively playful sorties towards the spectator/participants and culminating in crucial moments of ecstatic action. At these points the mood builds rapidly from 'cool' to 'hot': walking on hot coals, eating raw eggs or a live chicken, in which the otherness of the god is performed in the body of the actor, and hence his/her visitation is confirmed and the propitiousness of the outcome assured.

But not without passing through 'dangerous' stages, both for performer and for spectators, who are often closer to Boal's 'spectators' in that they both inhabit the immediacy of the event to their own cultural situation and look to it to provide tangible results. The effort and kinds of behaviour required of the performer – whether or not he is 'really' in some form of trance – pushes at the borders of the 'normally' possible; the *Theyyam* may charge the crowd for real and is sometimes – particularly since this happens at night and to the accompaniment of hypnotic drumming – disturbing, menacing or incomprehensible. The visceral effect of such performance depends upon the achievement by the performer of a liminal status, paralleled by the liminal performance space and time, both familiar and unfamiliar in that they are within the communal locality but yet outside it both by virtue of being made 'sacred' for the duration of performance and by virtue of occurring outside quotidian time-scales. He is in between actor and shaman, in between his well-known everyday self and the functioning of extra-personal forces, in between the time of everyday life and the round of seasonal occurrences or the whole life-span of the community: he becomes a 'moving icon' (Varadpande 1992, 145), similar to the Trickster/Fool figure in European theatrical tradition and iconography in, for instance, Shakespeare and Dada. Like Fools and Tricksters, he can be both frightening and comic: if he is performing 'out of his skin', he can also shake receivers out of theirs into another dimension where they both experience their vulnerability and can begin to feel comfortable with it (or able to accept being uncomfortable). He shifts his function as he shifts his status: performance too operates this shift since it is action, yet not ordinary action, and its effects on the receivers are also more than ordinary and may produce transformations in their awareness and their subsequent functioning. Kavalam Panikkar recounts that an actress in his company, asked to take a receptive role at a *Theyyam*, was, much to her distress, overcome in spite of her determination to remain unaffected; she felt her

rational, recognisable self to have been 'defeated', yet her later development as an actress was 'remarkable' (Panikkar, 1995, 112).

G. Sankara Pillai's *The Theatre of the Earth is Never Dead* (1986) lists some 55 ritual forms in Kerala alone, documented by the School of Drama at Trissur (Trichur) (the aim of the project was to record forms related to (a) the 'mother' cult and (b) fertility cults); a parallel operation at Udupi in Karnataka has recorded South Kanara forms (both with financial backing from the Ford Foundation). What emerges is a flexible spectrum or 'braid' encompassing the following:

- (i) performance/spectacle/ritual/theatre
- (ii) 'believing'/'acting'
- (iii) vitality/moribundity of form
- (iv) minimal/full-time training of performers
- (v) simple/ornate make-up, costume, headgear
- (vi) single performer/communal celebration
- (vii) special event/regular occurrence
- (viii) no text/improvisation/sections of text/mainly textual narrative
- (ix) clapping/drumming/several instruments/mainly musical

So there is enormous variety even within this category, which already contains many features of others, just as there is considerable overlap with 'folk' forms in other states. There is a sense in which all forms draw on similar roots and preoccupations, although they articulate these differently and place the emphasis on different aspects: for instance, stories derived from the *Mahabharata* used in the more 'classical' *Kathakali* may emphasise the importance of *dharmā* (morality, ethics, social and political structures), whereas *Therukuttu* and similar 'folk' forms tend to focus more on 'carnavalesque' physical links with the organic world, on exorcising physical ills or perceived threats to the community, on the recollection and celebration of communal and familial structures and on the celebration of natural and seasonal patterns.

But in all cases – whether, as in ritual-related forms, through participation, mediumistic 'possession', or sympathetic involvement; or, as in more 'sophisticated' forms, through a heightened state of aesthetic receptivity – the performance event can be seen as an effective means of extending individual and communal being (linking with extra-individual forces, getting in harmony with the 'divine', rarefying sense-perception towards synaesthesia and perhaps some form of transcendence of the senses). Sankara Pillai notes that 'in the case of rituals the aim has been and is a process of consummated

sublimation' (1986, iii); in her introduction to his book, Kapila Vatsyayan suggests that these forms 'represent the turning of man to paradoxically internalise archetypes and ... cosmoscise himself.'

This double movement seems to parallel Meyer-Dinkgräfe's model of paradox (discussed further in the next chapter), whose presence he identifies in various forms in all aspects of the performer-character-spectator-event transactions of theatre, and which signals that the occurrence of something new/different/as-yet-unexplained is crucial. Although Sankara Pillai warns that in order to qualify as 'ritualistic theatre', theatre would need to have similar aims to ritual, my sense is that theatre which shares the underlying understandings of its function with those encoded in many Indian forms can indeed be said to do so. Where ritual forms do differ, as Pillai notes, is in the degree of their cultural embedding: many rituals are specific to locale, belief structure and social organisation. However, the nature and function of ritual, as outlined above, is more universal.

What Vatsyayan refers to as a kind of cosmic outreach of the individual and Sankara Pillai calls 'sublimation', K. Ayyappa Paniker, in an essay in the same book, discusses in terms of 'sacrifice'. I want to pick this whole issue up in Chapter 4, because it is of central importance in terms of theories of how Indian (and other) theatre may be working; but I will touch on it here.

Paniker is writing about *Patayani*, a form which overlaps ritual, mask and narrative (in Sankara Pillai, 1986, 1-7). The single performer in the Mask-Dance of the God of Death has to 'play' three characters whilst the narrative is chanted in the background. He thus, says Paniker, presents 'the entire dialectic of death' (4). The performer as death god is the killer (he is trying to kill the boy Markandeya according to his fate). But he is also the killed (the death god is killed by Shiva because the boy embraces a Shivalingam and the death god tries to drag this away with him, thus arousing Shiva's fury). And he is the killing: he enacts the process of dying, of being killed, whilst trying to kill someone else.

Thus this apparently 'primitive' form is in fact a piece of metatheatre (the performer has to play three different roles with differing degrees of involvement, i.e. to embody/enter into/be possessed by and to indicate/present) which both marks out and transcends its own limits. In it, 'death is revealed as the death of death', which 'takes us beyond the frontiers of drama in the perspective of the theatre as illusion' (4). It also goes way beyond any narrowly focused ritual outcome, situating the performative function

as opening up capacities of insight across apparently contradictory modes of being. Paniker comments:

In all art there is a constant striving to go beyond the forbidden. You don't need an artist to do what anyone else can do as well' (5).

Drama probably holds out the possibility of human survival through the surrender of the personal, through ... self-transcendence. The village artist who performs his role in these ritual dances knowingly or unknowingly seems to hold the key to the secret of all art in this sense: by taking on other roles one sees life from angles other than one's own ... The joy that only tragedy can give arises from this aesthetic process of sacrificing the self (7).

There are many resonances here. Paniker not only neatly side-steps the apparently fascinating but probably diversionary issue of whether or not performers in rituals are 'really' possessed, he also enters a claim for an Indian (but by no means exclusive) understanding of tragedy; and he pin-points the nature and meaning of 'sacrifice' in ritual practice as the fading out of the everyday egoic self in favour of a dynamic, pluralist and performative capacity. All these are vital to the understanding of the purposes of Indian theatre throughout history and in the present day. I will be returning to them. In the context of the present chapter it is also important to highlight firstly that these insights derive from one of the forms which would not be accorded 'classical' status; and secondly that this form is itself a hybrid containing theatrical, ritual and metatheatrical elements. As a demonstration of the fluidity and profundity of performance forms operating as fan and web it could hardly be bettered.

Highly pluralised forms

This rather loose category comprises everything else (including in fact much contemporary work, though that is discussed in Chapter 5). In addition to the virtual impossibility of finding any watertight classification, as I have indicated, I use this holdall appellation to signal that whatever else has occurred, elements of ritual content and form remain ubiquitous.

However, it is wise perhaps to start this section by dealing with the forms which fit least well under this heading, namely those which in spite of considerable narrative sophistication nevertheless display

strong ritual elements and a great deal of formal precision. *Kathakali* is the principal case, but it is useful to consider it alongside *Yakshagana*, which in some ways resembles it.

Yakshagana and Kathakali

Yakshagana can appear to be a slightly brasher form of *Kathakali*, using a similar style and telling similar episodes from e.g. *Mahabharata*. The moustaches are flamboyant, the colours even brighter (much red and gold); the actors leap and dance more than in *Kathakali*, they speak some of their own lines. (See Vatsyayan 1980, 42–5 for useful comparisons of costume and make-up in *Yakshagana* and *Kathakali*.) The dialogue and interaction is a bit more down-market, as it were; there's more than a hint of bravado, conveying a sense that this depiction of (male) heroic behaviour is at least on the verge of irony. Sometimes this occurs in *Kathakali* too, but often things are a touch more solemn. There is an exuberance about *Yakshagana*; and in contrast to the singer-narrators in *Kathakali*, the *Bhagavata* not only narrates but also appears to foreground his own narrating as part of an ironic stance. His adoption of the *Sutradhara* role, pulling the strings, is in keeping with what is always embryonically present in Sanskrit drama, if conventionally truncated to a brief introductory scene; but it picks up on the liberty of the director/performer to adapt traditional material for contemporary contexts. If in *Kathakali*, narrative is splendidly presented by the statuesque body enhanced by elaborate costume, delivered by subtle and precise gradations of gesture, expression and signing, and counterpointed by drumming and the chanted text, in *Yakshagana*, narrative is enthusiastically and somewhat less reverently enlivened; both offer rich models of performance at work with its components.

In addition however to the gaudy facade, which has led in recent years to a proliferation of *Yakshagana* troupes at the popular entertainment end of the spectrum, its repertoire of around sixty plays draws on rich and distinguished literary and musical sources (Kannada literature, which enjoyed five grand phases from before 850AD to post 1850, and a blend of Hindustani and Carnatic musical systems). It also contains passages of pure dance, as well as spectacular jumps and distinctive gaits including a kind of virtuoso pirouetting on the knees. Its magnificent make-up and costuming divides characters into eight to ten categories (more than *Kathakali*). Red is used, as in *Kathakali*, for evil and heroism, but heroic characters use a base of pinkish-yellow as opposed to *Kathakali's* green;

moustaches are used instead of the cardboard and rice-paper 'collar' or *chutti*. All these features indicate an intricate and elaborate form which balances acting, recitative, dance movement, stylised gaits, music and rhythm and brilliant costuming. (For more detailed descriptions see Vatsyayan 1980 and Karanth 1973; *Dodatta* and *Bhagawata Mela* are among other forms of the *Yakshagana* type, found mainly in Karnataka and some parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.)

Kathakali has experienced a twentieth-century revival established by Vallatol Narayana Menon's founding of the Kerala Kalamandalam at Cheruthuruthi, near Trissur (Trichur) in the 1930s – permanently from 1937. The Kalamandalam, which features a school and a *Kuttambalam* (performance space reproducing the dimensions laid down in the *Natya Sastra*) is criticised for its 'Western' academy model by Chitra Panikkar (in Nair & Paniker 1993, 43–4); but Elappamanna Subrahmanian Nambudirippad sees it more positively as having 'popularized *Kathakali* even abroad, and established a systematic training' (Nair & Paniker, 48). Margi (in Trivandrum, founded 1974), functions as a kind of postgraduate institute taking artists on further than the Kalamandalam in the *Kaliyogam* style (*yogams* were troupes supported by patronage); it currently has the largest *Kathakali* repertoire and goes in for more lengthy (i.e. traditional) performances of both *Kathakali* and *Kudiyattam*. Other companies in places like Kochi (Cochin) provide 'packaged' versions for the tourist market. All of this indicates that *Kathakali* is in some ways in a relatively healthy state, though it certainly forms part of the debate about current practice which will be taken up in Chapter 5.

The many forms of classification of criteria for performance and of specific performance techniques (*mudras*, facial expressions etc.) set out in *Natya Sastra* and followed quite closely in *Kathakali* have an extraordinary thoroughness. This ranges from specifics of movement (four head actions, thirty-six kinds of glance, nine movements of eyelids and eyeballs, twenty-four single hand *mudras* etc.) to details about stage space and measurements, and to the classification of characters and the appropriate stylisation of make-up: these, for instance, are (in *Kathakali*):

<i>sattvik</i> or <i>pacha</i> (virtuous):	green face
<i>rajsic</i> (heroic):	green and gold
<i>tamsik</i> or <i>rakshasic</i> (destructive/demonic):	red, white, black
(plus female characters and <i>rishis</i> /saints, who have less elaborate make-up)	

Iyer notes that the make-up patterns 'reveal that the colours used are selected for their sensitiveness to communicate ideas and their transforming qualities' (Iyer 1983, 44). Considerable variation and subtlety in the patterning permits a whole range of refinements, for example villainous characters may exhibit some green, or the red of anger may appear in a variety of locations.

The above divisions mirror the three *gunas* or tendencies in nature (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*), themselves clearly paralleling the creation/maintenance/destruction spectrum of the *trimurti* Brahma/Vishnu/Shiva.

The modes of representation are similarly comprehensively classified in e.g. *Bharatanatyam*, across:

<i>vachika</i> (voice),	linked principally to	Rg Veda
<i>sattvika</i> (mind),	"	Atharva Veda
<i>angika</i> (body),	"	Yajur Veda
<i>abhaya</i> (décor, deportment),	"	Sama Veda

The above details are taken from Gopal (1951) but can also be found in Kale (1974) and elsewhere. To this can be added the 'nine *rasas*' or facial expressions (illustrated in Gopal) and the emotional states they convey, plus other areas (gaits, kinds of laughter) similarly classified. Other forms have their own coding of make-up, costume, movement etc. and, like *Kathakali*, are animated by particular musical rhythms.

What can be seen from this is a ubiquitous tendency to thoroughness, all-inclusiveness. It is a tendency which is evident in all Indian forms of systematisation: the so-called Six Systems of Philosophy are better comprehended as different vantage points which offer complementary ways of understanding and categorising 'reality'. Even Ayurvedic medicine classifies body-types as overlapping: any individual can be *Pitta*, *Vata* or *Kapha* or any combination of the three. On the one hand there is a kind of obsession with classification; on the other hand, the classifying principle operates more like Schechner's fan than as rigid compartmentalisation. What is at work here is a kind of generous and essentially performative or process-oriented intelligence: just as Ayurveda prescribes treatment in terms of the tendency dominant at the time but in the awareness that others also operate in some measure, so the classification of performance modes implies the awareness that any or all of them may be suitable within a mobile context, but that each needs to be classified, because the goal of the performance is to produce

'treatment' or cause an effect which can be monitored. What these overlapping systems of classification reveal is that Indian theatre is perceived as a special case of what is always a dynamic view of life as forms in continuously generative motion.

Although *Kudiyattam*, with its extremely elaborate *abhinaya* (expressive coding) is closest to Sanskrit drama, *Kathakali*, according to Nair & Paniker (1993), can be understood fully in terms of the aesthetics of the *Natya Sastra*, although it sometimes departs from its precepts or adds facets of its own. It is defined as *pakarnattom*, or 'multiple transformational acting' (1993, 8). Not only does each actor present 'multiple appearances and behaviour' (88) (e.g. the actor playing Hanuman also 'plays' both Sita and Ravana when recounting her abduction to Rama), but the performers undergo a 'radical transformation of the human face and figure' (88); the performance is intended 'to change the *laukika* (worldly) nature of things to the *alaukika* (non-worldly)' (86) and the ultimate aim is to arrive at a non-dualistic state in which performer, performance and reception are one (4).

The means to do this include: (i) non-mimetic stylisation etc., preventing 'identification'; (ii) the gap-structure of narrative and action (reinforced by the disjunction of text and action as in a film by Godard or Robbe-Grillet or in a Brecht play); (iii) the co-existence of opposing demands upon spectators, who have to perform very abstract decoding operations (re. the *mudras*) and are also subject to 'strident vitality' (Chaitanya, 1986, 25) recalling the visceral effects of parts of ritual performance. In other words they have to operate across several kinds of border and in several different receptive and cognitive modes simultaneously: they are required to extend themselves considerably.

These features suggest a suspension of everyday modes of behaviour and perception whose purpose is to assist the transfer across into an 'otherness' of functioning. The performers 'become' highly imposing heroic or divine entities resplendent in elaborate costume and make-up; they stamp heavily onto the playing area and adopt a position balanced on the outside of the feet. On their first entry they playfully signal their arrival in character by the alternating conceal/reveal use of the hand-held curtain. As audience we know they are there from the beginning, because they wear bells on their ankles and don't try to walk quietly; their progressive revelation shows us how *much* they are there, how 'different' they are: it celebrates their otherness. It also relies on the enticement of

concealment, the desire to see what is hidden. Often performed in an up-front, jokey fashion like a children's game, this sequence has quite complex significance. It is like the 'peek-a-boo' discussed by Emigh via Winnacott (Emigh 1996, 2) (or what Freud calls 'Fort/Da'), which stimulates the child to imagine what 'isn't there'; it is also a parallel to the rapid concealment and revelation of divine images in Hindu worship, as well as in the devotional performance form *Krishnattam* (Bharucha 1993, 174). The audience's potential to enter the 'divine' is thus stimulated through *play*.

I will come back to aspects of this discussion in the context of theory (Chapter 4), but in terms of performance it's important to note both the practice of using multiple techniques to produce specific effects and the direction of those effects: they work to set up that condition which Chapter I discussed in terms of self and other, of 'not me/not not me' and of extension beyond this into a dynamic but unfettered availability which is the ground of radical change in perception, self-evaluation and action. Since the analysis of ritual forms has pointed up similar features, it looks as though consistency of practice and intention is to be found, though it is a consistency which aims to produce not stasis but total availability, the possibility of inhabiting any form. To inhabit this availability means to pass 'beyond' form, out of given frameworks, and to discover the impetus to form in the ability to play (the conjunction of Schiller's *Formtrieb* and *Spieltrieb*).

Paniker comments about *Kathakali*: 'The text should be seen only as the skeletal base for evocative improvisation which diligently seeks to fill in the gaps in it by rendering passages taken from other texts' (Nair & Paniker 1993, 20: this recalls Kavalam Panikkar's comment about why he works with Sanskrit drama quoted on p. 93 in Chapter 2). Firstly then the 'text' becomes an 'intertext', it intervenes in and is intervened in by other texts, it is part of a continuum (see what I say in Chapter 2 about 'text'). Secondly it becomes an impulse to improvisation (cf. the interaction between musicians and dancer in many forms of Indian – and other – dance): it generates other dimensions and pluralises itself as performative dialogue. Thirdly it requires the active participation of its receivers, rather as Wolfgang Iser's reception theory of reading emphasises the 'gaps' which any narrative offers as invitations to its readers to insert their own response, evaluation, additions etc. (another angle on the imaginative play/passing-beyond-form process referred to above). The hierarchy Paniker establishes here is: written text > performed text > received text.

We have here a full model of the text > performance > reception process to which I will return in Chapter 4. It designates performance as fluid transformation for text, performer and receiver.

It is thus not quite the case that, as C.N. Ramachandran puts it, 'sophisticated classical theatre in India is characterised by its amazing formal rigidity ... [which] reflects the acceptance and endorsement of a rigidly structured society' (Ramachandran 1993, 21). There is a level on which this analysis works, but Paniker and others also point to ways in which forms like *Kathakali* escape rigidity. Although the distinction between 'classical' and 'folk' is marked by a lessening of formal rigidity which *may* be 'historical' evidence of 'dissatisfaction with formally structured society' (Ramachandran), this proposition also is rather oversimplistic, both as an aesthetic and a political comment.

Other forms

Moving towards varying degrees of more 'informal' or 'folk' performance, we find:

Therukuttu (Theru = street; kuttu = play) dates back two or three centuries, but is based on a Tamil version of the *Mahabharata*, and on the early works *Shilappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai* (c. 200AD). Like the *Ramlila*, *Therukuttu* ends with the burning or destruction of huge effigies with audience-participation, here as a version of the Bhima-Durodhyana fight; it also includes songs and interspersed (*ad lib*) prose elaboration, comic/satirical interruptions by the jester-figure *Kattiyakaran*, fights, physical action, grand stylisation and very colourful costume; stories are taken from *Mahabharata* and many feature the Draupadi cult, which is celebrated in a twenty-one-day festival in rural Draupadi-temples in Tamil Nadu. The ritual functions include *moksha* (rite whereby the soul is liberated) for recently departed relatives.

Bhavai: this 'folk' Gujarati form (also found in Rajasthan) has undergone a deliberate revival by, among others, Janak Dave, Jaswant Thaker and Kailash Pandya (the latter with the assistance of Darpana Academy in Ahmedabad), though here as often there is considerable debate about whether, and if so how much, it in fact 'died out': whether it is perceived to have done so depends very much on the position (location, social status etc.) of the perceiver. Much Indian

performance which from a 'westernised' or a 'scholarly' viewpoint appears to have been moribund or non-existent nevertheless continued in e.g. rural areas, where it has subsequently been 'rediscovered'. There is considerable irony here. Kapila Vatsyayan, for instance, believed *Bhavai* to be defunct, but having been shown evidence to the contrary includes an elegant apology in the introduction to her book (Vatsyayan, 1980, ix). I have met many people who assure me that it has been going strong, and others who suggest that it is in various kinds of crisis. As with other forms there are several reasons for this. Either investigators do not have access to what is going on in, for instance, remote rural areas; or new experiments, revivals, activities at local academies etc. are in their early stages and the results are not yet evident; or economic and other factors give rise to relatively sudden changes. Even more recently, traditional *Bhavai* performers who were beginning to lose out to television have again been 'rescued' by Darpana and utilised in a health education project in Mehsana district north of Ahmedabad from 1998; it is a story which is echoed elsewhere.

Bhavai consists of a number of sequences or *veshas* (in *Yakshagana* and other forms the term means impersonation of a particular character-type), under the direction of a *Nayaka* (cf. *Sutradhara*), performed in the open; sometimes on a platform, sometimes not. Women did not perform until the twentieth century. Some material is mythological but much is socio-historical in focus, co-ordinated by the *Ranglo* or *Rangalo* (cf. *Vidushaka*). Costume is based on the naturalistic but with stylised motifs; music and dance is interspersed with dialogue, and draws on folk forms: it offers considerable scope for improvisation. Like many other forms, *Bhavai* displays in its particular regional and linguistic garb the interweaving of the traditional and the contemporary, the stately and the comic, the stylised and the improvised.

Cbhau has three forms: *Purulia* and *Seraikella* (*Seraikala*) (masked); and *Mayurbhanj* (unmasked). *Seraikella* has beautiful, 'moon-face' masks reminiscent of Japan; in *Purulia* the masks are more 'earthy' (made in fact from earth and paper, where *Seraikella* masks are traditionally of wood and now of clay); the emphasis in all three of these eastern Indian forms (found in Orissa and Bihar) is more on mime and movement than on narrative. *Purulia* is the only Indian form to use full-body animal masks. Instead of a sacred flame, these open-air performances occur at salient points in the agricultural year in front of a pole representing (Shiva as) the world-tree.

Ankia-nata and *Bhaona* are Assamese forms (*Bhaona* is properly the dramatic presentation element). They contain a strong Sanskrit strand, particularly developed under Sankaradeva in the sixteenth-century; they are performed in a specially-designed prayer-hall with stage and auditorium (*namaghara*); the forms includes sung text, local music and dance. Themes are drawn mainly from the *Puranas*; some characters are masked; only males act; the *Sutradhara* introduces all characters and provides the links.

Ramlila: The Rama legend is pervasive throughout large parts of Asia; Vatsyayan indicates its extent and influence 'in the value system which it represents and the ideals it places before individuals for norms of human conduct'; so performance drawing on it 'must be seen as integral parts of the reality of life and not leisure time entertainment' (1980, III). Performance draws on any of the innumerable versions of the *Ramayana* in different local languages; the best-known example (Varanasi) is based on that of Tulsidas. Forms range from *Kathakara* (mono-actor, singer), shadow- and rod-puppets (Orissa, Karnataka, Andhra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu) to the *Ramlilas* of North India. Although Vatsyayan classifies the form as in some ways cognate with European mystery or procession plays, she also emphasises that there are very considerable differences. The central point derives from the term *lila* itself: the play of form functions as manifestation and celebration of the unmanifest source (see Chapter I). The mood and purpose is thus essentially different from most European 'passion plays'.

The Varanasi *Ramlila* is still directed by the Maharaja of Ramnagar/Varanasi and dates from the sixteenth century. It is an urban spectacle involving the whole town for ten to fifteen days by playing different episodes in different locations: one major effect is social cohesion achieved by communal input. Performers come from any caste but the heroes and heroines are played exclusively by young boys of less than fourteen. The text is recited by the narrator (*Vyasa*); music and dance contribution is basic, but major episodes (fights etc.) are grandly presented. There are some masks – mostly of cloth, for e.g. Ravana; Hanuman's mask is, uniquely, made of metal.

Like many other forms, though with different emphases, the *Ramlila* turns mythological narrative into performance spectacle: it is a theatre in which *communitas* (Turner) has clear socio-cultural aims. These could of course be regarded with suspicion, particularly as the director is a Maharaja, and in a sense the *Yatra*, particularly of Bengal, could be said to provide an alternative version.

Yatra: some 300 companies in Bengal employ 20,000 people (more than in film or urban theatre): *Yatra/Jatra* is a processional play, originating in devotional forms (cf. *Raslila*, *Gita-Govinda*). During the nineteenth century *Yatra* began to make use of social themes, for example in opposition to colonialist educational and artistic models; this continued in the twentieth century with more specifically Marxist-oriented material like episodes from Lenin's life; the form, always highly adaptable, now accommodates prose, contemporary language, political and social references etc. (see Chapter 5). It is very much travelling theatre, with simple and transportable props, sets and costumes.

Nautanki: an 'operatic' form from Uttar Pradesh exhibiting a similar development to *Yatra*, i.e. from the devotional towards an emphasis on contemporary social and political issues. Its origins derive from singing bards called *Chranas*. Few traces of ritual remain; *Nautanki* is characterised by sharp dialogue, melodrama, declamation, singing and dancing, much of it involving the *Vidushaka*/clown figure (*Munshiji*). The actors are professional, though not as highly paid as in *Yakshagana*, and receive training in institutions called *Akharas*, some of which accept women. There is a strong influence from Hindi movies in contemporary practice; in contrast, Habib Tanvir (see Chapter 5) has adapted *Mrccha-Katika* for *Nautanki*.

Tamasa: (Maharashtra): unlike most other forms, its origins date from as late as the eighteenth century. It is an 'earthy dance-drama [with] occasional obscenities and vulgarity'; but displays the 'potential of high drama' (Vatsyayan 1980, 171). In 1980 there were some eighty companies and 3,000 professional performers, rural and urban; *Tamasa* plays to large audiences in e.g. Pune and Bombay, acted inside or out. Previously, companies were co-operatives. The leading performer is female; the performance is characterised by interchange, both comic and serious, and banter between actors, musicians and the *sardar* (*Sutradhara*), with considerable room for improvisation. P.L. Despande, Vijaya Mehta and others have used the form extensively in contemporary Marathi theatre.

Varadpande notes the continued centrality in very many forms of the *Vidushaka* figure (director, stage manager, narrator, commentator etc. – cf. *Sutradhara*). He parallels in many ways the licensed transgression of the carnival tradition in Europe, and symbolises a subversive quality. His hallmarks are freedom to improvise and variety in the modes of doing so, in a mix of registers, styles and indeed languages. The jester figure can take liberties with any

established order – he was frequently dressed for example in mock British gear under the Raj.

Whereas, as mentioned earlier, the *Vidushaka* has a truncated role as a kind of embryonic *Sutradhara* in the Sanskrit drama of Bhasa, much subsequent Indian theatre has taken care to include contemporary and/or alternative perspectives in his person, (whether as *Sutradhara*, *Bhagavata*, *Katilyakkaran*, *Vidushaka*, *Ranglo* or *Munshiji*) whilst retaining ritual and/or religious structures.

Vatsyayan indicates (i) that the *Sutradhara* links phases in the narrative and serves as a 'chorus' figure, whereas the *Vidushaka* connects past and present, gods and men (1980, 13); and (ii) that these functions persist under different names in many forms (she lists some fourteen: 1980, 186). These figures thus in many ways exemplify the metatheatrical freedom which draws on the narrative and the dramatic, opening their convergence through the spirit of play.

It is not therefore surprising that much theatre invokes Ganesh as its presiding deity. Ganesh is often represented dancing, recalling Shiva as Nataraj and as the energising of creative forces, fertility and flow; Ganesh is also the elephant remover of obstacles, which perhaps are envisaged as inherent in such a potentially disrespectful form or in the attempt it presents at totality. There is more than a hint here of a Dionysos or *lila* quality, with the ability to break open the solemnity of apparently fixed categories and to do the impossible. Remember too Ganesh as totally alert scribe of the *Mahabharata*, able to assimilate, understand and write simultaneously. Like the flexibility and plurality of these forms, the role of clowns and elephant-headed gods seems to stand for requirements and capacities of all human performance. Whether they emerge from narrative, ritual or tradition, they are able both to construct frames and to break out of them.

This section has looked only at a selection from the multiplicity and range of performance forms, but has attempted to indicate the spectrum across which they operate and the extent to which they overlap. They range across categories like formal/informal, sophisticated/spontaneous; interior/exterior; they employ a vast spectrum of performance codes and styles, operating through different combinations and gradations of narrative, song, dance, music, mask, make-up, gesture, movement, costume and so on. Several different theoretical strategies and paradigms are employed to attempt to organise this material from various perspectives. In the next chapter I consider further what they each contribute.

The repertoire of practice sketched out above clearly indicates that Indian theatre as performance articulates the full range of expression and action, in many cases by seeking to return its participants to their 'origins' or, more precisely, originating modes of behaviour. This in itself suggests why its forms may also be appropriate to engage with contemporary concerns, be they socio-political or psychological; Chapter 5 looks at what is happening to and in traditional and regional forms in the current context. The discussion has also focused on ways in which Indian performance aims not just to activate a 'horizontal' richness across forms of behaviour, but also to identify and invite the extension of capacities of understanding and being through a 'vertical' dimension, opening up the full range of perceptual and conceptual potential and offering ways in which 'self' may begin to integrate kinds of 'otherness'. In STQ 17, Katyal writes of performance forms from Punjab, Bihar and Orissa, that they represent 'traditions which comfortably transgress what we are being taught are barbed-wire barriers between different systems of religious belief' and which in so doing 'affirm our centuries-old history of sophisticated acceptance of difference, of the other' (Katyal 1998, 2). As such, she claims, they need to be 'cherished'. This debate is pursued in the next chapter.

There is however an aspect of this negotiation which seems to have been glossed over both within the logistics of performance in India and in critical accounts of it. Although a combination of traditional and contemporary Indian and western approaches does cover many senses in which performance produces and transforms the body, some questions remain.

WOMEN IN PERFORMANCE

Many traditional forms, in particular where they are closest to ritual and the classical/courtly, use male performers in female roles: there are established terms, forms of training, groups or castes of performers etc. who in many cases still exist, ranging from the categorisation of 'feminine' acting-style in *Kathakali* as *lasya* (in distinction to *tandava*; similar to the Balinese *kris/manis* distinction), to terms for males who specialise in female roles (*strivesas* in *Yakshagana*), to accepted groups of transvestite eunuch performers (*bijaras*). Men represent all kinds and conditions of women, taking the role of the goddess Kali in ritual forms like *Mudiyettu*, of Rama's wife Sita in *Kathakali*, of mothers, wives and daughters. The only forms where

women have traditionally performed are the 'classical dance' *Bharatanatyam* (but this was revived – by a woman, Rukmini Devi – after being suppressed largely by the colonialist powers on moral grounds), *Mohiniattam*, *Kudiyattam*, and forms which tend either towards pure dance (e.g. pot-carrying dances in rural Gujarat) or towards the 'entertainment' end of the spectrum (e.g. *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh).

Important changes have occurred particularly during the twentieth century in women's situation as regards status, range of roles, position within the performance economy and its artistic, political and social organisation; the issues are varied, crucial and ongoing, and some of them will be taken up in Chapter 5.

But the changes occurred because a need for change was perceived. It is therefore important to ask why, in a theatre whose performance aesthetic is centrally about extension of possibility (becoming more or other, acquiring new kinds of perceptiveness, 'cosmoscising'), women as performers have been mostly limited to the spheres of entertainment or decoration. In order to address this we shall need to look at women characters as well, where they figure for example in episodes from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; and the issue is of course cultural and historical and in its scope way beyond a few paragraphs. I am not therefore claiming to write the history of women and performance in India, but I do think it's important to state some of the problems. Most accounts of Indian theatre have not engaged with them to any extent.

As far as I can judge there were no governing or organisational roles for women in the development of most classical or ritual forms, though they did *perform* in Sanskrit drama; these forms were closely allied to (or in some cases taken over by) Aryan (Brahminic) religious hierarchies and/or the ruling classes with which they were allied, where power resided mainly with male elders. The texts themselves (epics, *Puranas*) from which episodes were derived also reputedly originate from male hands, and the framing of the narratives certainly seems to confirm a male perspective. Although in South India many ritual forms link back to Dravidian culture, which is in considerable measure matriarchal (e.g. pre-eminence of Kali and Draupadi cults), here too in many cases the men played female roles, whether these were of the strong and violent type (e.g. Kali, female demons etc.) or the soft and submissive. Possibly this was a result of Aryanisation of the social structure.

Power to decide the content and form of the performance resides then with men; women, where they appear in their own right, do so

in closely-circumscribed behavioural zones as dancers, light entertainers or behind a mask; they remain as it were veiled or cloaked in aspects of the functions prescribed upon them; they do not, for the most part, speak. (It's true that in some forms neither do men – the text is sung or spoken by others, but traditionally those others have nearly always been men too. The *Bhagavata* can speak for female characters, but it has, until recently, been rare for the *Bhagavata* role to be taken by a woman who speaks either for her own sex or for both.) Where women are represented by men, this is transmitted through a stylisation of movement and gesture: men performers learn lightness of gesture, small steps, choose particular kinds of glance etc., like *onnegata* artists in *Kabuki*. This may, however valuable it is for the individual male performer to explore his own 'feminine' attributes, produce for the audience something of a caricature which shuts off a range of behavioural options. The roles women are assigned in the stories of gods and heroes tend to be submissive and/or supportive, in line with stereotypes of the wife, mother or daughter: Iyer says of the female characters in *Kathakali*: 'their important role in the drama is the delineation of the amorous and the pathetic: women in love and women in distress – the two themes around which the great stories of the world are built' (Iyer 1983, 50). Mahasweta Devi's comment quoted in Chapter 2 (p. 44) makes a similar point rather more acerbically. Finally, in some of the forms which allow room for improvisation, humour and interaction with the audience, women are barred from attending this section of the event because it frequently includes bawdy material. As I say above, much of this is changing. But it is part of the historical structure, a structure which, like counterparts elsewhere, appears to do a very thorough job of marginalisation. Texts, where they delineate women's 'nature' and role, appear to authorise this closeting; the effect however operates as outreach in performance in all senses, limiting their scope both in daily activity and at all levels of the event-structure of performance as discussed in this chapter. *STQ* 14/15 has two articles which recount the experiences of actresses in Manipur over the last half-century: the difficulties they speak of are still found in many other parts of India.

There are of course many excuses, ranging from physical stereotyping (e.g. many *Theyyam* roles require the performer to wear heavy headgear and rush around for long periods, sometimes performing gross or grotesque actions; *Kathakali* actors draw on the martial art of *Kalarippayat* and the form, like the cognate *Yakshagana*, is

in part rooted in a military/martial culture) to temperamental unsuitability (women are supposed by nature to be more 'modest'). Most of them come down to a conception of gender roles which accords with the representation of female characters mentioned above. It is fairly clear that most of these assumptions are flawed and/or biased in some degree. What needs to be asked here is why did they arise and what has been their effect in the domain of Indian theatre? Is it the case that only 'man' (as Vatsyayan revealingly puts it) can 'cosmospise himself'? Are women not regarded as aesthetically and psychospiritually adept enough to enjoy the profounder levels of *rasa*? And doesn't this seem to contradict iconography in which androgynous figures or the celebration of sexual fusion are equated with states of wisdom and 'divine' fulfilment?

Three of the best-known female characters in Indian theatre of all kinds are Draupadi (wife of the five Pandavas), Sita (wife of Rama) and Shakuntala (Kalidasa's protagonist). We might also mention Parvati (Shiva's consort and mother of Ganesh), Radha (Krishna's favourite Gopi), the apparently destructive but ultimately benevolent Kali, sundry demons, jealous mothers, abandoned lovers and other stereotypes. There are also in myth and some transpositions examples of wise, virtuous, devoted and even enlightened females. So the first thing to say is that, in spite perhaps of a tendency for stereotype to predominate, there is a wide range of possible models available. It may also be the case that few women would object to being represented as gracious, intelligent, virtuous etc., so long as it is clear that they are not refused any kind of existence outside these parameters as narrowly conceived.

In spite of these mitigating factors, major questions remain. Firstly, most of the named characters above do not have much *scope* for action: their choices are largely determined for them by men or by the norms of a male-led society. In one (important) sense this is a political issue, and one currently in process of enormous overhaul. In another sense it can be framed in terms of how we understand fundamental drives and faculties. (Remember, the epics deal with 'gods' and 'heroes', i.e. with the highest level of operation possible, with if you like the potential for operation at the height of human capacity.) If deliberation and debate, decision-making and execution, and desire and drive are all in some way seen as 'male' characteristics, the main-springs of both personal and political life may be deposited in the hands of the gender which apparently owns most of these qualities. This might be seen as a serious category mistake: experience