

Akshara

Key Note address

Sanjana Has done the formal welcome but I should, but I must welcome you all to Heggodu on behalf of Ninasam and the villagers. And actually I should..this is not the keynote address for the not the drama seminar for 2 reasons, I have never you know..this is the first time in my life that I am doing something like keynote address which is actually done by people like GPD and also I should..I will do 3 things in this presentation, the first is, why is this name, what is this 'Not' the logic, that I will present and then also tell you the story behind how we conceptualized the whole seminar from this logic, that's one point. The second point is that how do we connect ourselves to the 1956 Drama seminar? What actually happened during that seminar and how can we connect in different ways to that seminar and the third point, these are all inter-related things is that what do we actually want to achieve in the next four or five days. I will try to do all this in the next 20 minutes. First, why this name? 'Not the drama seminar. Let me answer you using the same in 'Not the Logic'. It did not arise directly out of some attempt to create a fancy post mortem label. Actually we literally stumbled upon this phrase, kept it initially as a tentative title and later decided to retain it as the name of the event. Three of us were having a meeting in Delhi and at the end of the meeting, when they were sending the minutes of the meeting, they wanted a title, they kept this title, Not the Drama Seminar and we thought that you know we will retain this title because we realized that philosophically it is making some important point, I'll try to present that point before you first. In Buddhist philosophy of language as Sundara has taught us, in Buddhist Philosophy of language there is a doctrine called 'Apoha' doctrine where a world is defined not by its positive meaning but by what it is not. For example according to the apoha doctrine every word denotes what it is not, for example a cat is not a cat, a cat is something which is not a dog which is not a tree, which is not a stone which is not Akshara, etc etc etc. You have to go on doing that until only cat is excluded so this is the Apoha doctrine. It might look very strange to us but very interestingly, just a few days ago there was a seminar here on the Mahila day, the womens' day, the international womens' day some judges came from Sagara to give lectures to the self help, to the womens' self help groups in Heggodu and they distributed a small pamphlet called the law for common people, it was just 10 rupees and I bought one and read one, very interestingly I saw that in the Hindu marriage act 1955, the word Hindu is defined in the Apoha way. In the Hindu marriage act, the word Hindu means one who is not Christian, who is not a Parsi, who is not a jew and who is not Muslim. That's how the word Hindu is defined in the Hindu marriage act 1955. And after reading that I thought that this is perhaps the best way of defining the word Hindu, because whatever other way you try to define Hindus you will exclude a few who claim

to be a Hindu. So we thought, as sanjna said, we began, I mean we wanted to do something like the Drama Seminar, the 1956 Drama seminar. In memory well we had this meeting where we talked about policy decisions, we discussed about censorship, we discussed about the state funding, the funding agencies, we discussed about various things that troubled us and finally we realized that we are in 2006 we just 50 years ahead of this historical drama seminar which happened in Delhi in 1956. So we immediately thought, it was Sudhanva's idea first that we should do a drama seminar. We said yes, we will do that and then we had another meeting and we planned it. We tried all our, for one day we actually brainstormed how to do the meeting. We...GPD was there, Samik da was there. We even made a schedule of whom to invite and what are all the topics etc etc. But after coming back from that meeting everybody started feeling that you know this is not the seminar that we want to do and emails started coming out saying that you know we did some mistake, this is not the seminar that we want to do. Then what else do you want to do? What exactly has been the problem? We realized that the term 'The Drama Seminar' have all been problems for us so we should actually do something other than that. so that is the reason that we completely planned it in a different way, again sudhanva came to our help and he proposed a completely different pattern for the seminar and that is what we have now. We have experiments, we have locales, we have institutions and training, so different areas where not only theatre people are invited, people form other fields of life are also invited to this event. So the logic 'Not', not only applies it to the whole sentence but it applies to all the 3 words involved. Not the drama seminar is not 'The 1956 drama seminar', it is not only about 'drama', and its not going to be a seminar in the academic sense of the word.

So with this in mind we tried to connect ourselves to the 1956 drama seminar. The first 2 questions were how do we wish to relate to the drama seminar? How do we apply the Not the logic there. The 1956 drama seminar is an important landmark in the history of modern Indian theatre and its in fact the beginning of most of our legacies of theatre practitioners. Without trying to be comprehensive, let me just point out some areas in which we could connect ourselves with the 1956 drama seminar. One the 1956 drama seminar reflects many of our dreams and nightmares that we still cope with today. Let me illustrate this with two specific examples. One example is a quote from Shambhu Mitra, he was responding to commercial theatre in that 1956 drama seminar. By the way the 1956 drama seminar was organized by the Govt. of India and most of the stalwarts of Indian theatre, starting from Shambhu Mitra, to Aya Rangacharya to alkazi to many many important names were all involved in that 56 drama seminar and there were topics on, mostly the topics on Kannada Theatre and Gujrati theatre and Bengali theatre and Assamese theatre etc and also there were papers on commercial theatre, folk theatre..there was a paper on plays of Tagore, there was a paper on playhouses

and there was one on dance, classical Indian theatre etc etc. So in one of the discussions Shambhu Mitra makes this important statement. How long do you believe that we can pull on without a Marcel to eat and without a shelter to live in, we are ready to work as professionals, we have qualified ourselves to be such, we believe that play-goers will see that we live and flourish. But how and where may we show them our metal and to get from them in exchange our requirements, we need a house of our own. I think it has been one of the key moments in the 56 drama seminar where Shambhu Mitra stood up and asserted that as artists and people belonging to theatre we need a house of our own, he meant several things in that. When he said we need a house of our own, he actually meant a play house which is a theatre and also he meant we need organizations of our own and he also meant that we need a support system to run our house and our home. This sentiment has often been repeated after the 1956 drama seminar. Even today if you have a seminar and invite all the theatre participants or practitioners from all over India, it somehow goes and connects to the fact that you know how do we survive with so many threats around, how does theatre survive, how do we build our own houses, is a question that still persists but there are several questions that the 1956 drama seminar did not ask. Do we really know the state of our houses today? If we need a house of our own we should have an understanding of what is the state of our house at the moment. Is the house same? For example if theatre, imagine theatre to be a big mansion, what are the smaller different houses in Karnataka, in Assam, in different states? What are the states of those houses? Do we know it? In what state are those houses and do we have an idea about how our house should be in future? And therefore have we made any concrete attempts to build it. And to me this building of our own house many resonances. A house is also a centre. When I replace the word houses with the word centre? We need a centre of our own, we have 2 distinct meanings coming out of it. One meaning is that we need organizations of our own, at the moment theatre has been thirst with organizations. When 1956 drama seminar happened, there was no organization for theatre but then the academy started, then the department of culture started, then the zonal cultural centres started and then we have a proliferation of organizations and organizations and organizations. And now we have to ask the question, whether those organizations are useful to us. Because we must realize today, standing 50 years away from the drama seminar that not! It was not the theatre people who started these organizations but it was the Govt. or the state which created these organizations and put it on the head of the theatre and so we will have to actually bear the burden of those organizations at this moment.

There I come to the second quote from that seminar. In one of the discussions, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay says and there are references that we need a separate ministry for culture is a demand that comes in the same drama seminar and to that Kamala

Devi Chattopadhyay responds with the following words. Again and again I hear, not only in this seminar but also outside it, how nice would it be to have a ministry of culture. God forbid if it happens there will be an end to all cultural activities in this country. I do not cherish any hope in this because I know how the Govt. Missionaries function. A ministry is a ministry and as it is it will have to go through so many formalities and procedures. It has become more true today but its not only the procedural problems that kamala Devi referred to have been the serious problem. I think the more serious problem is that with the proliferation of organizations we usually expect that things decentralize but what has happened is exactly the reverse, with more and more organizations there is more and more centralization and this has been the irony of the whole situation. For example, I will give you one example of you know when many people have asked NSD you know that we have put this demand before NSD that we should decentralize NSD. But the way NSD has responded has been very clever. NSD says that yes we want to decentralize and it opens branch offices and opening branch offices is more centralization its not decentralization. They have not understood it. Actually if NSD opens more branch offices all over and its basically controlled by the central office so it is more centralization by creating more organizations. So what do we mean by decentralization? These were the question which were not asked in the 1956 drama seminar. Therefore if we have to revisit the drama seminar, we will have to completely re-imagine the debate, we will have to reconstruct the debate. We will have to de-construct the whole 56 discourse and we will have to build our own completely, from our own experiences. The 56 drama seminar can only be a starting point, it cannot be a reference point for us, that is the first point I want to make.

Which leads to the second point that the 1956 drama seminar is also the bed rock of many of our structures and thoughts on theatre. Many of our discourses are derived out of the 1956 drama seminar. For example, the word Kannada theatre, appears for the first time in an official document in the 1956 drama seminar, until then dividing Indian theatre in terms of this linguistics or linguistic entities was not very popular. So for the first time in that seminar we have separate papers on Kannada theatre, a separate paper on Bengali theatre, a separate paper on Oriya theatre etc etc, so that language becomes a marker of different regional theatres. That we have actually accepted from then on, all theatre histories in India have made this a compulsory classification, so this is the classification from where we begin our discourses. We have never questioned that classification. For example if we come within Karnataka, there are people who are working in Konkani, in Tulu and in various smaller languages within Karnataka and what kind of theatre are they doing? Beenapani Chawla has to be kept in one of these pigeon holes, where do you keep Beenapani Chawla? In which theatre? Tamil theatre? Its not possible, English theatre? Its not possible, tamil theatre? Or do you create another category for Pondicherry? You know we really have trouble with this structure that the 1956 drama seminar has created. Its not only these linguistic entities, several key concepts like commercial theatre, folk theatre and amateur theatre, these words

have been invented by the 1956 drama seminar. I don't say that they were invented but they have been given an official seal. An official seal has been put on these words, so that you have an authorization that these words mean This! Now that comes from, that legacy comes from the 1956 drama seminar. For example let us take this word folk theatre. I have seen and met a lot of artists who do in quotes 'folk theatre' but none of them would identify themselves as people doing folk theatre. For example they would always say that I am an yakshagana artist, I am a Kathakali artist, no body would say he is a folk artist unless he is someone who has gone to one of the 'Apna Utsavs'. The whole concept of belonging to folk theatre is a construction. According to me folk theatre is an urban imagination, it's not at all a rural thing. It's completely a construction which has been made by the city and has been put on the village. So similarly this whole notion of amateur theatre is very problematic. Because of this notion of amateur theatre which has been constructed, in our theatre histories in all regions, at least I am very sure about Kannada we have erased some important parts of our theatre history from our history books, completely. For example if you take a text-book, a typical book on Kannada theatre, it begins with the formative period then it goes to the Company natak, then it immediately goes to the amateur theatre and then it jumps to the post independence period. Between 1900 and 1960's and 1970's you have a huge bunch of activities happening in all over Karnataka in villages and small towns and tehsils etc etc where theatre activity was neither commercial nor amateur in the sense of the word which was used in that discourse. There amateur theatre means theatre which was done by Adyarangacharya who was in the university. You take out a book on Kannada theatre and you look at the chapter on amateur theatre, none of these village theatres would be counted there. Therefore we have erased a huge bunch of theatre from our theatre history because we do not have a name for it. I am trained to call it, in one of my essays, as the 'In between theatre'. The theatre that happened between the cities and villages, it is an in between theatre which was neither here nor there which was neither commercial nor amateur, which was neither folk nor completely city based, so it was a theatre where you could mix up things, where you could use a bit of the company theatre curtains and some songs from Yakshagana and amateurish acting and you could cook up some kind of theatre and you all know that in each village, at least in Karnataka there are people who play the harmonium who used to direct plays, who used to travel from village to village teaching them, you know they were called drama masters. So we had that huge bunch of theatre, which we have not been able to represent at all in our discourse.

And I think the problem is also there called 'Political theatre'. In that category we have been only looking at IPTA and some other small movements and we have completely neglected what I call the politics of the apolitical. How this seemingly apolitical theatre also has its own political implication. We now realize that doing theatre itself is a

political act. We need not always do political theatre but doing theatre itself is very political. So we have not really applied this thought to the history of Indian theatre, therefore most of our narratives about Indian theatre is terribly flawed and I think the legacy goes back to the 1956 drama seminar. And the third point is that the 1956 drama seminar has raised some important questions that we are still grappling with. For example this interesting paper on the plays of Tagore. I think the first time that I saw these bunch of papers and I was reading that, it was very interesting that there was only one paper on Tagore and no body else. There are papers on Kannada drama but not any about a particular playwright, why? Why there was exclusively one paper on Tagore? Might be because we have the Nobel prize etc etc but for me the reason is that Tagore is perhaps the most enigmatic of writers, he still, for example at least in Kannada people for whom Tagore is not accessible in his own language, for whom Tagore has to be studied in English, I think none of us have really understood Tagore. I mean we really have to know why Tagore is a great playwright. And I think this is also true about some of the Sanskrit plays. For example some of the Sanskrit plays like *Mrichchakatikam* is very well known in the west, *Mrichchakatikam* is easily accessible but if you come to the other end, if you come to a play like *uttara-ramacharita*, it is completely inaccessible, why *uttara-ramacharita* is a great play is a difficult question to answer to people who are trained in dramaturgy from the western point of view. *Mrichchakatikam* is easy, because *Mrichchakatikam* resembles in many ways the Western notion of dramaturgy. So I think the problem of not understanding Tagore has more to it than just Tagore, you know we have not been able to understand certain parts of our own history and we are still grappling with it. The second question that Alkazi raised in that seminar, how to train an actor, I mean he has presented a whole paper on that, what are our methods? Have we developed our methods? Do we need methods at all? These are the questions that Alkazi brings in that drama seminar and we have not really made any headways on these questions. After 50 years we are still grappling with these questions. Do we really have methods, do people have methods? And sometimes really we should ask, do we have organizations in India? Or only people? I mean do we really have organizations? Or only heads of organizations in India? You know this is a question that I sometimes...because you know organizations do not seem to have an independent existence in India, there are many cases that I can remember. Or, the question on good theatre buildings, what are good theatre buildings? These were the questions that we wanted to relate, therefore in this seminar we have a session called experiments, where we take up all these questions. Are the methods really necessary? Have we evolved acting methods? If at all we have evolved acting methods what are those methods? Or do we really need those methods? Do we have some other way of doing it? Or we have another session on training and institutions, we will discuss those things in another part of the seminar. Therefore this seminar is only to open up questioning of the 1956 drama seminar, therefore I would appropriately say that this is 'Not the drama seminar'. Because we are not saying that

we completely continue, we are actually interrogating the drama seminar, we are trained to question the assumptions on which the drama seminar was mounted and in this gathering we have predominantly theatre practitioners across India, some scholars and theatre performers and well as some thinkers from other disciplines. The topics are not titles of possible papers but only an indication of an area for experience to scan. To make these scanning focused we have also given a description of each topic in a few words. Considering largest questions on the topics from which speakers can choose from and present their views. And most importantly, in this seminar, we have kept a part, an unusually long time for discussion with a hope that everyone will have a chance to speak and share their views, regardless of the specific areas that they come from. Usually in a seminar you have two papers, three responses and 10 minutes for discussions, that's how the seminars are structured these days. Somebody was telling me when we were recently having a seminar in Delhi and some body was telling me that we have got this idea from scientists. Scientists always do this, 2 to 3 papers, 3 responses and the question and answer session is only 10 minutes long. Because there the discussions are very technical it can be handled in 10 minutes. But in our cases the opposite is true, you need more time for discussions than you need for presentations and responses. Therefore what we have done is that we have kept one hour completely free for discussions where people can come up with lot many questions. So it is very strange sometimes in seminars that you have the paper and the chair asks for questions. Many times we do not have questions, we have actually responses. But unfortunately in most seminars there is not enough time to actually present your responses, so what we have tried to do in this seminar is give some more time or responses and to take the debate, wherever it wants to lead us to. So we should not really cut the debate short/ We should actually take the debates to whatever corners it takes us to. And I would repeat the concern that Sanjna was mentioning in her welcome speech. It's the prithvi slogans, its one of the prithvi festivals which coined this slogan that theatre matters. And I like this slogan very much because for many of us who are here, theatre matters, not only because we are in it but because that is the only thing that we can do. We cannot do anything else. It is such an existential question for us that if theatre doesn't matter, then there is no matter for us. Therefore we have to make theatre matter and who do we make theatre matter. I think in today's world it is not very easy. In today's scenario, according to a very prestigious report called the Price water house Coopers' report which has been circulating since 2006, the entertainment industry is growing from 1.2 trillion to 1.8 trillion \$ between 2006 and 2008. In 3 years the investment in the entertainment industry is getting into 150 percent. And the area where it grows in Asia and if you look at the PWC report, theatre is nowhere. In the entertainment industry, theatre comes as the smallest dot, you know they have graphs and theatre comes as a small line at the end which is part of theirs. You have films and entertainment, you have literature, something something something and in the end you have others and theatre is part of that 'others'. I think this is the problem

with theatre, it does not matter to the global gross of the entertainment industry, it doesn't matter to them but it is also the advantage. Because it does not matter to them, we can make it matter to ourselves. So what I am trying to get through this gathering is some kind of an assertion from theatre practitioners that theatre matters to us today. Another attempt that is being made in India today is that to make these creative industries as measurable things. One of the famous arguments of this has come from a person called Rajiv Sethi who says that what you cannot measure, you cannot manage has been his famous line. Therefore you have to make folk theatre, folk arts and crafts measurable. Once you make it measurable, you can patent it. Once you make it pricable, you can sell it. So you have to make these creative industries into measurable things. How do we? And we have been having pressures from all over the capital community that really we have to accept it. How do we handle this challenge that theatre...whether we are making it sellable or not. Until very recently, I thought this is something that is happening in Mumbai and it really does not touch me and recently, just a few weeks ago when I attended a seminar with a funding agency, a Dutch funding agency called Hugos, I was there, Sameera was there and we had this huge question. You are taking public money, you are accountable so show us your results. They are asking us in concrete terms, show us your results. How do you plan your organization? Show us what your objectives are, show us the present state of your area, then how do you want to develop, what are the measures that you want to take? And what are the indicators for that and etc etc We discussed these questions for 5 days and people from the arts and culture were always quarrelling that you know the present state is intangible, the results are intangible so you please don't put these questions in front of us. Frame the questions differently, we were trained to tell them. But they were saying that no no there are intangible things that they are ready to accept but there are tangible things that are attached to intangible things so show us the tangible things which are connected with the intangible. So you have to somehow make yourself measurable in this new world where it is not only the corporate money which is coming in, it is the huge entertainment industries which is entering. So how do we cope with this challenge?

Another challenge is what I would call the 'instrumentalization of theatre'. That today in the world of funding if you have to assert the existence of your theatre, you have to show that it is useful to the society you have to show that you are eradicating AIDS or doing some social service other wise if you say you are doing yakshagana for the fun of doing yakshagana, then you are not a candidate for funding because that is some kind of an arts for arts sake luxury. But today we have to rescue this arts for arts sake idea from this instrumentalists idea of theatre culture so that if you have to exist you have to be useful to the society. We agree that we have to be useful to the society but not in a measurable way and how do you measure the usefulness of a theatre group?

For example Ninasam does what we call the culture course, how do you measure the results of that culture course? Its very difficult but there are actually signs for me where I know that it is useful. I see it in the eyes of the students who go out. I meet a student several years later when, I was telling somebody that when Kurosova died on one of the blogs there were many small letters and one of them, I was surprised to see that one of them wrote was that I saw Kurosova's (35.08 secs)..... For the first time in a village called called Heggodu. So someone who is living in Tokyo now, he had seen Kurosova for the first time in this culture course and how do you actually assess that result? When we say that you know for example that our undergraduate children do not have access to good culture, good cultural activities, how do you really prove it? If a funding organization asks us to prove it, it is impossible to prove it. So how do we cope in this kind of a situation where theatre is completely made into an instrument of something else. And the third most important threat to the culture today is the cultural festivals, its again inter-related matter and..earliers it used to be one big festival somewhere in New York or Paris but then it started to happen in Delhi, Bombay, Kolkata, now it has started happening in every district of Karnataka and this year there are three or 4 festivals in every district, in Shimoga district I think there are four or five festivals and each festival is partially funded by the Govt. of Karnataka. This festival funding statistic is really starkling. For example if I give you the statistics of Hampi Utsav, it costs 4 crores, which is 10% of the total budget allocation for culture in Karnataka. 10% of the total culture Budget for Karnataka is spent on an Utsav called Hampi Utsav which runs for 4 days and the budget of National school of drama something like 20 crores out of which 5 crores goes to what is called Bharat rang Mahotsav which runs for 1 month, which runs for empty houses actually. So we are in such a state that we have to assert our rate to be there and we have to question all this. I think the seminar is designed for such questions and I only request, the scholars, the participants, the delegates to raise these questions and to use this platform to bring up some idea, some clarity about these things. I do not claim that I have provided you that clarity. I am only presenting the reality of a theatre practitioner from an experiential point of view and how do we make a theory out of it is a question that I put forward to this audience. Thank you.