
UNIT 1 CONSTRUCTION OF TRADITION

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Structure

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Music, dance and enactment have been an integral part of ritualistic and social celebrations in societies all over the world. All important occasions were celebrated with singing and dancing in groups within the community in which both men and women took part. Individual performances seem to be a much later phenomenon. The sexual division of labour reflected in the performance of various traditional art forms as well.

In India all the classical performing art forms have a long history. We are proud to have a treatise, Natyasastra, especially dedicated to theatre art, written in circa 200 BC to 200 AD. Alongside the classical arts forms have had well defined and well organised structures, there is a tradition of folk forms as rich as the classical forms. These folk forms reflect the society and its rituals and through them the age old traditions of the society are preserved. Most folk performances are associated with women. Women have contributed immensely in keeping alive many of these art forms. However, we need to reflect upon how society treats the women performers, and their status in society. In India, traditionally, all art forms have been associated with the different gods and goddesses, for example Lord Shiva with dance, Lord Ganesha with theatre and goddess Saraswati with music and education. Ironically, while goddess Saraswati, a

feminine deity is associated with music and education, women performers in the folk as well as classical tradition were not given the same status and respect as male performers.

In this unit our objective is to discuss the engendering of performance related activities in Indian society and the status of women performers in the area of performing arts.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Describe how the tradition of performance took shape in the Indian society;
- Critically analyse how gender is related to the traditional performances;
- Discuss the status of women in social performances; and
- Explain the status of women in classical performances.

1.3 PERFORMANCE AND GENDER IN PRE-VEDIC INDIA

As in any other society in the world, performing activities such as music, dance and enactment have been an essential part of the Indian society. They were an integral part of the shamanistic rituals in pre-Vedic India. There are no direct materials available for studying the state of performance related art forms of this period but archaeological findings help us to draw some conclusions regarding this. Evidence of dance or performance related activities was first noticed in the rock paintings of the Mesolithic age. The rock paintings in the caves and rocks of Kabarapahar, Abchand, Raisen, Bhopal, Berkheda, Pachmarhi, and Hoshangabad have illustrations of group dancing as well as individual dancing. Some of the paintings show people wearing masks and others show the dancers holding some kind of musical instruments.

These paintings indicate that group performances were the usual practice in the prehistoric period whereas solo form of performances came in vogue much later. Masks were used for enacting various characters in the shaman magic performances. It is difficult to differentiate between the male and female figures in the paintings of the earlier Mesolithic age as the figures are asexual. However, distinct male and female figures can be seen in the paintings of the later period. Three types of groups can be identified from the paintings: groups of male dancers, female dancers, and mixed groups. Evidence about the existence of women performers in India first appears in this period.

The only artefact from the Indus Valley civilisation that indicates evidence of performance related activities is the famous “Dancing Girl” figure. However no conclusion can be drawn based on a single artefact.

1.4 PERFORMANCES AND GENDER IN VEDIC RITUALS

The Vedas are regarded as the earliest sources documenting the Indian society. They contain the records of all activities of the inhabitants of that period. Numerous references in the Vedas confirm that performance activities were a feature of worship, shaman magic, social rituals and celebrations and entertainment. While evidence of the existence of dance and enactment can be seen in various rock paintings, existence of vocal music was not evident till the Vedic era. The Veda is the first source that refers to music that was in the contemporary Indian society. The Sama Veda in particular is associated to music that contains detailed instructions for singing the *richas* while performing various Vedic rituals.

Vedic rituals mostly pertained to productivity. The head of the family, usually a male member, and his wife, both took part in the Yajnas but women in particular had to sing the *richas* and play musical instruments such as *Vaana*, *Vina*, *Venu* etc. during the rituals. Traces of dramatic elements in their rudimentary form too could be found in the ritualistic enactments by the priests. According to Dr. A.B. Keith “the Vedic ritual contained in itself the germs of drama, as is the case with practically every primitive form of worship” (Keith, 1923, p. 23).

It will not be wrong to say that the Vedic ritualistic music was practiced by upper classes of the society as only Brahmanas and Kshatriyas had permission to take active part in Vedic rituals. Men and women had their distinct parts to render in this music. Apart from music many references to dancing by both men and women are also found in the Vedas. The “Shatapatha Brahmana” mentions reciting Samagana during the Yajna as a duty specifically delegated to women. Women desiring a child used to sing the *richas* as an accompanying component to Vedic rituals involving sacrificial offerings for the purpose.

Apart from the ritualistic music in which women had a definite and important role to play as performers, secular music was also in vogue in Vedic era. Ample references to married women singing in social functions like marriages, child births, etc. are found. Widowed women were barred in these celebrations. In the funeral ceremonies mourning women used to wail with rhythmic beating of the breasts. The actions were accompanied by musical groans and occasional shrieks. These traditions are still followed in many parts of India as a social tradition.

References also indicate about the existence of professional female artistes who could sing, dance and impersonate to earn their livelihood. Some of the female artistes who were wives of actor-entertainers (called 'œailu?a') were often forced into prostitution by their husbands.

Check Your Progress 1:

- 1) Which artefact from the Indus Valley Civilisation indicates the existence of women performing artistes in that era?
- 2) Give an account of role of women performers in a Vedic sacrificial ritual.
- 3) Apart from Vedic rituals, what were other contexts where women performers took part in Vedic India?

1.5 WOMEN PERFORMING ARTISTES DEPICTED IN ANCIENT LITERATURE

References in the ancient Indian literature indicate all kinds of performing arts as an important component in social activities. The palaces of the kings had a separate area dedicated for practicing music and dance. It became a part of education of the young princes and princesses. Music and dance teachers stayed in the palace with other officials. The "Sangeet Bhawan" used to have various musical instruments. In fact *Ramayana*, one of the important early literary texts, was actually meant to be a ballad, sung by Lava and Kusha, the sons of Lord Rama.

There are many references in the *Ramayana* which indicate the existence of women performers in that period. There were troupes of all women performers including vocalists, instrumentalists, dancers and impersonators or actresses. This implicate that these troupes were probably meant to entertain the ladies of the nobility in their privacy. The performers were termed as 'Vadhunataka Samgha'. There were some professional actresses too who were wives of the professional actors 'œailu?a', referred to earlier, who were frequently forced into prostitution by their husbands. Sita in the *Ramayana* accuses Rama of behaving like a 'œailu?a' while leaving her in someone else's hand

*"Svaya? tu bhâryâ? kaumâri? ciramadhyu?ita? sati?
œailu?a iva mâ? râma parebhyo dâtumicchasi"*

(*Ramayana*, Ayodhya Kanda, 30)

Patanjali (c. 2nd century BC) also refers to the existence of some professional women artistes in his *Mahabhashya*, who did not have a good reputation in the society because they openly accepted their affinity to their audiences: “tadyatha natanam striyo rangam gata yo yah prcchati kasyayuyamiti tam tam tvetyahuh” (*Mahabhashya*, VI.1.13). Moreover, these female artistes had to travel constantly with their troupes and such affinity with their audiences brought them disrespect.

The *Mahabharata* also mentions music as an essential part of education of the children of the royal families. Arjuna, one of the most important characters among the Pandavas, has been portrayed as proficient in vocal as well as instrumental music and dance. During their one year of anonymity, the Pandavas took shelter under the king of Virata where Arjuna, in disguise of a eunuch, was employed to teach music and dance to the princess Uttara. The *Mahabharata* also mentions the existence of professional male singers and female dancers in the form of Gandharvas and Apsaras who were invited with due respect to perform at various ritualistic and social occasions as well as in the court.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is one of the most important sources, documenting Indian Society around the 3rd Century BC. The *Arthashastra* lays down certain rules relating to performing Arts. Kings are advised to take proper care of the performing artistes and extend state patronage for their professional training. Interestingly, Kautilya suggests appointing women performers to do espionage. According to him women performers being beautiful and articulate could serve as good spies while performing among the crowd. In the ‘Ganikadhyaksha Prakarana’, Kautilya recommends 1000 *panas* per annum as a salary to the ‘Ganikas’ who were young and beautiful and adept in dancing, singing and acting. A ganika should pay 24,000 *panas* to get freedom from the service of the king. The dwellings of performing artistes were fixed on the boundary of the village but they were treated at par with the other citizens as far as tax was concerned. Kautilya also recommends taking away half of the earnings by the prostitutes and other artistes during difficult times. There is also a reference to ‘Kaushika striyah’, certain women who were from the communities dedicated to performing arts and were employed in the courts.

Apart from this Kautilya also recommends a fine from a woman for watching a dramatic performance without the permission of her husband. According to him for watching a ‘Stree-Preksha’ a woman should be fined just half the amount of fine for watching a ‘Purusha-Preksha’. This implies that the patriarchal society of the time did not approve of women watching any act of entertainment, without permission. The terms ‘Stree Preksha’ and ‘Purusha Preksha’ has been used for the first time by Kautilya. This should be considered as a significant quote in context of Indian performing arts as it implies either the existence of troupes of all women performers and all

male performers or two types of auditoriums for female and male spectators in around 400BC.

Buddhist and Jain texts too directly or indirectly refer to instances of performances by female artistes. These instances show that professional artistes used to visit public fairs to earn money. In one of the Jataka stories there is an instance of employing female performing artistes to the palace to test the normalcy of the son of the king of Kashi; as he avoided ascending the throne as the prodigal son, who is supposed to be the heir of the entire kingdom. There are also instances in Jataka stories where professional artistes sang, danced and played instruments in front of the Buddha. These artistes were called 'Natakittithiyo' who were well trained in the art of music and dance. 'Theragatha', another Buddhist treatise, mentions a troupe 'Talaputa' which consisted of 500 professional actresses. This indicates the existence of a large number of professional female performers who could earn their livelihood from performances (Iravati, 2003, p. 70). Similar instances are found in Jain texts too which refer to the existence of professional performers who were invited to perform in public festivals.

Check Your Progress 2:

- 1) *What do you understand by the term 'Vadhu Natak Samgha'?*
- 2) *Who are 'œailu?a'? Why did they attain social approval?*
- 3) *What are the rules laid down by Kautilya relating to women performers?*

1.6 GENDER AND PERFORMANCES AS REFLECTED IN NATYASHASTRA

The most important treatise relating to the performing arts is Natyashastra written by Bharata (2nd century BC to 2nd Century AD) in which he dealt with all kind of performing arts with special emphasis on theatre arts. By the time of Bharata performing art was quite developed. Two types of music, Gandharva Gaan and Aranya Geya Gaan of the Vedic Era had taken a definite shape. Sculptures in different temples also suggest that folk and classical art existed side by side. There were clear demarcations of the type of music to be sung during Vedic rituals, social rituals and performances for entertainment and women were an essential part of all kinds of performances. In this period women started giving individual performances; they performed on the Flute, Vina, Lyre, Lute and even percussion

instruments which is seldom seen in contemporary times. In this scenario Bharata thought it appropriate to add instructions for female artistes too. He gave equal importance to both male and female artistes; rather in some cases he gave more importance to female artistes. According to his preference the preliminary rituals in Purvaranga which included dancing, should be performed by the female artistes only as they possessed the natural physical beauty and grace. Likewise vocalists in a troupe were also mostly women due to natural sweetness of their voice.

Much architectural evidence from the temples at Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura, Gandhara, Kondana, Karla and Udaygiri caves confirms the participation of both men and women in performing art forms. Women are also depicted performing acrobatics in the panels of Bharhut Temple. But according to the interpreters these women were mostly professional women who performed to earn money. Depiction of noble women performing dance & music are rare. Even some sculptures and textual depictions suggest that women performers would disrobe and make overt display of their bodies. For instance, *Avadanashataka*, written in early centuries of Christian era, speaks of a beautiful actress, Kuvalaya, who was a part of a troupe from south and who came to perform at Rajgriha, who seduced many pious monks by her talent and physical attraction (Iravati, 2003, p. 66). Bharata was not in favour of this practice and clearly instructed that female artistes were not to disrobe in public.

Though Bharata preferred enactment of role according to the gender and age of the character i.e. “Anurupa Prakriti”, he laid down certain rules for enacting the roles by the actors. According to him -

- I) Men, women and children could enact roles in accordance to their age and sex, viz. an old man should play an old man.
- II) Actors could enact roles contrary to their natural age; viz. children could enact the roles of old men or old men the roles of children.
- III) Actors could enact roles contrary to their sex, viz. men or women could enact roles of the opposite sex. This might have been obvious as we have seen earlier too that troupes of all women actors and all men actors existed from the Epic period and Kautilya has mentioned Stree Preksha in his *Arthashastra*. This is still practiced in some of the traditional regional drama practices in India where troupes consisting of all men, women, or boys enact all kind of roles in a play.

The Natyashastra does, however, state that it will be more effective if women are represented by women because of their daintiness (*sukumara*). The Natyashastra recommends all actors including female performers to undergo special training to enhance their abilities in the dramatic representations.

1.7 THE STATUS OF GANIKAS AND APSARAS IN ANCIENT INDIA

Apart from the professional performing artistes a tradition of prostitutes called as 'Ganikas' was also taking shape in ancient India. They contributed to the field of art tremendously. In the Vedic period, they were regularly invited to perform during the sacrificial rituals. They were expected to be expert in sixty-four arts and crafts, and were trained under the best of the 'acharyas' with the help of state patronage. Their profession demanded sound knowledge of vocal and instrumental music, dance and acting. According to Bharata they could be included in the panel of judges for evaluating artistic performances.

The Ganikas were regarded as auspicious and became an essential part of all kinds of religious and social rituals because of their beauty, knowledge and delightful performances. They were regarded as the custodian of art and Kings used to take pride in having them in their State. They had their own luxurious palaces in one part of the city. References in the plays written by Bhasa and Kalidasa point towards the fact that often intellectual discussions took place in the palaces of the courtesans where city intellectuals used to participate. This suggests that the Ganikas were supposed to know about the intellectual pursuits as well as contemporary politics of the State. Among Lichhavis it was a custom to appoint the most beautiful girl as Ganika, also called as Janapada Kalyani, which was regarded as a highly valued status. This status of Ganikas in the society started declining steadily after the fall of Gupta Empire and by the advent of the medieval period Ganikas were reduced to mere courtesans in the court of Kings.

Apart from Ganikas there was another group of professional women artistes called Apsaras. According to Bharata Apsaras were created by Brahma to enrich the performing art. They were full of grace and were experts in dance, music and theatre arts. Often they are mentioned as the wives of Gandharvas, the celestial singers; this indicates that they were professional performers. Apsaras were also invited to perform in all kind of rituals and celebrations to give performances and enhance the grace of the occasion.

1.8 THE TRADITION OF DEVADASIS IN ANCIENT INDIA

Devadasis are the women performers dedicated to temples in the service of the deity. Perhaps seeds of this tradition lie in the sacrificial rituals of the Vedic era. As we have seen earlier in this unit, professional women performers were invited in the Vedic sacrificial rituals where they had to perform as the part of the ritual. Perhaps this custom gave rise to the tradition of dedicating young girls to the temple deities. The duties of Devadasis were to do daily services for different rituals performed for the deity like bathing, dressing, offering flowers, including singing and dancing.

We come across the word “Devadasi” for the first time in the *Arthashastra*, written by Kautilya in circa 350-283 BC, where he says that a Devadasi, retired from her temple duties in her old age should be employed in spinning work. This statement indicates that by the time of Kautilya employing Devadasis in temples to the service of the temple deity had already become a regular practice. At the same time, Ganikas or courtesans were invited in the temple for ritualistic performances of dance and music up to the very early centuries of Christian era. So it seems that earlier the devadasis were simply the girls who did temple duties like cleaning the premises, making garlands, etc. Regarding retired devadasis, Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* does not indicate that the Devadasis had anything to do with performing arts. Gradually the Devadasis started replacing the Ganikas and took part in ritual dance and music and soon it became part of their duty. Around the medieval period (10th - 11th Century AD) this tradition reached its height. The Devadasis came to be regarded as a part of the normal embellishment of temples; their position was next only to priests. Their primary work was dancing, singing and playing musical instruments in honour of the deity. However in some temples, Devadasis continued to clean the temple premises, fetch water, make garlands of flowers, etc. as their secondary duties.

Dedicating dancing girls to the temples was practiced in many other ancient civilisations too. Ancient empires like Babylonia, Cyprus, Phoenicia, Greece, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria were also known to employ young girls to appease their deities in the temples. The amalgamation of Vedic ritualistic religious practices and the indigenous religious practices gave rise to the tradition of worship of personal deities who could be housed in a temple. This consequently gave rise to the custom of dedicating young dancing girls to the temple deities. This custom was soon looked upon as the most affordable way to earn merit in order to ensure one’s transition to heaven after death. So not only the kings and merchants but also the poor started dedicating girls to the services of the god. Sometimes queens and princesses of the defeated kings were also forced to join the temple. The number of Devadasis employed in a temple would mark the wealth and prestige of the temple. At one point of time, there were four hundred devadasis attached to the temples at Tanjore and Travancore.

Devadasis were married off to the temple deities and were expected to remain celibate through all their life. The practice was more widespread in the southern part of India and continued until very recently. However, decaying traditions gave rise to exploitations and marginalisation of the Devadasis by the temple priests due to which the Britishers declared this tradition illegal.

1.9 WOMEN PERFORMERS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA (1200 AD - 1800AD)

1.9.1 Women Performers in the Court of Turko - Persian and Mughal Rulers

From the thirteenth century onwards India experienced frequent invasions from the North-West by Central Asian nomadic tribes and the Persian Empire. Unlike earlier conquerors who became an integral part of the prevalent social systems, Central Asian and Persian conquerors maintained their religious identity and initiated new legal and administrative systems that brought drastic changes in prevalent systems of social conduct, cultural traditions, religious practices, lifestyle and ethics of India. Although the Southern part of India was less affected by these invasions, northern India was almost devastated due to frequent invasions. Consequently performing activities took a backseat in the cultural life of North India. Under the circumstances these art forms could remain alive either under the shelter of the rulers or in the temples as religious activities. The credit for keeping the intangible heritage of performing arts and their sanctity alive mainly goes to the Devadasis in the south; while in northern India the way of life took a new turn with the amalgamation of indigenous and Muslim culture.

The Turko - Persian rulers, who ruled India in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, were known to be connoisseurs of music and dance. There were many women performers who held an important place among the court musicians. There are references in the writings of Amir Khusro Dehelvi (the great poet and musician) and Ziauddin Barani (historian and political thinker) about some very accomplished women artistes who could sing, dance and play a variety of musical instruments. These women performers in the courts of Turkish rulers were slaves to the king and great efforts were taken to train them in dance, music and other pursuits. Shihabuddin al Umari, an Arab traveller who visited India during the period of Sultan Muhammed -bin-Tughlaq writes in his comments that “great care was taken in the refinement of Indian slave girls and their good breeding; they could write, recite verses and stories, play chess and backgammon and they excelled in music and playing lute. Their prices amounted to 20, 000 tankas or more” (Nijenhuis, Delvoye, 2010, p.35-64).

Theatre took a back seat in the courts of these rulers due to their lack of interest in this art form.

1.9.2 Women Performers during the Mughal Period

Most of the Mughal emperors were known for their keen interest in music and dance, except Aurangzeb. Emperor Akbar was a trained musician in Dhrupad style of singing. He took keen interest in bringing the best of instrumentalists and vocalists and dancers from all over India in his court.

Inmates of Mughal harems also took keen interest in music and dance. Except for the period of Aurangzeb, performances for inmates of the harem by women performers were very common. There used to be a female superintendent of music and dance inside the Harem. It is also learnt that Jahanara Begum was quite fond of singing and dancing. The courtesans in the Mughal court were very well trained in vocal and instrumental music as well as dance. The best of the courtesans were wealthy and lived in luxurious palaces. They used to travel on elephants gifted by the kings and other nobles.

However, outside the courts only courtesans used to practice the classical art forms. Socio-ritualistic music remained alive in the households of the commoners in form of 'Sanskar Geet' songs which were mainly sung by the women folk.

1.10 WOMEN PERFORMERS IN MODERN INDIA

Around the 19th Century, a new chapter unfolded in the field of performing arts. This was the reformative period for all types of performing arts. On the one hand music and dance institutions were set up on the lines of institutions in Britain; and on the other hand musicians started moving towards the colonial cities for better opportunity as temple and court patronage declined. In the South, the Brahmin elite took keen interest in reviving Karnatak music and dance and encouraged upper caste women to learn dance and music and perform on the public stage. Some of the nobles and wealthy people who were connoisseurs of music and dance started organizing musical soirées at their home. In this way, common householders started coming closer to the court music or classical music. Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar in Mumbai and Raja Sourindra Mohan Tagore and later Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore in Bengal took huge steps in popularizing classical art forms among the common people. Pt. Bhatkhande also started collecting the repertoires and notating them which enabled the household women to learn the songs sitting in the privacy of their home. Pt. Paluskar established a school for music in Mumbai. A new wave of interest in Indian music and dance resulted in female members of the family were being encouraged to learn these art forms. In the household of Rabindranath Tagore, performing music, dance and drama written by him and other family members was a regular feature in which women of the family also participated. This encouraged common people to encourage women of their family to acquire training in these art forms. In Mumbai and Pune some organisations organised 'Mehfils' where court musicians gave solo performances on the public stage. This stage was shared by the courtesans or 'tawaifs' too. Many foreign scholars like Capt. Willard, Curt Sachs, Fox Strangways and others, were impressed by the beauty and depth of Indian music and dance. By the beginning of 20th century, Indian

music and dance established themselves as classical art forms widely patronised and practiced by the upper castes and new middle class.

However, the circumstances in the household of traditional Muslim musicians did not change much. By the 19th century the 'gharana' system was fully established in north Indian music and almost all the originators of the 'gharanas' were Muslim court musicians. Gharana in musical terms means a particular school of music which follows a particular way of delineating the ragas. The names of the 'gharanas' have been given according to the place where the originator of that particular 'gharana' lived. The 'gharana' system considered the legitimate male children of the originator as the only authentic carriers of the tradition. Unfortunately, the female members of the family were always kept out of this intimate fold. There were a few exceptions like Babli Bai and Zohra Bai of Agra, who could boast of being bearers of the traditions of their gharana. The degree of disparity was so great that the identity of the male singers were marked not by their quality of performance but on the legitimacy and authenticity of their family. This disparity was also seen in sixteenth century when the 'dhrupad' style of singing was popular among the court musicians and their patrons. It was considered that 'dhrupad' depicted masculinity so it did not suit the female voice. However, with the advent of 'khyal' style of singing women got more space to perform as this form suited female voices. From the 20th century onwards many women musicians trained under the 'gharanedar ustads', however, they were essentially Hindu women from progressive families. As in many Hindu families, discriminating against the female members of the family from learning music and dance is still prevalent in Muslim 'gharanedar' families. In the contemporary times also there are very few Muslim female artistes in the field of dance and music.

However, the 'gharana' remained a 'homosocial' space for a very long time. The place for women disciples was seen from a different perspective in such a space. The task of teaching music to both male and female disciples fell upon the master male musician of the court. This set up a patriarchal atmosphere for almost all courtesans or 'tawaifs' had to learn music from a male vocalist. This drew lines of gender discrepancy. For example, the male tutor never cared to adjust the scale of his voice with that of a female disciple. It resulted in overstraining of voices of the female disciples and consequently the voice became hoarse. Listening to the earliest recordings of the female artiste reveals how these artistes sang in a very masculine tenor. This gender discrepancy changed only after Hira Bai Badodekar entered the stage. Her way of presentation of the music and the way she carried herself on stage won acceptance for her. This paved the way for many women artistes of 20th century. Gradually women tutors also gained acceptance in the male dominated world of classical music.

At the end of 19th century the Devadasi System became one of the targets for social reform. In 1947, the practice was legally abolished. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the social reform movements and colonial ideas about associating prostitution to the degenerating devadasi system made it one of the prominent issues in the agenda of social reform. The Madras High Court denied Devadasis the status of artistes due to the stigma of prostitution attached to them. Revivalists, like E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi Arundale and others, considered the music and dance of the devadasis to be part of an ancient Indian tradition that extended far beyond the lives of devadasis. Their effort was to rid music and dance from the prejudiced psyche of music and dance being associated with prostitution. Rukmini Devi was one of the first Brahmin women in the 20th century to perform south Indian dance on the public stage and later established a reputed dance institution too; her goal was to prove that girls from any family could dance, not necessarily they ought to be prostitutes.

The 20th century gradually saw the emergence of many women artistes from the upper and middle classes of the society. The emergence of the electronic media also provided a stage for women in varieties of musical forms. Women artistes often have to fight against discrimination from the fellow male artistes and the audience as well as in the society. Women artistes continue to face discrimination at the hands of the ‘gurus’ and organisers of cultural events alike. They are often expected to perform their traditional domestic roles along with their art, and are, therefore, highly dependent on familial support. Due to the conflict between culturally determined traditional duties that women are expected to fulfill, and the rigorous demands of performing arts, many women are still unable to dedicate themselves to music and dance. However, changing cultural norms and greater awareness of gender disparities are gradually helping to transform this situation.

1.11 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we embarked upon the construction of performing tradition in context of India, especially through the gender perspectives. Being the first unit of this block on performance, this unit tried to explore the historical background beginning with the pre-Vedic period upto the modern period. This unit unfolds the basis for discussion on other issues of performance which the subsequent units will deal with.

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UNIT 2 GENDER AND PERFORMATIVITY

Anandita Majumdar

Structure

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- 2.3 Defining Sex and Gender
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2.1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of gender and performativity emerges from an analysis of how cultures construct ideas around the idea of what is male and what is female. More often than not our understanding of men and women is completely different from the general idea of biological differences. Gender identity is created and sustained through multiple ways of being and doing. The two main strands of analysis in the anthropology of sex and gender look at ideas and practices that create differences, on the one hand—and remove or confuse those differences, on the other. This unit will try to unfold these differences. Later the discussion will move the way gender and performance are connected to each other in an extensive manner. The theorists who have influenced the analysis of gender from the perspective of performance will be discussed. We will look at examples and instances from India, in order to understand the subject matter better.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Define and explain the connections between gender and performance;
- Critically analyse gender from the perspective of performance;
- Discuss the ambiguity of gender roles in rituals; and
- Distinguish the differences and discrepancies in the gender and performance.

2.3 DEFINING SEX AND GENDER

You have already read in detail about the sex and gender dichotomy in unit 2 Block 1 of MWG 002. Let us briefly look at these terms again in the context of performativity. The terms sex and gender pertain to the spheres of biology and society, respectively. Sex lies in the domain of biological and anatomical differences, and gender is a socially constructed identity, that is to a large extent influenced by sex. The biological uncertainty created by the existence of hermaphrodites, posed newer questions regarding the identification of sex as binary or divided into two. Hermaphrodites are born with both the male and female sexual organs. The gender they belong to becomes an issue.

The fact that sex and by extension gender is seen in terms of a binary division is based on the difference in sexual organs, orientation, socialization and also differences in division of labour. Yet, a lot of people do not fall into either the male or female category, on the basis of various social markers, such as clothing and mannerisms. This presupposes that most individuals are therefore seen not only as male and female, but that to be recognized as male and female an individual has to exhibit certain characteristics. These characteristics, particular the kind of walk, dressing, talking are socially endowed or recognised as masculine or feminine.

From the World Health Organization website, ‘ “Sex” refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.... “Gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.’ The website of the organisation goes on to list the sex and gender characteristics that distinguishes male and female as sex categories; and masculine and feminine as gender categories. In terms of sex characteristics, males have testicles that females do not have; females have developed breasts that are capable of lactating—that males do not possess. Gender characteristics however are listed in terms of cultural differences. So, ‘In the US (and most other countries) women earn significantly less than men for the same work; in Viet Nam, many more men than women smoke as female smoking has not traditionally been considered appropriate; in Saudi Arabia, men are allowed to drive cars, while women are not; in most of the world, women do more housework than men.’

These are often identified with what is known as *gender roles*. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), gender roles are related to behavioural aspects of being a man or a woman. Now this might be prescribed by cultures and be played out as per a prescribed format. In this sense there are many who do not follow a prescribed gender role because of ambiguity regarding their sex or gender. It is therefore important to note the different

social categories of genders and identities before we go further into the unit. It may also be helpful for you to review similar categories in Unit 4, Block 3 of MWG 001.

Transgender is an umbrella term used to refer individuals who do not conform to the gender role expectations of their biological sex. Also used by persons who may identify their gender as being the opposite of their biological sex. Under this category, and contiguous to it are others that cannot be placed under the strict demarcation of men and women. **Transsexuals** are persons with the biological characteristics of one sex who see themselves as the opposite gender and have had some type of surgical alteration and/or hormone treatment that changes their bodies' appearance in alignment with their identity. **Cross dressers** or **Transvestites** on the other hand wear clothes usually worn by people of the opposite biological sex. They do not however identify themselves as having a gender identity different from their biological sex or gender role. The motivations for cross-dressing vary. **Intersex** people are those born with aspects of both female and male physical features. This is usually understood to be congenital, involving chromosomal, morphologic, genital and/or gonadal anomalies, such as diversion from typical XX-female or XY-male presentations, e.g., sex reversal (XY female, XX male), genital ambiguity, or sex developmental differences. An intersex individual may have biological characteristics of both the male and the female sexes. Earlier, reportedly, doctors would often decide the sex of the infant at birth without consulting the parents (from the Boulder County advisory to understanding queer communities. Available on the website: www.bouldercounty.org).

By and large, people who conform to different gender roles and expectations. They also challenge the established definition of sex and gender. West and Zimmerman believe that gender is performed—they call it the 'doing' of gender. So, '“doing” of gender is undertaken by men and women whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production' (Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). This means that people act out their 'natures' as belonging to either the masculine or the feminine as per socially prescribed rules. They usually act them out as per socially prescribed rules, which are more often than not dictated by the social context in which they find themselves. West and Zimmerman note how this context is an amalgamation of various social arrangements and relationships. The doing of gender as per gender roles therefore becomes a kind of performance. Let us examine this idea in a theoretical context in the next section.

2.4 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gender performativity according to Judith Butler, refers to the process by which difference and identity are constructed in, and through the discourses of sexuality (Morris, 1995). In an insightful study by Foucault, the idea of

gender and performance becomes clearer. Foucault published the memoirs of an eighteenth century French hermaphrodite named, Herculine Barbin. In the memoirs Barbin talks of the predicament of forcibly taking on a male identity after having lived as a female for most part of 'her' life. The male identity is an imposition by medical and legal authorities who want to assign one particular 'sex' to Barbin. Through the memoir Foucault tries to recount the history of sexuality in pre-modern Europe wherein certain ideas of sex and gender were privileged over others. The most dominant amongst these ideas was that of the binary quality of sex and gender, i.e. there are only two types of gender and sex—man and woman, and male and female. This also resulted in a view that discriminated against those who did not fall into either category, or worse had sexual preferences for those belonging to the same sex. In Foucault's analysis history bears testimony to how sexuality comes to be seen in relation to sex and gender. Therefore homosexuality was seen as abnormal or going against nature.

Interestingly the theoretical and academic work in the area of gender and performativity tries to do away with the binary division of sex and gender, and attempts to analyse it from a more dynamic perspective wherein the idea of gender and sex is ever changing. Performance theory is therefore seeking to place both gender and sex within multiple layers of understanding and practices.

Rosalind Morris (1995) notes that the theory of performance emerged as a critique of structuralism within socio-cultural anthropology. Structuralism, as a theory and form of anthropological analysis espouses the importance of social structure in the mental life of individuals who make up society. According to structuralists, society and its structure condition individual actions as well as social rules and norms. Performance theory combines anthropology and a feminist perspective to arrive at a substantial critique of structural theory.

Here, thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau and others are very important, even though a gendered perspective is not overtly present in their work. Yet, the influence they have exercised on performance theorists has been very important.

Bourdieu's (1995, 1998) study of practice has been very influential in performance studies. Through the idea of the *habitus*, or a set of structuring structures that produce and are produced by specifically embodied subjects, Bourdieu wishes to place the idea of structures that recreate themselves through the acts of individuals who are socialized into reproducing the very same structures. Let us take the idea of acts and structures and then the idea of the embodied state.

Practical logic, according to Bourdieu, creates the illusion that all acts are geared towards a model, knowing fully well that the model and its rules will be violated. Take for instance, the idea of the 'feel of the game'. To be successful, or good at what one does, one needs to have a feel of the game—a sentence we have heard often, in different contexts, but conveying the same meaning—that in order to win one must know how the game operates. So even though the football player enters the match with no hidden intentions or motivations, he still knows that they exist and the rules can be manipulated in order to win the match. This is how individuals act to subvert, go against established models and rules. We work out strategies to get over rules. A *strategy*, according to Bourdieu, is a way of calculating practice which is not previously thought out, nor mechanically determined by the rule. They are on-the-spot in a way and yet not completely devoid of some kind of idea of the consequences that will follow. Strategies are context-specific, and a very important aspect of practice and practical logic. For Bourdieu the importance of time cannot be discounted in practice. The way it is presented is often removed from how it really happens in real time. As models the representation of a practice hides many layers within it. For instance, in gift exchange one is unable to see the motivations of the actors involved or what repercussions a delayed gift might invite. All one sees is the process removed from its reality, in a way. This is how, for Bourdieu, most structuring structures operate.

In this way the collective representation of the body, self and person come to be represented in material terms—that can be valued. In Bourdieu's idea of *embodiment*, the body comes to be seen as a result of social processes rather than in terms of abstractions. What we therefore call 'body language' is a carefully constructed set of codes and rules that are understood by others because they too are aware of, and practice the same rules. Tual gives the striking example of Iranian women, who must never let men be aware of their presence in public (Tual, 1986). For this they must be fully covered in the *hijab* or veil, they should avoid looking into the eyes of a stranger, and they should basically be invisible. Men, in turn, must treat them as if they are invisible. According to Tual, in Iran both men and women have embodied the habitus.

Michel de Certeau looks at practice as a form of meandering, improvisational acts of the individual, who must move through the systematized world (Morris, 1995). Individuals therefore indulge in 'creative gestures' that cannot be seen within the perspective of structural principles. De Certeau is known for his approach that looks at the *everyday* negotiations that individuals go through in order to subvert and overturn established rules. And even though the individual is completely socialised into believing that he/she is an objectified product of society and its rules—there is indulgence, often unconscious and in small acts, in the overturning of structures.

In the everyday approach, the most cited example is de Certeau's reading of walking in the city (Certeau, 1984). Individuals often take shortcuts to navigate through routes in a city and to save time. Interestingly, for de Certeau, it is these shortcuts that defy established routes, which are often set down in maps and route guides. By taking the unidentified routes individuals create their own paths—a creative gesture—to go against the established and the given.

Many gender theorists have been influenced by both de Certeau's and Bourdieu's approaches to look at everyday subversions of gender norms, as well as place practice within a dynamic, ever-changing perspective. Judith Butler (1999), has been influenced by Bourdieu's theory and sees gender as a set of non-normative practices. Butler, as one of the primary proponents of the gender and performativity theory, finds Bourdieu's idea of embodiment as relevant to understanding how even though the body assumes its sex as per culturally mandated practices, it is in the aberrations or deviations that gender and sex roles are really played out. So, as a set of acts gender 'derives its compulsive force from the fact that people mistake the acts for the essence—and come to believe that they are mandatory' (Morris, 1995).

It is this very idea of the essence or essential nature that influences the next theoretical stance in the understanding of gender and performance.

1.4.1 Doing of Gender

Another key thinker, Erving Goffman (1976), theorised that 'doing' gender is a part of every individual's negotiations with her/his gender identity and role. Goffman mentions that it is during social interaction with others in the latter's environment that individuals exhibit, what he calls, their 'essential natures'. This essential nature is representative of their social situation and basic character—and it is relevant to give an idea to the other person the social context from which the individual is coming from. Often as expressive acts, essential natures get represented in the form of 'displays'. For Goffman, "If gender be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), their gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.130). These gender displays however come to represent the personalities of the individuals, more than their essential natures. In this form they become to be dramatizations of the cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity. As an important part of everyday interactions, individuals may not want to express the conventional ideas associated with their gender. That is when the doing of gender becomes very important for us to study and understand.

Influenced by Goffman, West and Zimmerman base their analysis of doing gender by looking at how individuals negotiate in their everyday gender displays. They formulate and define three categories that form an important

part of one's sex and gender identity. *Sex* is defined as the "determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127). This classification may be on the basis of genitalia, or chromosomal typing before birth. *Sex category* is defined as when "placement...is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaims one's membership in one or the other category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127). The authors note that even though ostensibly sex and sex category go together, the two can be different. Finally, *Gender* "is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127). Gender activities emerge from membership to a particular sex category. Through a definition of the three concepts above the authors wish to point out how certain roles are played out in terms of one's sex-gender. However, they are unlike contextualized roles like that of a doctor, teacher, patient, which have an organizational base that is absent in sex and gender roles.

In order to understand how individuals negotiate through the three categories defined above, West and Zimmerman draw on Harold Garfinkel's study of Agnes (1967). Agnes was a transsexual raised as a boy, who after the age of 17 took a female identity—and some years later underwent surgery to make herself 'permanently' into a female. Pre and post surgery, Agnes enacted the sex, sex category and gender of a female and a woman. Despite having male genitalia, Agnes undertook what Garfinkel calls—being a 'practical methodologist'. This implies that she did not fake being a woman but tried to negotiate her everyday interactions by presenting herself the way a woman would—as part of a calculated, preconceived design and assessment of herself. In their analysis, West and Zimmerman note that when it comes to negotiating with her 'sex', Agnes manages very well. She insists that she has a penis by mistake—a fault that has to be corrected, and is eventually corrected through surgery. She is able to camouflage her genital difference through clothes. At the cultural level therefore the identification of sex remains restricted—so while clothes may help identify one's sex, they may camouflage it too. In the case of sex categorisation it is slightly different, for in the absence of clothes as symbolic markers, recourse is taken to aspects such as voice and facial hair—again variable in character. Some men have less facial hair, while some women may have a deep voice—again a terrain that can be negotiated with ease. Agnes made her adjustments to convincingly portray her sex category. It is when gender comes into the question that the authors note that Agnes finds the performance of being a woman challenging. In trying to be a 'woman' Agnes takes recourse to her fiancée's assessment of other women. She follows his guidelines to try and 'acceptable' gender performance. The fiancée's advisory

is of course loaded with the unequal power relations between men and women—but in following the same Agnes conforms more to her advantage.

The doing of gender therefore emerges from a mix of the prevailing social context and the kind of social relationships the individual is embedded in. In that sense, no particular social code with reference to gender display can be uniformly in practice. Variability is the most important characteristic of the ways in which gender plays itself out in different settings.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How would you describe the difference between sex and gender? How does performance theory view this difference?
- 2) Summarise the ideas of Goffman and Garfinkel regarding the 'doing' of gender.

1.5 MARKING AND DILUTING GENDER THROUGH PERFORMANCE

Rosalind Morris identifies two main strands of analysis in the anthropology of sex and gender. One strand looks at the way cultural orders construct gender and create subjects. This involves focusing on ideological and symbolic representations that further exacerbate the difference. For instance, rites of passage or life cycle rites (marriage, death, birth, initiation) that are an important area of analysis, combining performance and the explicit creation of a gender identity. The second strand decomposes difference and focuses on those institutions that create ambiguity in terms of transgendering institutions, especially those found in non-Western societies. This approach looks at subversion and agency through established and covert spheres such as theatre or marginalised groups. In the next section we look at both these spheres of analysis. In the first anthropological analyses of life cycle rites in Bengal are discussed to look at how cultures construct and socialize people into the idea of gender, through performance of rituals. With regard to the anthropology of decomposing difference, we look at a study on the Hijras of India.

1.5.1 Rituals and Sex Role Display

Rituals have always been important social markers of gender. There has been much anthropological analysis of the ways in which the rites of passage or life cycle rites play an important part in many non-Western cultures in social identification of sex and gender. Rites such as marriage and initiation

use symbols and practices to stress the change in social status for individuals. The symbols often focus on the body, especially genitalia, in an attempt to highlight sexual relationships. Morris notes that in many cultures, for instance, virginity is made visible through its destruction—both symbolic and real. And the ambiguity surrounding the rites is often meant to fulfil the dual task of pointing out not only the difference between men and women, but between men as husbands and women as wives. Below we look at the analysis of traditional initiation rites prevalent in the Bengali community to see how virginity and purity are notions employed symbolically to identify a young girl as a woman at the time of her menstruation.

In traditional Bengali kinship, the woman belongs to her husband's clan and family after marriage. This change in membership is important because she will bear her husband's children in future—children belonging to her husband's clan. It is for this reason that on attaining puberty the initiation ritual marks her transition to the status of a woman who is ready to be a wife and mother. In traditional Bengali culture women are also associated with ideas of auspiciousness (*sumangali*) and inauspiciousness (*amangali*). On attaining puberty, the girl stops being auspicious for her father's family—and becomes auspicious for the family that will accept her as their daughter-in-law. All these aspects, the change in status especially is reflected in the ritual—as are the references (in the ritual) to the impending sexual union that will seal the girl's fate as wife and mother. Before puberty, a polluting state amongst most upper-caste Hindus in India, the girl is auspicious for her family and is worshipped as a goddess (the Gouri Puja is an example). Ostor and Fruzzetti (1984) look at the initiation ritual as an example of how the women's domain was ritualised and hierarchically placed in an inferior position—away from the public domain of men and power.

In the Bengali menstruation rites the primary objects used in the ritual are the stone pestle and mortar (*nora/sil*) which women use in the kitchen to grind spices. The *nora* or pestle symbolises the penis (*linga*), while the *sil* or mortar symbolises the vagina or *yoni*. The two are together and can never be separated. The pure, virgin in the form of the goddess is the mortar, but with menstruation she must take the *nora* as an inseparable part of her. Interestingly, the pestle symbolises both the child and its father. Similarly the mortar is a symbol of the virgin, mother and wife—the latter two in relation to the pestle. These two objects, along with others appear through other rites specifically related to women, called *stri acars*. Even at the time of marriage they are essential to show the transition in status from an ambiguous, androgynous being to one who is now established in her role as woman and wife.

The repetitive aspect of the rituals, according to Morris, is important in understanding gender performativity. In the above rite, not only the stress on the use of the symbols, but their meaning as well is emphasized over

many other rituals to stress on the importance of the purity of the bride before marriage. Interestingly, the virgin must be married off once she undergoes puberty. Earlier, in these communities where child marriage was practiced, child brides would live in their parental home till their menstruation after which they would be formally transferred to their husbands' home for the consummation rite—establishing her firmly in her in-laws family and as a woman with procreative powers.

Yet, in many rites in North India there are provisions to subvert the institutionalized mechanisms within which the ritual operates. These occasions become the source of rebellion against established cultural norms regarding gender and gender practices. Raheja and Gold (1994) have looked at women's rites during the marriage ceremony in North India to show how women use songs and dance to jokingly get the message across to mothers-in-law and other members of the patriarchy that their suppression of the former's desires are not forgotten, or will be taken lightly. The songs are laments by women against their husband's family, and even their fathers and brothers for having forgotten them after giving them away in marriage. These songs enabled women to use the rituals, to vent, and air their grievances against and unjust social and familial structure where patriarchy treats them as inferior.

However some of these rites are clearly part of the ritual structure and may serve as only an avenue of protest without really impacting the nature of hierarchical relations already present. Yet, the festival of Tij which is traditionally celebrated by women for the welfare of their husbands has been analysed as a subversive movement amongst women, in the garb of tradition (Skinner, Holland and Adhikari, 1994). By looking at various types of Tij songs the authors trace their importance in women's lives as a medium through which they give voice to their grievances. So, for instance the *dukha* (sad) songs primarily deal with themes of marital unhappiness. The struggles that a young wife has to go through vis-à-vis her husband, mother-in-law, parents and society as a whole. The songs are often written and composed by the women themselves and form a part of their ritualised protest against the unfair treatment women are subjected to in society. The authors' analysis clearly places the Tij songs as subversive rather than a ritual overturning of otherwise dominant structures.

1.5.2 Ambiguity in Gender And Performance

In many cultures the idea of a third sex, not male or female, is neither seen as an aberration nor as something to be celebrated. The three sexes often live within the same social structure without necessarily threatening the structure. Hijras in India form a particularly interesting field of study. They are marginalized, and yet a necessary part of Indian culture. Serena Nanda (1990) undertakes a detailed account of the Hijra community to understand who they are and what place they occupy in mainstream Indian society.

Nanda contests that simply defining Hijras as eunuchs would be incorrect. They have many definitions attached to the multiple ways in which they are perceived in society. Most of these definitions are either in opposition or in disjunction with each other. So while even though in India, Hijras are identified in their traditional role of performers—in reality many of them rarely fulfil their traditional roles and have been reduced to the status of prostitutes or sex workers. However, the understanding of Hijras as neither man nor woman can primarily be seen in the following ways. As hermaphrodites the Hijras are found in very few numbers; as genetically belonging to the male gender, but who prefer to be women; and as emasculated or those who have gone through the castration ceremony from being men to Hijras.

The other understanding of who or what of Hijra is emerges from their rejection or renunciation of male sexuality in favour sexual relations with other men. Through the castration ceremony or even without it, most Hijras see themselves as impotent or unable to be men, both in the sexual and the social sense of being a man. Again as ‘incomplete’ men they are seen as lacking the appropriate genitals—and wishing to be like women. In this sense they are defined as in-between, or both men and women. Nanda notes that the desire to be like a woman is seen to be predominant amongst the Hijras, as seen in their clothings, gait, behavior and mannerisms. Even their names are feminine. Incidentally, many Hijras try to get themselves registered as women in the national population census in India. Yet in trying to be women, Hijras also believe that they are not like ‘real’ women. For real women do not behave in public as they do (loud, solicitous of male attention, often threatening to expose genitalia in public if not given alms, often threaten with curses, but also bestowing blessings), Hijras do not menstruate and do not have the ability to bear children. This is an important marker of why Hijras think they are not really women. Their public performances and gestures are both a sign of their lack of being a woman, and a man.

However the lack of a male organ bestows on the Hijras special powers (Hindu mythology testifies to the same). Nanda describes this as creative asceticism wherein the castrated phallus is also the source of *tapasya* or meditation. Thus, a negative cultural feature of being without the male organ is turned into a source of positive energy. This energy is seen to be important especially during many Hindu life-cycle rites, where the Hijras blessings are actively sought. Especially after childbirth Hijras are known to provide blessings to the child. Their curse is regarded as equally strong as per cultural notions –and most people invoke their blessings rather than incur their wrath.

The emasculation ceremony is seen as a big sacrifice for those who are not born hermaphrodites but do not see themselves as male. The Hijras invoke

the blessing of the Goddess Bahuchara to help smoothen the process of castration. In this way a Hijra enters the order and becomes the *chela* of a *guru* within the community. The Hijra community has an intricate set of caste relations governed by the *guru-chela* (teacher-student) relationship. The Jamat is the larger body amongst the Hijras headed by a few influential *gurus*. The Jamat as an umbrella organization includes in it other smaller groups, each headed by a particular *guru*. The *gurus* train, house and feed the *chela* in return for monetary compensation from them.

The Hijras, as a community, are symbolic of how cultures assimilate groups with different identities. Even though marginalised, the Hijras draw from their marginal status to show how idea, regarding sex and gender are variable. Through their performance during key life-cycle rites the Hijras are able to show that those very rituals that reinforce social identities of men and women are open to interpretation.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How do rituals perpetuate established cultural ideas of sex and gender? Give an example of any ritual that you know of that does the same.
- 2) Do Hijras dilute the binary difference in sex and gender? If yes, explain how.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we embarked upon the study of sex and gender and their relationship to performativity. Along the way we learnt that it is very difficult to precisely define sex and gender especially when the two often intermingle and create identities that may be different from established ideas. Thus we learnt that:

- gender is subject to negotiations in the way it is represented and performed in particular contexts and relationships;
- gender and sex displays are often manipulated against established social codes;
- while certain practices magnify sex and gender differences, others help hide them; and
- different cultures have different understandings of sex and gender.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Differentiate between de Cardeau's and Bourdieu's theories of gender and performativity.
- 2) Explain how rituals become the social markers of gendered performance.
- 3) Discuss the ambiguity created in performance with reference to the hijras.

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UNIT 3 STAGE AND THEATRE

Mangai Arasu

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 The Body In Theatre
- 3.4 The Stage and Theatre
 - 3.4.1 The Stage and Gender
 - 3.4.2 The Role of Audience
 - 3.4.3 Performing Women
- 3.5 Types of Theatre
 - 3.5.1 Classical Theatre
 - 3.5.2 Realism in Theatre/ Method Acting
 - 3.5.3 The Epic/Didactic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht
 - 3.5.4 The Theatre of the Oppressed
 - 3.5.5 Folk Theatre
- 3.6 Gendered Interventions in the Stage and Theatre
- 3.7 Performance as Assertion
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Unit End Questions
- 3.10 References
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3.1 INTRODUCTION

When we think of stage and theatre, we tend to focus upon how the characters portray their role. In this regard, it is important to recognise the overlapping concerns of both gender and theatre, both of which cannot evade the role of experience in performance. The transience of theatrical experience both for the participants and spectators makes it all the more difficult to be used as an analytical category. Body politics, representation, narratives and counter- narratives, conventions of the society and performance, notions of space, significance of the public space, acknowledgement of the personal and ways of seeing are crucial for both gender and theatre. In this unit, we will examine some of these issues in the context of the inter-relationships between gender and theatre.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to build an analytical understanding of various issues related to stage, theatre and gender and based on this you will be able to:

- Define and explain the meaning of stage and theatre on the context of gender;
- Critically analyse different kinds of theatre; and
- Discuss the reasons for performance being an assertive tool of gender and power dynamics.

3.3 THE BODY IN THEATRE

The body as a site of knowledge has gained currency for various reasons. Be it in medicine, philosophy or arts, the crux of inquiry has been the puzzles thrown open by the way the body works and the workings of the body. Apart from the inscriptions of caste, race, colour, religion and nationality, sex, gender and sexuality occupy a crucial role in the study of the body. The material construction of the sexualised body is a site of contestation for various other inscriptions, imposed and engineered. Especially for the marginalised in society, bodily wounds are the most easily inflicted punishment. In a casteist society like India, where untouchability is still practised, the body as a site for oppression and resistance becomes even more urgent and crucial. The body is at once part of nature, culture and society. That is the premise upon which gender and theatre begin their inquiry.

The representation of the body documented in society through language, art, literature and performing arts become the codes upon which the hegemony of hierarchic structures reside. In other words, one is born into an already given structure of gender, caste and religion. In theatre it gets further sanctified as an aesthetic and universal category. Notions of beauty, health, sanity and dignity are established based on these practices. It is also interesting to note at this juncture how there is a simultaneous existence of contradictory construction of images surviving in the same system, both with the same hierarchic approach. While the gods described as 'beautiful' like Lord Krishna or Goddess Kali are presented as 'dark' in complexion, one can still sell cosmetic fairness creams successfully. The archetypal dark beauty gives way to the industrialised, Eurocentric 'fair'ness, still perpetrating the same hierarchy of colour, caste and beauty.

A body in motion is considered still more dangerous. Societal and cultural prescriptions govern bodily movements. Most often the 'gaze' follows one in all aspects of life, laying down laws of permissibility. The gaze that

probes, masters and objectifies a body is omnipresent and worst still is internalised. Especially in a patriarchal system in which the female is 'othered', male gaze devalues or over-values the female body. Devaluing takes the shape of demonising women; while over-valuing mystifies, de-sexualises and places her as out-of-reach.

Conventions of body codes are the basis of the study of theatre and performance. Most studies on rituals and performance conventions in India assume that community rituals are common for both genders. But in practice, female in performing arts are a separate sub- genre of performance hardly dealt with as part of folklore or performance. In some cases the women guard that space as an autonomous one, forbidding any onlooker, like in the case of puberty rituals. Different regions in India have different conventions that guide the participation of women. That is a subject of study in itself. The Victorian morality reigned supreme in colonial India had a major impact upon gender and performance. Woman in the public space as an object of the gaze was deemed disrespectful. Sharmila Rege brings out the way caste was played out in making women perform for male gaze in Maharashtra (Singh, 2009, p. 1-24). Modernity only stabilised this caste- gender dynamics in performance by making sure that forms in which middle- class and upper- caste women participated gained 'classical' status. For instance, the debates between Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswathi are interesting in this regard (O' Shea, 2007, p. 39-51).

Narratives that are oral, performed in a collective, and non- linear in its form have been crucial for both gender and theatre. Several interesting versions of Mahabharata and Ramayana have come to lime light through studies on narratives of this kind, like those of Iravati Kave, Paula Richman, Alf Hiltebeitel, and others. 'Ways of seeing' is the most significant aspect of both gender and theatre. Theatre has proposed various kinds of theatre based on the role of the spectators. In terms of gender, looking at things through a 'gender lens calls for a great deal of un- learning and learning.

3.4 STAGE AND THEATRE

Stage and Theatre are often used interchangeably in common parlance. But for the sake of clarity it is helpful to know the subtle variation of the meaning of the two terms. Stage is usually referred to as an assigned space where 'performers' and 'audience' congregate. The shape of the stage changes the view of the audience. Not surprisingly, Peter Brook called his book on theatre *Empty Space*, to connote that any space can be converted into a stage for a performance to happen. Stage is a space for performers.

Theatre on the other hand is defined either **historically**, like Shakespearean theatre, or **dramaturgically**, like Noh Theatre, or **ideologically**, like Feminist theatre or Dalit theatre. At times theatre can also define the style of

presentation - realistic or stylised, like street theatre, classical theatre, or post-modern theatre.

Both stage and theatre however are temporally defined. The conventions of an age, nation and historical context of a specific form play a major role in defining the way stage and theatre get formed and communicated. Since theatre is always a live performance, constraints and possibilities thrown open by the stage would always be there. In fact, in recent times, site-specific performances have become more popular making the stage-space acquire significant emphasis. Bearing in mind this difference this section explores the way stage and theatre are gendered.

3.4.1 The Stage and Gender

Notions of intimacy and distance and the ways in which bodies are represented are crucial to an understanding of the way gender operates on stage. The levels on which the actors are presented and the angles which they hold to the audience decide the importance ascribed to them in the narrative. Add to it the interaction between actors, which is the alphabet of choreographic principles. A basic understanding of theatre divides the stage space into front (up), back (down), centre and right and left. There are also vertical and horizontal space and movement. The assumption is that anything that is placed at the centre and at a height holds maximum attention. But it is important to raise issues with that assumption itself. Another major contentious practice is to reflect 'reality' by revealing the power structures through levels. The 'reality' thus captured invariably makes one sometimes look at women as a Dalit, servant, worker or a tribal in a submissive lowered stance and level. When the character is juxtaposed against a socially powerful one in terms of class, caste or gender, (eg. man and woman, landlord and labourer), it highlights and re-emphasises the existing hierarchical social relation.

Activity 1

Collect photographs/newspaper clippings of various stage productions. Analyse them from the point of view of level and angle.

The body presented on stage almost always represents something. There cannot be a totally idiosyncratic gesture since gestures are encoded and inscribed by our socio-cultural contexts. They are 'codes' that perform as Judith Butler would say. In a country like India, where traditional and contemporary performance forms exist together, these codes are defined within systems of performance. A symbolic miming of a flower or a bird would take its code from a specific dance tradition of a region; a melody that is drawn upon might have a ritualistic significance like in the case of a lullaby or wailing; an instrument that will become representative of the

region, caste and gender. The politics of re-presentation on stage is an inescapable trope one plays with. There cannot be an 'innocent' or general application of even a single gesture, move or sound on stage. In that sense the stage is a very self-conscious space and therefore, challenging and exciting simultaneously. Apart from gestures, costumes, sets and props (properties) add to the representation. For example when Neelam Mansingh's *Kitchen Katha* makes the kitchen the set for the play, it changes our functional attitude towards the kitchen. The installations of Nalini Malani as used in Anuradha Kapur's plays, such as *Antigone* and *Crusaders* reveals a lot about the self-conscious use of sets in the productions of plays.

3.4.2 The Role of the Audience

No public performance is complete without an audience. The audience completes the performance text. In India, the Natya Shastra places utmost importance to how the reception of a '*bhava*' creates a particular '*rasa*' in the viewer. The theory of *rasa* is based on the reception of a performance. Like in the Greek society, in India too the stage is considered as a vibrant place of discussion. The Artha Sastra laid down the rule that female audiences be levied a fine for watching a show depending on the time of the performance and the kind of show. As you have already read in unit 1 of this Block 1, there are also variations that operate in the way male and female audience, are imagined. This trend seems continue to this day as evidenced in the advertisements for films, plays and other entertainments. A detailed study of the drama notices is bound to offer an interesting analysis of how the audience was controlled and conditioned and opens up the discussion on how the play, enacted on stage can be a site of power to engage the psychology of the audience watching the play.

3.4.3 Performing Women

Theatre history in India is still to discover who the first female actress was on stage. The tradition of female dancers seemed to have existed from at least 3rd century B.C. Sangam poetry talks about a whole clan of Panar, a performing tribe. It consisted of *Patini*, the female singer and composer and *viraliyar*, the dancer. Apart from these two categories there were also those who played instruments. This clan is nomadic in nature but a patronage of sorts was already in place. Of course, Sanskrit tradition refers to apsaras, who must have been dancers. Since theatre is considered to be part of Natya - dance and drama - there seemed to have been an overlapping of histories in this realm. Apart from the devadasi system, there must have existed a more community based, village based system of offering women to temple gods or goddesses. Hanne de Bruin refers to a few female artists who she had met in their old age (Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 31, 2001, pp. 64-70). In that she clarifies that there must have been a devadasi system prevalent in rural Tamil Nadu, by which women were dedicated to local,

village goddesses unlike the ‘high culture’ counterparts who were dedicated to male gods. These women seemed to have run all- female theatre companies. Prof. S. Ramanujam revived the tradition of Kaisiki Natagam in South India, in which there were temple dancers who performed the annual play at the Vaishnavite temple. With the advent of colonial rule, English education and Victorian morality the idea of women performing was certainly not treated as ‘respectable’. It required a great deal of effort on the part of social reformers and middle-class English educated artists to sanitise the dance forms and make them palatable for consumption. Once that process happened, however, the traditional dancers can be considered crass and lowly in taste.

The division of classical and folk forms survived on caste, class and patronage systems. While the classical soon moved on to ‘modern’ modes of training, the folk forms still survived on hereditary practices, most often ritualistic, and were controlled by the caste hierarchy. You will read about this in details in Unit 5 of Block I of MWG 004. In some cases, utter poverty drove families to literally sell young girls to performance. Whether they were in prostitution or not, the performing women were considered to be of easy morals and sexually available. It is ironic that a culture that had always had women in the field of performance, unlike in most other civilizations, seems to hold on to this perception of performing women as dishonourable. It is also interesting to note that it was not the skill and mastery of art of these women that got the attention, but rather it was their personal lives, which were more dramatic than most plays. In other words the artist mattered more than the art itself. Therefore the performing women lived constantly oscillating between fanfare on stage and condescension and disapproval in real life. The case is not very different for many artists in the film, television, and theatre world even today. The fact that some women quit the field after marriage or commit suicide while in the heyday of their career is proof of this perennial dilemma.

The life of Binodini Dasi, popularly known as *Notee Binodini*, exemplifies the point made above. Famous and reputed for her depictions of roles like Pramila, Sita, Draupadi, Radaha, Ayesha, Kaikeyi, Motibibi, and Kapalkundala, her life shows how nineteenth century Bengali society was opened to European ideas but yet subtly subjugated women within four walls of the household. *Notee Binodini* was given the appellation *Notee*, which in Bengali means a woman who performs for the male gaze and gets financial benefit from her spectators, much like the *Tawaif parampara* in parts of Uttar Pradesh of northern India. Binodini Dasi very carefully presented an embodiment of liberated femininity that can surreptitiously be viewed from a distance, and be loved despite being an object of scorn. She could never aspire to the ‘respectable’ notion of womanhood that was cocooned inside the four walls of the household.

Substantial work has been done to study the contribution of women to stage in Bengali and Marathi theatre by Rimli Bhattacharya (1998), Neera Adharkar (1991), and Shanta Gokhale (2000). Theatre journals in these languages were published from late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries. But still the documentation of women's contribution has to be gleaned with great difficulty. Neera Adharkar mentions, "In July 1990, 'Expressions' - a women's cultural festival was organized by some women from various women's groups. Since the focal point of the festival was 'Theatre' an effort was made to invite some of the first generation stage actresses of the 1930's to share their experiences. It was soon realized that the task undertaken was rather difficult as very few women of that generation were alive and amongst those who were, most were confined to the house because of their age. The third important factor discovered was that actresses from the upper caste background were comparatively easier to contact than the actresses of devadasi origin. We were denied access to their family members who were rather ashamed of their past" (Adharkar, 1991, p. 87-90).

In his introduction to the Seagull Theatre Quarterly issue Samik Bandyopadhyay says that in contrast to men who came into theatre, solely motivated by the passion for theatre, women entered theatre also for livelihood. This somehow led to discrimination within the groups and the women were treated as hired hands while the men were seen as idealistic. He adds, "For the actresses, several of them single mothers or with dependents, the options were more constricted, and acting remained the only means of living" (Bandyopadhyay, 1995, p. 65-66).

Although the precise date or name of the first woman to enter Tamil stage cannot be authentically established, the notices give us information about many women who were active participants in professional theatre. The system of female artists playing male roles seemed to have been an acceptable trend. We know of the legendary performance of Sundarambal doing Velan and S.G.Kittappa, her partner in life too, performing Valli. It can safely be concluded that by 1920 women performers had established their presence on Tamil stage.

Hindi theatre from Uttar Pradesh also saw women performers on stage, especially in *nautanki tradition*, a travelling folk theatre. Gulab Bai is one such name who brought women performers of nautanki tradition. She is the first female stage performer from the orthodox traditions of patriarchal Hindi speaking regions. She started her career as a performer at the early age of 12, despite belonging to a very poor family in Rail Bazaar, Kanpur. Her diction, script, narrative techniques and songs won her much appreciation from her audience. (Mehrotra, 2006, p. 14)

It is ironic that gender as an aesthetic construction has been codified through female impersonation while the actual, historic women had to

struggle in this field. Theatre seems to have built its own way of meting out bias towards women. It is not always harsh, since women are essential to the field. It is not always welcoming either. Very rarely do we find a couple like in the case of Shombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra or Sabitri and Kanhailal treated on par with each other on the basis of merit.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How is the body a part of nature, culture and society? What are its implication/s for the stage and theatre?
- 2) What is the stage? What is theatre?
- 3) How does the participation of women on stage affect the audience?

3.5 TYPES OF THEATRE

Each region has a history of theatre that could be further analyzed in terms of various kinds of theatres that evolved during different times, for instance Elizabethan theatre and Victorian theatre in England, Sanskrit theatre in India, etc. But cutting through regional histories of theatre are conventions of theatre that could be classified according to the forms of presentation or the ideology of theatre. Therefore, we shall take up the two major styles of acting - stylisation and realistic acting - that are seen as two extremes of the spectrum. Stylised performance or acting has been the major school of acting in almost all classical theatre, be it Sanskrit or Greek. What we identify as realistic acting today is a school of acting referred to as 'method acting' established by Constantin Stanislavski in the late 19th century. It resulted in the creation of "an illusion of disbelief" on the stage by treating the audience as fourth wall. The creation of the fourth wall in perception became a form of representations of social realism. Stanislavski gave a shape to the naturalist tradition of theatre in the Western world. In most cases these two styles (stylized and naturalistic) overlap, at least in training, if not in the theatrical production. In India, however, stylized acting was seen as pre-colonial and realistic acting as a product of modern Western exposure.

3.5.1 Classical Theatre

In her discussion of Classical Greek theatre, Sue- Ellen Case shows how the attic morality of the Greeks replaced the Amazonian practices in theatre. With Zeus swallowing his wife Metis in order to gain her power of reproduction, resulting in the birth of Athena, the dangers of the womb

represented by the earth mother Gaia were annulled. Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, vine and revelry, assimilated the power of female sexuality. Maenads, the female celebrants in the Dionysian festivals went into oblivion. The satyrs or the male celebrants took over. The gender specificity of the satyr was underscored by the actors wearing a leather phallus. Most of the actors and dramatic subjects were male and masculine. (Case, 1988, pp. 14-72). But amidst these, there were women-centric plays like *Medea*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, which focused mainly on Feminine subjects of the contemporary society.

Sanskrit theatre witnessed a different evolution. Women continued to be in the domain of performance and entertainment. Varadpande refers to all-female forms of performance called *Stree Preksha*, referred in Natya Shastra. But the apsaras, as they were called, were not considered high quality performers. Tamil, the other classical language of India that still continues to be a living language, had a whole community of artists patronized by the chieftains of the Sangam era. Silappadhikaram, the Tamil epic contains valuable details about stage, curtains and various dance forms. So, the classical theatre of India allowed a particular section of women to participate in theatre.

Sanskrit dramaturgy, however, stipulates the definitions of the protagonist on the same lines as Aristotle. Since most Sanskrit plays were also based on mythology, the lead characters were male and noble, godly male! In order to assure the nobility of the male character, Natya Sashttra rules that the language of the gods, rulers and lords should be Sanskrit and the language of the 'servants' and 'female characters' must be Prakrit. Therefore, even if a male performer was impersonating a female character, he would speak Prakrit on stage.

Characterisation of the dramatis persona in classical Sanskrit theatre had to follow the norms. Natyashastra itself was seen as the fifth Veda and therefore the purpose of drama is didactic. One has to prove that good will win at the end. The notion of tragedy was not permitted, though the 'soka' rasa was depicted. Playwrights like Bhasa had to bypass these rules to make Duryodhana or Karna to be heroes of the plays. The comedies like *Bhagavathajukkam* had powerful female characters. Romila Thapar's *Sakuntala* traces the way her character is domesticated in Kalidasa as against the portrayal in the Mahabharatha.

Kerala has Kudiayattam, the only surviving Sanskrit theatre practiced still. But most of the features of Sanskrit theatre could be found in many other traditional forms like Kathakali, Yaksha Gana, Jatra and Theru Koothu. All these forms continue to have the tradition of female impersonation by male performers.

With the changing patterns of characterization, dancing was reduced and at times relegated to the comedians of the show. The lead actors continued to sing in a poised fashion, dressed close to reality to the accompaniment of harmonium. The legacy of stage songs continues to inform our aesthetics even in films till date.

3.5.2 Realism in Theatre/ Method Acting

The shift to realistic acting that draws from what Stanislavsky called 'emotional memory' in late nineteenth century forms the primary basis of Western schools of acting. He proposed that one can reach a 'believable truth', through 'emotional memory'. To prepare for a role that involves fear, the actor must remember something frightening, and attempt to act the part in the emotional space of that fear they once felt. Stanislavsky believed that an actor needed to take his or her own personality onto the stage when they began to play a character. Later Stanislavsky concerned himself with the creation of physical entries into these emotional states, believing that the repetition of certain acts and exercises could bridge the gap between life on and off the stage. Stanislavski discovered his "principle of opposites," as expressed in his aphoristic advice to the actor: "When you play a good man, try to find out where he is bad, and when you play a villain, try to find where he is good."

From the point of view of gender, method acting or realistic portrayal initiated a whole range of debates about female impersonation, female characters of various plays and the understanding of women's psychology implicated in such characterisations. In India, this acting style became a colonial legacy and coincided with the entry of female performers, efforts at realistic plays like *Adhe Adhure* by Mohan Rakesh and evolving a new idiom on stage.

3.5.3 Epic/Didactic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright and director was instrumental in questioning the Aristotlean notion of catharsis and granted the spectator the status of an 'active thinker'. Drawing his inspiration from a variety of sources from Chinese, Japanese, and Indian theatre, the Elizabethans (especially Shakespeare), Greek tragedy, fair-ground entertainments, the Bavarian folk play, and many more, Brecht had the uncanny ability to take elements from seemingly incompatible sources, combine them, and make them his own. He didn't want his audience to get carried away with emotions -he wanted them to *think* -and towards this end, he determined to break the theatrical illusion.

The result of Brecht's research was a technique known as "verfremdungseffekt" or the "alienation effect". It was designed to encourage the audience to retain their critical detachment. His theories resulted in a number of "epic"

dramas, among them *Mother Courage and Her Children* which tells the story of a travelling merchant who earns her living by following the Swedish and Imperial armies with her covered wagon and selling them supplies: clothing, food, brandy, etc. As the war grows heated, Mother Courage finds that this profession has put her and her children in danger, but the old woman doggedly refuses to give up her wagon. Bertolt Brecht's theatrical techniques are commonly cited as a useful means for feminist revisions of theatrical realism. His persistent antagonism to closed systems of representation taken as a 'given' and the insistence on the construction of 'socialist' paradigm are potentially rich in terms of feminist / gender politics. There have also been strong feminist criticisms against Brechtian theatre in terms of privileging class at the cost of gender blindness or for equating gender neutrality as synonymous with gender equality.

3.5.4 Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal managed to enlarge the performance space to make the spectators not just an emotional or thinking 'mass' but into 'spect-actors'. Using the potential of theatre as a discursive space, the Theatre of the oppressed evolved into Forum, Image, Invisible, and Legislative theatres. Boal broke the normative notions of theatre's representation as autonomous; he underlined the scope of representation to be modified by spectators based on their specific context. His theatre also questioned the hierarchy within the practice of theatre. The role of the actors ceased to be one of histrionics alone. It called for an empathy and sensitivity to contextual variations and evolved a methodology to understand differences with mutual respect. Though the style of acting in Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) did not emphasis gender aspects, the thematic and conceptual framework of never lost sight of gender as one of the major categories of social analysis. Boal insisted on the difference that women brought into discussion based on their lived experience. It was not an accident that many women's groups and street theatre activists in India took to Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in creative ways, chief among them being Jana Sanskriti of West Bengal.

It is important to analyse the modes of gender operations in various kinds of theatre both in practice and theory.

3.5.5 Folk Theatre

Folk theatre of India has a very long history. The gradual decline of Sanskrit theatre saw the emergence of folk theatre in the country, however, its origin can be traced back to Buddhist literature folk theatre. It is considered as a 'lived experience', both historically and culturally. In India, songs and dance drama were the main aesthetics of folk theatre, like *jatra* of Bengal, Orissa and Eastern Bihar, *nautanki* from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab, *bhavai* from Gujarat, *yakshagana* from Karnataka, *therukoothu* or *therubuttu*

from Tamil Nadu, and others. Not only these, the dance forms like *chhau*, *kuchipudi*, Buddhist lion dance, *santhal* dance, all contributed to the magical sheen of folk theatre as an aesthetic art form. This tradition eloquently exemplifies the navarasa of the *Natyasastra*. They all display contrasting styles, usage of local language, dress, attitude and humour of the region, and their contents -are all depicted with strong gender biases. It is observed that women performers were kept away for a long time, until women like Binodini Dasi and Gulab Bai, pointed out the differences vehemently through their performances, proving the fact that women were no less in performing on stage. Although male performers had been performing the women characters for ages, but most of them could not bring aesthetic beauty to the performance, except Bal Gandharva from Marathi theatre and Chopol Bhaduri from the Bengali theatre.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the gender implications of different forms of theatre?
- 2) What sort of performance takes place in Classical theatre? Are there any codes for characterisation and representation?
- 3) Describe Brecht's epic/didactic theatre?
- 4) What does Augusto Boal mean by 'spect-actors'?

3.6 GENDERED INTERVENTIONS IN THE STAGE AND THEATRE

Interventions in the stage and theatre are the primary concerns of cultural activism. The socio-cultural aspects of form and content of such interventions ought to be studied. In terms of gender, the interventions in stage and theatre can take the form of entry of women in forms hitherto considered a male bastion; re- presentation of gender in ways that question the conventional modes; introduction of new images and narratives that are specifically of importance to gender; and creating an aesthetics of non-hierarchical, collective imagination. These aspects have to be analysed from textual and performative aspects.

Activity 2

Read any play or drama written by any woman playwright. Try to analyse the play in terms of content and narrative structure from a gendered point of view.

Life stories of early actresses in Indian theatre are a growing field of study. Binodini Dasi, a pioneering stage actress of West Bengal wrote her autobiography as a serial in an early Bengali theatre magazine. It has been translated into English by Rimli Bhattacharya. There are also interviews and biographies of these artists that could throw light on how much they dared and how little were they rewarded. The stigma attached to performing women and their morality seems to have been the overarching concern of these women. The discriminatory attitude of theatre historians in documenting the contribution of male and female artists in the stage and theatre needs to be critiqued with intellectual rigour.

The role of comedy or humour to re-inscribe values of patriarchal hierarchy and the ways by which female practitioners have subverted this has been the basis of a study by Susan Seizer (2005). Women's groups took up theatre as their primary tool of mobilisation of views in the late 1970s. The 1990s saw the emergence of a new crop of women directors who have changed the idiom of theatre in interesting ways. The works of Neelam Mansingh, Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, Kirti Jain, Usha Ganguli, Amal Allana and many others all over the country have negotiated with the form of theatre in different ways to create a new world view. "It (Feminist theatre) slits open the certainties of gender roles, of the stereotype of wife, mother and courtesan and it dissolves the boundaries between public and private, between outer and inner selves" (Dalmia, 2006, p.16-23).

3.7 PERFORMANCE AS ASSERTION

The 1990s saw a new discourse emerging. With the advent of the AIDS epidemic and the question of sexual health getting foregrounded as mandatory aspects of gender and sexuality, many unspoken subjects were forced to appear upfront. Sex and morality that were often discussed within the realms of reproduction, the family system and law had to be discussed in terms of actual practice. The 'high risk' groups of sex workers and homosexuals had to be 'treated' or 'protected' from the spread of the epidemic. Initially, the understanding of victimhood and enlisting sympathy prevailed. But soon organizations of sex workers and queer communities were formed and their discourses challenged the earlier understanding of patriarchy and sexuality. The 'us' and 'them' divide that was overtly present in the political theatre scenario was reversed in an ironic way. Performers

emerged who called attention to the masses, not for mobilizing collective struggle but for comprehending a hitherto silenced point of view. It was an assertion of identity and sharing of 'lived' experiences, by the communities themselves. The issue of representation dealt more with the embodied selves of sex workers and queer groups; the very bodies that are presented for public viewing served as a counter to the stereotyping that had gone into the 'imagining' of these people.

The two major initiatives of sex workers' movements were in West Bengal and Maharashtra. Both the states have made use of theatre as a major venture in communication. There are many interesting films that have documented these movements*. But in the theatrical presentations, one finds the participation of the community members for a considerable period of time and the process is longer and perhaps more sustained. Des Moires Social Club (DMSC) of Iowa has a cultural wing called Komal Gandhar and Sangram and Point of View in Maharashtra produced a play entitled *My Mother, The Gharwali, Her Maalek, His Wife*.

As one of the reviews of the above play says, "These people are not actors; they wear no masks on the stage. All they did was, tell the story of their lives" (Wagle, 20 March, 2008, DNA). Sushama said that the play is "an attempt to inform society about how these people live and to give their perspective of life". One of the members of the cast said, "We have staged this play to ask society not to enforce their rules on us". The narrator of the play Sangita said, "In real life, we act to make money. Here we act to show people what our lives are like". These performances have posed a great challenge to heteronormative, patriarchal structures. It has also laid bare the unease the women's movement has about addressing these issues.

Kannadi Kalai Kuzhu was formed as the cultural front of Sudar Foundation in Tamilnadu. It is a collective of transgender people who wanted to work on community issues in a broader spectrum. They did not want to be restricted by the work around AIDS awareness. As Priya Babu, one of the founder members of Sudar says, "It is as if we are remembered only for the spread of HIV. If not for that, we cease to exist".

The sex workers' movements and queer movements have pushed the boundaries of gender to include sexuality. At the same time they have helped in establishing the old dictum of feminist thought that gender is performed after all. In theatre, we are yet to create a breakthrough performance that can turn upside down our gaze. But the theatrical efforts of these groups have forced us to study our own gaze in a new light. In thus gendering theatre through their bodies, existence and lives, these performances have expanded our discourse.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

This unit has drawn attention to the way gender is performed on stage and theatre that reflects the ways in which gender is conceived of as a socio-cultural system. It draws attention to the hurdles that are inherent in the cultural systems of which theatre is one. Since it is a performative art, it exhibits the values inscribed on performance and therefore makes it easier for the observer to know the codes that operate. A self-conscious analysis of the performative aspects of gender would hopefully pave the way for a critical study and endeavour to change the patriarchal modes of functioning.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe the role of the body while performing on stage.
- 2) Elucidate the role of women performers in India, citing relevant examples.
- 3) Compare and contrast the Folk theatre and the Classical theatre.
- 4) How can theatre be used as a metaphor for asserting one's space?

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